rocket men (and women, too)

by zantetsuken

Summary


( also known as that one au where jim kirk goes to starfleet university: a prestigious college in albany, new york ~ )
( please read author notes )

Notes

so, uh. i've been sitting on this baby for awhile now, and now that i'm actually getting around to posting it, i'm not entirely sure what to say. i kind of feel like it's a mess right now, to be honest. this is my first stab at star trek fic, and i haven't really read a whole lot of other stories in this fandom (i don't know if that has any effect on how this story reads, but i thought it was worth mentioning).

just a heads-up: i plan on posting this in either three or four very large parts. this first part took me about four weeks(?) to finish, so - if i can manage it, what with the school year starting soon - hopefully there'll be a month or less between updates.

some things to consider:
there are ableist slurs used in a derogatory fashion and a racial slur used teasingly.
i've tweaked chekov's accent and tried to write it in a way that reads more like an actual russian accent instead of the polish-esque accent they gave him in both TOS and the reboot.
also, i hope the way i write chekov and scotty's accents doesn't come off as offensive. i researched the characteristics of both russian and scottish accents as i wrote, so their dialogue in the story is based off of that information. mccoy's southern accent also wasn't intended to be offensive or stereotypical or anything – i myself come from the south and i based his speech off of the way most people talk where i live.
i know john cho is korean, but i'm pretty sure sulu was originally intended to be japanese, so. my sulu is a japanese sulu.
there are and will be extended references to other works of fiction that might be confusing to people who are unfamiliar with their plots, but i don't think it's a big deal that you should go out and a bunch of research or whatever to understand them.
this is only the first of three or four parts, so please please please, i encourage you to not be deterred by my initial characterization of jim. i've seen a lot of criticism of some of the traits a lot of fans disagree over whether he does or doesn't possess, and i understand that in this part alone, he might come off as more negative than most other depictions of him are. all i'm going to say on the matter is this: people are as much their mistakes and shortcomings as they are their strengths and achievements, and in the context of this story and this part, jim is still wet behind the ears. cut him a little slack.
if you're not comfortable with metafiction/the narrator addressing the audience, you might not like this all that much.

this story, in its entirety, is for lenore, who has been the absolute greatest, most hilarious and supportive and all-around awesome friend i could ask for this summer. also for my dear, amazingly sweet priya. ♥

See the end of the work for more notes.
Friday, August 2nd, 2013.

James Tiberius Kirk, known by most as simply "Jim", crosses five state lines over the course of one-thousand and twenty-three miles in his stepfather's old pickup truck on his way from Riverside, Iowa to Albany, New York. He does not sleep for the entirety of the trip – a good sixteen hours and twenty-three minutes, to be exact – and he is only accompanied by the sweet sounds of Joy Division and Nirvana streaming from speakers that are easily over thirty years-old and the half-gallon mug of black coffee he will refill every time he stops to gas up.

Some things to remember about Jim Kirk:

- The longest period of time he has ever gone without sleep is forty hours and eighteen minutes.
- He could probably be considered sleep-deprived about 82% of the time.
- He may or may not have a case of undiagnosed bipolar disorder.
- There is a 97% chance that he is not ready for college (or adulthood, for that matter).
In the passenger seat beside him is a crumpled leather jacket and a somewhat tattered backpack, the contents of which include:

- A wad of three hundred dollar bills, four fifties, four twenties, five tens, ten fives, and twenty-one ones (seven-hundred and one dollars in total).
- His laptop (and its charger).
- His cellphone (and the charger for that, too).
- An unopened package of thirty ballpoint pens, and another of five black Sharpies.
- Two three-hundred and sixty page college-ruled notebooks.
- A copy of Slaughterhouse-Five, a copy of 1984, and a copy of The Catcher in the Rye.
- His driver's license.
- His course schedule, folded twice.
- Five copies of his mostly sparse résumé.
- Half a pack of cigarettes and a Zippo lighter.
- Two toothbrushes, one tube of toothpaste, one can of shaving cream, two razors, one stick of deodorant, one bottle of Advil, and one hairbrush.

In the bed of his truck sits:

- Two suitcases of clothing.
- Four crates of personal belongings, most of which consist of things like bedsheets and band posters and flashlights and an alarm clock.
- One mini-fridge.

Every two hours or so, he will fish another cigarette and his Zippo out of his backpack or change the CD currently playing out for another. Every sixty minutes, he will remind himself that he wanted this, that he voluntarily chose to do this, that this is the only way he won't end up stuck in Riverside for much of the foreseeable future with nowhere to go and a hypothetical alcohol addiction. Every twenty-five minutes, he will panic and fool himself into thinking just the opposite.
Jim Kirk was **six years-old** when he decided he wanted to become a police officer. Sam told him one morning over his bowl of Cheerios that their father was one, that he saved a lot of lives doing what he did. And Jim found that really liked the sound of that whenever it would come fumbling out of his mouth – 'saving lives'.

Jim was **ten years-old** when he got sick of everyone comparing him to His Father, the Life-Saver. The eyes, bluer than the depths of any ocean (as if Iowans have ever seen the ocean anywhere but through their television screens). The mouth, perpetually open and bleeding on the inside from the sharpness of the tongue that it holds and rarely, if ever, soundless. The attitude, headstrong and confident and passionate and almost as if made via carbon copying, give or take a little of that arrogance and volatility. But it's mostly the eyes that make him his father's little duplicate, especially when his mother is scolding him and she accidentally calls him 'George' (and Jim knows that the slip of the tongue has nothing to do with his older brother, who has always been just 'Sam').

Jim was **eleven** when he stopped wanting to become a police officer.

Jim was **fourteen** when he snuck into the local planetarium in a scarcely thought-out attempt to hide from Sam and his stepfather. He spent nearly **three hours** watching the artificial night sky play out before him, naming the planets and following the stars with his ocean eyes over and over and over again. Never in his life had he ever felt more at peace. Never in his life had he wanted to go home less (and he'd already begun to think of his home as one of the many unknown circles of hell, right alongside his school and Riverside itself).

And that was the day his homework started getting turned in, his C's began to transform into A's, and Jim Kirk's heart became set on becoming an astronaut.

**(Saving lives in this day and age is overrated anyway.**)

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**Saturday, August 3rd, 2013.**

Jim Kirk moves into the Alpha Dormitory after checking in and snagging his student ID from the lobby of the ever prestigious Starfleet University. On his way to his dorm, he thoughtlessly collides front-first with a young woman with caramel skin, pixie hair, and eyes like embers. He spills a bit of his coffee on her pristine shirt in the process.

“**Shit, I'm sorry --**”
A flash of her sharp, burning eyes. “Be a little more careful next time and you won't have to be.”

And in that moment, Jim thinks he's in love.

He reminds himself then that he's not some clueless fifteen year-old and lets the subtlest of smiles grace his face, his eyes wander very briefly to the fresh stain on the breast of her shirt, and his right eyebrow quirks upwards just the slightest bit, and he says, “I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name there?”

“Yeah, probably because I didn’t pitch it in the first place,” she says. She's walking away before Jim can scrape his jaw (and a little bit of his heart, not that he would ever admit it) off of the pavement, but somehow, that's okay when he gets to watch her leave with her crisp button-down hugging her shoulders and her high-waisted skirt accentuating her every curve and her mile-long legs carry her away, and that's when he subconsciously decides that he is going to have her one way or another by the time the week is up.

(We're holding him to that, you and I.)

“You sure you don't need help with that stain?” is what he calls after her. She doesn't answer him, but the line of her shoulders straightens just enough for him to see.

She'll fall in love with him yet.

Then there is Jim unloading his truck and getting all of his shit (which isn't much, to be honest) into his assigned dorm room – third floor, fourth to the right, just his fucking luck – and when he first walks in, he takes a moment to appreciate the surprisingly spacious living room/kitchen combination, the carpeted floor, the wooden coffee table, the 36-inch LCD television. It's really nice, for a standard-issue apartment. He is, for once in all his eighteen years, the first one to arrive.

There are two bedrooms fitted for two occupants each – two beds and two nightstands with one desk, one dresser, and a closet per room – and one bathroom adjoining to both simultaneously (a very economical layout). Jim takes all of thirty seconds to claim the bed on the right in the room on the right (mostly because he likes the color of the paint on the walls in there better), and in three trips to and from his truck, he has everything but his mini-fridge stacked in his own little corner.
At the end of his fourth trip, he nearly drops the damn appliance on his foot in surprise, no thanks to the guy (presumably one of his new roommates) popping out of the bathroom not three seconds after he's in the apartment, and before you have yourself a good chuckle over that (which I encourage you do), please consider how much sleep and coffee Jim has had over the course of the past eighteen hours or so (absolutely none and about five gallons — roughly 7600 miligrams — respectively).

“Hello?” the guy says when he jams his head through the doorway, and his voice is loud, rough, tainted with a thick Southern drawl Jim has never heard anyone in real life speak with before now, and to be honest, that's what startles him more than anything else — just the sheer volume and the timbre of the man's voice.

Before he can answer or do anything but try to prevent his imminent death via heart attack, the man's eyes land on him and he asks him, “You're the one with all your stuff in the room, aren't you?”

And from there to the room and on, it's just this guy asking him questions without giving him time to answer and making comments (critiques) about the campus and the dormitory and the state of the bathroom (“Lord knows if they've even cleaned it since before the summer — you can never be too thorough, you feel me?”) while Jim digs his bedsheets and quilt out of one of his crates and busies himself with dressing his mattress while his new roommate continues to soapbox and ramble, and Jim doesn't really know if he's relieved by it (in the sense that wow, he actually met someone without managing to piss them off in the first five minutes of knowing them, and he didn't have to try, didn't have to do anything at all) or just the slightest bit annoyed, but that doesn't really matter when he's sitting on the edge of his bed and he feels as though he’s just lived through a war and his eyelids are so heavy with exhaustion that the mere thought of keeping them open any longer is too much for him — he might actually cry about it.

A hand on his shoulder and Roommate Guy is asking, “You okay, man?”

Jim decides that he likes how remarkably comfortable the guy is with him. It’s a first for him.

“When's the last time you got any sleep?” Roommate Guy adds when Jim peers up at him, his eyes most likely just as bloodshot and strained (which reminds him that he probably looked like microwaved shit when he spilled his coffee on that caramel goddess earlier, goddammit).

“Eighteen-ish hours ago?” is his answer. The responding look on his roommate's face is downright comical in its horror.

“Dammit, man!” the guy exclaims, surprising Jim once again (but thankfully not enough to have his
heart threatening to give out on him). He gives his shoulder a good shake, says, “As a doctor in the making, I order you to get some sleep – stat.”

Jim doesn't need any more encouragement to shuffle his kicks off and worm his way beneath his comforter, and even though it might seem like he's blindly following the orders of a man he just barely knows, he's simply too bone-tired and senselessly comforted by the guy's unusually abrasive presence to do otherwise. On his way under, he says something like, “You're gonna be an old sawbones, huh?”, because he's drunk with fatigue and he's lost control of his life, or something.

(I would like to take this moment to draw your attention to the fact that it is almost 9:30 in the morning and Jim Kirk is about to spend his first day at Starfleet University sleeping like a log. He traveled over a thousand miles to lie down and take a nap. What a life this guy has.)

“You bet yer ass,” Roommate Guy replies. Jim can't see him when he pats his leg through his quilt and moves across the room to start unpacking his own things, when he asks, “You been drinkin' coffee outta this thing all night?”

Assuming that he's referring to the mostly-empty mug sitting on the dresser, Jim makes a grunting noise that kind of passes for a 'yes'.

Roommate Guy lets out a loud, extraordinarily audible sigh. “You're lucky you found me when you did, kiddo,” he comments, nearly grumbling.

Jim can tell right then and there that they're going to have a very special relationship, and then he's lost to the crumbling black abyss of sleep.

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**About three months ago.**

Jim Kirk rolls into bed with a bag of Hot Cheetos from down the street and his laptop and opens up his Gmail with a whopping total of three keystrokes. He finds eight emails waiting for him:

- **One** is a notification from Spotify.
Two are from pornography websites.

One is from Facebook, reminding him about two of his ‘friend’s upcoming birthdays.

Two are spam emails.

One is from Starfleet University.

One is from a ‘Hikaru Sulu’.

Jim makes quick work of deleting all of them save for the last two, which he reads with varying degrees of interest.

The email from Starfleet informs him that he has been assigned to Apartment A28 in the Alpha Dormitory on Starfleet campus and that he will be rooming with two freshmen and one sophomore, whose contact information they have gracefully provided him with.

- Chekov, Pavel | Email: rachmanisaur@gmail.com
- McCoy, Leonard | Email: leohmccoy@yahoo.com
- Sulu, Hikaru | Email: suluhikaru@gmail.com

The email then goes on to say that he is due on campus on August 4th, 2013. Apparently Starfleet is lucky to have him, or whatever. Jim makes a mental note to print the message out sometime later today.

He then moves on to the email from Hikaru Sulu, his soon-to-be roommate.

James.

Jim snorts a laugh. (Who the fuck calls him James anymore?)

After receiving my email from Starfleet University (which I am sure you received as well), I took it upon myself to contact you as soon as possible, being that we will be living together in three months. It would be nice to get to know you a bit before we're crammed in the same apartment, and so I would greatly appreciate it if you would respond to this email telling me a little about yourself (no pressure, though). As for me?
I'm open to discussing a chores schedule.

There Jim has to actually laugh out loud, because honestly, the last thing he was thinking about when it came to college was the fucking chores he'd have to be doing (which he inevitably wouldn't be, what with all the parties he'd be going to and the ladies he'd be courting).

I can promise you I will beat your ass at any multiplayer game you might run me by.

Jim's obnoxious snickering turns into an amused chuckle, then.

I have many hobbies, so rest assured that you won't find a boring roommate in me.

And you can just call me Sulu.

The ignorant white man in Jim heaves a heavy sigh of relief at the prospect of never having to struggle to pronounce a name like 'Hikaru'. It occurs to his more sensitive side that this such reaction is probably the reason why Mr. Sulu has resorted to going by his last name only in the first place.

I hope to hear from you soon, James. I'm sure I would be glad to have you for a roommate.

Sulu.

Jim tells himself he's going to write the guy back as soon as he finishes his bag of Cheetos and his bottle of Sprite, but over half an hour later he's entrenched deep in the bowels of Cracked.com and he still hasn't even begun to pick out what few not-awful personality traits he may or may not have to tell Sulu about.

Saturday, August 3rd, 2013.

Jim Kirk wakes to find that the bedroom is significantly dimmer than it was earlier, and when he musters up the strength to sort-of roll out of bed and dig his cellphone out of his backpack, he learns that it is 6:29 in the evening. He slept for nine hours – a good five hours less than his more devastating usual fourteen hours.
A distant, laughing 'oh my god' from the living room reminds him that oh yeah, he's definitely not the only person who exists in the world, and he is currently sitting on the floor in a dorm room on the campus of Starfleet University, and he is enrolled in Starfleet University, and he is in college, yes – as of now, he is an adult and he is in college.

Jim then proceeds to puke all of his internal organs onto the carpet.

Then there's him remembering that he hasn't changed his clothes since yesterday and he actually kind of smells a little and he more than likely has three roommates (one of which actually put him to bed nine hours ago, holy fuck) in the living room waiting to laugh at him and his utter pathetiveness, and it would honestly be the shittiest move ever if he tried to go take a quick shower without being noticed, but like I said, he smells kind of funny and he's probably already made one of the worst impressions possible on the people he's going to be living with for the next ten months by conking the fuck out first chance he got and not returning their emails and generally being the child he is, and shit, there he goes, he's lying on the floor and he kind of hates himself and he's wondering for what has to be the six-thousandth time whether or not he actually belongs here, in College City, a subsidiary of Adultville.

After about five minutes of that useless behavior, Jim takes it upon himself to get up and at least change his clothes – a dark tank top instead of the grungy Black Sabbath t-shirt he had on, a pair of gym shorts in exchange for his holey jeans. It doesn't occur to him how douchey such a getup might be until his hand is on the doorknob and he isn't stopping himself from going into the living room, which is... empty.

There is a laugh from the kitchen (which is only separated from the living room by a short dividing wall that looks like it comes up to just past Jim's hip), though.

“Oh– is that Sleeping Beauty?” a disembodied voice says, interrupting the laughter, and it's not the doctor-to-be from earlier; this guy has a considerably softer, evener voice with no discernible accent, no consonant-dropping, nothing but practiced enunciation and something like a stone of intent and authenticity weighing it down in Jim's eardrums. Jim likes the sound of it instantly.

When Jim steps out from behind the projection in the wall hiding him from view, he becomes the focus of three sets of eyes, most prominently the one belonging to the medical student from earlier, who does this thing where he kind of cocks the glass in his hand at him and goes, “Oh, yeah. That's him.”

A decidedly Asian young man (who is more than likely the 'Hikaru Sulu' Jim got an email from several months ago) smiles an oddly welcoming smile (and I only say 'oddly' because Jim has almost
never in his life been welcomed by anyone) and says, in his warm baritone voice, “Welcome to the land of the living. You must be James.”

A more than familiar smirk takes up residence on Jim's face, then, tugging the left corner of his mouth up and putting the sun in his ocean eyes. It's not entirely real yet (he doesn't know these people well enough for it to be), but it will be very, very soon.

“Call me Jim,” he tells them when he's shaking their hands and the Asian guy is passing him a glass of wow, rum and coke (drinking on his first day at university, awesome), and even though it's a little uncomfortable and almost terrifying that he's standing in this brand new kitchen with these brand new people he's going to be living with in this brand new apartment in this brand new place from now on, the alcohol and the warmth of their palms makes it exponentially less so.

Jim discovers that medical student's name is Leonard McCoy and that he is the sole sophomore (and therefore the one most likely to become the mama bear in this ensemble) in the household. He was born and raised (and I want you to imagine him saying that in his ridiculous Southern accent, because Jim just barely resists bursting into laughter when he does) in Athens, Georgia, he has five (five) older sisters, he hasn't spent a moment of his life not being angry about something since his sixth birthday (which was, according to him, the day the Lord forsake him and his name everafter), and the things he enjoys most in this world include whiskey shots, Bob Dylan, a good rant every now and then, and the satisfaction of helping another human being. He is dubbed 'Bones' in no time, courtesy of Jim's rapidly decreasing sobriety and the absurdly dated epithet he used on him earlier.

Much to Jim's utter and total lack of surprise, the Asian guy does turn out to be Hikaru Sulu, who is double-majoring in physical science and biology and isn't sure whether or not he wants to become an astronaut or a botanist (cue an extraordinarily well-intentioned, “Is that an actual job?” from Jim). He hails from San Francisco, California, has a wide array of varied and somewhat unusual talents and hobbies (such as taekwondo, and fencing, and gardening, and crocheting), isn’t the least bit opposed to doing most of the grocery shopping and the cooking around here, and is prepared to beat each and every one of them at Mortal Kombat several times during this year. He also doesn't mind that Jim never returned his email (the saint).

And then there's Pavel Chekov, who speaks with a Russian accent so thick Jim actually has a hard time understanding him for the first three minutes or so of just listening to him talk, may or may not be the weirdest person he's ever met in his life, and has 'no idea what this Mortal Kombat is, ahem'. Jim is astonished to learn that not only is the kid just sixteen years-old, but he's also an early high school graduate, a full-fledged child prodigy, a native Russian who immigrated to the States at the age of ten, and pretty much an artistic genius/musical virtuoso with a double-major in physical science and orchestral music. Oh, and he's basically some kind of anxious, hipster sheep in human form. Did I mention he's only sixteen?
They've all moved out of the kitchen and into the living room by the time it's Jim's turn to tell them about himself, and they haven't turned the TV on and they're nearing the bottom of their pitcher of rum and coke and McCoy is lounging next to him on the couch while Sulu kicks it in the arm chair someone brought in while Jim was sleeping and Chekov makes himself comfortable on the floor, and there's a moment where they all just look at Jim expectantly, not saying anything, before McCoy bumps the back of his hand against Jim's shoulder and says, “What about you, kid?”

What about him, huh?

James Tiberius Kirk was born on March 22nd, 1995 at 5:51 PM in Riverside, Iowa to George and Winona Kirk. He weighed 10 pounds, 5 ounces. He was named after his maternal and paternal grandfathers, respectively. His birth was a difficult one.

In the same hospital on the same day, George Kirk lost his life in the emergency room two floors down after colliding head-on with an eighteen-wheeler on his way to his second son's birth. When Jim tells people this story, he likes to say that he was born the exact moment in which his father croaked – a life for a life sort of thing – but in all actuality, George Kirk died several hours before Jim ever saw the piercing, clinical light of the delivery room.

The first five years of Jim's life were a little tricky – a concussion here, a broken collarbone there, Sam playing with him a bit too roughly and accidentally dislocating his right shoulder, and his mother so fickle in her moods and affections – but they weren't all that bad, really. He and Sam shared a bed and played tag with each other in the backyard. His peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were always cut in four neat little triangles. He never liked to color inside the lines and he found he favored yellow over all other hues. He formed a very profound attachment to Bugs Bunny.

He is six years-old when his mother marries another man – a Frank, to be exact. She tells him many times in his life that this man is his new father, but Jim can never bring himself to believe her.

And it is at this point that his life becomes a tempest of chaos and anger and confusion and absolute, utter mess.

Sam turns distant and cold and is suddenly, irrevocably out of time for anyone but himself. He is almost never home, and when he is, it is impossible to pry him from his room or have anything resembling a decent conversation with him, and really, Jim doesn't like Sam all that much when the
older boy is relentless in his assertion that he's a 'fucking retard' and he refuses to look at him when he's speaking to him and when this one time, after he's come home really late and Jim catches him sneaking in through the back door in the kitchen and asks him where he's been, he looks him dead in the face and tells him, “It's your fault dad died.”

(It's safe to say that Sam was a little disturbed.)

Jim is eleven when he's told that. He was seven when he first started to believe it.

Frank is intolerable in an entirely different way from Sam, all fiery and volcanic instead of sharp and glacial. He seems to have a not-so-hidden personal agenda to be in some way displeased or angered by Jim's every move, by the clothes he wears, by the sound of his voice, the way he pours his milk and his taste in music and television programming. Jim reasons that part of the man's vitriol has to do with the fact that he more than likely didn't sign up to become he and Sam's full-time caregiver when he married his mother, but that doesn't stop him from despising him, doesn't rein in his sassy back-talk and, as he gets older, blatant disrespect, doesn't keep him from running away from home four times between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, doesn't kill the urge to remind the man every time he tries to order him around that no – he isn't his father.

His mother becomes a long-lost relative to him. For the first year after she remarried, she stayed with them all, and she was happy, and Jim loved her best in that year, but after it was all over with, she became more and more ghostlike in manner with each passing month. In the beginning she would only leave for two weeks or so, just enough to be worrying and painful in the way a pinch to the arm would be, but two weeks eventually turned into a month, which turned into two months, which turned into four, and by the time Jim was fourteen, he was used to not having seen his mother in almost half a year, used to having lost her to the thrill and the excitement and the, what, therapeutic nature of Away From Them. Every once in awhile, he'd think that she'd never come back.

And of course, when she was with them, she was always arguing with Frank or trying to force Jim and Sam to open up to her, which, no, she's the one who shut them out in the first place, and Jim knows he loves his mother and he's always known that he loves her and yeah, he could have normal conversations with her for the most part and yeah, he never really got all that angry with her except for the times when she wasn't there for him to confront her about it, but sometimes, it was really hard to look at her without seeing her features glaze over and melt, render her a faceless woman in their barren home, and when she would reach for his hand across the dinner table and say, “You know I'm proud of you, right?”, Jim couldn't feel any more ashamed.

(It's safe to say that she was a little disturbed, too.)

As for Jim? Well, there's much to be said about him.
Jim was widely regarded by his school counselors to be some kind of antisocial or emotionally unstable due to his constant instigation of fights and brawls with his fellow students, his flagrant contempt for his teachers and other authority figures, and his apparent lack of empathy or consideration for anyone around him. (Note: He wasn't antisocial or unfeeling or even **unfriendly**, really, just very, very angry.)

Jim was the kid who would laugh when the band asked for a moment of silence before the pledge of allegiance at assemblies, the kid you'd find prowling the hallways or camped out beneath the bleachers more than you would in class, the kid everyone seemed to know and talk about in scandalized, half-hushed tones even though they all knew he fascinated them more than he shocked them, even though he knew it, too.

Jim often found himself in destructive situations, such as beneath the biggest bully in school's fist or zooming down the freeway in, you got it, his stepfather's truck or dangling off the edge of the roof of the local strip mall or mere **inches** from busting his head on the bottom of a pool, and more often than not, he was the one who put himself in these circumstances.

Jim played fast and loose at everything he did – school, romance, recreation, you name it. He'd skip class **three out of five** days of the week and still ace his exams. He'd have a girl twisted around every single one of his fingers at any given moment on any given day, and maybe even a guy or two on the side. His hobbies included jacking cars, starting fights, playing pranks, and generally making an ass out of himself. And he'd **still** have enough time at the end of the day to get home, eat dinner, and blow through a few hours sitting on his computer.

Jim started smoking cigarettes at the tender age of **fifteen**, and he's been a casual drinker in just the same amount of time.

Jim took a liking to science at a young age, familiarized himself with the language of **numbers**, equations, theories and axioms, and often, when he felt particularly stressed out or worn thin, he would lose himself to the calculations of his mind – 

\[
\text{maximize}\ f(x) = 12x + \frac{121}{x} \text{ for } x > 0
\]

– and if he ever tired of the hard, constant Earth, he'd lay out in the backyard or in the park at **eleven o'clock** at night and turn his eyes to the ever-changing sky, name the clusters of stars when he'd recognize them (which he always would) – “**Andromeda,**” he'd call her name like she was an old friend, and “**Cygnus,**” who the gods turned into a swan to end his ceaseless mourning, and “**Aries,**” the star he'd been born under – and these are the only things Jim has ever truly enjoyed that haven't in some way destroyed him.

Jim grew up intelligent and clever and charismatic and steadfast and with all the devilishly handsome looks in the world, but he also grew up a furious young man, full of fire and arrogance and hunger and reckless abandon that he's never been able to fully quench, not with his self-destructive behavior, not with his smoking or his drinking, not with the science and the math he'd immerse himself in just so that he could feel a little less human – **nothing**. The anger has burrowed deep beneath his skin and made a home for itself there, and well, Jim hasn't exactly found a way to evict it yet.

**Most importantly, Jim hasn't spent a day of his life free of the loneliness that seemed to have sunk its claws into him the moment his father left this world.**

All this isn't so say that Jim Kirk has had an exceedingly difficult, wearisome life. He has, of course. But that's not the point.

Jim Kirk has been through times that threatened to drive him **beyond** insane, times when he has escaped from home and then hitchhiked to the Iowan border and then nearly gotten his brains blown
out at a gas station robbery and then dragged all the way back to Riverside in the back of a police car; times when he's nearly gotten expelled from school for breaking into the gym after hours and coloring the walls with vulgar graffiti; times when Frank has hurt him, slapped him in the face and grabbed him by the wrist and Jim has punched him in retaliation, and they have fought and they have cried and Jim has promised to get him arrested for it all; times when Jim has carefully helped his mother out of the bathtub and half-carried her to bed and listened to her soft, nearly silent cries of helplessness and seen more of himself in her than he'd ever, ever be able to make peace with.

Jim Kirk has also seen the sunlight just for what it is and drank root beer floats with Sam on the back porch and fallen in love with more girls than he could ever remember and went for joyrides in nice, shiny convertibles, and he has memorized the lyrics to almost every Foreigner song and made perfect scores on the SAT and stayed up until midnight on Christmas Eve and watched The Lion King exactly eighty-seven times, and he has bought his mother the scarf she wanted for her birthday with his own money and licked coconut cake batter off of a mixing spoon and carried on all-night conversations with Sam when he let him and laughed and laughed and laughed until it hurt, until his ribs were sore, until he could feel how painful it was to be happy.

The punchline to all this? Not anything I could tell you.

Sunday, August 4th, 2013.

Jim Kirk is standing squished between one of the largest men he's ever seen in his life and Hikaru Sulu in the middle of the very crowded, very noisy quadrangle at the very center of Starfleet University campus. To Sulu's right stands Pavel Chekov, who admittedly appears as though he might have a panic attack at any moment.

“Chill, Ruski,” Sulu says, good-natured and even. “We'll be able to breathe just as soon as everyone gets sorted.”

(Just in case you were wondering, no, they are not about to put on the Sorting Hat.)

Above the mass of heads surrounding him, Jim spies a banner hung above the booth at the far north side of the quad, screaming 'HELLO FRESHMEN' at him in large gold letters. Sweat collects at the nape of his neck and in the dips in his collarbones; the giant beside him bumps his arm against him for the eleventh time in the past five minutes.

“I hope we are sorted soon,” Chekov comments, and Jim mentally congratulates himself for being able to understand the teen almost immediately after he's spoken – they've only been roommates for a
good **fifteen hours** and he's already making headway.

“Yeah, me too,” he agrees, throwing the kid one of his easy, flippant smiles. “Can't wait to get away from Gigantron 5000 over here.”

As Jim tosses a quick glance to his left in a somewhat belated attempt to make sure Gigantron hasn't heard him, Sulu lets out a quick, almost barking laugh in response and Chekov just continues to be anxious and confused, yet adorably pleased, by his jest.

Presently, it is **9:17 AM** and Jim, Sulu, and Chekov are standing in the middle of Starfleet University's first day of freshmen orientation, waiting to get assigned to impromptu caravans so that they may tour the campus. Jim got maybe **two and a half hours** of sleep last night, no thanks to the all-day nap he took yesterday, Sulu is fiddling around on his iPhone while they wait, and Chekov keeps pulling at the hem of his tank-top and pocketing and unpocketing and repocketing his hands in his jeans in an exceptionally obvious effort to heed Sulu's advice and **chill**. Respectively, their moods are bored, patient, and apprehensive.

Just when it seems like Chekov might actually **pee** himself (he reminds Jim of a toy poodle, honestly) or sink into the earth and die or something, a student with vibrant pink hair comes speeding right over to where they are in the crowd, handing out Xeroxed campus maps of varying colors at random and howling in a voice much like a police siren, “**Red maps to the lobby! Yellow maps in front of the library! Blue maps stay here! Green maps to the greenhouse! Purple maps..!**”

Jim ends up with a yellow map, Sulu with a blue, and Chekov with a red. Chekov seems to become even **more** distressed when he notices this, as evidenced by the stricken look on his face and the interjection he utters half-under his breath, something Russian and impossibly fretful.

And for an instant, Jim is struck with the urge to help him or console him or whatever, but that such urge is quickly shot down by an internal reminder that he's kind of useless and an overbearing, typical lack of ideas (where the hell is his paperback copy of *A Guide to Being a Not-Crappy Roommate With Your Average Russian Whiz-Kid* when he needs it, huh?). It turns out he doesn't have to do **anything**, not when it takes Sulu mere **seconds** to do what he can't and ask everyone around them if they'd be willing to trade a red map for his blue one. It's in that moment that Jim realizes that Sulu is a much better man than he is, because even though it's kind of a good thing that he can mostly understand Chekov when he's talking, Sulu is the one who would actively try to stick by his side after knowing him for less than **twenty-four hours**, and that's not just **good** – that's **awesome**. Talk about your moral upstandingness.

(It doesn't occur to Jim that the simple desire to comfort Chekov at **all** is wonderful in and of itself.)
After giving both of his roommates a brief, amiable smack on the shoulder and sort of promising to meet up with them later (which, uh, might be a total lie considering the fact that after his campus tour, he's going to try to get a job at the local auto repair shop and then most likely go the fuck to sleep), Jim kind of just wanders around and follows a group of yellow maps until he happens upon the library, where several freshmen are slowly forming a small crowd.

At first, he's content with just hanging out towards the back of the mob and refraining from interacting with anyone in particular (especially the girl about five feet away from him who keeps gushing about how wicked it is to be in college), but it isn't long before a familiar sight catches his attention – a pair of long, shapely legs, that caramel skin, the edgy pixie cut, the igneous eyes. He doesn't have to look twice before he's sauntering right up to her, hanging silent and alive by her side only a second before he's raising a hand to tap her briefly on the shoulder and effortlessly sliding into his most charismatic persona, one he thinks she'll like, one where he's going to cater to her intelligence (which he can safely assume she possesses based on the fact that she's here at Starfleet) and rile her up with how completely doggish he is, and before you ask if he's fully conscious of the fact that he's doing all this and whether or not he normally custom-builds his personage to ensnare his conquests – the answer to both questions is Yes with a capital Y.

The young woman starts a little at his touch (she's guarded, he muses), snapping quickly around to regard him with her sultry chocolate eyes, and as soon as she recognizes him, something in her expression sharpens and closes off. “Oh,” she says without passion. “It's you.”

Jim isn't fazed in the slightest. This isn't the first time a girl's been less than impressed with him (and it certainly won't be the last).

“I think the gods of color-coding have smiled upon me today,” he quips instead of commenting on her lack of enthusiasm, letting a whisper of smirk fix itself upon his face. “How's your shirt?”

“Clean, not that you'd have anything to do with it.” Her eyes flick away from his for a second, graze downwards, somewhere around his collarbone. She's precise when she adjusts the crimson folds in her blouse.

“I can reimburse you for that, you know,” he says in a purposefully ambiguous tone. He doesn't expect her to see right through it, doesn't expect her to just stare at him and reply,

“What, with dinner? So you can spill more beverages on me?” She turns away from him in a not-so-subtle show of 'lay the fuck off’. “Not interested, sorry.”
Something tells Jim she isn't sorry at all. Whatever, she can play hard to get – he's good at that game anyway.

“I never did catch your name,” he goes on without missing a beat, adjusting his position relative to her so that she can't not see him, but not so that she's looking right at him; he's good at being intentionally aggravating and present like that. “Would you care to enlighten me with that information?”

Instead of answering his question, she hisses a quiet, “Shh,” at him, and suddenly everyone is going quiet and Jim is feeling a little affronted until Miss Caramel points directly ahead of her and he's all but forced to follow her finger with his eyes. That's when he sees him for the first time.

(And see, you can tell right now just by the way I worded it that the deuteragonist of this whole charade is about to be introduced. Sit down and relax, though. This is going to take awhile.)

He's lithe and tall, just an inch or two taller than Jim himself, and the first thing Jim notices about him is the vivid blue of his shirt, an almost indigo color, and that every button up to his neck is secured and the cuffs of his sleeves are neatly folded, his collar not one bit askew. Then there are his legs, which (much like the goddess to Jim's left's do) go on for eons and are encased in straight-leg black jeans, casting him in all dark hues that make him stand out in the sea of pastel or otherwise faded colors everyone else is wearing. His student ID hangs loosely around his neck – Jim can tell by the coloring of it that he's a sophomore.

Then there is the intensity of his face, and not just in expression, but in the large triangle of his nose, his oddly-shaped lips (which turn up at the corners the tiniest bit and leave him with this default look of vague, constant amusement) and the inky, severe arch of his eyebrows (which offset that previously-mentioned guise of mirth and turn it into something more calculating and shrewd). His shiny raven hair, cut short and neat, contrasts starkly with his beige, olive-toned skin, and his eyes are dark and soulful. Jim thinks he looks like a complete and total nerd.

(Years from now, Jim will think back to this day and remember how the first time he saw this man, he thought he was the geekiest person he'd ever laid eyes on, and he will have never felt so silly or so right in his entire life.)

And then the guy opens his mouth and proceeds to out himself as a possible android when he says, “Good morning, fellow students. My name is Spock, and I will be your campus guide for the next hour.”

Jim didn't know what to expect he would hear when he started talking, but this Spock’s voice sounds
exactly like that of one of the many uncanny valley-esque automatons he's seen in science fiction movies his whole life – a bit soft and articulate and with almost no nuances or inflections besides the one that keeps it from being completely robotic, and it's almost pear-shaped, almost soothing, save for the fact that Jim is squinting trying to look for any hinges in the man's jaws or a red glint in his eyes.

“I ask that you feel free to voice your questions and comments and please endeavor to pay attention and keep up,” Spock goes on, coolly skimming his gaze over everyone present with the sort of practiced elegance that makes Jim feel awkward and uncomfortable (mostly because he reasons it isn't human and it stands at contrast with his own innate baseness).

“O-kay, C-3PO,” Jim comments under his breath, quietly enough so that only the students in his near vicinity can hear him. Miss Caramel scoffs beside him.

And so it goes that Jim, Miss Caramel, and about thirty other freshmen begin their tour of Starfleet University campus under the graceful and meticulous direction of Spock, who first leads them on a brief sweep of the library and then takes them from building to building to building – the observatory, the medical school, the art center, the philosophy department – and all the while, Jim busies himself with wondering how in the hell one is expected to be totally familiar with the geography of this place (because honestly, there are easily over forty facilities on this single goddamned campus) and offhandedly flirting with She-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, who regularly (and unsuccessfully) attempts to escape his side. Spock engages the tour group in small bouts of trivia and a little light quizzing – things that Jim mostly yawns at and Miss Caramel responds to with surprising earnest and knowledgeability.

“Are you actually interested in this?” he asks her at one point, when they've stopped in front of the anthropology hall and Spock is explaining the importance of the study to a couple of curious students. He stretches his arms above his head in an exaggerated display of boredom (and so that his shirt rides up on his belly, but hey, who's keeping count?).

“As shocking as it may be to you, yes,” she replies with a particularly dour glance in his direction. “If you're not, I suggest that you leave.”

“And let you miss me?” he shoots back. He nearly bursts into flames at the responding look she gives him.

“I swear, you wouldn't know game if it was sitting right under your nose,” she says, and before he can contradict her or prove her wrong (because yes, he's extremely well-acquainted with game and he has been for years), she's putting on her best smile and answering some question Spock asked that Jim didn't hear. Just like yesterday, Jim is feeling a little winded yet all too pleased by her resolve.
(mainly because it only means his victory will be that much sweeter in the end when she finally gives in to him, of course).

That all changes when at the end of the tour, Jim looks up to see that she's disappeared and promptly finds her about ten feet away from him seconds later, standing with – of all people – Spock.

She's saying something to him, something Jim can't catch, something Spock replies to with an expression almost like relief coloring his features. They're in each other's personal space.

She smiles at him with all her teeth.

He smiles back at her, a slight, subtle thing.

Jim still doesn't know her name.

He drops off his resume at the local auto repair shop and meets Sulu, Chekov, and McCoy at the cafeteria for lunch at 12:13 PM. Chekov babbles on excitedly about how beautiful the campus is, McCoy grumbles about the nutritional value of the hamburgers, and Jim manages to simultaneously amuse and gross everyone out by jamming a French fry up each nostril and calling himself a walrus. So what if he doesn't know her name.

At least he knows theirs.

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**Sunday, August 4th, 2013 – Sunday, August 11th, 2013.**

Jim Kirk's first week of college is surreal, to say the least.

After sitting down with Sulu and Chekov over a pitcher of vodka-spiked strawberry smoothie (which Sulu is careful to make sure Chekov doesn't drink too much of), Jim finds that he and Sulu take both their *Theoretical Mechanics* and *Quantum Mechanics* classes together and that he also shares *English I* with Chekov. They draw up a plan to support each other in getting up for class, or whatever, one that primarily entails Sulu taking full responsibility for everyone and Jim taking none at all. Meanwhile, McCoy shuffles around in the kitchen and calls them all infants.
They also get together to work out a bathroom schedule for the mornings and evenings so that they don't all end up drowning each other in the bathtub in a fit of unhygienic rage. Bones and Chekov have shower privileges in the morning while Jim and Sulu have full reign at night. They color code their toothbrushes with masking tape to avoid confusion and any swapping of germs (much to McCoy's immense relief).

Jim and Bones spend **four and a half hours** one night unpacking and organizing their things in their shared room. Jim wins the closet space after half-seriously threatening to pee in it; McCoy claims that the desk is rightfully his seeing as he's the one who'd actually *use* it most of the time. They find that they wear the same shoe size, McCoy accuses Jim of being a 'wangster' for owning two pairs of Air Jordans, and Jim learns that McCoy has a slight fetish for cowboy boots. Bones vocally disagrees with Jim's Nirvana poster and Jim rifles through the man's CD collection, which consists of Bob Dylan, Elvis Presley, Bruce Springsteen, and more Bob Dylan. Mostly, they banter and jam out and laugh and drink beer, and by the night is over, Jim and McCoy have discovered that they are insane and hypochondriac, respectively, and Jim is beyond thankful to have McCoy as his roommate.

Miss Caramel turns out to be in Jim's English class as well (a sign from the Fates, no doubt), and every day before instruction begins, Jim will linger by her desk and pester her for as long as she'll let him and longer, engage her in only partially-playful repartee and attempt to sneak glances at her student ID so that he might *finally* be able to learn her name (to no avail, of course).

“Is it because you're dating Marvin the Paranoid Android?” he asks her on Friday, his arms crossed on top of her desk as he squats in front of it. He likes giving people names, you see.

“*We're not* dating,” she snaps after she realizes who he's referring to, irritated and impatient and, if Jim didn't know any better, disappointed.

She obviously still doesn't care for him all that much. However, she *does* seem to take a liking to Chekov, who is just as polite and adorable and turns out to be a total *babe magnet* in the way that he's young and cute and apparently Jim's protege, or something. Yet again, Jim gives thanks to whatever deity blessed him with the roommates he has.

Freshmen orientation lasts all week. Every day, there are new activities lined up for the underclassmen to take part in before, between, and after classes – small sports tournaments, field days, rallies, even a talent competition. Jim beats Sulu in the 100-meter dash and Chekov gets them both in the discus throw. All of them score highly in *Trivial Pursuit* and drink way too much alcohol, and on Friday, Jim gets to watch Sulu perform capoeira and listen to Chekov play the cello in the talent show. They drag McCoy along with them most days because, according to Jim, he doesn't have anything better to do, not to mention the fact that the impossibly pleased look on Chekov's face when he agrees to chaperone them is too sweet to pass up more than once.
And even though they don't actually know each other all that well, in that first week, it certainly feels like they do. Bones will entertain them with his stories of how his sisters often liked to stick his hair in short little pigtails when he was little and the time his mother and her brother-in-law wrestled in the mud of their backyard after a particularly heated disagreement and all the family dinners he won't ever forget (the ones his ears will never recover from, he says), and Sulu cooks almost every day – boneless ribs and tilapia and lasagna and falafel – and teaches Jim how to make a base and makes sure they're all at least somewhat alert by the time 7:30 rolls around, and Jim tells them all about the crazy girlfriends he's had over the years (like the one who insisted she was the reincarnation of Cleopatra and another who legitimately stripped all of her clothes off and stood naked in his backyard until he agreed to let her inside) and the gas station story and shows them the various scars he's acquired growing up – the faded burn mark on his lower arm, the welt across his right shoulderblade, the small tear in his lip – and one night, when Jim and Bones are sitting around in the living room debating the comedic value of That 70's Show and Sulu is enjoying his shower time, Chekov walks up to them and asks with his accent thick and his eyes drowsy, “Do you zink ve are all friends now?”

McCoy makes a noise like laughter and derision all at once. “We damn well better be,” is his response.

Jim gets the job at the auto shop and works on Tuesday and Saturday in the morning and on Wednesday in the afternoon. He doesn't study or anything, but he gets his homework done and shows up to class on time (because believe it or not, he does care about his future). Between all the to-and-fro and the endless activity of the day and the necessary time spent drinking peach schnapps and playing Skyrim with his roommates and simple tasks like bathing and eating and brushing his teeth and such, Jim has never in his life been so thoroughly exhausted, never ingested so much coffee on a daily basis, never puked so much as a result of the dual consumption of caffeine and alcohol, and never felt so great about himself. It's an enlightening experience, really, to wake up slightly hungover after maybe five hours of sleep and then proceed to fix up a car or two, grab a quick lunch, master quantum mechanics, nap through calculus, and then spend the rest of the day injecting himself into the metaphorical veins of the student body or listening to slam poetry with Chekov or getting his ass kicked in Mortal Kombat by Sulu or listening to McCoy harp on about the malevolence of immunization, and then to sit out on his dorm's fire escape, cigarette in hand, and let himself look at the stars that got him here in the first place.

He may get in a fight or two.

He may not physically feel the greatest when he gets up in the morning.

He may have small anxiety attacks in the shower or in bed some nights, and McCoy may ask him if he's alright and sit on the sliver of mattress Jim isn't occupying, just typing away on his laptop, until Jim finally answers him by gently knocking his knuckles against his shoulder, a silent 'yes'.
He may fall a little in love with the caramel girl whose name still escapes him, may grow slightly infatuated with the tiny flames in her eyes and the way she refuses to stand for his bullshit, refuses to allow him to stand for it either.

He may feel like he doesn't deserve it all sometimes.

But the stars remind him that he does, remind him to go back inside and ask Chekov if he wants to watch with him and tell Sulu that his chicken marsala is fucking delicious and give Bones half a coronary when he jokingly tells him he accidentally used his toothbrush and finish his reading assignment before there's a chance he could fall asleep on it.

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Monday, August 12th, 2013.

Jim Kirk begins his career as a potential stalker.

Well, that's a bit of a misconception and an exaggeration, to be honest, but from an exceptionally observant bystander's point of view, it's not all that off the mark. Here, let me explain.

On Monday, August 12th, Jim finds himself accidentally trailing Miss Caramel out of their English class. He promises Chekov that he'll meet him and Sulu and McCoy in the cafeteria in fifteen minutes, then promptly forgets all about that and focuses his energy on staying about twenty feet behind the young woman on her way out of the classroom, down the stairs, and past the English building to wherever she's headed to.

In hindsight, Jim reasons that he's following her because she took a few minutes longer than usual to gather her things at the end of class and he just so happened to notice and, as a result, fixate his entire universe on her (and if you hadn't figured it out yet, he kind of has one of the most compulsive personalities of all time). Yes, it's creepy and inappropriate and maybe even a little perverted. Yes, he is aware of the fact that he could end up with a face full of mace or a swift kick to the groin if he gets caught. Yes, he is a complete and utter idiot (and no, that's probably not going to change soon).

They end up at the library, where Jim lingers half-hidden in the shade of an old magnolia tree while he watches Miss Caramel disappear beyond the heavy double-doors adorned with float glass, her messenger bag slung over one shoulder and a small stack of notebooks balanced in her left arm. He hesitates there, unusually thoughtful.
You see, Jim isn't good at losing or feeling inadequate, and that's a huge part of why he's here and not having lunch with his friends right now. If he were being totally honest with himself, he'd know that it really does upset him on a very basic level that he hasn't won this girl over yet (who does she think she is, rejecting him?), never mind that he could have any pick of women (or men, for that matter) he wanted at this school just based on his looks and charm alone. It's entitlement and male privilege and downright frustration that's got him following her right now, but here's the thing – that's not all there is to Jim.

He's considering whether or not it's a good idea to go into the library and find her. There's a 87% chance she'll rebuke him if he approaches her and a 25% chance he won't approach her at all out of respect for his own physical wellbeing, but then again, he's anything if not stupidly confrontational and determined on the best of days. There's also the fact that he's hungry and oh yeah, he did promise Chekov he would be in the lunchroom like two minutes ago, but getting told off by a beautiful woman somehow seems a whole lot more appealing than eating grilled cheese and cobb salad. On the other hand, the likelihood of him looking like the asshole he is to his roommates and perhaps getting assaulted with a pair of puppy eyes courtesy of Chekov would go up maybe 16% if he ditched them. And (again) he's kind of starving. And he likes his face (a lot) as well as his balls (probably even more). And there's a possibility he won't be able to find his caramel girl – the library is only four stories high, after all. As the magic eight-ball says, all signs point to the cafeteria.

Jim is mere seconds from turning his ass around and heading in the direction of food and friendship when a particularly disgruntled sophomore he managed to piss off last week catches his eye from maybe three yards away. Just like that, he's zipping his way into the library, good ideas (and his stomach) be damned.

It takes a little over five minutes of furtive, pseudo-casual searching for Jim to locate her on the second floor, sitting alone at a study table covered nearly edge-to-edge in binders, textbooks, notebooks, and various other academic materials like pens and flashcards. When he finds her, she's reading a passage in one of her textbooks, her expression clear and full of concentration and the fingers of her left hand resting delicately against her jaw, the wine-colored polish on her nails contrasting nicely with her skin.

And you know, he almost leaves right then and there, almost keeps himself from disturbing her when she looks so serene and pretty in her own little bubble of concentration, too perfect to be popped. He's almost satisfied with just letting her be and jetting over to the cafeteria like he was going to do in the first place. Almost.

But Jim has never been one for perfection and he's always had a thing for getting under people's skin, so instead of being smart and considerate and everything he's so far from being, he saunters over to her table and stands opposite her and says, “That's a whole lot of studying you got going on there.”
She doesn't jump or anything, but her head cocks up swiftly when she looks at him and her face goes from tranquil to cross in nearly no time, her eyebrows angling irritably and her cheeks hollowing incrementally (her expressions of anger are very subtle, Jim has noticed). “Oh my God–”

“What is this, *Accelerated Calculus*?” He briefly lifts the edge of one opened textbook to examine the cover. “You majoring in mathematics or something?”

“That's none of your busine–” She cuts herself off, hand shooting forward to quickly slap at his as she snaps, “Would you *stop* touching that?”

“I'd like to make it my business,” he says in response to her unfinished statement, unruffled and insouciant. He easily kicks the chair he's standing half-behind away from the table and drops down into it, doesn't tear his eyes away from her face for one second. “What are you into, huh? We might have something in common.”

“We *might* just have to take this outside,” she retorts, sitting straight and stiff in her seat and narrowing her eyes at him the tiniest bit. *She just threatened to fight me like a man*, Jim realizes in a small haze of shock.

“See? We *are* alike,” he laughs, heedless of the sour looks he's getting shot by various students attempting to study in his vicinity.

“Oh? How so?” Her tone is more vindictive than it is curious.

Jim smirks, obnoxiously self-satisfied. “We both like it rough,” he purrs. He is abruptly reminded of the phrase ‘*if looks could kill*’, then.

“Listen,” she says, her voice a sharp sliver of intent. “I don't know if you're actively trying to piss me off or you're just extraordinarily bad at taking a hint–”

“You never know, I could be both–”

“If you cut me off again, I just might rip your head off.” She is almost *scarily* serious when she says that, all quiet and solemn and perfectly articulate, with absolutely nothing but her stare betraying just how *livid* she is. “Do you understand me?”
Because he is still insistent on being a total moron, Jim replies, “Well, you're the one who said I was bad at taking hints. Do I?”

She looks like she's actually going to murder him for that remark. Jim watches his life flash before his eyes as the muscles of her jowls tighten, her fingers curl into a tight fist on the tabletop, her eyes turn into two blazing pits of hellfire, and then that's it, he's done for, tell his mother he loves her and make sure the papers know he tried as hard as he could –

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she asks instead of, I don't know, launching herself across the table at him and sinking her jaws into his jugular, and now, it's obvious that she's struggling not to lose her shit or make a scene or scream at him, and Jim finds that not only is he intimidated by her anger – he's intrigued by it as well (and he's just the type of person who likes to play with fire).

“Would it surprise you if I told you that's not the first time I've been asked that question?” he replies, this time with a touch of seriousness coloring his tone.

She scowls darkly at him, biting her words as they leave her. “No, not in the slightest.”

And because Jim is actually curious and because this is what brought him all the way up here and to her table in the first place, he tilts his head just slightly and says, “Look, what's so awful about me wanting to get to know you? I just spilled a little coffee on you and I apologized for it right after, so what did I do that was so unforgivable?” He might not sound entirely earnest, but that's because he isn't (after all, he knows he didn't do anything wrong, right?).

“Have you ever considered that it might be how relentlessly you're trying to get into my pants that's bothering me?” she replies without missing a beat.

“I thought girls were supposed to like that sort of thing.” Like I said, still an idiot.

Maybe where you come from,” she snaps. Her knuckles tense and shift atop the table. “Where I come from, it's considered rude and degrading.”

“So you must know that I don't mean any harm,” he points out with a smirk. Again, something murderous and lethal flashes in her eyes, and her expression turns into one of outright fury when she leans forward and snarls,
“You must be some kind of f**ked-up if you think you're being cute or charming or whatever the hell the idiots back in your hometown made you believe you are, you self-centered son of a –”

And then, out of fucking nowhere and in that distinctive, unusually soft tone – “Is there a problem, Nyota?” – and when Jim looks up, there Spock is, book in hand, in all his prim-and-proper, arched eyebrow-having, blue sweater-wearing, freakishly android-esque glory.

But that's not what catches Jim's attention.

“Nyota?” he asks, sweeping his eyes over the woman before him as if seeing her for the very first time. He savors the taste of her name on the palate of his mind, slowly, over and over again. Nyota. Nyota. “Is that foreign?”

“Oh, get out of here,” Nyota (Nyota!) groans at the exact same moment that Spock asks him, “And who might you be?” The look on both of their faces the second after that vocal collision has taken place is Kodak-worthy (and may I just draw some attention to the fact that the volume in this corner of the library has gone up maybe 45% since Jim sat his ass down here?).

Unable to help himself and unfortunately suffering from a condition known to most as chronic jackass syndrome, Jim turns his attention to Spock and goes, “What's it to you?”

Spock simply stares at him for a beat, gives Jim this unwavering, intense obsidian gaze that makes him squirm uneasily in his chair, and then he says, in no uncertain terms and so matter-of-factly it's almost comical, “You're in my seat.”

Oh.

“Accelerated Calculus, huh?” Jim blathers instead of making any move to get up, gesturing blithely to the textbook from earlier. “I'm guessing you're the mathematician in this outfit, am I right?” Nyota rolls her eyes; Spock's brow crumples a bit in what may or may not be confusion. “Which reminds me –” Jim glances between the two. “Is this something I should be worried about?”

“You shouldn't be worried about anything because none of this is your business,” is Nyota's growling response. She looks like she's prepared to say more, but Spock briefly touches a finger to the fist she has balled up on top of the table – a grounding action that Jim can only watch in total
puzzlement – and reminds her,

“Nyota, this is a library.” It disconcerts Jim how easily she pipes down at that, how eerily dispassionate Spock is. Spock fixes his dark gaze on him once more, says, “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Oh?” He folds his arms behind his head, insolent and nonchalant. “Could you run that by me again?”

“Who are you?” The response is instantaneous.

“He’s a self-absorbed asshole, that’s who,” Nyota comments, inciting a quick, amused smirk out of Jim.

“That too,” he purrs with a wink. She rolls her eyes again, more irritably this time. “My name is James Tiberius Kirk, monsieur. You can call me Jim.”

Spock raises one sharp brow at him. “Duly noted.” His tone grows even more solemn, if possible, when he goes on to ask, “And may I inquire as to why, Mr. Kirk, you are so insistent on inflaming Ms. Uhura's temper?”

“Nyota Uhura,” Jim marvels rather than giving Spock a straightforward reply (because, unsurprisingly, he's still not taking any of this that seriously). He grins at Nyota, spreading his arms as if to concede some sort of victory to her. “I gotta say, that's a beautiful nam–”

“The question, Mr. Kirk,” Spock cuts in, and he doesn't say it too harshly or with any sort of antagonistic intent, but the clipped, no-nonsense tone of his voice makes Jim extraordinarily uncomfortable, makes him feel as though someone has shoved a metal rod up his spine, because what, this guy is a year older than him and he's talking to him like a teacher would, all high and mighty and so sure of himself, and we all know how Jim feels about teachers, especially the ones who try to order him around and tell him what to do, who the fuck does he think he is –

“Why the hell does it matter to you?” Jim asks, a little rougher than he imagined he would.

Unfettered, Spock replies, “It matters to me because it matters to Ms. Uhura.” His voice is just as even and calm as it has been since he showed up out of the void. “I would now ask you to remove
yourself with consideration to how much you've vexed her—"

“Has anyone ever told you they needed a dictionary to understand what you're saying?” Jim blurts.

And then, for the very first time since Jim ever laid eyes on him, Spock looks irritated, his dark brows drawing together into a tense triangle at the center of his forehead, his lips tightening into a thin, taut little line. In the distance, there is the sound of trumpets and the beating of drums and a cavalry and We Are the Champions by Queen blaring at full volume.

“Excuse me?” Spock says, and again, his voice isn’t particularly sharp or anything, but there’s this barely audible strain tugging at the back of it and this undeniable glint of exasperation in his eyes that is giving Jim so much life right now.

“Oh, nothing,” Jim replies, practically hopping out of Spock's chair and watching almost manically as the man's expression grows infinitesimally crosser. “I'll just be getting out of your way now, you know, since you asked nice.” He claps a hand against Spock's shoulder as he makes his way off, taunting him, observes with something like glee as man bodily flinches in response to the contact.

And then, before he's totally out of range, he remembers himself, turns mid-pace to throw a cheekily merry grin and a loose peace sign their way, and – because he has something of a death wish – crows, “Catch you on the flip side, Spock, Nyota!”

Amidst the incensed groans of 'shut up!' and 'good riddance' all across the floor, Nyota snaps, “That's Uhura to you!”

Uhura. He can get down with Uhura.

The last thing Jim sees before he's booking it for an elevator is that gloriously peeved look on Spock's marble face. He's almost entirely certain he's never going to see the man again after that.

Boy, is he mistaken.
Jim Kirk starts seeing them everywhere.

He's hanging out with McCoy in the quad on Tuesday afternoon, playfully reading the man's medical text aloud from over his shoulder in a deliberate attempt to be annoying, and McCoy is correcting him with a brusque, “That's not how you pronounce onychomycosis, you child,” when Jim catches them in his periphery. He doesn't hear Bones chewing the word out at him – “AH-nee-COH-my-COH-siss” – as he watches Spock and Uhura walk side-by-side across the green, engaged in a conversation he can't make out from six yards away. She has her notebooks folded in the crook of her left arm like she always does. He's wearing a different sweater than the one he was sporting yesterday, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, still undeniably blue (this time, it's a shade close to periwinkle). They're not holding hands, but they look like they should be (and maybe even like they want to be).

And Jim can't bring himself to stop stupidly gawking at them as they sit at one of the unoccupied benches dotting the quadrangle, can't rend his eyes from from Uhura's crossed legs and Spock's neat crop of hair and the meager bit of space between them until Bones is in his ear going, “Hello, Earth to Jim?”, and he's focusing his attention on flipping the pages of the man's textbook several chapters backwards, laughing mercilessly and obnoxiously in response to his spirited protesting.

He swears up and down that he and Spock don't make eye contact the second before he looks away.

(He's wrong.)

Of course, then there's Wednesday morning, when Jim sees Uhura in English and, for once, doesn't make a move to speak to her or do anything more than offer her than a customarily charming smile (one she greets with an icy glare, mind you). It's when he passes Spock on his way to his car afterwards that he starts to freak out a little (and when I say freak out, I mean give the guy about three or four double takes and release these silent, semi-panicked little 'what the fuck's into the cab of his truck as he drives off to work, because yeah, he is a wee bit paranoid that Spock may or may not be keeping an eye on him or something creepy and overprotective like that), and even later that same day, when he's accompanying Sulu to the campus bookstore so he can pick out a postcard to send his parents, he notices both of them several aisles away, casually perusing the encyclopedias, and proceeds to have a miniature panic attack on the spot. He makes so much of a scene trying to get Sulu to hurry up and buy his postcard so they can get the fuck out of there (“– just go with the damn Empire State Building, they gave birth to you, man, of course they'll love it –”) that there's no doubt in his mind that they saw him as well.

And on Thursday? He spots them a grand total of four times all throughout the day – when he's walking to class with Sulu, taking a stroll with Chekov, grabbing a cup of coffee from the cafeteria,
hell, when he and McCoy are getting ready to go on a fucking beer run at nine o'clock in the evening – he sees them, together and apart, and I wouldn't be lying if I told you he was convinced he's cracking up because of it.

It's not that he doesn't want to see them (specifically Uhura, for that matter) and it's not that he's afraid of confrontation (he never has been). It's not even so much his irrational theory that Spock is checking up on him. It's the fact that he's not even trying to be an uncomfortable presence in their lives, and yet for some reason, he's succeeding perfectly at doing just that. What are the odds that he'd run into the same two people seven fucking times over the course of only three days on a campus as large as Starfleet's and without a clue as to where they live or even who they are on a personal level?

(The answer: very small, but very real.)

And of course, all the while this accidental game of tag is going on, Jim doesn't stop pondering the curious case of Spock and Uhura's relationship status. He never sees them doing anything explicitly romantic, doesn't even catch them holding hands, but Uhura's peculiar defensiveness where that question is concerned, his lack of a clear answer, and the sheer amount of times he sees them together makes him wonder, you know? (It never occurs to him that they could simply be very close friends.)

He's chilling out with his laptop and a can of Sprite in the shade of a magnolia tree in the quad again on Friday afternoon, just after 3:00, when he sees them yet another time, sitting at a wrought iron table about fifteen feet away from him and conversing over their cups of coffee and their textbooks.

Now, at this point, Jim is seriously starting to consider himself scorned by some kind of supernatural force, so he takes a few moments to peer imploringly, helplessly, at the blue shards of sky peeking at him from between the magnolias and the leaves above him. He silently apologizes to whatever heavenly being may be looking down upon him in that moment for anything shitty he might have done in his short life – “Sorry for stealing Mr. Harrison's car, sorry for never calling whatsername back like I promised I would, sorry for punching Sam in the face, even though he kind of deserved it...” – before returning his gaze to the table, foolishly expecting Spock and Uhura to have magically disappeared in some form of divine mercy.

Unsurprisingly, they're still there, sipping their cappuccinos and being just as classy and studious as they always are. Jim Kirk has retained his status as a damned man.

At first, Jim is ready to grab his shit and get the hell out of dodge, maybe go find Bones and make his life a little harder for an hour or two, but something keeps him from moving, something that, to a guy like him, walks and talks a whole lot like enlightenment.
Why should he have to go out of his way to avoid them? Why is he freaking out so much over a simple coincidence? And when the hell did it become acceptable for him to be so completely affected by another human being, let alone two?

These are the questions Jim is asking himself as he continues to stay exactly where he is and stare rather imperviously at Spock and Uhura, completely lost to the article he was previously reading on his computer. In his all-consuming idiocy where they (in addition to most other people) are concerned, he is not aware that he's been gawking at them an awful lot this week, only that he is mysteriously familiar with both of their mannerisms and that he's sort-of-kind of captivated by their existence. He is also oblivious to the fact that he's been pretty unsubtle about his unintentional fascination with them. He is also unable to notice that Spock is staring back at him until he manages to tear his eyes away from Uhura, who is currently engrossed in her textbook, and shit, that would be small splinters discomfort spiking in the pit of Jim's stomach and tiny flashes of red flaring up in his mind and what little bit of common sense he may possess leaving him in one big stupid rush, and Spock is just watching him so damn intently and with that freakishly impassive look he's always got on his face, as if there's some sort of jam in his wiring that prevents him from expressing any sort of human emotion or maybe even like he spent the first thirteen years of his life locked in a fucking basement or something (Jim saw a documentary about a girl that happened to once and couldn't stop freaking out about it for months), and Jim is panicking and uncomfortable and not at all ashamed, so do you know what he does?

He smiles at the guy, a quick, toothy, nervous quirk of the lips that ignites an infinitesimal spark of curiosity in Spock's mostly unreadable expression. The man's eyebrow twitches.

Jim watches, nearly terrified, as Spock turns back to Uhura, says something to her (what was that? Jim can't hear anything over the sound of his own stupidity), and then gets to his feet and starts walking towards him, still just as vague and as eerie as can be. Uhura doesn't make any move to look his way or even respond to whatever the hell Spock told her with more than a brief nod, so Jim can only assume that the man didn't blow his cover (as if he has a cover to speak of).

And when Spock reaches him, stops about five feet away from where he's sitting on the grass, the man asks him, “Why have you taken to pursuing Ms. Uhura and myself over the course of the past four days?”

Jim's initial instinct is to contradict him, tell him he's really not trying to stalk them even though it more than definitely looks like he is, but because he has no mind/mouth filter and he's still Jim Kirk, instead, he says, “Still talking like a dictionary, huh?”

Spock's eyebrow twitches again, but otherwise, his expression continues to not change and he continues to be a fucking robot. “Resorting to petty insults will not help you,” he says, like he's
pointing it out to Jim for his benefit.

“Should I start calling you Webster?” Jim blurts, but before Spock can, I don't know, beat him with a verbal yardstick, he quickly and awkwardly attaches a, “I'm not stalking you guys, okay?” to the end of his jest, and he may or may not be gazing really intently at Spock's face right now, because it actually kind of rivets him that a guy as young as Spock probably is (nineteen is his best guess) would have such an oddly formal, atonal manner of speaking. Was he raised in Buckingham Palace or something?

“You're not?” Spock asks, and he doesn't voice the question like he's confirming Jim's statement or even like he's particularly disbeliefing of it; it could almost be considered rhetorical, really, but Jim isn't sure so he just kind of gives him this dumb shake of the head. Spock's brow shifts the tiniest bit as he goes on to say, “Then why have I observed you in almost every place we have been for the majority of this week? Are you suggesting that this is a mere coincidence?”

Jim nods a bit slowly. “Yeah, pretty much,” he replies, and because he's actually a little lost, he asks, “Are you angry right now? Because I really can–”

“I'm not angry,” Spock swiftly clarifies. “I am only curious, as well as somewhat concerned for your wellbeing.”

Well, that throws Jim for a loop.

“Why would you be worried about me?” he laughs, a snorting, incredulous thing accompanied by one of his more impudent smiles. Honestly, he can't even help himself at this point in his life; he's just come to expect his immune system, or whatever, to automatically respond to any sort of human kindness by compelling him to act like a gigantic asshole.

Jim could swear that Spock almost smiles at him then, slight and subtle and only with one corner of his mouth, and the man averts his gaze for a moment as he absently smooths down the front of his denim (blue!) shirt before quickly returning his eyes to Jim and replying, nearly amused, “Should Ms. Uhura become aware of your recurring presence, I presume she would not take too kindly to you.”

“Touché,” Jim sighs, suddenly understanding the odd whisper of delight in Spock's expression. His demeanor temporarily sobers as he adds, “But I mean, I'm not following you guys, or at least I'm not trying to.” He then lets out a brief chuckle. “Maybe it's fate that we keep on bumping into each other, huh?”
“I do not believe in fate,” is Spock's simple answer. It leaves Jim just as uncomfortable and confused as he was before this conversation even began, which reminds him...

“Are you two dating or not?” The question is clumsy, abrupt, maybe even fairly inappropriate (but hey, it's not as if Jim has never been any of those things). When Jim realizes this and Spock gives him a slightly inquisitive look, he scrambles to offer an explanation (because for some obscure reason he feels like he owes one to this guy – someone he just barely knows and has insulted on several different occasions over the course of their five-day relationship). “I mean, Uhura wouldn’t say anything and I'm not gonna go out of my way to steal some other guy's gi–”

“For Ms. Uhura's sake,” Spock cuts him off, slipping his hands into the pockets of his trousers and fixing Jim with an indecipherable look. “I'm going to say yes.”

What?

That word – what? – is the only thing Jim can hear ricocheting around in his head while he watches Spock retreat, his back a broad blue plane of unanswered questions and stony indifference. He can only imagine what his face must be doing as he keeps his eyes glued to the man, who reclaims his seat across from Uhura, says something brief to her, and then proceeds to continue studying, not looking back at Jim for even an instant.

Jim has never rushed to get home so fast.

He's in his dorm room in a record three minutes (which is kind of a big deal considering that Starfleet campus is a little over 270 square acres and he's carrying his backpack and a half-full beverage), all but slamming the door and letting loose a rallying cry of sorts – “Bones, where the fuck are you!!”

You see, McCoy happens to be just as good at listening as he is at complaining, and ever since that first day when he opened up to Jim (if you consider unreservedly bitching about bathroom sanitation to be opening up, that is) and put him to bed like he might have known him for years instead of only fifteen minutes, Jim has come to subconsciously consider the man his closest confidant. He's never been a particularly whiny person or anything, but whenever he needs to air his thoughts (mostly just so he can get them out of his head for a second or two), Bones is his go-to guy, and he never disappoints.

“What happened?” McCoy's voice comes sailing out from their room several moments before he
appears, idly scratching at the stubble covering his jaw and carrying a book of crossword puzzles in 
his hand (because Bones is really passionate about those kinds of things). He gives Jim a vaguely 
disappointed look, like he already knows he's done something wrong. “Did you finally get yer ass 
kicked by that woman you've been doggin’?”

“I think she's dating an android,” Jim says instead of answering McCoy directly. “Except I can't 
really tell because neither of them want to give me a straight answer. It's like they're allergic to doing 
things the easy way or something.”

Bones makes his way over to the sofa and plops down as Jim speaks, refraining to look up from his 
crossword puzzle. “An android?” he asks, incredulous.

“Yes, a fucking android,” Jim practically explodes in a heavy gust of air. He starts thoughtlessly 
pacing about the living room, not moving to put his backpack or his soda down. “And she nearly 
bites my face off every time I ask her and he's about as useful as a, as a...”

“As a tit on a boar hog?” Bones pipes. Jim stops being excited just long enough to shoot the man a 
look of utter astonishment.

“Whatever the fuck that's supposed to mean,” he snorts, and when McCoy doesn't make a comment 
or do anything but give him this brief nod that could honestly mean anything, he shrugs and resumes 
his moaning and groaning.

“I mean – I'm not out to steal anyone's girlfriend, so why the fuck can't Mister Confucius Says stop 
with the riddle-me-this bullshit and –”

“Wait, wait, stop,” McCoy cuts in, looking up at Jim for the first time since he's sat down, his 
expression vaguely irritated. “Put yer stuff down and sit, why dontya? Yer makin' me nervous.”

Jim expels a lengthy sigh as he does what he's told, carefully tossing his backpack onto the coffee 
table and dropping into the easy chair next to the sofa. He keeps his Sprite, though.

“Start from the beginnin','” Bones instructs him with a small wave of his pen. “And try to make as 
much sense as possible fer my sake.”

So Jim tells McCoy the tale of how he accidentally came to stalk the object of his affections and her
“Didja ever think that maybe you could lay off her and she'd stop, I dunno, wantin' to castrate you?” is Bones' first question, asked over the edge of his crossword book and punctuated by the less-than-enthusiastic look on his face, all furrowed brows and unimpressed scowling. Never let it be said that Leonard McCoy is a dishonest man.

“Well, I have laid off her, mostly,” Jim immediately replies, just a little defensive. “I mean, the extent of our communication since Monday has been me smiling at her and her glaring back. That's it!”

“Too little, too late, man,” McCoy tsks, scribbling in his crossword puzzle and completely ignoring Jim's hangdog frown. He raises one eyebrow without looking at the other, asks, “Who did you say she wasn't datin' again? The android?”

“Yeah, him,” Jim grumbles, leaning back in his chair and taking a swig of his now-warm soda. “He's this total freak that talks just like he popped out of a fucking Brontë and may or may not have a thirty nine and a half foot pole shoved up his ass.”

“Yer a mean one, Mister Grinch...” McCoy hums, sing-songy.

“His name is Spock,” says Jim. It is almost comical how instantaneously Bones drops his crossword book on the table and whips his head up to look at him, eyes wide and expression inflamed.

“Spock?” the man asks, his eyebrows steadily climbing up his forehead. “The Spock?”

Truth be told, the amount of alarm Bones is exhibiting at the moment is really troubling Jim (mainly because it's never a good sign when the mere name of the guy you're sort of beefing with incites that sort of reaction in others; that's usually an indicator of something intimidating and scary like excellence or steroids), so his voice comes out a nervous croak when he says, “You know him?”

McCoy snorts loudly in response. “Do I?”

According to Bones, Spock (last name Grayson) is at the top of his class and has consistently been at the top of his class since the first semester of his first year at Starfleet. He supposedly comes from a wealthy family down in New York City, and he is known throughout the majority of the student body for three things:
• **One**, that he is almost certainly a genius. There have been rumors circulating since last year that his intelligence quotient surpasses 170 (cue an involuntary gasp and a shocked 'no fucking way' courtesy of Jim).

• **Two**, his oddness in general. It's common knowledge around Starfleet that Spock doesn't have the most normal way of speaking or acting, that he might stare a little longer than he should, that nearly 99% of the time he comes off as nearly robotic in nature. Apparently most people don't think much of that, though, as evidenced by the fact that –

• **Three**, hordes and hordes of men and women have been vying for his affections ever since he first hit Starfleet campus, and in all the time he's been here, he's never dated a single one of them, let alone shown them any sort of interest. As a result, not only does he appear to be almost entirely too aloof, but he's something of a heartbreaker as well.

Of course, then McCoy goes on to whinge about how haughty and stuck-up the guy is – “*I bet you a whole lotta money that the reason this guy doesn't date is because he's too busy bein' up his own ass half the time.*” – and when Jim asks him if he's ever actually met him, he's met with a resounding 'no', followed by, “*But his damn reputation speaks loud enough in my opinion, ya hear what I'm sayin’?*”

Jim hears. But it – all of it – doesn't sit quite right in his ears, doesn't quell any of his confusion, doesn't explain if and why Spock is really courting Uhura, and it doesn't make him any less lost than he was before he came running up here. He's getting there, though. At least he's a little less anxious about it all.

After about ten minutes of sitting quietly, pensively, in his chair and watching McCoy continue to work on his crossword puzzle, Jim springs to his feet and starts heading for his bedroom, backpack in hand. Before he's even halfway across the living room, he remembers himself and turns back to his roommate, asks, “Where's the directory?”

“Sulu put it on the counter by the fridge,” Bones replies, growling briefly at his crossword after he's spoken.

Jim alters his trajectory to retrieve the student directory from the kitchen, momentarily tripping over a stray article of clothing on the floor on his way there. It's then when he first realizes that neither Sulu or Chekov have wandered through the apartment the entire time he's been here.

“Where's Sulu and the Russian?” he asks as he's flipping through the directory, scanning the pages for names beginning with *U*. 
It takes McCoy about a second and a half to answer him. “Out.” Several more moments of silence. “Tryin'a hoard orange juice from the cafeteria.”

Jim chuckles, amused, as he exits the kitchen and makes a beeline for his original destination. “I'm gonna make a phone call, okay?” he announces a moment before he's moving to kick his door closed behind him, but McCoy stops him with a semi-urgent,

“Wait!” Jim pauses, right foot still poised six inches off the ground. “Where Charon carries on, four letters.”

“Styx,” Jim replies without more than an instant of thought. He shuts the door on McCoy's irritated echo – “Styx!” – and transfers his full attention to digging his cellphone out of his backpack and the name resting beneath his thumb – Uhura, Nyota.

One, two, three, four rings before she picks up. “Hello?” Her voice sounds an octave deeper on the phone.

“Uhura?” Jim asks, just to clarify that it's her.

“Who is this?” she shoots back instead of answering. There's a bit of movement over the line.

Jim leans back against his headboard, shrugging lightly and making a sheepish face at no one in particular as he prepares himself for the dial tone. “I'll give you three guesses.”

A beat. “I don't have time to play games with you, whoever you a–”

“It's me!” he crows with a nervous laugh. “Your friendly neighborhood self-absorbed asshole.”

It doesn't take her very long to catch on. “Oh, god,” she groans, immediately exasperated. Jim hears what sounds like a door slamming in the background. “How the hell did you get my number?”

“Student directory,” he replies, idly flipping through the pages of the book in question without
looking for anything specific. Not thinking, he adds, “You mind if I save it?”

“I'm going to hang up now,” Uhura says, effectively reminding him of the sheer mortality of this phone call.

“Wait, listen!” Jim scrambles, dropping the directory onto the floor and instinctively straightening his back. He runs a hand through his brush of sandy hair, out of his element. “I... I wanted to apologize.”

Yes, my friends. The reason why Jim Kirk has endeavored to contact Ms. Uhura is because he, for the first time in the entirety of his life, felt the need to apologize for his wrongdoings. Let's just say that something in McCoy's profound disapproval of his methods of courtship really inspired him.

There's a somewhat lengthy, terrifying moment of silence that hangs between them, then. Jim holds his breath, gazing deeply into the eyes of Kurt Cobain as he stares out at him from the poster on his wall. While he waits for a reply, a little ditty starts composing itself in his mind – “When I find myself in times of trouble, Kurt Cobain comes to me, speaking words of wisdom...”

“Thanks but no thanks, jackass,” Uhura eventually says, unintentionally finishing the verse. Jim sighs.

“Look, I know I haven't exactly been a white knight to you –”

“Is that some kind of jab at our ethnicities?”

“But shouldn't it count at least a little that I'm saying sorry?”

“Do you even know what you're apologizing for?” Uhura asks, and for the record, it's actually quite shocking that she's still on the phone with Jim after so long. He expected her to have hung up on him like fifty seconds ago, and this conversation is only about a minute old to begin with.

“Well, uh...” Now is when Jim starts to fumble a bit. He only rehearsed this exchange up until the initial apology, and that's mainly because one – he's not a big fan of forethought, and two – he was pretty sure his douchebaggery was self-explanatory at this point. But because he's a hard worker by nature and he's supposed to be good at this whole talking thing, or whatever, it's only a second before he recovers with, “I've been a total jerk to you, haven't I?” As if he didn't already know that.
“You have,” Uhura agrees. There’s some more rustling over the line, then, “Are you telling me this because you're actually sorry or just because you think it'll make you look better to me?”

Jim hesitates, sensing a trap, carefully considering his answer. “… both?”

There shouldn't be anything wrong with a little kissing up, should there? And she can't knock him for his honesty, right? Right?

Apparently she can, because instantly, she's shutting him down with a, “Bye, Kirk,” and hanging up on his ass without any further ado. Jim is left alone with the dial tone, Mr. Cobain, and the small thrill of having his name said for the very first time by Uhura (not that jackass and asshole didn't do it for him, either).

For maybe two and a half minutes, Jim remains propped up against his headboard, lazily twirling his phone in his lap and listening to the muted sounds of rap music playing in the apartment below and several female students laughing on the sidewalk outside. He sits there and slowly convinces himself that he's not that let down, that his feelings aren't all that hurt, and yeah, that he deserved what he got, didn't he?

Really, it's not about being rejected anymore. He's pretty much past that, thanks to Spock's existence, his conversation with McCoy, and his own common sense. It's more that he's blown his chances at achieving anything close to a relationship of any kind with Uhura that bothers him, and there's almost nothing Jim Kirk hates more in the world than wasted opportunities.

There's also the fact that he's actually starting to think Uhura is, dare he say it, kind of fucking mean. Not because she's independent. Not because she stands up for herself. What gets him is her absolute, unwavering certainty that she has him all figured out even though the extent of their communication is limited, at best. And how exactly did she come to the conclusion that Spock is so much better than he is after like, not even a day of knowing both of them? And did he really ever have a chance with her after he spilled, what, an ounce of coffee on her? Did she even give him one to begin with?

Jim is contemplating this and whether or not he should take a shower, get in his pajamas, eat some junk food, and play Mass Effect for the rest of the afternoon and evening when the sound of the front door opening and closing and Sulu, Chekov, and McCoy's voices snap him out of his reverie. He tosses his cellphone to the side and makes for the living room, where he finds McCoy and Sulu engaged in some sort of discussion and Chekov rummaging around in his messenger bag, which, upon closer inspection, is nearly overflowing with ten ounce bottles of Tropicana. Jim lets himself have a laugh at that.
“You know how them Greeks are, though,” is what McCoy is saying when Jim tunes in to he and Sulu's conversation. “Bunch'a pompous assholes if you ask me.”

“Bones, you think everyone's a pompous asshole,” Jim points out as he drops down next to the man on the sofa. He gets a quick glare in response.

“It's not like everyone there is going to be a Greek, though,” Sulu says, moving to sit in the easy chair Jim was occupying earlier. Chekov passes behind the sofa and into the kitchen as the man goes on, “They pretty much said that anyone was invited.”

“Invited to what?” Jim pipes in, his interest piqued. Suddenly, the remainder of his evening isn't looking too shabby.

“Oh!” Sulu emits a nervous little chuckle and slaps his knee as if to reprimand himself – an action Jim can't help but smile at. “I was just telling McCoy about how Chekov and I ran into these Greeks in the caf who were handing out invitations to this party they're having tonight.”

“Well, if they're just arbitrarily handing out invites to everyone they can't be that elitist, can they?” Jim aims the question at Bones, who has defiantly turned back to his crossword puzzle and is scribbling in a word almost furiously at the moment.

Sulu grins exultantly, briefly raising a hand to Jim and crowing, “What he said!” Jim gifts him with a short little bow of the head.

McCoy's scowl deepens incrementally in response. Instead of dignifying either of them with a direct reply, he says, “Japanese earthquake city of 1995, four letters.”

Sulu shakes his head at Jim for a moment, a look of feigned hurt upon his face, and sighs, “It's because I'm a Jap, isn't it?” Jim just about blows a fucking lung out laughing as the man turns to McCoy and says, “Kobe, K-o-b-e. Do we get to party because I helped you?”

“Dancer Tallchief, five letters,” is Bones' stiff-lipped answer.

“Maria!” Chekov supplies, returning from the kitchen and presently free of any extra orange juice.
Jim composes himself just enough to scoot over and give the teenager some room to sit down on his other side. Chekov gives him a gleeful smile for his trouble.

And then, because he actually does want to go to this party more than he wants to breathe, Jim struggles through his laughter to say, “Oh... come on, Bones...” He snickers into his hand. “Doesn’t the promise of booze call to you?”

“Ah, the booze...” Sulu hums in accord.

“Glorious showers of booze,” Jim goes on, spreading his arms for emphasis and grinning when Chekov laughs at the display. “What do they say about going to college parties?”

“And they say, upon entry, they will lay you upon their leather couches smelling of sweat and sex and you will be rewarded with seventy-two untouched red Solo cups filled to the brim with the finest of all liquors.” Sulu pauses dramatically. “Heineken.”

You hear that, that ugly, hysterical howling noise? That would be Jim breathing his last on his journey from the land of the living. Oh God, he's almost peeing.

“Speaking of which, how do you think they acquire so much alcohol?” Sulu asks, watching McCoy's face intently as the man makes a valiant, yet failing, attempt not to end up like Jim. “I mean, that's a lot of booze to go out and buy, especially considering that nearly half the student body is going to be there...”

“Do you zink Ms. Chapel vill be zere?” Chekov puts in, openly referring to McCoy's not-so-secret infatuation for one of his fellow medical students.

Immediately, Bones is lowering his crossword and shooting both Chekov and Sulu pointed, defensive looks, saying, “Christine doesn't do parties, alright?”

“You never know, man,” Jim manages through the small seizures of laughter still racking his body, slouching deeply against the sofa at this point. “This one could be the turning point for her.”

Sulu nods his agreement. “And you'd never even know if you didn't go.”
“You should call her and invite her,” Jim suggests. “I promise I'll sleep on the couch if you get lucky.”

Bones whacks Jim in the stomach with his crossword book, shaking his head in affectionate exasperation as the man simply purrs in response and Sulu and Chekov chuckle at the exchange. “Why d'you guys even want me to go to this damn thing so bad?” he asks.

He gets three answers, all spoken at the exact same time, right on top of the other:

- “Because it vill be fun!” That's Chekov.
- “Because you need to get your soggy ass out of this apartment.” That's Sulu.
- “Because we love you, y’old sawbones.” And that's Jim.

Jim smiles up at the look of tender bemusement McCoy gives him, shows him all thirty-two of his teeth and scrunches his nose up and makes his eyes small and squinty and adorable. They all know he hasn't told a lie.

After a prolonged moment of silence, Bones lets out a lengthy sigh, drops his crossword book onto the coffee table, gets to his feet, and walks all the way across the living room, six curious pairs of eyes following him all the while.

It's only when the man reaches his bedroom door that he says, “So we'll go the goddamn party, yeah?”

Jim and Sulu explode into a melodramatic fit of cheers and rejoicing, leap about six feet out of their seats, and meet each other over the coffee table in a noisy, violent high-five. They then proceed to dance around the living room, with Sulu breaking out into full air-guitar mode and Jim grabbing up a giggling, bewildered Chekov from the sofa to sloppily waltz him across the floor.

It's safe to say that they're pleased with this outcome. Meanwhile, McCoy is rolling his eyes so hard they're nearly falling right out of his head.

The next hour and a half is spent getting ready for the party, and by getting ready, I mean Jim, Sulu, and Chekov nosily sitting in on McCoy's phone call with Miss Christine Chapel for about fifteen minutes, the four of them arguing over the shower for ten, Chekov brushing his teeth in the
kitchen sink while Bones mans the bathroom (mostly due to the fact that 'he's the one who's definitely getting laid tonight,' as stated by Jim), some panicked searching for the invitation (which Sulu misplaced at some point between walking in the door and doing his victory dance with Jim), and, of course, the actual things getting ready entails, like the changing of clothes and the applying of deodorant and the grooming of persons. As it turns out, McCoy, Sulu, and Chekov are the only ones who actually do any cleaning up; Jim mostly just runs a hand through his hair, says “fuck it,” and sits in the corner of his room playing Temple Run on his phone while playfully criticizing McCoy's sense of fashion – “I hope Chapel has as much of a boner for your cowboy boots as you do,” and “Did you tell her to look for your belt buckle when she gets there? Because you could see that sucker from space, man.”

They take Sulu's car – a fairly old Trailblazer – to the Greek house just outside of Starfleet campus. Jim is more than determined to call shotgun until Chekov turns to them all and asks for their permission to sit there – “If it isn't too much to ask,” he says – and the kid is too polite and adorable and eager for Jim to deny him the privilege. He takes the backseat with McCoy and pokes fun at his clothing some more.

Just as they're exiting Starfleet campus, Chekov announces to the whole car that, “I have never been to a party before,” effectively bringing about one huge collective gasp among the roommates.

“Are you serious?” Jim blurts without realizing how rude the question might sound until it's already out of him.

Thankfully, Chekov doesn't seem to take any offense, and his reply is a completely genuine, almost alarmed, “Like a heart attack!”

“As a heart attack,” Sulu corrects him. He reaches across the center console to give Chekov's knee a brief, reassuring pat. “Nice try, though.”

Meanwhile, Jim is having a minor freak-out in the backseat. “We can't let him go off into the wild unprepared and uneducated.”

“Unprepared?” Chekov echoes, a note of fear in his voice.

“Don't mix your drinks no matter what McCoy might tell you,” Jim says, laughing when said man cracks a hand against his shoulder.
“Don't put yer drink down, either,” McCoy adds. “That's just askin' fer trouble,”

“Try to drink a lot of water so you don't end up with the worst hangover of all time tomorrow,” Jim puts in.

“Don't do anythin' you wouldn't want people to remember you for,” McCoy says.

“Did you eat anything before we left?” Jim asks.

Before Chekov can even begin to answer, McCoy is saying, “Tell me yer not wearin' sandals.”

“You guys, come on,” Sulu interrupts, shushing Jim and McCoy with a beseeching wave of the hand with consideration to the look of absolute terror on Chekov's face. “I'll stick with you the whole time, okay? Don't worry about it.”

Chekov shifts uncomfortably in his seat, the anxiety apparent in his expression lightening only just slightly. “Okay...” he whimpers, plaintive and apprehensive. Sulu pinches his cheek in response.

Ever a perceptive one, Jim snorts from the backseat and lets out a whispered, intentionally audible, “Gay.” McCoy takes that as his cue to hit him again.

When they get to the party, students are pouring out of every doorway and a Beastie Boys album is booming from two gargantuan speakers in the living room. The air is thick with the smell of alcohol, cigarette smoke, and human sweat, and Jim can't turn anywhere without finding a hand on his ass or nearly tripping over someone's feet or trying not to get a mouthful of a stranger's hair or getting a deep whiff of body odor. They're only six feet into the house before it looks like Chekov is going to have a panic attack, McCoy is yelling over the din that he's 'goin' to look fer Christine, okay?!', Sulu is wrapping an arm tight around Chekov's shoulders, and Jim is drunk simply by proxy.

Plainly put, it's the craziest party Jim has ever been to, and they've only been there for about forty-five seconds.

Immediately after McCoy has disappeared, Jim, Sulu, and Chekov agree to stay close and rendezvous in the backyard in three hours just in case they lose each other. Sulu and Chekov then proceed to navigate the crowd, looking for a pocket of relatively clean air and a slightly lower concentration of people, while Jim makes it his mission in life to find some booze and get some
drinks for his friends and for himself (mostly himself).

And for the first **hour and a half** or so, they actually have a lot of fun, considering the sheer amount of people in the house and the fact that for about **thirty minutes**, Chekov is the human equivalent of a newborn kitten, all overwhelmed and bewildered and helpless and possibly blind. Once Jim and Sulu manage to get a drink or two in him, though, it's smooth sailing from then on out, and the party quickly becomes a blur of strobe lights, wanton screaming, body heat, and random girls (and guys) cooing all over Chekov. They pass their time mingling with the party goers, casually searching for McCoy, drinking way too much jungle juice, and laughing at each other's ridiculous attempts at dancing. Sulu turns out to be the only one of them who's actually proficient at such an activity, seeing as he took hip hop and swing classes in his adolescence, while Chekov just kind of awkwardly pushes his butt around and flaps his arms a bit and Jim threatens to kills Sulu with his white boy butterfly/two-step combination.

“Why don't you teach me how it's done, then, Fred Astaire?” Jim teases him, playfully shoving a hand against his shoulder and accidentally spilling **a few ounces** of jungle juice onto his shirt (he's really good at getting beverages on people if you couldn't tell). Keep in mind that everyone is screaming just to be heard over each other and the music.

Sulu just continues to laugh into his Solo cup, says, “I might have to before you make me choke on my drink and **die** right in the middle of this party.”

Jim is prepared to say something back to him when Chekov starts patting his arm almost frantically, pointing into the crowd and crying, “Look! It's Ms. Uhura!”

Sure enough, there she is straight ahead of him, helping herself to a drink at a table near the kitchen and engaged in conversation with a female student Jim's never seen before. She's wearing a sleeveless, wine-colored party dress that only just brushes her knees and, as a result, looks especially, **dangerously** beautiful. Jim is suddenly reminded of the exact moment in which she hung up on him earlier today.

“Oh my God, **that's** the girl you've been trying to butter up?” Sulu gasps, and when Jim turns to him, he's shooting him a look of pleased surprise and saying, “I **work** with that chick at the restaurant.”

“Are you joking?” Jim asks, staring at Sulu as if the man has slapped him.

“Not even for a second,” Sulu replies, taking a sip of his jungle juice. He makes this soft, giggling sort of noise. “**Man**, I actually feel kind of sorry for you now. She's tough as nails.”
“‘Tough as nails?’” Chekov asks, watching Sulu inquisitively. Sulu grins.

“It's an expression,” he clarifies. “It means she's really fierce.”

It's at around that time that Jim stops listening to them and starts making his way through the crowd in pursuit of her. He's not entirely sure why he's going to talk to her or even what he's going to say when he does, but he keeps getting hit with that stupid, almost gut-wrenching hung-up-on feeling with every step he takes toward her, and that's what keeps him from turning his ass around and going back to Sulu and Chekov, where he's comfortable and happy and not in danger of getting a drink thrown in his face.

“You know, it's really impolite to hang up on someone,” is what ends up coming out of his mouth when he reaches her, unrehearsed and thoughtless.

Uhura turns away from the girl she's talking with to look at him, and for what feels like the thousandth time this week, Jim is hit with the look of unimpressed, exasperated recognition that crosses her face every time she sees him. It still stings, believe it or not.

“It's also really impolite to interrupt conversations and relentlessly hit on a girl long after she asks you to stop,” Uhura retorts with a smile of feigned pleasantry, a smile that twists something nasty in Jim's core.

“I tried to apologize to you, but...” Jim gives her a shrug and an insincere, bitter little smirk. “You know how well that went.”

Uhura narrows her eyes at him a moment before her friend is passing her a quick, “I guess I'll talk to you later, okay?” and disappearing into the throng of partygoers. Her ire only seems to intensify as she watches her go, and when she looks back to Jim, she's snapping, “Great, now you're driving off my friends.”

“I guess I'm just not that good for you, huh?” Jim says, simply smiling in response to the glare she aims at him.

“It's nice to see that you're finally catching on,” Uhura replies. Jim soberes pretty fast at that.
“Look,” he says, drunk on the supremely negative energy this conversation has suddenly taken on and the relative lack of space between them. “I apologized to you. I haven't come on to you or even really talked to you since that day in the library. Why are you still so hellbent on hating me?”

Uhura gives him this look that’s half-smirking and half-sneering, full of amusement and disbelief and scorn all at the same time, and her voice is high and incredulous over the din of the party when she says, “You actually think that just apologizing is enough. That I'm going to just up and forgive you just because you want me to.” She cocks her head to the side, slaps him in the face with another one of her awful fake smiles. “Uh, reality check – I'm not that kind of girl, and you're going to have to work a little bit harder than that.”

She starts to walk away, then, push on past him (i.e.: basically rub all the way against him on her way away from him, seeing as they're cramped into such a tight space and surrounded by at least twenty people on all sides) to move into the crowd, and at first, Jim is okay with swallowing the apparent unfairness of her judgment and letting her go on her merry way – it's a party, after all, and they both came here to have fun, right? – but then she throws him a parting comment so biting he can actually feel it clip him in the jaw as it sails past him:

“Like you even deserve my forgiveness.”

And something clicks inside of Jim, then, something hard and angry and almost as old as he is, something he tends to associate with Sam and Riverside and principal’s offices and his stepfather, something that's sent him running away from home – running here, in fact – numerous times in his life, and suddenly, it doesn't matter that she's beautiful or that she's a woman or that he's attracted to her or that he actually happens to admire everything about her (save for her double standards, that is), and it doesn't matter that they're at a party and that anyone could be listening to their conversation (“Don't do anythin' you wouldn't want people to remember you for.”), and it doesn't matter that Jim is supposed to have a heart of gold or be a good guy (or at least, that's what he's always been told to be) – he doesn't stop himself from calling after her, barking at the back of her head, “Hey, how can you even say something like that? You don't even know who I am.”

Uhura stops in her tracks almost instantly, turning around to face him again, and her expression has retained all of the venom and none of the fabricated pleasure it had seconds before and her eyes are sharp and critical and full of surprise and the fire so familiar to them when she asks, “Oh, really?”

Jim doesn’t flinch when she gets back in his face, actually relishes in the waves of anger radiating off of her, but that sick kink of delight all but flies out the window when she looks him dead in the face and says, “I know exactly who you are, Jim Kirk, because I've played with guys just as selfish,” – she grinds the word out – “arrogant,” – harder – “inconsiderate,” – harder still – “and immature,” – it hits him directly between the eyes, slashes a cruel line right down the center of his face – “as you my whole life.”
There's a moment after that's out in the air where neither of them say anything, just stare at each other with varying shades of anger in the dim light of the party. Uhura is obviously incensed. Jim is seriously fighting the urge to punch her directly in the mouth.

And then, as if to punctuate her previous statement or maybe even capitalize on the hurt fresh in Jim's eyes, Uhura adds, “So, no – you don't deserve my forgiveness.”

That is the instant in which Jim becomes acutely aware of how hot he feels and how his blood seems to be boiling and how his heart has sped up and his breath is coming to him faster, and the maroon of Uhura's dress looks especially red right now and the music booming in his ears is ten times louder than it truly is and the people around him are suffocatingly close and there's something coiling up tight and painful in his center and yes, if you're wondering if Jim Kirk has become so angry that he's actually having an anxiety attack right where he's standing, you are absolutely correct and you should give yourself a great big pat on the back for me.

Remember what I said earlier about how (not) wonderful Jim is with inadequacy and being undervalued and dismissed? That's really coming into play right about now.

The voice that rips out of Jim is harsh and low when he snarls, “You know, I can put up with a lot of shit – and I have put up with a lot of shit, not that you'd care about my sad, sorry life,” – Uhura winces at that – “but I'm not gonna stand for some person who doesn't even know me telling me who I am and what I do and don't deserve.”

For a moment, Uhura actually looks a little guilty, but it's only a second before any phantom trace of remorse in her expression disappears and she begins to retort, “You've shown me who you are–”

“Oh yeah, by oh-so inconsiderately trying to get to know you just like any smart person with eyes would – as if that's such a fucking crime – while you throw yourself all over an undateable guy.” Because Jim is the best at mixing shit-talking with telling the truth. Also, might I draw your attention to the look of utter dismay that has slapped itself across Uhura's face?

Then, out of absolutely fucking nowhere, this huge, beefy guy is shoving his way between Jim and Uhura – who have ended up nearly pressed against each other in the heat of their argument – and spraying Jim in the face with a mouthful of saliva as he barks, “Hey, back the fuck up, asshole!” In Jim's breathtaking shock and rage, he can only watch as the ape turns to Uhura and asks her, “Is this kid bothering you?”
Uhura's slightly uncertain, “I'm fine, thanks,” flies right over Jim's head as he takes in the circle of spectators that have surrounded them, all wide-eyed and excited and staring at him with such alarm, and in that moment, he realizes that he has become *that jackass* in the eyes of everyone present – that jackass who just happens to argue with a girl in public and is automatically a horrible person as a result – and wouldn't it be a fucking *miracle* if he didn't spontaneously combust right the *fuck* now –

“Who the fuck're you calling 'kid'?” Jim spits at the ape, full of vitriol and acid and the dangerous sort of reckless abandon that comes with being *insanely* pissed off.

The asshole turns to him slowly, deliberately taking his time to raise himself up to his full height and give him a thorough once-over – an intimidation tactic that does absolutely *nothing* for Jim – and says, “You, *kid*.“ He sneers at him. “What, are you stupid or somethin’?”

There isn't a pragmatic, pacifistic, or otherwise logical thought in Jim's mind when he gives the guy a toothy, openmouthed grin and replies, without a single drop of hesitation or forethought, “You know, I'm actually starting to feel like I am, considering that the collective IQ of everyone in a given area seems to drop once you're in it, you fucking *mongoloid.*”

And that, my friends, is how Jim Kirk ends up sprawled across the drinks table, half-covered in jungle juice, possibly sporting a broken nose, and nearly deafened by the frenzied screaming of every human being within a **twenty-foot** radius. It takes maybe a **second and a half** for him to realize that he's been punched rather forcefully in the face, and in just as much time, his attacker is dragging him up onto the very tips of his toes and slugging him again, right in the jaw, then once more in his nose, then in his eye and against his temple and across his chin, over and over and over again.

And **yeah**, he fights back as best as he can. He actually succeeds at getting a few punches in. For the most part, though, Jim gets his ass handed to him on a silver platter in full view of about a quarter of the student body, and that's mainly because his opponent has **six inches** and **five times** as many pounds on him, not to mention the fact that he caught him **way** off guard with his initial punch.

At one point, right after taking a particularly brutal blow to the stomach and managing to smash his fist against the asshole's nose (a punch that results in an extremely painful-sounding, extremely satisfying *crunch*, might I add), Jim Kirk hears a name slice through the riotous uproar as he lays battered on the floor, struggling for breath:

“*Nyota!*”

It's clear as a bell when it goes ringing through the cacophony, the loudest sound in the room for all of **three milliseconds**, and it's just as articulate and baseline and atonal as can be, but there's *alarm*
there – Jim can hear it plain as day.

And in the moment only seconds before the ape kicking his ass from here to next year realizes, with an outburst of explosive proportions, that Jim broke his 'motherfucking nose!', Jim catches a glimpse of Uhura through the crowd, an olive-toned hand clutching her caramel arm, and he follows that hand and finds Spock wrapping a protective arm around her shoulders, shielding her from the violence and the commotion and trying to pull her away from it all as quickly as possible. For an instant Jim is almost entirely sure he's imagining, they lock eyes from across the sea of people, and he has blood dripping into his mouth and it feels like the whole world is standing between them and Spock's gaze is darker than the starless night, but it's leaving Jim too quickly and the wind is being knocked out of him with a swift kick to the gut courtesy of Mr. Asshole himself before he can even begin to wonder why he misses it so much.

The side of his head is getting bashed into the ground when another familiar voice breaks through the chaos, growling, "Get him off of him!"

And then another – "Stop! You're killing him!"

In all actuality, Jim has been much closer to death on several different occasions and felt lightyears worse than he does right now (mostly because he's got so much adrenaline flooding his veins at the moment that he actually can't feel the trauma his body is taking), but he truly appreciates Sulu's concern on the basis of the fact that it will more than likely save his life anyway.

Suddenly, the fists pummeling into him disappear and McCoy is hauling him to his feet by his armpits, grabbing him around his waist and positioning one of his limp arms about his shoulders. The second Jim is upright, the room starts steadily spinning and he can't see anything worth a damn and his head begins to throb and he has this sudden urge to vomit, and he knows McCoy is shouting something but he doesn't know whether or not he's shouting it at him, and Sulu is somewhere around here being helpful like he always is, and Chekov is fucking nowhere to be seen (and that just so happens to be at the very top of Jim's list of Extremely Bad Things That Could Happen Tonight), and shit, that was a pint of blood that just came spilling out of his nose, wasn't it?

Somehow, Bones manages to single-handedly beat a path through the screaming crowd and get them to a bathroom. As soon as they're in there, Jim is, quite stupidly, tearing himself away from his friend and going stumbling to the floor, where he frantically drags himself a short two feet across the tile and to the toilet. He gets there just in time to empty the contents of his stomach (which pretty much only consist of alcohol) and, by sheer force of gravity, a good bit of the blood dripping from his nose into the bowl.

Bones lets out a long, exasperated sigh from somewhere above Jim as he carefully lays his forehead against the toilet seat and makes a valiant attempt to catch his breath. He slowly becomes more and
more aware of that thing that is his body – the godawful pounding of his head, the tenderness around his left eye, the soreness of his nose and the pain in his jaw and the ache in his abdomen and how his hands are shaking and his back stings all over, and in a place hovering around the forefront of his mind, he knows that McCoy has to be really, really pissed off right now, so he isn't all that surprised when the man's voice explodes into the air of the room, bellowing,

“What the fuck happened out there?!” He's still standing over Jim.

Jim raises his head to peer up at his friend; he ends up seeing two of him. “Well, I kind of got my ass kicked,” is his breathless reply.

Bones snorts loudly. “No shit, huh?” The man bends at the waist to drag Jim off of the floor again, snapping, “Up, up! So I can make sure yer not gonna start seizing or anythin’.”

Jim is weak and uncoordinated as McCoy heaves him over and onto the counter by the sink, boneless when the man pushes him up against the mirror behind him. It's then when he notices Sulu and (thank God) Chekov standing by the door, watching him with expressions of anxiety and terror, respectively. He gives the latter of them a quick, painful smile and a wink in a somewhat feeble attempt to ease his distress. Chekov only blinks in response.

“One of you get me a wad of toilet paper and a washcloth if you can find one, please,” Bones orders, all but hurling the words over his shoulder as he reaches for Jim's face. “And put a chai– stop moving, you infant – put a chair under that doorknob.”

Jim flinches in pain when McCoy's fingers frame the bridge of his nose, feeling along the bones there, but he forces himself to obediently remain still as the man carefully searches for any fractures. Chekov momentarily appears to give Bones the toilet tissue and the towel he asked for, but as soon as the man instructs him to 'just leave it on the counter', the teenager does just that and then quickly vanishes from view to scuttle on back to Sulu, obviously shaken. Jim fights the urge to sniff.

“Well, yer nose ain't broken,” Bones huffs, releasing his face and turning away to run the washcloth under the tap. “How d'you feel?”

Jim inhales as sharply as he can, thoughtlessly trying to rid his nasal passages of the blood clogging them. “Shitty, wouldn't you think?”

Bones makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat and grabs Jim again, this time by the jaw, to
start wiping the gore from his face. “I'm gonna need you to be a little more specific, Jim,” he retorts, dabbing roughly at the space beneath his nose.

Jim starts to let out an irritable sigh, but quickly stops himself after Bones squeezes down on his sore jaw and gives him an incredibly incensed glare (and for the record, this might be the angriest Jim has ever seen the man, and McCoy is always pissed off). His voice is half-muffled in the washcloth as he replies, “I'm kinda dizzy, everything hurts, and I think my head is about to split open.” He sniffs a little. “Like a watermelon.”

“You probably have a concussion,” McCoy notes. He tosses the bloody towel into the sink and makes to rip two sheets of toilet paper off of the wad Chekov brought him, peering carefully at Jim's left eye. “And that's more than likely gonna be purple as a plum tomorrow mornin’.”

Jim turns to regard his reflection in the mirror. There is still some blood dripping from his nose and caked in his nostrils, the right side of his bottom lip is splitting, and his jaw and his eye (especially his eye) are visibly bruising. All in all, it isn't the worst abuse his face has been dealt.

“Can't fuckin' wait,” he chuckles just as Bones takes his face a third time and forces him to look at him, then promptly shoves a twisted stump of toilet tissue into each of his nostrils. He thanks the man with a warm, silly smile; in return, he gets one of McCoy's trademark heavy eye-rolls.

“Care to tell me how you ended up gettin' yer ass busted?” McCoy asks as he moves to wash his hands of Jim's blood. “Or am I gonna have to use my imagination?”

Any pretense of a good mood Jim might have had evaporates at the question and is quickly replaced with the residual anger he's always left with after he exists for a little while. He lowers his eyes to his hands, which are slightly bloody and bruised themselves. “You'll just get pissed off.”

“Have you been payin' attention? I think we've already reached that section of the program,” Bones says. His voice softens a bit as he goes on, “Start from the beginnin'. Make sense.”

And because Jim actually does think McCoy ought to know why he was forced to peel him off of the floor and clean him up in some random person's bathroom, he tells him. Of course, he gets the full brunt of the man's criticism when he does.

“Fighting with the girl you're tryin'a start a relationship with,” McCoy puts in after Jim has finished his story, giving him a mocking, sarcastic okay sign with his right hand. “Real nice, Jim. Yer really
givin' Spock a run for his money.”

At the same time that Sulu is asking, “Who's Spock?”, Jim is grumbling, “I don't want to start a relationship with her anymore.” They both share a brief, apologetic look for having spoken over each other.

Bones gives Sulu a small nod and a quick, “I'll tell you later,” before turning back to Jim and asking, “Did you come to this conclusion before or after you had an argument with her in front of half the damn school?”

“Before,” is Jim's reflexive answer, but after it leaves him, he's not entirely certain of the truth in it. “No, after. No – before.” He lets out a frustrated sigh, gives McCoy a helpless, beseeching look. “I dunno, Bones, is it really that important?”

“Yes, it is!” McCoy retorts, assailing Jim with one of the harshest of his judgmental glares. “I'd honestly like to know why in the world it was so imperative that you, what, defend your honor to a girl that doesn't even matter to you.”

“She does matter to me!” Jim snaps, and even though he never consciously realized it before now (not to mention the fact that he doesn't quite understand the nature of his feelings yet), he knows he isn't lying. He runs his hands through the unkempt mess of his hair, rough and exasperated and maybe even a little desperate. “Gosh, can't you just– stop being so fucking critical for at least two fucking minutes?”

Bones’ glower softens incrementally, but the expression on his face tells Jim that the answer to his question is one great big, angry ass 'no'. It's not like he expected otherwise, really.

Almost as if to give Jim a little reprieve, Sulu pipes in from where he's still lingering by the door. “What did you call the guy again?”

Jim deflates against the mirror, exhaling heavily. His voice is a note softer than it is normally when he says, “A mongoloid.”

Sulu gives a long, low whistle. “That's really bad, man.”

“That was the intention,” Jim points out. Bones tsks loudly.
“You know, I was actually having a really good time with Christine, just like you told me to.” McCoy crosses his arms over his chest, shakes his head in a supremely disappointed fashion. “Then I had to come save your ass.”

That – the words, the tone of voice in which McCoy said them, the fact that the man said them to him at all, everything – twists something awful inside of Jim, the same old something Uhura grabbed a hold of and pretty much ruined earlier, the something that tells him every day in some form or another that he doesn't deserve, but instead of getting mad angry like he did before, Jim just gets really tired. He was already pretty close to being there anyway.

He hasn't the self-control or the willpower to stop the stream of words that come spilling forth from his mouth, then, uncontrolled and bitter and absolutely exhausted – “Yeah, yeah, I know, I get it. I fucked up like the selfish, inconsiderate, immature piece of shit I am.” He sniffs around the toilet tissue in his nose. “I mean, how much more disgusting could I be, right. Right.”

Jim Kirk has never been one for self-loathing or insecurity or even shame, but he has been beaten down – both physically and emotionally – in one of the most humiliating ways possible in front of a quarter of the student body, his entire being feels like one gigantic bruise, he has toilet paper hanging out of his nostrils, Chekov is seriously looking like he might start crying at any second, and Bones just kind of broke his heart a little. Everyone has their moments, right?

For several lengthy, unbearable seconds, nobody speaks. Jim stares vacantly at the space between his knees while McCoy, Sulu, and Chekov all stare at him, uncertain and frightened and uncomfortable and guilty. He realizes with a twinge of some unidentifiable emotion between irritation and insight that in saying what he just did, he became the first member of this collective friendship to drop an awkward personal bombshell. How everyone else will react to such a bombshell will define their relationship for the remainder of its lifespan, however long that may be.

After what seems like a year and a half, McCoy finally speaks up.

“Oh, shut up,” he says, grumbling. “You should know by now that self-pity doesn't suit you.”

The words themselves are harsh, biting, but Bones says them like he's saying sorry, so Jim doesn't really mind.

And several minutes later, when they're walking back to Sulu's car in the dark heat of the late summer night, Chekov falls back to tread beside Jim and says, very softly and without looking at
him, “I do not zink you are disgusting.” And Jim smiles at him so sweetly he can feel it in his cheeks the entire way home.

Sulu gets him a bowl of rocky road and a homemade ice pack after they've gotten back to the apartment, carefully places the former in Jim's lap and the latter on his head where he lays stretched out on the couch. Bones forces him to take three Tylenol and keep his head elevated. All three of them stay up with him long after they really need to, watching episode after episode of Cold Case and House until they've all fallen asleep, McCoy with Jim's feet in his lap and Sulu and Chekov half-tangled together in the armchair adjacent to the sofa.

Yes, Jim thinks he isn't worthy of them for all of their effortless support and their stellar senses of humor and their well-intentioned criticism and their general magnificence. But he'd be damned if he didn't hope they could all last for as long as possible. He is pretty needy, after all.

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**Monday, August 19th, 2013 – Saturday, August 31st, 2013.**

Jim Kirk's eye is the color of an eggplant when he walks into English on Monday morning. The bruise on his jaw is a lighter hue, closer to mauve or amethyst, and ringed with a champagne yellow halo tainted with tiny touches of green. It is still fairly painful for him to exist in a physical sense.

For the first time in the history of this class, Jim doesn't spare Uhura even a glance, just finds his seat with Chekov, removes his laptop from his backpack, and leans back in his seat while he waits for instruction to begin. He's been tonguing at the cut on his lip for about five minutes when Chekov tugs lightly on the sleeve of his Henley and whispers,

“Ms. Uhura is looking at you.”

Jim's first instinct is to return her gaze, but he stops himself mid-glimpse and redirects his attention to his laptop monitor, a master of self-control for all of three seconds. “I'm pretty sure everyone is, Ruski. I mean, would you take look at this eye?” He points at it with his thumb for emphasis.

Chekov makes a noise that isn't quite laughter but still captures the basic gist of such a noise. Jim thinks he might die of adorable when the kid kisses his index and middle finger and gently presses it to the tender, bruised skin lining his eye socket.

And for the remainder of the class period, Jim continues to pointedly not look at Uhura. He actually
manages to pay attention to most (54%) of the lecture today. By the time the hour is up, he feels like he’s stepped into the Twilight Zone.

That feeling pretty much multiplies tenfold when Uhura actually approaches him as he and Chekov are walking out.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” she asks him, her hand hovering over the place she would have tapped him on his forearm to get his attention had she not hesitated and let her mere proximity do the job.

And it's not anger that goes crawling up Jim's spine, then, nor is it distress. Maybe it's a weird, hybrid child emotion, more uneasy than pissed off. Whatever it is, it doesn't feel all that great, and Jim doesn't like that it goes zinging through him every time he's confronted with Uhura – when Chekov said her name earlier, when he was checking out his reflection in the mirror this morning, literally the entire fucking weekend when he could feel her every time he moved and his body would silently bitch at him in response.

He turns to her not knowing what to say, but her eyes and what they do to him pry his mouth open and draw the word, “Sure,” out. It's the first time he's seen her today, and she doesn't look like the dark, wine-colored girl who ripped him a new asshole on Friday. Her button-down is white and her skirt is vermillion with black pockets, her books are at home in the crook of her left arm, and her bangs are swept away from her face.

Uhura makes a brief, hitching sigh in her throat (which Jim takes to mean that she's nervous), then says to him, right outside room E215 on the second floor of the English building, “I'm sorry.”

A moderately lengthy moment of silence passes between them. Chekov shifts awkwardly behind Jim as he studies Uhura's face, which is wearing the same elegant, practiced aloofness it always does, but with a touch of openness to it, a vulnerability behind the smoldering embers in her eyes, and Jim honestly doesn't have the foggiest idea what to do with it or with her apology, so, in typical Jim Kirk fashion, he doesn't do anything, just stares at her like he's spontaneously lost the ability to comprehend the English language. Let's all give him a great big round of applause, shall we?

Uhura seems to interpret his silence as a lack of acceptance (which it isn't, but it isn't quite not either), because her expression does something kind of like a pyramid, goes sharp and steep and even a little bit anxious, and she keeps talking, says, “It was wrong of me to make assumptions about the kind of person you are when... when I don't even know you, really. I don't blame you for taking offense to that, and I shouldn't have been so hard on you.”
Jim suddenly remembers the uncomfortable, drowning sort of feeling he'd been assaulted with when he was apologizing to Uhura over the phone on **Friday**, the awkwardness of shucking his pride in favor of remorse. It occurs to him that Uhura is more than likely experiencing the same discomfort at the moment and that she's probably been sitting on her apology for all of the past **hour** (and possibly even longer than that), and for some reason, that really, **really** endears her to him.

“I do stand by my choice to reject your advances, though,” she adds, the tiniest hint of amusement taking hold of her features. Oddly enough, that's what manages to snap Jim out of his stupor and put a small smile on his face.

“Oh, yeah, well.” He lets out a brief, sheepish chuckle. “I was totally annoying and rude about it, I get that.”

And thus Jim Kirk, **eighteen years-old**, has slowly begun to learn the meaning of humility.

“But, uh... thank you. For saying that, I mean.” Jim's smirk takes on a softer, warmer edge, not quite as impishly delighted as it usually is. “I guess I forgive you,” he teases, the statement only half-genuine.

Uhura mirrors his smile, adjusts her grip on the books in her arm, and replies, so much more tender than she's ever been up until now, “I guess I forgive you, too.” Just like that, Jim's partial lie becomes a straight-up truth, and he thinks he might have fallen in love with her all over again.

(A small note: Jim tends to go through most of his relationships at about **twenty times** the speed everyone else does. For example, he's been looking at McCoy a whole lot like he would a lifelong friend even though he's only known him for, what, a little over **two weeks**? Uhura over here might as well be his recently divorced ex-wife he's trying to rekindle his relationship with. Sometimes, he even catches himself thinking along the lines that Spock is his **friend**, as if **that** will ever fucking happen.)

“Can we start over?” The grin splayed across Jim's face is wide and luminous and a whole lot like the late August sun, and he couldn't be arsed to do a goddamn thing about it when he does the single most trite, hackneyed thing of all time and holds his hand out for her to shake, says, “Jim Kirk, resident jackass.”

Uhura chuckles lightly, taking his hand in her surprisingly strong grip and giving it a hearty shake. “Nyota Uhura, part-time bitch,” she replies. Jim is already enamored with her sense of humor.
Uhura's gaze then skates on past his shoulder and her smile broadens a bit, and Jim realizes only a second before she opens her mouth to speak that it's Chekov she's looking at, asking, “And who might you be?”

“Oh! Uhm...” Jim steps to the side to ever-so generously let the teen sputter to her face, smirks as Chekov nervously shakes Uhura's hand and introduces himself. “Pavel Chekov, ma'am.”

“Very nice to meet you,” she says with a brief, musical little laugh that warms Jim to his very core. It's nice, you know, to see her happy and have it not be from what feels like a world and a half away.

Jim and Chekov walk Uhura to the library before heading off to the cafeteria to meet McCoy and Sulu for lunch. She gives each of them a gracious nod of farewell on her way into brownstone fortress, and then she's gone, lost beyond the heavy double-doors.

Now, it wouldn't at all to be inaccurate to say that for the remainder of that day and the next, Jim is plagued with the somewhat irrational fear that the understanding he and Uhura have come to is only temporary, that as soon as they see each other again, she will be back to treating him like dirt and he will be back to being the apparent bane of her existence.

“Don't you think you're being a little melodramatic?” Sulu asks him on Tuesday night as he's sauteing a pan of chopped mushrooms at the stove.

Jim shrugs where he sits atop the counter, thumbing at the neck of his bottle of Heineken and dragging the hem of his shirt up to wipe at the perspiration filming over his forehead. “Can't say that's not my style.” Sulu smirks.

“Sounds like you gotta chip on yer shoulder, my friend,” is McCoy's totally uncalled-for observation, hurled Jim's way from where the man is currently watching an episode of House Hunters in the living room.

“Sounds like you can kiss my ass!” Jim yells back. Several minutes later, he's trying to get McCoy to do just that, climbing over the back of the sofa and unceremoniously shoving his rear end in his face. Bones just about throws him across the couch and scolds him with the most colorful assortment of cusswords Jim has ever heard in his life, all while he's lying bent over the arm of the sofa and killing himself laughing and Sulu is yelling at them from the kitchen to behave themselves.

And you know, Bones might actually be on to something, with that whole chip on his shoulder...
thing. I mean, as long as it hurts for Jim to lie down or laugh or simply turn over in bed, he's going to remember everything Uhura said to him at that awful party and it's going to sting regardless of the fact that he forgave her for it all. That's the funny thing about apologies and time.

Jim goes to English on Wednesday still quietly nursing his anxiety and fear, his eye now more yellow than amethyst and his back still slightly sore. He doesn't see Uhura in her usual spot when he and Chekov are locating their seats, and for a second, he's actually worried that he's going to have to spend another two days losing his head over his own stupid sense of dread.

But, just before Jim abandons all hope of being any kind of Zen until Friday and about a minute before she'd be considered late for class, Uhura shows up looking slightly, uncharacteristically flustered. For the first time since the day Jim met her, she's wearing a pair of pants—jeans, in fact—and a familiar button-down shirt free of any telling coffee stains. The sight of it brings a small smile to Jim's face.

And then, much to the immense surprise of both him and Chekov, Uhura wastes no time in finding them with her eyes, adjusting her shoulder strap, and actually making her way over to them without even a hint of hesitation. She steals the desk directly to the right of Jim, neatly placing her notebooks atop it as she drops into the seat, and her voice is slightly amused when she says, “You planning on scooping your jaw up off the floor any time soon?”

Jim quickly turns his expression of shock into one of delight. “You're looking decidedly casual today,” he notes, and when she cuts her eyes at him, warning him, he puts a defensive hand up and adds, “Not in a bad way, I mean. It's...” He carefully tastes the word on his tongue before he lets it out, trying to decide how flirtatious it might come off to her and whether or not he's allowed to offhandedly flirt with her in the first place, considering their history. “Cute.” And then, “Unusual.”

“Well, I was in a hurry to get out of the apartment this morning,” Uhura says. At Jim's inquisitive look, she smirks and clarifies, “Random naked guys in my kitchen aren't exactly the best thing to wake up to.”

Jim lets out a loud, semi-embarrassing snort that Uhura only smiles at. “Please tell me you weren't getting like... burgled in the most offensively sexual way possible.”

“I wasn't, but apparently my roommate was,” Uhura replies as she pulls out her laptop and a ballpoint pen. “All night long.”

Jim throws his head back and laughs wholeheartedly at the euphemism. Yet again, he keeps on falling for her.
And so it goes that Uhura becomes a semi-permanent fixture in Jim's life for all of a **week and a half**. Every **Monday**, **Wednesday**, and **Friday** at **9:30** in the morning, she will take a seat next to him in English and Jim and Chekov will accompany her on her way to the library afterwards, and during these class periods and these walks, Jim learns several varied and assorted facts about her, some of which include:

- She was raised in Washington, D.C. from the tender age of two, but her birthplace is none other than the capital of **Kenya** (a fact to which Jim reacts with great surprise and wonder).

- Her father is the United States ambassador to Kenya and her mother became a zoologist after moving from her native country to America. They met and courted each other several times while her father was stationed in Africa.

- Uhura is double-majoring in international relations and communications. She hopes to someday be an ambassador like her father herself.

- All together, her name means “star of love and freedom” in Swahili (and that's really, really beautiful).

- She can speak a grand total of **ten** foreign languages with varying degrees of proficiency.

- Some of her favorite things in the world include Russian literature, a nice and aggressive game of tennis, frequent visits to art galleries, and the sweet sounds of Frank Ocean.

Of course, Jim also learns one singular fact about himself:

- He was right, about not wanting to date her.

It's not that he doesn't think she's great or anything, because he *does*, many times over in fact. But he'd be crazy if he thought that after all he's discovered about her – her strength and her fire and her everything beautiful and piercing and bright – that he could actually give her what she wanted, that she wouldn't surpass him in every way that counted. It's no biggie, though. He still thinks he's smitten with her.

**On Monday, August 26th**, Jim comes home, kicks back on the couch, and logs onto Facebook to find a friend request from a certain Nyota Uhura waiting for him. He spends the next **hour and a half** raiding all of her pictures and postings like the stalker-in-training he is, eyeing her *About* page (specifically her relationship status, which is *Single* with a capital S), and marveling at their new status as *friends*, at least in the digital sense.
On Wednesday, August 28th, he, she, and Chekov exchange phone numbers, passing their cellphones around to key them into each other's contact lists. The whole exchange gives Jim a little thrill of happiness he's only comfortable with admitting to Chekov as they're retreating from the library in the direction of the cafeteria.

And on Friday, August 30th, Uhura drops two squares of cardstock on Jim's desk and says, in a moderately imperative tone, “Come to my party tomorrow.”

Jim eyes the invitations with curiosity and deduces that the party, like the last one he attended, is located off campus. “Are there gonna be any hot girls there?” he asks in a half-hearted attempt to seem mildly disinterested (which he by no means is).

“Well, I'll be there,” Uhura retorts, smirking wickedly. Jim tries and fails to pinch her for that. “Yes, there will be hot girls abound.” She gives him an unambiguously naughty look. “Guys, too.”

Jim just about gags on his own spit. “Excuse me?”

“You're not the only Facebook stalker in this outfit, Kirk,” she purrs. “I did my fair share of research, too.”

And this, my friends, is why Jim Kirk is in love with Nyota Uhura. He tells her so, too.

“I'm like in love with you, you know that?” See?

“I know, I know,” she replies, sweet and just casual enough to make the moment perfect. She's good at doing that, Jim has noticed.

“Can I come to ze party?” Chekov pipes in rather adorably from Jim's other side, poking his curly head around to be seen.

“Oh course you can!” Uhura is enthusiastic in her reception, smiling and crinkle-eyed and just as radiant as can be. She gives Jim a light rap on the forearm. “You know what, bring your whole household. It'll be fun.”
So, on Saturday, August 31st at 7:17 PM, Jim, Chekov, McCoy, and Sulu pile into McCoy's outdated Accord and head off to the party, this time with Jim riding shotgun while Sulu and Chekov are left to their own devices – 'to be gay, or whatever,' in Jim's words – in the backseat.

“You know he's a minor, right?” Sulu says, flicking Jim in the ear from behind.

Instead of commenting on that, Jim turns all the way around in his seat – inciting a reproachful 'Turn yer ass around and put yer goddamn seatbelt on,' out of Bones when he does – and asks, blasé as anything, “Chekov, have you ever had sex before?”

Chekov goes so red in the face he looks like his poor little head might burst from the pressure. Meanwhile, the noises coming out of Sulu sound just a tad urgent, all choking laughter and high-pitched wailing.

“Don't answer that.” Sulu weeps through his helpless cackling, slapping a hand against Chekov's knee (and consequently intensifying the blush in the teen's cheeks). “Please, for my sake more than anyone else's. Just don't.”

“What, you scared he'll ruin your perfect fantasy of him as some delicate, virginal flower?” Jim teases, and when Sulu actually starts wheezing, the most maniacal of grins splits his face right in two. “Watch he turns out to be a total freak, man. Does that make you hot?”

“Uh, you need to shut the fuck up with that in my car,” McCoy snaps, making an overly sharp left turn. “I mean, right the fuck now. Before I reach over there smack the hell outta you.”

Snickering, Jim rights himself in his seat, grinding his hips ever so slightly and softly singing, “He's a very freaky boy…”

Sulu kicks the back of Jim's seat and lets out a guttural snarl of laughter at the exact same moment that McCoy's hand goes flying over the center console to bop him in the ear, knuckles first. Chekov mutters something Russian and flustered beneath his breath, sinking as deeply as he possibly can into his car seat.

They all love each other, can't you tell?

Soon, they are pulling up to a neat, gated, decidedly posh apartment complex by the name of Orion.
Peaks and Jim is digging around in the darkness of the car for the invitation, which he most likely dropped on the floor while he was busy harassing Chekov and Sulu. He reads the entry code printed at the bottom of the card out loud to McCoy, and then the next six minutes or so are spent searching for the high-rise indicated on the invite, a Building E.

“You better not get in another fight tonight, ya hear?” Bones says to Jim as they're stepping out of the car and making their way towards the flight leading to the upstairs apartments. “That would be, what? Yer fourth one in less than a month?”

“Fifth,” Jim corrects him with a smirk. He gives McCoy an amiable pat on the back before he's taking the stairs two at a time, chuckling, “I promise I'll behave myself,” over his shoulder.

“I bet you like, ten bucks he's going to break that promise before we're even in there for five minutes,” Sulu says from behind Bones.

“I might as well just give you the money now, huh?” McCoy sighs, shifting the bottle of vodka he's carrying from one hand to another. Sulu's responding laugh is sharp and amused.

“You know, your astounding lack of faith in me is truly upsetting,” Jim says, tone full of manufactured hurt, as the four of them approach Apartment E09. Behind the door, the sound of synth-heavy music and a bass drum beat can be heard. “Really, I'm hurt.”

“Oh, I'm sorry,” McCoy drawls in an affected tone. “Remind me of that the next time I have to peel you off the floor and wipe the blood offa yer face.”

“That was one time!” Jim retorts, (admittedly) smiling, as Sulu slips between him and Bones to rap a two-tone knock against the door.

“It won't be for long at the rate yer goin',” Bones huffs. If Jim didn't know any better, that would be the tiniest of smirks playing on the man's lips.

Before he can argue back, though, the door is swinging open and Uhura is standing on the opposite side of it. Her eyes land on Sulu first (obviously), and as soon as they do, this expression of surprise of the vaguely delighted sort comes over her face and she cries, “Sulu?”

Said man smiles brightly. “Hey!”
Uhura looks between him and Jim, who is just sort of standing off to the side being all stupidly charmed by the exchange, and says, “I didn't know you guys roomed together.”

Jim shrugs like that's actually wholly his fault. “Oops.”

Uhura's awed smile starts to mirror Sulu's ever so slightly, and she opens the door wider to let them into the apartment, beckoning them with a pleased, “Come on in, guys. The party's just getting started.” She gives Chekov, the designated caboose of their four-man train by way of his inherent shyness and the minor emotional trauma he underwent earlier, a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek on his way inside.

When they walk in, there are about fifteen students scattered about the living room and more, by the sounds of it, in the kitchen, all in clusters of three, four, and the odd group of five. None of them are people Jim immediately recognizes (not that that's a problem or anything).

“You guys,” Uhura calls everyone present to attention with a single clap of her hands, people raising their heads from their drinks and pausing their conversations all over the room. She gestures to each member of their band as she says, “This is Kirk, Sulu, Chekov, and...?”

“McCoy,” Bones helpfully supplies, smiling cordially as he holds out his hand for Uhura to shake. “Leonard McCoy.” Jim indulges himself in a furtive little chuckle at that, amused with the thought of just how much he's talked to Bones about Uhura without the man even having known her personally, and how much of that such talk was him bitching about her.

Uhura returns McCoy's handshake with warmth. “Nice to meet you, Mr. McCoy.”

Just as Jim is starting to ogle a pretty red-haired girl idling in the corner, this loud, incredibly thick Scottish accent comes sailing out of the kitchen, yelling, “We 'ave newcomers, aye?” Only seconds later, a man of moderately short stature is sauntering into the living room, juggling a bottle of margarita mix and several lemons in both hands and eyeballing Jim, McCoy, Sulu, and Chekov as if they're aliens recently arrived from a foreign planet. Uhura gives him a mildly patronizing smile.

“You just missed the introductions, Scott,” she laughs, crossing the room to give his shoulder a quick squeeze.
"Is he 'Scott' because he's Scottish?" Jim blurts without thinking, just as forthright and possibly rude as he always is. He's both relieved and tickled when the man howls wildly in response (instead of, I don't know, getting pissed off and throwing a lemon at Jim's head or something).

"You sure know 'ow to pick 'em, yeah, Uhura?" he chuckles, and then he's turning to address Jim and the rest of his party, introducing himself with his strident, rapid manner of speaking. "Montgomery Scott. Call me what you like." Before anyone can answer him, he's waving the hand holding the margarita mix and saying, "Don't bother with your names, I'll learn 'em soon enough."

He's a bit abrasive and he sounds a little drunk, but Jim is the same way more often than not, so he decides he likes him well enough for having just met him.

Only a moment after Scott starts brandishing the bottle around in the air, a hand is darting through the doorway to take it from him and Spock is gliding out of the kitchen – just for a few seconds – to steal a couple of lemons from the man and say, "Careful, Mr. Scott. I'm going to need that if you plan on getting any more intoxicated tonight."

Scott laughs his raucous, radiant laugh as he surrenders his bounty to Spock, chortling, "You know me too well, my friend." He then turns back to our favorite foursome, beckons them closer with a flourish of his now free hand and says, "Come on, loosen up now! Once Mr. Spock does 'is magic, we'll ge' a few drinks 'n you and we'll blow the lid off 'is place, yeah?"

As Jim lets himself be led to the couch by Scott, he and Spock make the briefest, most ephemeral instant of eye contact, and it's just like last week when he was getting beaten to a pulp in front of more than three times the number of people in this apartment alone, except now, Jim feels like it's Spock's gaze dealing him all that abuse, and he's not entirely sure why.

And again, when they're all sitting around the coffee table and Scott is having what's close to resembling a stroke after having been informed that Chekov is only sixteen years-old – "And you're telling me you're on your way to mastering the theory of subdivision of energy?" he exclaims – Jim catches Spock's eye as the man is carefully placing four margarita glasses brimming with lime green slush on the table, damn near winks at the guy while he's at it, just to see how he might react, but the moment is over as soon as Sulu asks, "Could you get one for him, too?"

Spock glances at Chekov. "Virgin?" he asks. The quietest of snorts escapes Jim, who, as far as we know, has suddenly regressed to being about eleven years-old in the span of three seconds; Spock's eyebrow twitches the slightest bit, an action Jim has started to notice almost compulsively.

"Oh, he can hold his liquor," Sulu replies, nudging Chekov's shoulder with his own. Bones lets out a
snort louder than Jim's, incredulous.

“O-kay, Sulu,” he huffs. “You wanna repeat that after I remind you about last Saturday, when the kid was singing Cyndi Lauper at the top of his lungs and tryin'a skate across the kitchen floor in his socks?”

“I think that was me trying to skate across the kitchen floor,” Jim notes. There goes Spock's eyebrow again.

“Yer right, it was,” McCoy says, clinking his glass against Jim's when he holds it up for cheers. Sulu makes a preemptive, clucking sort of noise.

“He can hold his liquor,” he repeats with a smile. Scott laughs loudly at his right.

“I like you guys!” he pipes. “You're a fuckin' riot, s'what you are!”

Spock does this little nodding thing with his head that Jim realizes maybe a week later means he sees no further utility in remaining part of the conversation taking place. For now, though, Jim is absolutely enthralled with the gesture.

“I'll be back momentarily,” he says, giving Jim one last imperceptible look before he's off to the kitchen, where Uhura is currently singing something poppy and upbeat – “... says he's gonna teach me just what fast is, say it's gonna be alright...”

Now, I'm going to stop for a second or two and let you know that there are three things worth noting at this point in our story:

× One, that Jim is positively fascinated with Spock.

× Two, that he honestly hasn't been able to stop thinking about him and his odd way of speaking and his odd little mannerisms and his odd, odd eyes since last Friday and that moment during the fight, the tiny looks they'll pass each other when they think the other won't notice, their timing all wrong.

× Three, that the feeling I mentioned in the first bullet, that lovely captivation that's usually only reserved for the most foreign of creatures, is entirely mutual. Don't tell anyone, though. That's supposed to be a secret.
There comes a time – a very, very rare and special time, almost phenomenal in nature – when two extraordinary things just so happen to collide, even if only slightly. Collisions of that nature have been happening again and again and again since **August 12th, 2013**, when Jim Kirk decided to follow the girl who'd captured his affections into a library, and they aren't going to stop any time soon.

In the meantime, though, Spock is bringing Chekov his non-virgin margarita – only a *couple* of side-glares at Jim involved – Sulu, McCoy, and Jim are taking sips from it as well as their own drinks – which they always do, by the way – Scott is quite vocally falling in love with the four of them – he even dubs Jim his *new best friend* after he tells him the tale of how he ended up stranded in the middle of a twelve-acre field at **four o'clock** in the morning all the way back in Riverside, wearing nothing but a pink pair of panties – and this party is turning out to be quite a hell of a lot better than the first one. They drink, they dance, they sing along to Eurythmics and talk quantum theory and American history – questions of *'President you'd most like to smoke a joint with?'* and *'Dead celebrity you'd most like to fuck?*** flying at top speed across the coffee table – and soon, Jim is sipping mai tais and laughing his ass off with Uhura in the doorway of the kitchen while Chekov is in the process of giving Sulu a clumsy, alcohol-fueled lap dance and McCoy is digging around in his wallet for **twenty dollar** bills to throw the teen's way.

“Ge' some fifties in there!” Scott hoots over the rim of his Bloody Mary. “He works hard for the money!”

“**God** help me,” Sulu moans helplessly, grabbing at Chekov's hips in a desperate attempt to make him stand still, or at least keep him from getting any closer to his pelvis. Instead, the teen flops bodily into his lap, giggling madly into the back of his hand. Uhura makes a pleased, purring noise in her throat.

“Aren't they just adorable?” she comments to Jim, playful and pleased as she lightly prods him in the bicep with her elbow.

“Aren't they just ***illegal?***” Jim retorts, grinning when Uhura lets out a loud, whooping laugh in response. “Sulu wouldn't bad-touch him if his life depended on it. He's like some kind of knight in shining armor.”

“**Yeah,** a knight in shining armor with an incredibly cute boy gyrating in his lap at the moment,” Uhura points out in between sips of her drink. Jim gives her a quick slap on the side for that.

“Chekov's sixteen,” he says, all authoritarian and huffy and like he totally didn't lose his virginity
when he was nearly two years younger than that. He's full of weird double standards like that, in which he always expects everyone else to be infinitely more well-behaved than the hellion he's turned out to be.

“Chekov is a child prodigy and very nearly a genius who you let guzzle down margaritas and mojitos like it's nothing,” Uhura throws back, turning to look at Jim directly. Her lip curls up into a self-satisfied smirk that Jim is absolutely smitten with. “I don't think a little heavy petting is that big a deal.”

Jim quirks a face at her, says, “You know, when you call him a 'child prodigy' it just makes this whole thing that much sketchier.” Uhura laughs at him again, reaching out to whack him in the forearm. “Now I'm thinking about him like he's eleven.”

“Oh, stop,” Uhura soothes over the rim of her glass. “Let them have their fun.”

Jim throws a glance in their direction, surreptitious. Sulu is currently attempting to steady Chekov, who has just begun to topple over in his delirium, in his lap, chuckling sheepishly as he takes a long drag from his margarita and watching as McCoy salvages about a hundred and thirty-five dollars from the carpet and the coffee table. Jim can't help but smile at the sight.

“Whatever,” he snickers, downs the rest of his mai tai with a grin. “I'm not the one going to prison for statutory rape.”

When Uhura hits him again, she packs a bit more power behind her punch.

“Let me get you a refill, Sheriff Kirk,” she teases, stealing Jim's now empty glass. She sashays her hips ever so slightly as she retreats into the kitchen, humming softly to the music pulsing from the sound system in the living room.

Jim's gaze remains glued to her as she goes bopping across the linoleum, singing, “He can only hold her for so long...” and swaying right up to Spock, who is busy mixing drinks like he's been doing for the vast majority of the party so far. He watches, almost mesmerized, as she clunks the glasses in her hands down against the counter and deftly plucks Spock's fingers away from the lemon he's juicing, pulls him into easy two-step, his right hand instinctively going up to rest against her left shoulderblade. She drops a cursory kiss on the patch of skin directly to the right and below his mouth, and the expression that feathers across Spock's face then isn't quite a smile, but it's pretty damn close for him, the android. He doesn't pull away from her, doesn't do anything but let her dance him around the kitchen and sing into the space above his shoulder, and Jim would swear to anyone that in this moment, he doesn't look like the arrogant, detached heartbreaker McCoy insisted
he was only **two weeks** ago. In fact, he almost comes off as **warm**.

And really, Jim doesn't know what that – the dancing, the little displays of affection, the Pacific Ocean of ease between the two of them – does to him. He doesn't know if it bothers him, if he's uncomfortable or just a little overheated, if that's really a knot of gravity growing in his chest, how the hell the human brain manages to trick the body into physically feeling such things. He doesn't know how it makes him feel **at all** and he's much too drunk for that sort of in-depth comprehension and soul-searching right now and **yeah**, he's happy Uhura's his friend now and he still likes the fire in her eyes and her touch thrills him a little and he just had a good laugh with her in the middle of her house party and that's **great**, and **yeah**, he isn't completely certain about **anything** concerning Spock aside from the fact that he might be a little unhealthily obsessed with him and that he's been seeing him **way** to much over the course of the month of August considering the fact that they're not even **friends**, they're barely even **acquaintances**, really, and Jim has seen Uhura's relationship status on Facebook and he didn't feel anything but a twinge of relief at having finally solved the ongoing mystery of it when he did, but Spock isn't supposed to be half-smiling at kisses from a freshman and Jim kind of wants to be friends with his nerdy, impossibly stony self, only a little, kind of wants to be the one dancing to Amy Winehouse with Uhura on that linoleum floor, and he's known her just as long as Spock has and he's her friend too, now, and that's fair, right? He doesn't know.

He takes off his jacket, though, just in case it's the temperature getting to him.

The minutes turn into hours spent spinning, drunk, laughing and carousing and talking and laughing some more, Jim perched on the edge of the coffee table while he takes turns playing **red hands** with McCoy and Scott, Sulu and Chekov drifting around the room to mingle with the other partygoers, Uhura and Spock drinking wine and conversing softly by the kitchen, voices hushed and susurrating. Eventually, Jim ends up with a mouthful of gorgeous redhead – he learns her name is **Gaila** at some point between finding her hands pressed firm and warm against his shoulders and slipping his tongue into her mouth – and a brain far too addled with alcohol and lust. Eventually, Chekov passes out in Sulu's lap and the two of them are suddenly nowhere to be seen, disappeared or whisked off to somewhere Jim really doesn't have the brain capacity to give a shit about. Eventually, McCoy and Scott are nearly falling over each other in their intoxication and passionately swapping stories from their childhoods in Athens and Aberdeen, respectively, drawing a small crowd around the coffee table as the night wears on.

Eventually, everything begins to blur.

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**Sunday, September 1st, 2013.**

Jim Kirk wakes up with his face shoved deep into the crevices of a sofa cushion.
The first thing he becomes aware of is the splitting pain in his head, a blade of agony slicing straight from the center of his cranium to the spot between his eyes, right where it makes him suddenly, incredibly desperate for something like death. Then there is the appallingly awful taste coating the inside of his mouth and the back of his throat, the remarkable thirst voiding his oral cavity of any and all moisture, the pit in the base of his stomach, absolutely abysmal. Every joint in his body seems to be screaming at him.

Put simply, it is the second-worst hangover he's had in his entire life. The worst one put him in the hospital for a night.

Jim slowly, arduously struggles to turn onto his back so that he might be able to breathe better or observe his surroundings with more efficiency, but he soon realizes that there's something heavy and warm keeping him trapped where he is – a body, specifically. It takes him no longer than two seconds to recognize the body's deafening snore as none other than McCoy's, and only an instant more to attempt to spontaneously self-destruct via sheer brainpower so as to remove himself from the cruel, cacophonous world he's in, so full of pain and unpleasant physiological responses.

Jim lays there for maybe seven minutes, staring mindlessly at the tiny little fibers covering the suede cushion his face is smushed against and counting the snores that come ripping out of his friend beside him before he registers that he's still in Uhura's apartment and that he must have drank at least two and a half gallons of alcohol last night. Like leaves caught in an autumn breeze, memories of the party go drifting through his mind – Chekov's brief and memorable stint as an erotic dancer, the feeling of Gaila's full breasts beneath his palms, the tale of how Scott nearly drowned himself and two of his classmates in the River Dee at the age of seven, the red, stinging pain in his hands after getting them slapped by Bones easily over forty times, Uhura and Spock's brief dance in the kitchen. Considering his current state of agony and the probability that he will be hungover for days, Jim considers last night's soiree to be one of the best he's ever been to, certainly one worth remembering long after today.

It's when he comes to terms with the fact that he really doesn't want to pee all over Uhura's nice sofa (and McCoy, by extension) that Jim finally musters up enough willpower to carefully ooze himself out of the cranny Bones has him confined in and climb over the man to stand on the carpet, a sea surrounding the archipelago of bodies randomly sprawled out in various places on the living room floor. A wave of nausea and dizziness washes over him and threatens to send him toppling over as soon as he's upright, but he quickly catches himself on the arm of the sofa and takes several moments to curb the urge to empty the contents of his abdominal cavity onto Scott, who is lying face-down and halfway underneath the coffee table, completely unconscious. He thanks whatever invisible entity that might just be occupying the room at the moment for his expertise where hangovers and gag reflexes are concerned.

Then there is him pawing his way down the hallway, locating the bathroom, and relieving himself in almost total darkness, silently praying that he doesn't accidentally make a mess out of the room in his fully conscious decision to forgo the pain turning on the light would entail. He drops the toilet seat to
flush so he doesn't have to confront the noise of the water rushing down the drain, again picking up on his first-hand knowledge on how to best deal with hangovers.

Never let it be said that Jim Kirk isn't a smart man (and, I mean, why would you when he's kind of a genius anyway?).

After sort of washing his hands and wandering back out into the hallway, Jim finds himself incredibly drawn to the crack in the door directly across from the bathroom through the thick gauze of discomfort he's swathed in. He has no common sense and several unaddressed impulse control issues, so – as is his nature – he doesn't stop himself from carefully, quietly sweeping the door open and peering inside, just as endlessly curious as he always is.

It's a bedroom, the walls painted a muted, cornflower blue and the molding lining the ceiling and windows a clean shade of white. To be honest, the first word that enters Jim's mind upon seeing it is *sterile*, which turns into a more favorable *immaculate* once he passes his gaze over it a second time, as there isn't a thing in the room out of place, all the books on the bookshelf neatly arranged and bookended, no stray articles of clothing or pieces of trash on the carpeted floor, the desk before the window neat and mostly bare. The sheer white curtains are pulled tidily closed.

Upon Jim's fifth or sixth sweep of the room, he discerns a sleeping mound of a person lying beneath the midnight-colored sheets on the bed – an Uhura, in fact, stretched out on her left side with her arm curled elegantly below her head. Her face is serene and soft in her slumber, a near total opposite of the one she wears while awake, and Jim is helplessly mesmerized by the way her hair feathers over her forehead, the angle at which the filtered light hits her cheekbone, the supple curve of her hip under the cloth covering it.

He nearly shits himself when he sees Spock in the chaise not two feet behind the bed.

After about ten whole seconds of pure, unadulterated panic – the kind that has his heart thudding violently against his ribcage and his breath rushing out of him in an awful, almost painful burst – Jim realizes that Spock is just as conscious as Uhura is, that his eyes are closed and his mouth is only slightly ajar as he lays curled beneath an elaborately-patterned quilt, an explosion of color in the otherwise monochromatic room. Even though impassive in his sleep, his expression is impossibly gentle, maybe even a little angelic, and so, so incredibly far from the meticulous severity and careful dispassion Jim is used to seeing on his face. It's almost eerie.

Once it occurs to Jim that it's actually pretty fucking creepy that he's watching both Uhura and Spock sleep like it's no big deal (especially considering that he's been friends with one of them for only a week and the other he's pretty sure kind of hates him a little; how he came to this conclusion, no one knows, but it has a little something to do with the less-than-amiable picture McCoy painted of him
and the rough start they got off to), he scoots his ass right on out of the doorway and back into the hall, where he's stuck quietly marveling at what he just witnessed, the situation he's in.

That's when he notices the picture on the wall.

Upon closer inspection, Jim finds that the photograph is one of a classic New York City apartment, a pretty old brownstone with a faded white door. On the thick, wide cement steps stands a man, a woman, and a boy who looks about thirteen or fourteen years of age.

Some things Jim takes note of the longer he looks at the picture, in chronological order:

- All three people in the picture are white, or at least they look like they are. The woman and the boy are few shades darker than the man, but.
- None of them look even remotely like Uhura, and the woman is a far cry from the native Kenyan she spoke of to him.
- Also, they're white.
- Again, the picture was taken in front of a New York brownstone. That's a whole 227 miles from Washington, D.C.
- The man is long-jawed and stern-faced, buttoned up in a scrupulously tailored black suit and neatly clasping his hands before him. He doesn't look like he's seen a happy day in all his life.
- By contrast, the woman is smiling warmly into the camera, her eyes crinkling at the corners, her dimples digging into her cheeks. Her long, wavy hair is tied in a loose braid slung over her left shoulder and her arms are draped around the shoulders of the boy between her and the man beside her. Just looking at her makes Jim feel small and soothed and six years-old again.
- The boy is tall for his age, gangly and lanky and cursed with bony, broad shoulders and too-long legs. He's wearing a suit akin to the one on the man and similarly tailored. His hair is short and neat and inky in color, his expression bashful, withdrawn, detached, his eyes just as dark and abysmal as can be.
- His eyes are just as dark and abysmal as can be.
- Wait.
- Those are Spock's eyes.
- The boy is Spock.
- Holy shit, the boy is Spock.

It hits Jim like an eighteen-wheeler hurtling towards him at eighty miles per hour that he's standing
in the middle of Spock's apartment – not Uhura's – and that he's been in Spock's apartment for over fifteen consecutive hours and he hasn't even known it, not until now. Suddenly, it makes a thousand times more sense to him why the bedroom was so colorless and tidy and why Spock was in there with Uhura instead of, I don't know, kicking it with the rest of the people passed out in the living room, and how fitting is it that he would live alone, distanced from the hectic, social nature of campus life?

(Extraordinarily fitting.)

Jim spends the next six minutes or so clumsily surveying the flat while trying his best not to disturb anything, overtaken by an insatiable desire to gather as much information as he can about Spock, however superficial and arbitrary that information may be. After all, he's been perplexed by the man's existence ever since that day in the library, and we all know how it is with Jim Kirk and compulsive behavior, don't we?

A quick inspection of Spock's apartment yields:

- More photographs of the stone-faced man, his sunshiney wife, and the dark, diffident boy anxious to look directly at the camera.

- A mostly bare refrigerator, supplied only with six or seven bottles of Dasani, two cucumbers, a head of lettuce, three tomatoes, and a few take-out containers. A calendar, another picture of the woman (who Jim is only assuming is Spock's mother), a grocery list, and a phone number labeled 'Nyota' in neat, blocked handwriting are carefully magneted to the freezer door.

- Several bottles of various liquors from last night sitting on the kitchen counter.

- A trashcan a fifth of the way full of lemon peels.

- A PlayStation 3 and two DualShock controllers.

- A CD rack stocked with artists like Debussy, Tchaikovsky, Daft Punk, The xx, Phoenix, and even Billie Holiday (cue a vaguely mystified hum from Jim).

- Minimalistic, simple décor, all geometric sculptures and art deco-style prints.

- Not a single speck of dust or dirt to be found.

Jim is inspecting a picture of Spock sitting beside a pretty, exotic-looking girl with eyes and hair just as dark as his on an old park bench when a loud, hilariously anguished groan pierces the silence of the apartment, has him jumping in both pain and surprise and scrambling frantically away from the shelf he's nosing at, suddenly a world-class ninja of sorts. He promptly feels like a complete and utter buffoon when he looks up to see McCoy laboriously pushing himself into a sitting position, sweeping his squinted gaze around the room like some kind of drunk, pissed off crocodile until it lands on him where he's standing awkwardly in the middle of the living room with his hands
clutching at the front of his t-shirt. McCoy literally growls.

“The fuck're you doin’?” he grunts, obviously just as hungover and miserable as Jim is, if not more. Jim thrills at the thought of how ridiculously grumpy the man must be at the moment, he really does.

“Research,” he replies, making his way over to the sofa more so he can stop being so uncomfortable and useless than for any other reason. He pushes a hand against McCoy's shoulder when he tries to stand up, warns, “Don't get up too fast. You might lose your lunch.”

“I've had hangovers before, Jim,” Bones retorts with heat, slapping his hand away and doing exactly the opposite of what he was told. He doesn't even stumble once he's on his feet. “Prob'ly many more’n you've had.”

Something warm and fuzzy buzzes in Jim's center at McCoy's snarling, petulant tone, the muss of his hair and the thicket steadily growing on his jaw and chin. It gives him life, you know, to see Bones being Bones.

“What time s'it?” McCoy half-snaps at him as he regards the crime scene they're stranded in, all the unconscious bodies flopped out on the floor.

Jim digs his phone out of his back pocket. “Ten forty-seven.”

“Beautiful,” is McCoy's supremely sardonic reply, one that garners a straight-up giggle out of Jim in its derision and his relative lack of self-consciousness.

“Where's Sulu and the Russian?” he asks once he's composed himself, not having seen them in the array of passed-out partygoers.

McCoy snorts something disdainful and amused. “That's right, you wouldn't know,” he huffs as he navigates the chain of bodies and starts heavily down the hallway, moving towards a doorway Jim failed to notice during his assessment of the apartment. His voice is mocking and affectionate when he adds, “Mister Casanova.”

Gaila dashes through Jim's mind for a fraction of a second, almost highlighting the fact that within the past fifteen minutes, he has spied on Uhura in her sleep, snooped around his not-friend's apartment, and legitimately giggled. “You jealous?” he chuckles after Bones; it's almost a reflex for
him to tease the man at this point.

“Redheads aren't my type,” is McCoy's blunt, totally not-irritated answer, thrown Jim's way as he disappears through the doorway. And that's the end of that conversation.

When Bones returns several minutes later, he returns with Sulu and Chekov, the former carrying the sparsely-conscious latter on his back and in considerably better shape than the rest of them, owing to his seemingly infinite tolerance for drink. It takes about three minutes for them to elect Sulu as their designated driver, carefully chart a course around the sleeping bodies, and let themselves out of the apartment so they can head down to McCoy's car, Jim thoughtfully flicking the latch on the doorknob into its locked position before pulling the door closed behind them. He steals one of Spock's bottles of Dasani on his way out.

It doesn't occur to him until 10:36 that evening that he forgot his jacket – as well as the pack of cigarettes and the lighter it held – draped over one of Spock's stupid art deco armchairs. The sigh that comes bursting out of him when he does is gale-force.


Jim Kirk stands on the doorstep of Apartment E09 and hesitates. From 12:23 PM to 12:27 PM, he breathes, rehearses, questions, hesitates, and breathes.

Some events leading up to his presence here:

- “Shit!” he cursed on his bedroom floor, suddenly realizing his lack of a jacket, the seven cigarettes he'd been smoking through since Thursday, and his trusty Zippo.

- McCoy gave him a funny sort of look from where he was folding one of his many flannel shirts on his bed, all angled, inquisitive brows and slightly pursed lips.

- 'Can u do me a favor?'' idled in his phone, ready to be SMS'd to Uhura, for about eight minutes before he backspaced through it all and mentally called himself a pussy for the next hour and a half for wanting her to be his middleman.

- Jim woke up at 11:18 AM the next morning with absolutely no improvement in his resolve to retrieve his jacket.

- He spent fifteen minutes coming up with excuses not to, excuses such as: I can wait until the
Jim allows himself two practice knocks on the sheet of air just before the door – a measure taken in the name of his own silly sense of comfort – before rapping his knuckles thrice against the white wood, quickly and precisely. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

You see, even though Jim does give a shit about his jacket and has more or less consciously decided that he's actually kind of-sort of interested in becoming Spock's friend (in addition to conducting an informal investigation of the man's mysteriously robotic nature, not that he'd ever openly admit to it), there are so many weird, somewhat unidentifiable feelings that start stewing inside him at the thought of Spock, some of which include:

- Fear.
- Awkwardness.
- That feeling where he's not certain whether or not Spock hates him or is just really fucking talented at looking semi-hostile at all times.
- That feeling where ‘how does Uhura play into this, if she plays into it at all?’.
- That feeling where he's pretty sure he and Spock's personalities aren't the slightest bit compatible.
- That feeling where he thinks the exact opposite.
- Indecisiveness.
That feeling where he starts thinking of Spock as live game and himself as a hunter, only out to catch him for the thrill of it.

That feeling where he knows Spock can see right through him.

That feeling where that exhilarates him.

Captivation.

Most importantly, though, fear.

The vast majority of those feelings start having a field day in the forefront of Jim's mind the moment he finds himself standing across the open doorway from Spock, whose expression changes only marginally once they're stuck staring at each other, uncomfortable and surprised. A beat, then,

“Hey.” The word comes out stronger, more sanguine than Jim thought it would. He gives himself a mental pat on the back.

Spock blinks, says, “Hello,” in his perfect monotone, typically devoid of even the tiniest hint of inflection. Jim half-expected him to come out with something ridiculous and nerdy like ‘salutations’ or some such shit, so he's pleasantly surprised and almost comically self-satisfied with the comparatively normal response he got instead.

But then he remembers that he's Jim Kirk and he's standing about a foot away from Spock and he's here to get his jacket and possibly make or break their not-relationship, and just like that, he's awkward and afraid and indecisive and captivated all over again. There's a reason why he rehearsed this in his head.

“Uh, I think I forgot my jacket here yesterday?” It's not a question, but he voices it like one to pump a little moisture into the dry, stale air, reduce the relative concentration of discomfort between them, hell, maybe even to make himself look dumb and ditzy and charmingly absentminded like he's never, ever been in his life. People are supposed to like feeling smarter than you, right?

Spock's face does something subtle, silent. “I thought you would return for that at some point,” he notes, more to himself than to Jim, easily sweeping the door open several inches wider and retreating into his apartment – an unspoken invitation to enter. It's about the most cordial thing Jim has ever witnessed Spock do, save for the dance he shared with Uhura at the party and that time when he told him he didn't want Uhura to kick his ass, and hey – if Jim was being honest with himself, he'd know that the simple act of it thrilled him a little, in the way coaxing a wounded animal out of hiding does thrill. He's industrious and competitive like that.
Jim ends up a little lost in his awe of Spock's apartment once he's inside, his eyes greedily skimming over everything he examined so hastily the day before. It all looks so different, now, when the windows are open and everything is so much more washed out and the room is bathed in natural lighting and there isn't a human being occupying almost every bit of space, sitting on the couch or standing against the wall or sprawled all over the floor. There's a clean, almost clinical sort of spaciousness to it, the near antithesis of Jim and his roommates' apartment.

“You have... a really nice place,” Jim comments, a little obtusely, as Spock momentarily vanishes down the hall and into his bedroom. “I mean, it looks way different. Without all the people, you know.”

He is answered with total silence. Was that a tumbleweed that just went rolling through the room?

Several moments go by before Spock is reappearing with Jim's jacket in his grasp and belatedly replying, all crisp and precise like he always is, “Thank you.”

“Thanks,” Jim says when Spock hands over his jacket, then promptly forgets all about everything he's ever learned about normal human behavior and conducting casual conversations. If you think the brief exchange that has just been described sounds awkward, it's probably because it really, really does.

So then there's this awful, wordless stretch of anxiety and tacit expectancy that passes between them for a whopping total of twelve whole seconds, twelve seconds of unbroken eye contact and slightly shallow breathing and that familiar feeling of fascination and legitimately tangible discomfort as far as the eye can see. In the yellow corner, we have James Kirk – eighteen years-old, exactly six feet tall and 165 pounds, a specimen of pure inelegance and tactlessness. In the blue, there is Spock Grayson – nineteen, six-foot-two and 166 pounds of careful, cool elegance and startlingly clear acuity. They've seen way too much of each other to be so speechless, wouldn't you say?

Spock's voice is loud and jarring in the stillness of the room when he asks, “Will that be all?” (He doesn't know just how much he hopes that the answer is no.)

That is the instant when, of all times, Jim remembers how to laugh. He does it, laughs, because this situation is actually kind of funny – the two of them face-to-face after all their time spent sharing glances intended to be surreptitious and silently wondering at each other and they're both at a complete loss for words – and isn't it amazing what a bit of laughter will do for your nerves?

The look that comes over Spock's face then only amplifies Jim's amusement – one of his brows angling upwards, his dark, intense eyes narrowing a little. It's an expression of curiosity Jim will
come to fall in love with very, very soon, but for now, it just tickles him a whole fucking lot.

“We got off to a really shitty start, didn't we?” he asks, chuckling as he runs a hand through his sandy hair. He feels something akin to triumph when a whisper of a smile plays upon Spock's lips in response, some good old-fashioned emotion on that marble visage.

“I would say so,” is his reply, acknowledging, amused – a wholesale agreement. They're breathing a little better at this point, the tension lining their shoulders steadily evaporating without either of them really noticing, both of them – I can promise you that – feeling incredibly silly.

“Would it be –” Jim cuts himself off, self-conscious for all of a half-second, before deliberately deciding it would be a lot more beneficial to the two of them if he just cut it the fuck out with that as soon as possible. “Would it be too awkward if I said I wanted us to be friends?” Because that is what he wants, right? And this whole visit is about what he wants, right?

This weird, half-astonished, half-relieved sort of light dashes across Spock's face, lingering in his eyes long after it's left his expression. There's more inflection in his voice than Jim's ever heard – it's still not that much, but it's evident – when he says, “Not at all.”

And he sounds grateful, really, as grateful as he can manage without betraying himself too much. He sounds soothed, too. He sounds happy, is what Jim realizes after a week and a half of replaying those three words in his head, when he's much more familiar with Spock's quirks and he's learned how to read him better.

Jim is astonished to find that two hours later, he's still sitting in Spock's apartment, engaged in a lengthy, remarkably enthusiastic conversation with the man about astrophysics, Greek mythology, American geography, and Final Fantasy, among other things, and as they make variations of the same faces at each other – pleasantly surprised faces and comically confused faces and impossibly intrigued faces and all the indescribable faces shaded in between, Spock's expressions always several degrees less than Jim's – Jim learns.

Some things snooping around Spock's apartment would have never told him:

- Spock's IQ is 189, to be precise (and again, Jim's very eloquent response to that is a shocked, gasping, 'no fucking way').

- In his spare time, he likes to play video games, watch documentaries, research ancient civilizations, study rocket science and economic trends (which Jim discovers really aren't all that different in a concrete sense), and cook.
- His favorite color is *white* – *not* blue like Jim was so sure it was.
- He became friends with Uhura because he was *tutoring* her (as opposed to trying to *date* her), and he will continue to tutor her until the end of the semester.
- His eyes are a dark, chocolatey brown that Jim easily mistook for black while looking at him from the long distances and for the short timespans that he was before.
- His favorite novel is – just like Jim's – *1984*. Honorable mentions include: *Slaughterhouse-Five, The Great Gatsby, Into the Wild,* and *The Life of Pi* (all of which are books Jim has a secret infatuation for as well).
- He has never seen *The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Donnie Darko, The Bodyguard, Gone With the Wind,* any of *The Godfather* films, *Pulp Fiction, The Breakfast Club, The Big Lebowsk*, *Ghostbusters,* and many, many other assorted cult and classic pictures. He has, however, watched all of the *Star Wars* saga, *Blade Runner,* and *Tron,* and he has a rather peculiar predilection for *The Wizard of Oz* and *The King and I.*
- He has a preoccupation with logic the likes of which Jim has never seen.
- He knows even *more* languages than Uhura does – *thirteen,* in fact – and all of them he can speak fluently.
- He is double-majoring in physical science and mathematics, and he plans to be an astrophysicist after he's earned his PhD.
- He is, in all probability, the most interesting person Jim has ever met in his life.

On **Tuesday, September 3rd**, Jim texts Spock as he's walking back to his dorm from the cafeteria with McCoy, something totally trivial and arbitrary that just happened to go flying through his head:

[text]: *How do u say pigeon in japanese?*

He lets out a short, amused laugh when he sees the man's response. McCoy shoots him a quick, scrutinizing look.

[text]: *You realize that the Japanese language utilizes an alphabet I do not have the keyboard for on my cellular phone, don't you?*

[text]: *U could spell it phoentically yknow lol*

Jim gets distracted by something McCoy says, a comment about the quality of the instant coffee they grabbed on their way out of the cafeteria, and they end up bantering about it all the way up to their
“They don't have time for you and your fetish for home-grown coffee beans, man.” “Yeah, well they will after I file a complaint.” “About what? Cheap, affordable coffee that just happens to be inappropriate for your oh-so cultured palate?” – so he doesn't see Spock's message until after he's kicked back on the couch with his sneakers off and his hoodie rolled up to expose his stomach, modesty be damned.

[txt]: Hato.

Later, while Sulu is taking his time to pick a character in Mortal Kombat, Jim asks,

[txt]: What about in russian??

[txt]: I was under the impression that you have a Russian roommate.

It is at that point that Jim becomes very familiar with Spock's inability to say anything without some – usually quite sizable – degree of sass. He's thrilled by this revelation, to say the least.

[txt]: Humor me, Spock :^)

Sulu is quite vocally celebrating the fatality his Sub-Zero has dealt Jim's Raiden – he even starts singing a decidedly melodious rendition of Beez In the Trap and swinging his controller around like a lasso in the wake of his success – when Jim checks his phone, shaking his head in both amusement and shame.

[txt]: Golubok.

Of course, then Jim is falling back against the sofa and laughing his poor head off as he watches Sulu dance Chekov around the coffee table, warbling on, “Bitch, I spit that crack, like I'm in that trap, so if you need a hit, then I'm with that bat...”, and the rest of the night is spent watching Jersey Shore reruns and eating cold pizza from the day before, but by the time McCoy is dragging Jim off to bed at fourteen minutes past midnight, Spock has taught him how to say the words pigeon, grenade, and star in about a fourth of the languages he knows how to speak.

On Wednesday, September 4th, Jim, Chekov, and Uhura run into Spock and – much to Jim's surprise and satisfaction – Scott in the quad after English, and almost immediately, they fall into the
same easy camaraderie they shared at the party, this time without help from any copious amounts of alcohol or the relatively uninhibited ambiance of last Saturday night.

“Y’know, I still contend tha’ you could make quite a livin’ as a dancer, m’ boy,” Scott jests as they sit around one of the wrought iron tables spaced out all over the quad. “Tha’ performance of yours was something I will never forget.” His default expression of impish delight intensifies at the blush that immediately rises in Chekov's cheeks, the teen unable to stop himself from hiding the lower half of his face with the cuff of his sleeve in his sheepishness.

“Yeah, why’d you come all the way to Uppercrust University when you could be making good money without having to worry about making the grade, huh?” Jim plays along because he likes Scott a whole fucking lot and he likes seeing Chekov fluster nearly just as much. Scott laughs something sharp and amused, slaps a quick hand against his knee.

“This kid is a fuckin' trip, isn't he?” he chuckles, wagging his index finger in Jim's general direction. The query is mostly aimed at Spock, who does that thing he likes to do where he's not quite smiling but you can sort of tell he's in agreement – or pleased, or intrigued, or whatever sentiment just so happens to apply to the situation – simply by paying attention to which muscles shift in his face and how. It makes Jim smile to watch it happen, that small unfolding of feeling on his face, like a little victory being played out before him (even if he wasn't the one who won it).

“He came here to find us,” Uhura says in response to the teasing, playful question Jim fielded at Chekov, says it in that semi-casual, profoundly perfect way she possesses so easily. The words roll like two river stones onto the table, settle at the center of it without rattling too much – heavy, comforting. Like warm honey in the pit of their shared stomach.

And the look on Chekov's face is beautiful.

They all chill out beneath the September sun – talking, joking, Jim and Chekov complaining about their professors while Scott and Spock laugh and scoff at them as much as their greater experience allows, Uhura giving the whole table an in-depth lesson on astrology (Chekov learns that he is a Pisces, Scott a Gemini, Jim and Spock – whose birthdays turn out to be only four days apart, wow – both Aries), Scott easily becoming 'Scotty' to Jim and Spock and Chekov carrying on a brief conversation in Russian when Jim asks them to – until Uhura announces that she has to leave so she can start getting ready for work, laughing, “If I spill diner food on this dress and these shoes,” – she kicks her leg out for emphasis, showing off the pristine white pumps she's clad in – “I'd never forgive myself.”

She leaves a light, affectionate kiss on Spock's right temple just before she goes. The muscles in his face shift again – another one of his not-smiles.
And as they're getting to their feet to start setting off in separate directions – Scott to his dorm so he can 'study and drink responsibly,' in his own words, Chekov to the library in pursuit of some art books to check out, Jim to his truck so he can head to work himself, Spock to Lord knows where – Jim's mouth does what it does best and outruns his mind.

“You know she's in love with you, right?” He says it before he can think the words through, before he can realize how much weight is actually behind them, how much he truly believes them, and in the instant after they've left him, Jim sort of-kind of hates himself for letting them escape (but only for that single instant – not a second before or after).

Spock goes still – an odd sight, bearing in mind that he's always relatively motionless – and looks at Jim without heat, without curiosity, without anything but quiet consideration. When he replies, it is only with two soft, solemn words.

“I know.”

A confirmation.

Jim doesn't ask Spock if he loves her back, doesn't try to make a conversation out of it. He just walks with him until their paths are forced to diverge some ten yards from his dormitory's parking lot, then gives him a quick pat on the back and a parting wave devoid of any of the discomfort he'd thought it would have. Spock returns the gesture in the awkward, muted way he has.

On his drive to the auto shop, Jim reminds himself to pick up a pack of blank DVDs from Office Depot before he heads back home.

It is 5:23 PM on Thursday, September 5th and Jim has just finished his twenty-page essay on symbolism in American literature (with an extraordinarily long, extraordinarily relieved sigh, might I add) when he snatches his phone off of the nightstand and sends a message Spock's way.

[txt]: Are u free rn?

The apartment is unsettlingly quiet, what with Sulu still at work and McCoy and Chekov off looking for lightbulbs and toothpaste or something at Wal-Mart, and Jim is hungry, lonely, and in need of some sort of congratulations for his incredible feat of academic perseverance. His phone vibrates on
McCoy's desktop as he's hooking his laptop up to the man's printer, blindly feeling at the vacant USB ports all along the back of the device.

[txt]: I am. Why do you ask?

[txt]: U wanna grab some dinner??

The seventh page of his essay creeps out of the printer before he gets a response.

[txt]: I believe that would be enjoyable. What sort of establishment did you have in mind?

Jim decides right then and there that he will never be over Spock's peculiar diction.

Fifteen minutes later, he's meeting Spock in the parking lot with only his phone and a twenty dollar bill in his back pocket. It's the first time he's ever seen the man's car – a sleek, most likely very expensive (as in, the most expensive thing Jim has ever been in the presence of in all his eighteen years) Volvo that looks like it's been driven straight out of a car commercial and directly into the bizarre thing that is his life at this point – and he slides into the passenger's seat like he's Cinderella and this is his magical pumpkin carriage, ready to whisk him off to the ball that is greasy diner food and charming retro music (quite a ball indeed, in his humble opinion).

“Man, what was the price tag on this sucker like?” he asks before even thinking to say hello. Shit, the surround sound in here is ridiculous.

Spock turns the music volume down in one second and shifts the car into reverse in the next, his cheek twitching almost imperceptibly. “Extravagant,” is his simple, concise reply.

Jim lets out a low whistle as they practically glide on out of the parking lot, smooth and silent like he's only ever heard of vehicles being before. He's struck with the same sort of feeling he had when he visited Spock's apartment on Monday, this shrinking sensation of being suddenly, fantastically small and base and lame in comparison to Spock, who is basically pure, condensed excellence in one nice, pretty human package.

That feeling allays, though, when Spock glances over at him and says, “I recall you saying you were partial to New Order,” effectively drawing his attention away from the mere quality of the sound
system and to the actual song playing – an old favorite of his.

And in that moment, Jim discovers that not only is he fascinated by the man on his left – he *likes* him, too.

The place is called *Enterprise* and is styled after the quintessential 70's diner – all neon lights and checkered flooring and Norman Rockwell prints decorating the walls. Jim and Spock steal the table in the back – a huge booth that wraps around the whole rear left corner of the restaurant – mostly because Jim wants to stretch out and kick his feet up on the cushion across from him.

“Your choice of seating is a bit inconsiderate, don't you think?” Spock comments, watching Jim like one would a bird-of-paradise or a circus performance, this borderline *hysterical* look of intrigue splayed out across his features. Jim shrugs puckishly.

“It's a habit.” Young and reckless as he is at this point, he's anything if not self-aware. Thoughtlessly, he reaches over, pokes Spock's bicep – which is surprisingly firm, by the way, him being King of the Nerds and all – and says, referring to his impossibly straight posture, “You gotta ramrod stuck up there or something?”

Spock flinches a bit at Jim's touch, slightly taken aback. “Does my carriage offend you?”

Jim laughs openly at the inquiry, tickled. “*God*, no.” He levels a warm, amused smirk at Spock. “I just think it's a little funny, s'all.”

Spock's face does something interesting, nearly indescribable when he says that – his eyes blinking, his brow flattening. There's almost no change in his expression at all, and yet Jim can see everything in the world *shift* in his face, like tectonic plates beneath the ocean floor (in the sense that he definitely knows they're there, but can he honestly say he's ever seen one move?).

Then he says, “We are not very much alike, are we.” And it's not a question, nor is it a criticism, and the responding smile that flowers across Jim's face is neither an agreement nor a denial.

Uhura looks nothing short of *enchanted* when she makes her way over to their table, flopping two shiny, laminated menus down in front of them and humming, “Well, well, well. If it isn't two of my favorite people in the world.”
“Please tell me you're going to be our server,” Jim says. “Because that would just make my entire night.”

“I will be for...” She brings her left wrist up for a **second or two** to consult her watch. “The next fourteen minutes or so. Then I'll be free as a bird.”

“You should join us after your shift's over.” Jim momentarily glances at Spock, stupidly expecting to gauge his reaction to the invitation (which, of course, is impossible to do).

“I'll consider it,” Uhura teases with a grin. All Jim hears is ‘yes, thank you, I'd be delighted to’. She fishes her little notepad out of one of the pockets in her waist apron, asks, “What can I get you guys to drink?”

Soon, Uhura is bringing Jim and Spock a ginger ale and a tall bottle of root beer, respectively, the two of them are ordering their food, and their conversation starts to err on the science-fiction side of things – namely, *Star Wars*.

“I always thought that that Sith Lord – shit, I can't think of his name – like, manipulated the Force or whatever and magically inseminated Shmi, and then *bam* –” Jim slaps the tabletop for emphasis. “Anakin popped right on out of her womb.”

“Darth Plagueis,” Spock supplies helpfully, belatedly.

“That's him,” Jim exalts, failing to curb his urge to touch Spock again and giving the man an amiable smack on the forearm. “Thank you.”

Spock doesn't recoil from him this time, instead simply continues to speak in just as even a tone as ever. “Darth Plagueis attempted to... exert dominance over all the midi-chlorians in the galaxy, but the Force resisted his efforts. In response to that such struggle, the midi-chlorians acted of their own accord and conceived Anakin with Shmi.” Once he becomes aware of the vaguely bewildered look Jim is aiming at him, he adds, “I've researched this.”

It pleases Jim like almost nothing else in this universe that he is now not the only person he knows that studies all the arbitrary things that just so happen to interest him. So they aren't so different after all.
“Isn’t that basically what I just said?” he says without heat, grinning without really meaning to.

“Not quite.” The corner of Spock's mouth twitches a millimeter upwards – a genuine smirk. “Details and such.”

Jim mirrors Spock's expression, amplifies it, then takes a drag from his beer and asks, “So, are you telling me that Anakin is basically Star Wars-Jesus?”

Spock raises a brow. “Well, there certainly many Christian allegories underlining all of the Star Wars saga.”

Uhura comes around with Jim's burger, Spock's chicken tenders, and their bills sometime after Spock has begun illustrating the similarities and differences between Anakin, Luke, and Jesus Christ and right before Jim starts bitching about the discrepancies embedded his comparison.

“Luke totally couldn't be Jesus, though,” is what he's saying as Uhura is dropping his check on the space beside his plate. “According to the Bible, Jesus is supposed to come back at the end of time and save everyone, which is exactly what Anakin did at the end of the last movie.”

“Your logic is flawed, James,” Spock comments, barely even batting an eyelid. “Christ didn't fall to the Devil's temptations. However, Anakin did.” He digs his wallet out of the pocket of his jacket where it's neatly folded on the booth beside him, retrieving his credit card as he fills out his bill. “His story is more analogous to that of the Prodigal Son than it is to that of Jesus.”

Jim is too busy chowing down on the ten French fries in his mouth to reply immediately. During his food-induced silence, Uhura purrs, mostly playfully, “Leave me a big fat tip, will you?”

Spock makes a brief, humming noise in his throat. “Of course, Nyota.” The look on his face is tinged with warmth as he hands his bill back to her, his movements colored with a nearly imperceptible tenderness that's only apparent because he's so clinical almost all of the time. A knot begins to form somewhere near Jim's diaphragm.

It's the second throwback of the day, and this time, Jim feels distinctly as he did when he was watching Spock and Uhura dance at the party, and even a whisper of what he felt yesterday after that awful, awkward thing he said to Spock. It isn't jealousy. It isn't discomfort. It's the knowledge that Uhura definitely loves Spock and that Spock is better than him in her eyes and the fact that he's never been good at feeling inadequate and that he loves Uhura and that Spock is more captivating
than anything he's ever encountered before and that his feelings change every time his vantage point does and that he *knows* all this and he isn't exactly sure how to accept it in a global, all-encompassing sense. The individual pieces of the puzzle are easy enough for him to deal with; it's when he steps back and takes a look at the big picture that he starts pissing himself off.

His meal costs **twelve dollars and seventy-four cents**, including tax. He lets Uhura have the rest of his **twenty** for her tip.

“Oh!” Uhura turns to Jim abruptly as though remembering herself, having already started towards the cash register. Her expression is bright and pleased when she says, “Sulu told me to tell you *hi*, that he hopes you like your burger, and that he’s going to be off in a few minutes as well.”

Jim can't rein in the smile begging for supremacy over his features (not that he wants to all that much, mind you). “Roger that,” he jests, giving Uhura a mock-salute and a wink.

And after she's gotten a good distance away, he turns back to Spock, steals a chicken finger from his plate, and says, “I think Luke is an allegory for Moses.” He tears a strip of meat from the fillet, drops it quite theatrically into his mouth. “But that wouldn't exactly be Christian, would it?”

Spock snorts quietly, looking only subliminally affronted at Jim's unabashed theft of his food. “It wouldn't be,” he concurs.

It isn't long before Uhura and Sulu have joined them – Uhura taking a seat next to Spock with her own plate of chicken tenders and Sulu beside Jim with a bowl of chili-cheese fries (that Jim immediately takes it upon himself to snack on as well) – and Jim has sent out a group text to McCoy, Chekov, and Scott, simply reading: **GO TO ENTERPRISE NOW.**

Scott is the first one to show up – slightly drunk, by the look and sound of it – with McCoy and Chekov arriving only **six minutes** after him. The conversation evolves as their group grows – once Uhura and Sulu have entered the discussion, Jim and Spock's extended analysis of *Star Wars* turns into a deliberation on the arbitrary, day-to-day elements that never seem to be explained in works of fiction (“Like, do you ever think about what kind of food they eat everyday? What's Yoda’s diet like? Were Ewoks considered game at one point? And what about bathroom facilities?”), which in turn becomes a discourse about all the shitty pornos parodying famous movies and comic books Scott has ever nearly killed himself laughing at, which then develops into an amazingly heated conversation about The Best and Worst sexual encounters they've undergone (a discussion Spock and Chekov both elect to dismiss themselves from out of a sense of dignity and a simple lack of experience, respectively), and then desirable traits in a significant other, and then how animal instinct plays into human courtship, and so on and so forth.
“You cannot honestly expect me to believe that physical attraction has no meaning to you. That just... that doesn't make any sense.” Jim glances at Spock, nudes him briefly with his elbow. “Am I right or am I right?”

Spock cocks one of his eyebrows again, something that sort of looks like accord, but he doesn't respond verbally (Jim's not entirely sure whether it's a matter of him not being able to reply or him simply choosing not to) when McCoy is saying, “It's possible, Jim. Love ain't necessarily logical, you know.”

“Exactly,” Uhura agrees with fervor. “Why do you think there are so many stories of thrilling, heartwrenching romance out there?”

“Fictional stories,” Jim retorts, eliciting a dismissive scoff out of McCoy and a protest from Uhura – “Oh, don't be such a cynic,” she says – and he throws his hands up defensively before either of them can argue with him further, adds, “I'm not saying I don't believe in love,” – his voice goes high and campy when he says that – “I'm just disagreeing with your claim that you could fall in love with someone without being attracted to them. I mean, what would even make you pursue them in the first place unless you were digging them?”

“Circumstance,” Uhura replies. Sulu and McCoy mutter their agreement as she goes on, “There are all kinds of situations you could end up sharing with other people and find yourself falling for them.”

“You could spend years growing up with someone and fall in love with them,” Sulu says. “Or you could end up falling in love with someone you used to consider just a friend.”

“Yeah, but that's not the point in question.” Jim's tone is both laughing and frustrated, his hands going up to briefly catch against his hair. “That's all well and good, but it doesn't necessarily account for the initial ‘oh, I think they're pretty hot,’ that makes you go for them at all. Without that, what would honestly compel you to start dating them?”

“Yer forgettin' that attraction ain't strictly physical,” McCoy says, murmuring a quick thank you to the waitress bringing him a fresh bottle of beer.

“You can fall in love with someone's personality before you fall in love with their body,” Uhura puts in.

“What are the chances of you seeing their personality before you see their body, though?” Jim
throws back. “Like, I can get... slowly convincing yourself that someone's hot after you spend awhile getting into them as a person, but without sex, what's the point?”

“In saying that, you're invalidating the legitimacy of chaste romantic relationships, which are just as sound as sexual ones,” Spock coolly points out, the first time he's spoken in what seems like an eternity. Both Uhura and Sulu start unironically applauding him, then – an act to which he simply nods his head appreciatively – while Jim finds himself unable to come up with a suitable argument against his very, very valid point. It's the second debate he's lost to the man tonight, and yet he doesn't feel defeated in the slightest.

“You got me,” he sighs, leaning back against his seat in his failure. “I officially concede this argument to Team True Love.”

“Y'know, all of you have good points, though,” Scott pipes in. “I' just depends on the person.” He motions to Uhura and McCoy on either side of him with his beer bottle. “You're allowed to value personality over looks, just like you,” he gestures to Jim this time, “You're allowed to le' physical attraction take the reins first.” His shoulders bunch upwards in a quick shrug. “'T's a free country, so long as you're not imposin' your opinions on everyone else.”

A collective hum of agreement settles over the table, effortlessly sucking the tension of the debate out of all seven of them sitting there.

“Personally, all tha' 'heartwrenching romance' stuff isn't for me,” Scott adds, smiling when Uhura playfully rolls her eyes and scoffs at him. “Bu' I'm not rulin' it out as a possibility.” His eyes land on Chekov – who's been speechless throughout the entirety of this discussion, preferring to simply listen rather than to contribute – and something in his expression turns inquisitive. “Wha’ d'you think, kid?”

Everyone turns their gazes onto Chekov, who quickly starts squirming uncomfortably under the scrutiny. He nervously glances from his plate to Scott, then to Uhura, then to Sulu, and then back to his plate, toying briefly with a French fry before saying, “I zink zat... anyzhing could happen, really.” He briefly clears his throat, strengthening his voice. “Zere is no method to falling in love.”

It's the wisest thing anyone has said since the onset of the conversation. Chekov has a way of being startlingly, breathtakingly brilliant like that.

They all spend the next fifteen minutes or so listening to the tale of how Chekov's parents met and fell in together – his mother a wealthy, aristocratic heiress from St. Petersburg, his father a lower class factory worker from Taganrog. It's a story of many struggles, many break-ups and reunions and familial conflicts and everything you'd expect to hear in an old storybook or an epic romance film,
but it's real and, more than anything, it simultaneously proves everyone at the table both right and wrong.

“Mama used to tell me zat sometimes, she would catch herself zinking Papa was so ugly,” he says at one point. “She would ask herself how she could love someone as grizzly and hard and... scarred as him. And Papa too used to question why he loved Mama when he zhought her so unbearable at times – she could be very critical and proud, you know.” He lets out a soft, bittersweet little laugh – a tiny hint of affection. “But eventually, zhey stopped trying to explain it to zhemselves. Zhey kept coming back to each ozher for a reason, right?”

Nobody can manage a verbal response; there are only soft, hushed hums of acknowledgment all around the table, these twenty-first century romantics awed into reverent, wondering silence. Spock seems especially pensive when Jim sneaks a glance at him in his periphery – his dark, solemn eyes cast downward, his brow faintly creased with thought. It's a soulful wistfulness so different from the careful calculation Jim is accustomed to seeing on his face – he doesn't know why noticing it makes him so suddenly sad.

It's 8:32 when the group departs from Enterprise – a whole two hours spent talking into the night – Uhura passing goodnight hugs and kisses all around, Sulu leading Chekov back to his car with an arm slung around his shoulder, Scott saluting the group through the window of his Passat, Jim deciding to ride back to campus with Bones to save Spock the trouble of driving him to his dorm. He thanks him for the company right before he can disappear silently, inconspicuously into his car, thanks him over the roof of McCoy's Accord and across the empty parking space between them, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

Spock pauses, his hand on the door of his perfect fairytale Volvo, and replies, “Thank you, James.”

Jim gives him a quick wink and a smirk. “Call me Jim.”

And on Friday, September 6th, Jim shows up, totally unannounced, on the doorstep of Apartment E09 at approximately 7:02 PM, having recently come to the conclusion that it is his mission in life to educate his new friend in the world of classic and cult films as best as he's able to and armed with a six-pack of Corona, a bag of Cheeto Puffs, and The Big Lebowski burned to a DVD-RW to help him do the job. The look Spock gives him when he opens the door and sees him standing on the other side is a sight – barely suppressed surprise and his own peculiar brand of curiosity, his arching eyebrows still the most expressive thing on his marble face.

“James?” He cracks the door open further despite his confusion. “I was not aware that you were planning to visit.”
Jim flashes him a smile, not really all that sheepish. “Are you busy?”

Spock hesitates, watching him with that dark, impenetrable stare of his. “... no, howe–”

“Then step aside and prepare to have your pop cultural horizons broadened significantly, my friend,” Jim cuts him off, satisfied with all he's heard. He deliberately bumps Spock's shoulder with his own as he slides past him through the doorway, laughs, “And didn't I tell you to call me Jim?”

Spock closes the door slowly and carefully after Jim's inside, visibly bewildered by his boldness, while Jim wastes no time in making himself at home, immediately dropping the Cheetos onto the coffee table and ducking into the kitchen to store the six-pack on the bottom shelf of Spock's refrigerator – making sure to come away with two bottles when he does – before he's strut ting back into the living room, grabbing his DVD, and gesturing it expansively in the general direction of the television.

“Can you hook us up?” he asks, just as casual as can be.

Spock, who is still standing a bit uncomfortably by the door, all stiff and noticeably uncertain (which, for the record, might be the greatest thing Jim has ever beheld in his life, considering Spock's default behavior), takes a moment or two to reply. “I was watching that,” he says.

When Jim turns to the TV and discerns the program that's on – a documentary about the Wall Street Crash of 1929, to be exact – this unusual hybrid of shame and amusement roils up in his gut, more ticklish than unpleasant. He regards Spock with something like mischief coloring his expression, briefly waving his DVD in the air as he says, “We'll finish your documentary if you promise we can watch this right afterwards. Deal?”

And it never occurs to him until nearly a month later just how much he's intruding on this man's life, so much more than anyone else has ever before. It never occurs to him how his actions tonight will affect their relationships with themselves and with each other for almost all of the foreseeable future. Right now, all that matters to him is the TV in front of them, the movie in his hand, and the look on Spock's face, which is – rather amazingly – just beginning to thaw.

“That is...” Spock considers his words carefully, observing Jim somewhat intensely for all of three seconds. “An agreeable arrangement.”
Jim may or may not give a little *whoop* at that. Oh, well. Only Spock will ever know.

(A small note: That's more than alright with Jim.)

For the next **twenty-six minutes**, Jim and Spock kick back on Spock's immaculate suede sofa in front of the Discovery Channel, then spend the following **two hours** watching *The Big Lebowski* on his PlayStation 3. Jim drinks a total of **three** bottles of Corona as opposed to the meager **six ounces** Spock consumes (he's not huge beer guy, Jim learns), the vast majority of the Cheetos end up in his stomach instead of Spock's (not that either of them mind), and for the better part of the movie, he has a good old time laughing his ass off at all the zingers he's loved since the first time he saw it while Spock just sits beside him and looks **pained**.

“I do not understand the premise of this film,” he says about **three-fourths** of the way through it, his eyes narrowed and scrutinizing as they stay glued to the screen. “It is... utterly illogical.”

“Of course it is,” Jim chuckles warmly around the neck of his beer bottle, impossibly amused with Spock's earnest use of the word 'utterly'. “It's not supposed to have a premise.”

“Why then is it worth watching?” Spock asks without averting his gaze. The way he voices the question isn't necessarily cutting or spiteful or anything like that – just really, **really** blunt – and honestly, it puts a smile on Jim's face.

“Well, there's comedic value to consider,” he replies thoughtfully, watching as Spock's brow furrows in mystification with something a whole lot like **glee**. “Not to mention the compelling characters, brilliant one-liners, and various pot and drinking references.”

Spock blinks, unsmiling. “I am not sure how recreational drug use and moronic behavior makes a character ’compelling’, but I suppose I will take your word for it.”

The laugh that comes out of Jim then is hearty and candid, leaves him pleasantly winded and slouching heavily against the back of the couch. Spock's mouth twitches at the corner, unnoticeable in the darkness of the room.

And later, after they're through with the movie and Jim is sort of helping Spock empty his dishwasher in exchange for his ear (which he's diligently filling with his expertise and knowledge as an ongoing cinephile), he catches himself saying, “You wouldn't believe how much you shocked me when you told me you hadn't seen *any* of those movies.”
“I would, and I do,” is Spock’s even reply. He carefully lifts a stack of porcelain plates into the cabinet above the stove, almost pantherlike in his grace.

Jim clumsily relocates one stray shiny steel fork from the spoon tray to its rightful home. “I mean, were you raised on a different planet or something?” he teases, smirking at the brief, vaguely slighted look Spock shoots him in response.

“James, where you come from...” Spock pauses, smoothly crossing the floor to where Jim is snatching a slightly damp glass from the dishwasher. His voice drops half an octave or so as he retrieves a pristine white coffee mug to shelve, as he finishes his sentence with a quiet, meditative, “I might as well have been.”

The air stills around them; Jim can feel it when it settles. He meets Spock’s gaze without an inkling of fear across the dishwasher door, says, “You don't say, huh?”

He doesn't even know the half of it.

Spock Grayson was born on **March 26th, 1994** at 1:01 AM in New York, New York to a man named Sarek and a woman called Amanda. He weighed **6 pounds, 2 ounces** – only slightly underweight. He came into the world quietly, painlessly, and with a head full of dark, downy hair.

The difficulties Spock was to experience for the next **eighteen years** of his life preceded him greatly, so greatly that none of them – not his father, his mother, the sea of relatives between them nor himself – should have ever been surprised. And they weren’t, for the most part. Everything just seemed so much more hopeful on that beautiful day in the hospital, when Amanda held her newborn son in her arms and he was nothing but a bright-eyed baby boy – not a **freak**, not **retarded**, not a **mule** or a **kike** or any of the varied and assorted things he would turn into in the years to come. Nothing but a baby boy.

His father came from a large, immensely wealthy Jewish family steadily growing roots into the law and medical industries for **sixty years** now, you see. They were all Conservative Jews (a term that has no political connotations, mind you), some of the elders even Holocaust survivors. They adhered to the **Halakha**, they observed the **Shabbat**; they kept kosher and blessed their wine and never took the Lord’s name in vain. A tight-knit dynasty of halcyon princes and queens with sable eyes and sable tresses quietly embedded in the face of Brooklyn.
Nearly **nine miles** north on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Spock’s mother grew up the daughter of a white, Protestant woman and an Iranian, Muslim man, grew up an olive-skinned working-class girl with dreams of becoming an actress or a singer or anything brilliant and shining and great. Her relatives were few and far between – a far cry from Sarek’s expansive, upper-class kin.

They met – in typical New York fashion – on a crowded subway platform. Both had just barely missed the **5:00** train. They talked, they laughed, they shared a cab back into the city, shared phone numbers, shared smiles. It wasn’t long before they were falling in love and into a world of trouble.

Their betrothal produced much strife: a wholesale lack of acceptance of Amanda on the part of Sarek’s family, an exceedingly violent clash of cultures – the Jewish and the Muslim – Sarek’s stark objectivity and sternness in constant conflict with Amanda’s sunshiney radiance and warmth, and all the confusion and discord that came from growing up in entirely different worlds, the glue of New York City be damned. A bystander could feasibly argue that the only truly magnificent thing that came of their union – save for the act of joining itself – was the boy. The boy who flourished in a garden thick with trouble. The boy who always lived in two pieces of himself. The boy with eyes like the Jerusalem night – abysmal, luminous.

Spock and his parents lived in a pretty Brooklyn brownstone with a faded white door. Up the cement steps and into the extravagant foyer, he would count the pictures on the wall and each wooden plank in the floor, then in the kitchen, he’d help his mother make the **matzoh** or watch the city outside through the tall window by the counter – **one** black cat disappearing into the shrubbery across the street, **four** women saddled with **Gucci** bags flouncing down the sidewalk, **two** cardinals preening their scarlet feathers in the tree just to the right of him. From the window, he would carefully climb the stairs and slip into his father’s study to read the tomes lining the walls – books with titles like *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* and *The Legal Environment of Business* and *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* – then wander on to his room, where he would practice the cello or flick through the dictionary or study the map of New York pinned to the wall above his bed, **three** out of the **five** boroughs already seared into his brain. He awoke every morning at **6:00**, ate breakfast at **6:15**, went on daily walks with his mother to school or the park – depending on which day of the week it was – at **6:30**. Lunch was invariably at **midday**, then snacks after **3:00**, then a lesson or two spaced out during the afternoon – piano or Italian or tap dancing or any number of the artistic, cultured things his father so desired – and dinner at **7:00**. After **two hours** of rest – **two hours** usually spent completing schoolwork or reading – he would retire at **9:00**, sleep soundly until it was time for him to start the cycle over again. His life was a meticulously regimented ritual. There was no time for such trivial things as play.

His mother fancied herself with holding his hand and mussing his hair and imparting her knowledge of both Jewish and Islamic cuisine on him. She taught him how to smile, to see, to appreciate and breathe and listen very closely. She ensured he went to bed every night with at least **one** thing to be pleased about. She never failed to remind him just how she felt about him (in three short, entirely too common words).
Conversely, his father kept him ever on his toes, forged him into a sterling silver superboy armed with endless aptitude and the finest of armor. He was a man of astronomical standards and indomitable expectations – 'make that grade' and 'waste no time' and 'stand up straighter' and 'be a good Jew'. There was no smiling or breathing with this man. Not a hair was to be out of place, not a word misspoken.

His father's family was a constant presence in his life and home, always filling the halls with talk of business and faith and the economy and, of course, the weather. They so loved to comment on Spock's resemblance to Sarek – the same ears, the same nose, the same hair and the shape of his lips. They never seemed to notice his mother's eyes staring at them through his wide sockets, or his mother's brow sitting straight upon his forehead, or his mother's square jaws or his mother's high cheeks or his mother's olive skin, hiding beneath the translucent Ashkenazi curtain he's been shrouded in since the day he was born. They never seemed to notice his mother anywhere, honestly, but most especially never in him.

Spock never knew his maternal grandparents, only the numerous softspoken, darkly intelligent Jews of Sarek's blood. They marveled at the industry of his mind, at his talents and his calm disposition, but they always did so as if they were so surprised, as if a boy of his tainted pedigree was never supposed to succeed as he did.

From the ages of five to fourteen, Spock attended the Ariel Vandenburg School of Manhattan, where his every achievement was something remarkable and unforeseen and the teachers spoke in Hebrew just as much as they did English. There, God's chosen people would wrestle with him in the mud of the courtyard and call him and his mother awful, ugly names – 'mule' and 'half-breed' and 'raghead' – and he would arrive home beaten and bruised, Jewish blood seeping from the cracks in his lips. The abuse didn't cease when he transferred to the Brooklyn College Academy, because there, not only was he a 'dirty Muslim' and a 'mutt', but a 'kike' as well. It's a wonder, really, the lengths people will go to tell you what you are.

The boy with the oil lamp eyes was much more than this, however.

- Spock had a habit of staring too long or not looking at all, often to the irritation and confusion of those around him. He found it extremely difficult to understand the subtle nuances in others' speech, often tuned out of conversations that held no interest for him, and much preferred to spend his time alone than preoccupy himself with something as petty and bewildering as human interaction.

- He was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at the age of eight.

- He had an odd manner about him, a too-straight spine and no tone to his voice and an eternally wandering mind, his thoughts many times too fast and frequent for him to hold onto all at once.
- He was using words like ‘beckon’ and ‘aplomb’ and ‘plethora’ long before most children his age would. He could read at a college level before he entered the fourth grade, and he possessed the rare gift of eidetic memory. He knew the name of every street in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens by heart. By the time his fourteenth birthday rolled around, he was a certified genius.

- There was a certain something about learning and looking that always had him alight with fever, a curiosity forever coded in his DNA, demanding answers for all the endless questions the world would fill his head with. He wasn't very fond of school, what with its slowness and stagnation and the meaningless cruelty he'd endure there, but if there was one thing he never tired of, it was the pursuit of knowledge.

- Spock found solace in the concrete, unchanging nature of numbers and patterns, calculus, time – the workings of the world around him and the positions of the stars in relation to the Earth and complicated chemical equations – \[ CaCl_2(aq) + 2AgNO_3(aq) \rightarrow Ca(NO_3)_2(aq) + 2AgCl(s) \] – and the effect of gamma rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds and the exact distance between Mercury and Neptune and how long it will take for the Sun to enter its red giant phase and hypothetical profit-and-loss probability density functions and the theoretical terminal velocity of various bodies falling from the Brooklyn Bridge, all the suicides he'd never be able to wrap his broad, aspiring mind around. Spock seldom, if ever, concerned himself with that which was devoid of reason.

- Just as well, he wasn't ever overly comfortable with matters of the heart or grand expressions of feeling or the things that would make him lesser, inefficient, having discovered very early on in his life that emotion is weakness and emotion is pain and emotion gets you ground into the dirt and bleeding out of your mouth and scolded for hours on end and well – he's never been a fan of things like weakness or pain, never prided himself in being anything but positively stellar. His heart tended to make him less so; of course he'd elect to put it on the back burner, if not forget about it completely.

- Spock grew up keen and perceptive, with a head level on his shoulders and a mind sharp with determination, with virtuosity. In the first eighteen years of his life, he'd accomplished more than many others could claim to: learned thirteen languages and just as many instruments (all that time spent counting beats and bars and perfecting each and every accent), developed a comprehensive knowledge of various scientific and mathematical subjects, acquired several college credits before even touching Starfleet campus, so much achievement, so much pride. But he also grew up lonely and peerless – an astonishingly un-tragic archipelago of a boy, always in fragments of himself.

He knew frustration. He knew sadness. He was never particularly cold or even unfeeling, really, and he knew anger so well it threatened to suffocate him sometimes – oh, the pain of being so unfathomably brilliant, the cleverness of him. He's tasted the New York dirt far too many times to count, looked up the noses of his ever-critical Jewish uncles and aunts and cousins, argued nonstop with the brick wall that was his father – “What if I don't want a bar mitzvah?” and “Why shouldn't I be able to read the Qur'an as well?” and “How can you stand idly by as they criticize Mother so?” and “I will go to Starfleet whether you wish it or not.” – and he's never had a pet, or a best friend, or a proper birthday party or even a senior prom.

He did have the sense to know that a person is never what they lack, though. He had the sense to
see, and to breathe, and to appreciate and — in a city of endless chaos and noise, always racing, never stopping, the lights so bright they put even the stars to shame —

Spock had the sense to listen very closely to the quiet, make it his comrade when it would sneak up the cement steps and into his father's lovely old brownstone, let him know that emptiness, well — it wasn't always so bad.

It was certainly good enough for him.

\[ Saturday, September 7^{th}, 2013. \]

Jim Kirk departs from Spock's apartment at 12:09 in the morning, taking with him his DVD and the three remaining bottles of Corona. He figures they're more likely to get consumed if he brings them back to his dorm than if they stayed in the bottom of Spock's refrigerator.

He is just beginning to feel the day get to him when he leaves, sleep faintly calling to him from the edges of his consciousness, but it's a good sort of tiredness — a buzzed, pleasantly boneless fatigue that he doesn't at all mind the prospect of riding out.

“'I'll give you a call tomorrow, okay?’” he says before he even knows he means it, flashing Spock an easy smile from across the doorway.

Spock doesn't reply for a moment or so, doesn't really know how to. He's never been promised anything like this before — he has no prior experience to tell him how to act — and he is so lost and it is so late and he should have been asleep hours ago, but.

But.

But Jim is standing there shadowed in the darkness of the canopy and looking so absolutely pleased to be graced with his presence that he can only nod and say, “Okay.” And he feels the word once it's out of him, and it feels exactly how it sounds – okay.

Jim's smile grows into something rascal and ingenuous. He raises a hand in a brief, blithe wave,
throws a soft, warm, “‘Night, Spock,” over his shoulder before he's making his way down the steps and back to his truck, the midnight air cool on his face.

He's keen enough to catch the quiet, “Goodnight, James,” Spock gives him in response.

And as Jim drives back to Starfleet, he realizes that that light – that half-astonished, half-relieved sort of light that went dashing across Spock's features the moment he asked if they could be friends – hasn't left Spock's eyes for the entirety of this week. He realizes that Spock has been watching him with it there this whole time and he hasn't even noticed it. He realizes that he feels more at ease around Spock's strangeness – his dispassion, his quiet – than he does with himself, as loud and anxious as his mind always is.

More than anything, though, he realizes that Spock is not the most interesting person he's ever met because he knows how to speak Farsi and Portuguese and Swahili, not because of his peculiar diction or his detachment or all the faces he doesn't know how to make, not because of his fairytale car or his pristine apartment, not even because of his brilliance, really.

It's his ability to have all of these things at once and still be as human as Jim has ever wanted in a person, in a friend. He was lacking in those things growing up too, you know.

“Where the hell have you been?” McCoy asks him when he comes wandering through the front door, just as content and exhausted as can be. He clumsily catches the Corona Jim tosses his way, shoots him a quick, lukewarm glance.

Jim flops down on the sofa next to Bones, kicking his feet up on the free space on the coffee table, the wood that's not occupied by a mostly empty pizza box. He leans into the man's side without thinking about it, ignores his quiet, aggrieved grumbling and closes his eyes against his shoulder, sighing softly and slowly and wordlessly.

Several beats of silence pass, then – “I hate to inform you, Jim, but I'm not a mind-reader.”

Jim snorts, a smirk curling into the fabric of McCoy's t-shirt. “M'tired,” he mumbles with a yawn.

“How darlin',” Bones croons, dragging a breathless, weary laugh out of Jim. He swiftly adjusts their position so that his arm is slung around Jim's shoulders and Jim can rest more comfortably against him, because no matter how rough around the edges he can be, he never hesitates to be as present as possible. That's the wonderful thing about McCoy.
Jim falls asleep there with a pair of atom-bomb eyes on his mind.

“I love how all the constellations are named after Greek heroes.  
It reminds me that even though immortals,  
They have their vices, too.”

– Alysia Harris.
**what impossible light**

Chapter Summary

Jim Kirk wakes up at 2:24 AM on Monday, September 30th, and finds himself in an extremely rare, extremely unusual predicament.

Chapter Notes

ahhh! where do i start?

first of all, i want to apologize to those who are following this verse for taking so stupidly long to finish this. i probably should have expected a lot less of myself, being the queen of procrastination and meticulousness, but eh. you do what you gotta do.

secondly, i also apologize in advance for the general... messiness of this? i've finished feeling like this whole thing is kind of all over the place, and even though that was kind of the plan from the get-go, i'm sorry if it's confusing or off-putting to any of you. the story is already meant to be a wee bit unsettling, though.

i've tweaked the first part a little bit? (don't worry about all this if you're just getting on board)
- i've retconned spock’s last name in (it’s grayson, btw). the only reason why i hadn’t put it in before is because i wasn’t entirely sure where i wanted to go with it, if i wanted to give it to him, and whether or not i wanted his last name to be jewish (which i just kind of… glossed over so as to not run the risk of his name sounding really, really stupid).
- i’ve also altered some physical descriptions of spock a bit – nothing major, just little details about his skintone (because i feel that spock’s status as a poc should be a little more obvious).
- jim’s stepdad is now definitively frank – before, his name wasn’t specified.
- err, little changes in formatting.
- (i expect to go back and edit this part if it ever occurs to me to)
- (also, let's scrap the idea that this whole thing is happening in just four parts, okay? okay)

there are more notes at the end of import, but for now, i'll just get off my soapbox with a few dedications:

- **mavis**, who has been unbelievably sweet and supportive and just the absolute best for the past month and a half or so. thank you for all your messages, dear!
- **priya**, who i still keep on my mind and wish all of the best.
- anyone and everyone who reads this and loves it just as much as i do.
- and **len**, who this gigantic clusterfuck of a story will forever be for, who stays up until illogical hours of the morning crying and laughing about all my ridiculous headcanons and plot bunnies, who puts up with my incessant love for gary mitchell (and everyone else, of course), and who is honest-to-god my best, best friend and the closest thing i have to a t’hy’la. happy birthday, favie. ♥ (i told you i’d finish in time!)
An overview of September, 2013.

Jim Kirk wakes up at 2:24 AM on Monday, September 30th, and finds himself in an extremely rare, extremely unusual predicament (in terms of his life, that is). It is completely pitch, save for the scant bit of light stealing through the open doorway from the living room, the television still on. McCoy is snoring loudly on his side of the room; when Jim peers over the edge of his mattress and
across the expanse of carpet and empty air between them, he can just barely make out the shape of the man lying face-up and with one arm hanging several inches above the floor in the darkness. By now, he has gotten used to the volume.

Jim rolls out of bed and pads into the living room, gently rubbing his eyes with the knuckle of his thumb. It takes him a moment or so to notice Chekov curled up in the corner of the sofa, swaddled in one of Sulu's old quilts he brought from San Francisco. Chekov starts a bit when Jim makes his presence known with the sound of his feet scuffing softly against the floor; his head spins abruptly around, his gray eyes wide in the dim light of the room. He is a very anxious boy, you know.

“Oh!” he gasps in a whisper once he sees Jim, recognition washing over his face unaccompanied by relief. “Did I wake you?” His voice is quiet, almost scared. Jim trembles just slightly with affection.

“F’course not,” he chuckles in a low tone, briefly moving to ruffle Chekov's wildly curly hair. Chekov makes a sound like an afterthought of laughter in his throat when he does. “You know how weird I sleep.”

And it's true. Of the four young men living in Apartment A28, Jim has the strangest sleeping habits (namely his invariable tendency to wake up every three hours or so – McCoy has told him about six times now that he probably has insomnia – and the occasional bout of sleep paralysis).

“Speaking of...” Jim trails off with a lengthy yawn as he wanders into the kitchen, not bothering to flick the light on on his search for a bottle of orange juice. “What're you doing up, huh kid? It's past two.”

Chekov is silent for several moments, the mop of his hair the only part of him visible over the back of the sofa and the boundary of Sulu's quilt from where Jim is standing. The noise from the television is the only audible thing in the room, volume low and mumbling.

“I could not sleep,” is what Chekov says when he finally replies. He nearly sounds ashamed of it.

Jim lets out a soft, acknowledging hum, lazily moving over to the couch to sit beside Chekov, who curls himself up a bit tighter in response to his proximity. A few weeks ago, Jim might have been a little worried, maybe even wounded by the reaction – now, he understands that Chekov just has this omnipresent apprehension about his person, that it has nothing to do with him and everything to do with the fact that he's a sixteen year-old kid who's been living away from his parents for two months. He gets nervous about it too, sometimes.
“You okay?” Jim asks, casual and quiet. As he unscrews the cap of his orange juice, he becomes aware of what Chekov has been watching – *House Hunters* (which, as known to everyone in this household, is pretty much the bane of his existence – all prissy rich people complaining about everything under the sun in twenty-two-minute intervals). He doesn't complain about it, though, not when Chekov is so silent and wistful at his side.

Idly tracing the scales of a koi fish embroidered on the quilt with the tip of his middle finger, Chekov briefly worries the left side of his bottom lip. “I am, how you say... lost in zhought.” He watches the television screen with unfocused eyes, his head gently leaning back against the cushion behind him. “Makes it hard to sleep.”

Jim hums again, folding a leg beneath him as he takes a sip from his bottle. Something quiet and throbbing is singing at him in his center, around his diaphragm – that place where six eccentric, idiosyncratic, beautiful human beings have been not-so-quietly cramming themselves for the past month, tearing at the floorboards of him and leaving him feeling like one of these stupid old HGTV houses, suspended in some form of renovation – and I mean, Chekov does that to him a lot, you know. Makes him feel so open, so cavernous. Like a big brother, if he knew what it was to be one, if he was more comfortable with admitting it (as comfortable as Sulu is). Maybe it's his doe eyes that do it.

“You wanna talk about it?” At first, the question feels awkward and tense on his tongue, like he's just eaten half a cake and its bittersweet aftertaste is refusing to leave him and he doesn't want to get a glass of milk or water or anything tempering and cool, doesn't want to lose that tartness so soon, and since when the fuck does he have any business comforting another human being, where the hell did that come from? – but then the feeling is gone, and he is just soundlessly radiating with concern and warmth. This is okay, Chekov is okay – everyone is okay.

Chekov takes a little while to answer him again, blinks once, twice into the cool light of the television before opening his mouth and letting any words out, asking, “Do you ever... lose time?” Jim is tense and alarmed in no more than half a second, that same unfamiliar, bittersweet protective feeling suddenly springing up inside him without warning.

“You wanna talk about it?” At first, the question feels awkward and tense on his tongue, like he's just eaten half a cake and its bittersweet aftertaste is refusing to leave him and he doesn't want to get a glass of milk or water or anything tempering and cool, doesn't want to lose that tartness so soon, and since when the fuck does he have any business comforting another human being, where the hell did that come from? – but then the feeling is gone, and he is just soundlessly radiating with concern and warmth. This is okay, Chekov is okay – everyone is okay.

“Like, black out lose time?” He tries (and fails) to not sound as worried as he actually is, terrified at the prospect of Chekov having some kind of dissociative disorder (or any disorder, for that matter, but especially something like that).

A sheepish look overcomes Chekov's face, then, and the teen starts shaking his head and laughing quietly, apologizing, “I'm sorry, I use ze wrong expression.” He pauses thoughtfully, sits up straighter beside Jim. “I meant... do you feel like you have gone too fast, sometimes? Like zhere are too many zhings you have missed?”
Jim sighs softly – a noise of concession. “You have no idea, Ruski,” he replies with another drag of his orange juice. He nudges Chekov lightly with his elbow, smiling a bit at the faint, half-surprised little noise that comes out of him. “I can see why you’d feel like that.”

Of course he would feel like that. He's two years younger than he should be. He lives with three (mostly) grown men. He's enrolled at one of the most prestigious universities in the damn country. There's no reason why he shouldn't feel like that.

And then, like it's absolutely nothing, Chekov says, “I am sad, Jim.”

Jim promptly feels like someone has punched him directly in the chest. It's a few moments before he can stop wincing around the painful echo of that in his head, clear his throat as offhandedly as he can manage.

“That's...” He hesitates, the words scrambling on their way from his head to his mouth in his tiredness and general uncertainty where consoling others is concerned. He quickly convinces himself to just say something, though, determined not to make Chekov feel even worse than he does already. “That's okay. It's okay to not be okay.” It's awful and he knows it, but he keeps talking anyway, his mouth running away from him like it always does. “It happens to everyone, you know?”

Chekov is quiet for an unbearable three seconds, his body so still and his gaze still not-focused on the TV. Jim can see it, the little traces of weariness – of fear – in his posture, his jaw, the way his chin is tucked into the fold of Sulu's quilt, oh god, the way he shivers ever so slightly – those tremors Jim knows so well from his own experience. He can't bear the sight of it, but again – out of stupidity or instinct or something else, something deeper – he doesn't look away.

Eventually, a brief whisper of a laugh stutters out of Chekov, and Jim is completely shocked when – instead of expressing thinly veiled disappointment in his crappiness as a human being – he says, “Yes. You are right.” He turns to look at Jim for the first time since he's sat down, half of his face disappearing into shadow when he does, and he smiles – a muted, tender thing that makes him look so, so much older than he actually is. “Zhank you, Jim.”

Just like that, Chekov is better. Still sad, but better.

Jim spends the next twenty minutes sitting there with him, letting the teen lean against his shoulder through Sulu's quilt as they channel surf and he slowly finishes off his orange juice. When Chekov stops trembling and begins to sag against him – his thin, lavender eyelids flickering closed every
eight seconds or so – Jim gently coaxes him to his feet and sees him to his room, where Sulu is currently fast asleep in his bed, lying with his stomach to the mattress and his face buried in his pillow.

“Try to get some sleep, yeah?” he murmurs, voice low so as to not wake Sulu. “You're gonna be so tired in the morning, man–”

He goes quiet when Chekov shuffles forward and into his arms, sudden and without a word. Like everything about the boy, the embrace is soft and sweet and surprising, and for several seconds – too many seconds – Jim is too caught off-guard to return it.

It's only the second hug he's been given this year.

Then Chekov wobbles backwards, gives him a tired smile, says, “Goodnight,” and ambles on to his bed, curling up in the center of it still wrapped in Sulu's quilt like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Jim lingers in the doorway a moment longer than he needs to before slowly, carefully pushing the door closed. He switches the television off before heading back to bed himself.

Later, after the sun has risen, Chekov will yawn and yawn and yawn and yawn and Jim will ruffle his hair and tease him with a playful 'I told you so,' and Sulu will verbally wonder why Chekov didn't tell him he couldn't sleep and they will have a three-minute conversation about it, but after Jim and Chekov have eaten their French toast and headed out for English, they won't speak any more of the exchange, and Jim will only think about it when his mind just happens to drift around the half-pleasant memory of it before moving on to something else.

Now, that extremely rare, extremely unusual predicament I was talking about? It wasn't the darkness, and it certainly wasn't McCoy's snoring. It wasn't Jim's insomnia. It wasn't even the fact that Chekov was awake at almost 2:30 on a Monday morning, really, nor was it his sadness (which has been accidentally bleeding into his expressions a lot more than he might like and a lot more than Jim would ever admit to noticing for awhile now).

Most specifically, it was Jim's inability to stop himself from panicking at the sheer thought of Chekov in trouble (an acute case of sympathy, he will muse later on), his inability to shut up when he started trying to fix that trouble, the physical pain taking his eyes off of him would have entailed, how easy it was to put a smile on Chekov's face. It was the clench in his chest and the fear of fucking up, the warmth of Chekov's body when he rested against him, the hug in the doorway. It was all the silent familiarity and comfort of that thirty-minute stretch of consciousness – McCoy's snoring almost melodious to him now, Chekov's ever-anxious eyes so endearing, the plane of Sulu's back in the darkness of his room grounding in the way presence is, just reminding him that he's a human being and he's sleeping within a twenty-foot radius of him most nights between 10:30 and 7:00.
James Tiberius Kirk is an adult and – for the very first time in his relatively short, eighteen-year life – he is carrying on stable relationships with other human beings. Six other human beings. His friends.

Naturally, McCoy, Sulu, and Chekov are a constant presence, almost every second of his time spent in the company of at least one of them. It doesn't really hit Jim until that dark moment on September 30th that he wakes up every morning with the three of them always there, Sulu putting around in the kitchen singing songs from various musicals in his smooth baritone – “Haven't you noticed, suddenly I'm bright and breezy...” streaming through Jim's doorway on one Tuesday morning, “I did not live until today, how can I live when we are parted?” the next, the whole last five minutes of Grease on Thursday, his voice rising into a forced tenor for all of Sandy's lines – Chekov either napping absently on the sofa until breakfast is ready or helping Sulu cook, smiling stupidly at the man's impromptu performances, and McCoy usually either taking his sweet time in the shower or bitching at Jim to 'get the fuck up' before he has to 'take drastic measures', and even though sometimes, Jim hates the noise and the clamor and sometimes, he seriously thinks about punching McCoy in the dick and sometimes, he wants nothing more than to bury his head beneath his sheets and forget about the existence of all things save himself, it's wonderful in an entirely new way to know that he can never not count on having them with him, you know? He hasn't felt like that in years, not after his mother started disappearing (and remember: Jim Kirk hasn't ever not been needy).

McCoy is best at keeping his feet firmly planted to the ground and his thoughts from consuming him completely, the man's all-inclusive philosophy of no bullshit and total honesty a leash on Jim's stray dog of a mind. At first, the offhanded little comments and commands he's always giving him would get under Jim's skin – “Stop sidetrackin' yourself,” and “Don't get too excited, ya hear?” and “If you leave that soda half-empty, I'm gonna smack you one,” and “Yer side of the room isn't gettin' any cleaner, Jim.” – because, you know, he has that huge peeve about being told what to do and all, but by the end of September and after experiencing a very understated, mostly unaddressed epiphany in the passenger seat of McCoy's car one night on their way back to their dorm, Jim understands that McCoy only does it because he sees the very best in him and will never be content with letting him be any less than that. And that's a little heartwrenching (because, I mean, it's not like anyone else has ever given so much of a shit about him that they'd put him through hell just to see him succeed), and really, Jim thinks he loves Bones for it.

(Scratch that. He knows he loves Bones for it.)

That's not all there is to McCoy, though, not when you consider his pervasive hypochondria, his unusual love for things Jim finds inherently annoying (for example: country music, HGTV, road rage, grape-flavored things), and his ability to maintain a constant level of ire without tiring – all traits Jim has quickly come to adore him for. He's insanely protective of his twenty-eight year-old car. At nineteen, he is more like a stress-driven forty-eight year-old than most of the professors on campus. He lets Jim help himself to the extra change in his wallet and he accompanies him to the free jujitsu classes the university offers every Sunday night, where he whips his ass just as many times as
Jim whips his. Jim never stops being thankful for him, not even in the infinitesimal moments when he thinks he might just launch himself onto his back with a raucous battle cry and strangle him a little bit (only a little bit).

Sulu consistently proves himself to be better than Jim at all the things that do and don't count – he has better living habits (such as picking up after himself without being asked and refraining from smoking a whole pack of cigarettes a week and not waiting until he literally has no clothes left to wear before doing his laundry), better liquor tolerance, a better, broader repertoire of skills. He can cook pretty much any dish you might throw at him just about perfectly, while the most Jim can prepare without inadvertently setting the kitchen on fire is instant macaroni and cheese. He almost always has the upper hand when he and Jim are playing fighting games or FIFA. He is calm and collected where Jim is rowdy and boisterous, comfortable in his skin when Jim feels like he might just crawl out of his sometimes, polite where Jim is brash, conservative in his tendencies where Jim errs on the excessive side of things, his charisma an easy thing whereas Jim's is so extravagant, a better roommate, a better person, a better friend.

And that bothers Jim when he thinks about it, when he takes a few moments to count how many times Sulu has beat him at Mortal Kombat (69 by September's end) or when Sulu pays special attention to all the traffic signs like the good guy he is or when Jim notices the way Chekov looks at him like he's the most magnificent being to ever have graced the face of the earth, because it's at those times that it's especially apparent that Sulu is who he was always supposed to be in the eyes of everyone else – well-mannered, even-tempered, courteous, successful. It's inadequacy at its finest, always quietly tearing at the walls of his stomach.

But all that doesn't mean that Jim is immune to Sulu's charm, because he really, really isn't – not even in the slightest. In fact, all the reasons why Jim might envy Sulu just so happen to be the same reasons why he loves (yes, loves) the guy, why he doesn't complain too much when he suffers another fatality at his hands and why he's always happy to eat his dinner and take that old saying about kissing the cook very literally (much to Sulu's amusement and bashfulness and McCoy's playful exasperation) and why Sulu's mere presence feels like a miracle to him half the time – him a sort of guardian angel to the lot of them.

Chekov, of course, remains just as sweet and bemused and bright as he has since that first day in August when they all gathered around a pitcher of rum and coke in the kitchen. As we all know at this point, Chekov has a way of accidentally stealing everyone's breath away with his wisdom and his insight, those things so uncanny for a boy (a boy) his age. He also has a way of making mush of Jim's (not to mention everyone else's) heart, dancing all about his hard edges with his radiance and his tenderness until they soften just enough, revising his whole fragmented oxymoron of a self-image with statements such as:

- “I do not zink you are disgusting,” and,
- “He bleeds so easy,” and,
- “He is like the sun, isn't he?”, and, and –
And the statements he doesn't say with his mouth but with the look on his face and the roundness of his storm-colored eyes, all the times he looks without speaking. He is constantly alive with these somewhat unsettling combinations of nervousness and excitement in varying amounts – brimming with happiness at the prospect of meeting Uhura in the quad, writhing with angst at the ridiculous, highly improbable, and mostly imagined possibility of failing, on top of the world when surrounded by the six of them, quivering with panic for the very same reason. It isn't a weird thing, isn't particularly distressing or problematic or anything – Jim knows what it's like to be sixteen and full of feeling, and it's not as if he doesn't have the same problem, his anxiety being what it is. It's not as if it makes Chekov any less endearing to him, as if it makes him love the kid less. It's not as if it doesn't make Jim grateful for him, too, walking in step with him every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning on their way to the English building and shamelessly clad in his grandma sweaters and silly flip-flops.

Jim stops worrying about how much Uhura does or doesn't like him after that first night at Enterprise, when she left him a quick parting kiss on the cheek before disappearing off into the darkness of the parking lot. She might not always agree with him, and she might bicker with him more often than not – a result of two equally dominant personalities sharing the same space as much as theirs do, every Monday a brand new argument about feminism or the media or political science or color theory – and she might not look at him quite the same way he looks at her – never warmly, yet always tainted with love – but her eyes are still embers and her spirit is just as fiery and Jim still loves her in the absurd, indulgent way he does – all about her beauty and her excellence and the way she, much like McCoy, refuses to have her time wasted by any of the mediocrity he may pester her with. She starts to become like a sister to him, in a sense – an exasperating, beautiful sister who sometimes makes Jim want to pull his hair out or run away and hide and could never, ever be compared to, not after he's seen her dance, not after he's heard her laugh. He's loved her since the day he met her, you know.

Scott also becomes a huge part of Jim's life, fills his days with laughter and the uncanny, whimsical perception he so easily carries about him. Jim learns over the course of several hours spent at Enterprise and drinking in Scott's apartment (which surprisingly turns out to be a floor above Jim's, wow) that the man is just as much of a grease monkey as he is, that he's double-majoring in physical science and engineering, that this is his fourth year at Starfleet, and that oh yeah – he's fucking brilliant. The two of them talk quantum circles around each other for what seems like ages all throughout the month of September, bonding over their mutual love of tinkering, alcohol, and – most prominently – adventure (which might translate into reckless, self-destructive behavior at times, but who's to judge?).

“Momen’ o’ truth,” Scott says to him on Thursday, September 19th while they're having a quick smoke outside of Enterprise, waiting for everyone else to finish cleaning up in the bathroom. “Near-death experiences?”

Jim exhales two billowing gusts of smoke through his nostrils, dragonlike in the slightly chilly air.
He takes a second or two to consider his answer. “Four.”

Scott tsksd dismissively, a smirk curling his lips at the corners. “*Bush league* shite,” he snorts, and when Jim shoots him an affronted, incredulous look, he smiles impishly around his Malboro and raises both hands – all fingers of his right uncurled, only two of his left – and says, “Seven.”

“No fucking way,” Jim gasps, grinning in amazement despite himself. “How the fuck am I even talking to you right now?”

Scott snickers quietly in response, his eyes twinkling with mischief and delight. “Odds are definitely in my favor, I reckon,” he laughs, and the next three minutes or so are spent debating over whether accidentally shooting yourself in the shoulder is worse than getting gored in the stomach by a goat at a petting zoo – an argument Jim wins after stretching the neck of his sweatshirt over the muscled curve of his left shoulder to show Scott the discolored, dimpled scar there... just as McCoy and Uhura are walking out of the restaurant. I'm sure you can imagine exactly what kind of reaction the display gets out of them – “Stay classy, Jim,” McCoy grumbles with a spectacularly heavy eye-roll – what with their similar senses of propriety.

Then, of course, there is Spock.

Jim isn't quite sure how it happens, but by the end of September, he and Spock have seen, spoken to, or at least texted one another each and every day – without fail – since that first Friday with the movie. Some mornings, it's him rolling out of bed and messaging Spock (who he always knows is awake by the time he's up) about whatever fantastical dream he might have had the night before – “*Dream journal 9/10/13: evryone was in a musical and u had pointed ears*” – others, Spock has already texted him, asking him something ultra-specific and inane like he's so inclined to – “*Is the scent of your shampoo mint or rosemary? I could not discern the exact fragrance yesterday afternoon.*”

(Jim laughs, briefly wanders into the bathroom, grabs his bottle of shampoo, and gives the label a quick once-over.)

[txt]: *Mint, haha.*)

Then there are the periods between classes, the time spent hanging out in the quad or quietly perusing the shelves in the library (read: Spock quietly perusing the shelves in the library while Jim simply tags along behind him like a lost puppy and talks nonstop about anything and everything that crosses his mind), and the afternoons and nights they will go out for lunch or dinner – Chinese and
fast food and Lebanese and Thai. Around the third week of September, Jim gets his first taste of Spock's cooking – a Jewish casserole Spock calls kugel and Jim initially greets with something like disgust... until he actually takes a bite out of it, that is.

“I feel like I'm having an orgasm in my mouth,” he says around the food on his tongue, devoid of table manners and yet just as gracious as one could imagine. Spock makes a faint, ambiguous face at him from across the table, his brow shifting ever so slightly.


From that point on, they spend significantly more time eating in than out. On the evenings they don't, the evenings in which Jim has dinner with his own household (nights that grow curiously more and more infrequent as the month goes on), Jim usually ends up talking to Spock the whole time anyways, texting him just as if they were actually conversing face-to-face.

“Y’know, I always thought that real people were a lot more interestin’ than digital ones,” McCoy comments one night over Sulu's homemade sushi after Jim has let slip a particularly amused chuckle at one of Spock's characteristically sassy retorts, something facetious and not-so-subtly likening him to a newborn kitten (perpetually tired, clumsy, adventurous, and hungry; as they say, if the shoe fits...).

“Spock isn't a digital person,” Jim replies in a light, airy tone, leaning over to steal a dollop of wasabi from McCoy's plate. Bones makes a low, skeptical noise in his throat as his hand snatches out to slap Jim in the wrist with expert precision, like a king cobra going in for the kill, immediately sending the piece of sushi clenched clumsily between Jim's chopsticks sailing across the table at top speed and smacking Sulu directly in the center of his chin before falling sloppily into his lap with a faint clump.

Immediately, all four roommates erupt with laughter.

Once they've all mostly managed to settle down amidst Sulu's playful, halfhearted claims of discrimination – “This is a hate crime, I swear,” he snickers as he wipes the smear of wasabi from his face, nearly succeeding at killing Jim when he does – McCoy leans back against the sofa and argues, “I distinctly remember you callin' Spock an android last month.” His mouth quirks into a quick frown. “If that ain't digital, I don't know what is.”

Jim only shrugs through his laughter, preferring not to dignify McCoy's contention with a verbal response. Who knows? Maybe he likes digital (and quiet, and magma, and night and silver and close, empty spaces – all the things Spock holds inside him).
It's never an actual issue, you know, that Spock lives somewhere on the autism spectrum. Spock is foreign, unusual in that perfect way only people can be, all his little mannerisms something for Jim to marvel at and take note of in their newness. The way he holds coffee mugs with only two fingers whereas Jim uses four. The way he never slouches unless he's sitting at his desk, hunched over his computer, while Jim tends to sprawl out almost anywhere he might touch down. His unique handwriting when it's pressed into the Post-It on Jim's laptop – thin and heavy-handed and minimally spaced and blocked off, so different from Jim's large, artistic, flourishing scrawl. His immutable, irrevocable stillness a contrast to Jim's near-constant movement; Jim this living, breathing embodiment of romanticism, Spock infinitely more classical in style and taste.

They work out an unconventional sort of exchange system in which Jim torrents movies for them to watch every Friday so that Spock will continue to introduce him to things like goulash and schnitzel and latkes and varnishkas. They trade life stories and various likes and dislikes and bits and pieces of each other's medical history – Jim learns that Spock prefers warmer temperatures to the cold and that he has an extremely rare allergy to chocolate; Spock discovers that Jim has broken exactly eighteen bones in his body and that he likes rap music so much it's almost embarrassing. They start running together and taking turns playing Final Fantasy X and Mass Effect with each other, and Jim finds that Spock can actually be quite talkative when he wants to be, when you speak to him correctly and listen to what he has to say (which Jim most certainly does) – so many drawn-out conversations about the theory of conservation of energy and what it's like to grow up in New York City.

Jim stops asking Spock to call him 'Jim' and starts paying attention to way he says 'James', all the scarcely different variations and intonations of that single syllable and the assorted emotions entrenched within them.

Spock learns the lines of Jim's face just as he used to memorize that old map of New York, calculates the exact meaning of his each and every expression like one would a very complicated, very confusing math equation.

And one night, on the last Friday of September, Jim averts his gaze from The Rocky Horror Picture Show long enough to look at him – really look at him, his neat hair and the large triangle of his nose and the soulful, endless depths of his eyes – and he thinks the man might be his best friend, in a weird, accidental sort of way. After all, it's never been so easy for him to just breathe around anyone.

(Spock had that exact same thought only a week earlier. He just didn't say anything about it to Jim.)

They – all seven of them: Jim, Spock, McCoy, Sulu, Chekov, Uhura, and Scott – fall into the habit of having dinner together every Thursday night at Enterprise after Uhura and Sulu have completed their shifts, sitting around that same huge booth in the back left corner of the restaurant and talking.
about everything under the sun over their curly Q's and their milkshakes. They catch each other between classes and snap silly, unflattering candids of one another and argue about such things as love and quality television, and honestly, the constant stream of contact, the verve, the warmth of it all – it threatens to overwhelm Jim damn near every day (in a totally, totally, absolutely, 100% breathtakingly awesome way, that is).


Spock turns his gaze on him almost immediately after he says that, his dark eyes bright with what Jim can easily identify as fascination and appreciation and curiosity all rolled into one luminous amalgamation of a feeling, and Jim only smirks at him in reply – knowing, amused.

“Obviously I'm the Wicked Witch,” Uhura says all matter-of-factly, deftly lacing her fingers beneath her chin. “I'm the biggest bitch here, after all.”

“Aw, I dannae think you're a bitch, lass,” Scott protests with a scoff. “You'd definitely be Glinda, or –” He hesitates a moment, brow furrowing the slightest bit. “Tha’ is her name, righ’?”

“Bones would so be Glinda,” Jim throws in instead of directly answering Scott's question, grinning rascally when Uhura lets out a high, melodious laugh and McCoy glares sharply at him from over his beer bottle, hazel eyes narrowing tempestuously across the table. “Wearing a pink, frilly dress...”

“Floating around in a bubble...” Sulu adds in a mockingly dreamy voice.

“Stabbin' you all in the face with my wand,” McCoy snaps. Everyone present – save Spock, whose lips simply twitch the slightest bit in amusement – bursts into one collective fit of laughter.

“Well, if Uhura's the Witch,” Scott starts, still chuckling heartily. “Consider me a flyin' monkey, aye?” Uhura coos affectionately at the sentiment, leaning over to give the man a brief, loving pat on the cheek.

“Can I be the Cowardly Lion?” Sulu mostly directs the question at Jim, who for some obscure reason has become the informal moderator of this discussion. “He was always my favorite one.”

“You can be whatever you want to be, baby,” Uhura replies, only somewhat sarcastically, before Jim
can answer him first. Her silky tone quickly dissolves into a wild, frenzied giggle when Sulu rips the bandana off of his head and flings it at her face, his lower lip caught mischievously in his teeth.

Chekov's small, meek voice pierces the commotion to ask, “Who would I be?”

In near-perfect unison, Uhura, Sulu, McCoy, and Scott all turn to him and say, “Dorothy.” The faintly flushed, entirely too pleased expression that comes over Chekov's face is nothing short of absolutely fucking adorable.

“I thought I'd be Dorothy,” Jim huffs more playfully than not, crosses his arms over his chest in an exaggerated show of defiance and hurt. Uhura snorts, incredulous.

“You're not cute enough to be Dorothy,” she retorts without hesitation, smirking devilishly at the pout Jim aims her way (because yes, she can be – and often is – just as impish as he is).

“You'd be the Scarecrow a thousand times before you'd ever be Dorothy,” McCoy says in a slightly vengeful manner. Now it's Jim's turn to narrow his eyes at the man.

“Are you trying to say I'm stupid or something?” he asks, half-confrontational, instinctively leaning over the table and towards McCoy, who is (unsurprisingly) not deterred by how offended he seems; he is far too outspoken and they play this game far too much for him to want to coddle Jim.

“Oh, you've got brains, Jim, believe me – all the brains in the world,” he replies between sips of his drink. Something like a smirk plays upon his lips when he adds, “You only use 'em 'bout eight percent of the time, though.”

It wouldn't be dishonest to say that the genius in Jim is a little strung when Uhura and Sulu both hum their agreement. The airy amusement tainting his expression falters a bit, only enough to be just vaguely perceptible, and he shrugs – not conceding, but dismissive – and says, “That's just what you think.”

“I know, and I stand by my opinion,” McCoy teases. He actually surrenders a laugh to Jim when he grabs a stray French fry from Spock's plate and throws it across the table at him, hits him directly in the forehead with it.

And then, almost hesitantly (if it weren't for the fact that he is nearly never hesitant about anything),
Spock asks, “And who would I be?” There's a note of eagerness in his otherwise impassive tone, a hint of luster in his face – things Jim has made himself a contest out of winning from him – as he awaits an answer, an answer he obviously expects from Jim. He has a funny little habit of forgetting his surroundings when they are together, you know.

“That's easy.” Some of the tension seeps from Jim's posture as he leans back against the booth, absently rubbing at the tip of his nose. “You're the Tin Man.”

Another collective murmur of agreement passes around the table. Spock's expression doesn't change when he asks, more curiously than hurt, “Are you implying that I am not in possession of a heart?”

“Well, no,” Jim replies with an easy smile, hardly uncomfortable under Spock's intense gaze. “The Tin Man had a heart the whole time. He just didn't know it.”

Spock blinks, considering Jim's response in the quietly calculating manner he has, before giving him a brief, curt nod without a word. *The logic is sound,* Jim can practically hear him think at him, the way they've begun to talk without speaking.

Later, long after that conversation has ended and they're all breezing out of Enterprise with their heads held high and their voices singing with laughter like the small gods they are, Uhura joking about finding a sparkly pink ballgown to put McCoy in at some point and Sulu enthusiastically agreeing to help her while Bones half-seriously threatens to knock their heads together, Spock shocks the shit out of Jim and touches him, gently bumps the knuckle of his left forefinger against the back of his elbow and draws his attention with a soft, even, “James?”

The gesture surprises Jim so much because Spock typically doesn't touch anyone of his own volition, has never freely sought out physical contact with others and usually ends up wincing or freezing up out of respect for his own personal sense of security whenever Jim pats him on the back or brushes their shoulders together or pokes him in the arm like he often tends to do. For him to actually reach for Jim astonishing, to say the least.

And when Jim turns to look at him, expectant and bemused, he finds himself even more amazed when Spock says to him, ever so astutely, “If I recall correctly,” – which, I mean, of course he does, and isn't it something that a genius like him is trying for modesty? – “The Scarecrow was endowed with the intelligence he so desired from the start as well. He, in the very same way as the Tin Man, was simply unaware of it.”

Something round and quiet warms in Jim's chest when it occurs to him that Spock has most likely been sitting on those words for the past twenty minutes or so, just waiting to tell him and, I don't
know, assuage the tiny pit of hurt inside him when the moment was right. He grins at the thought, grins at Spock, who is watching him with just as much intrigue and thinly-veiled satisfaction as he always does, his Mona Lisa smile a shadow under the neon lights.

“You make a good point,” he says. He and Spock step off of the curb in tandem, trailing the rest of their laughing, rejoicing party out onto the dark, rain-soaked asphalt.

It's not all perfect. They don't live in a fairytale. Spock and McCoy butt heads almost every time they exist within a twenty-foot radius of one another, and Jim and Uhura have their fair share of heated, too-passionate disagreements, and both Chekov and Jim suffer from the chance panic attack a few times throughout the month, hell – even Jim and Spock rub each other the wrong way on a few occasions.

More than anything, though, Jim can never stop wondering why the hell they all drifted to him, him with his chaos and his reckless abandon and his easy thoughtlessness and all the bad habits he could spend hours listing: his smoking, his abrasiveness, his impulsiveness, his cockiness, his predilection for trouble –

But on that night of Thursday, September 26th, he gets Uhura to dance with him in the parking lot of Enterprise and they laugh so hard they cease to breathe in healthy paces and as he holds her to his chest and she holds him back – both of them heaving breathlessly against each other – he hears what Chekov says from where he's sitting atop the hood of Sulu's car:

“He is like the sun, isn't he?”

And he catches Spock's eye the exact moment he replies in his flawless monotone, his face half illuminated by the street lights hanging over them: “Yes – yes, he is.”

And Jim understands that they don't have to be perfect. He doesn't have to be, either.
Spock Grayson slips between his sheets at 9:09 PM with many, many thoughts weighing heavily on his mind.

Quite often, Spock prefers to think of his life in numerical terms: days, minutes, inches, feet – all manner of things quantifiable and calculable and finite. Everything is much more calming and reconcilable that way.

- It is nine minutes past the time he should have been in bed, and this causes him some distress.
- The seventy-eight minute phone call he very recently hung up on with James is still ringing in his ears, the man's warm, laughing, 'Goodnight, Spock,' a pleasant echo in the silence of his bedroom.
- Tomorrow, he has an engagement with James after he has finished his Accelerated Calculus course and gotten home to change.
- It is approximately twenty-six hours and fifty-one minutes until October 2nd, 2013 – the day Nyota turns nineteen.
- Spock believes he has six friends, now.

He is unable to be absolutely certain, of course – they are all so foreign to him still, though they surround him on the daily and have begun to slowly but surely crowd around him for the majority of the past month. They are amiable, eccentric, imperfect, varied. He has taken to silently cataloging the small, instinctive things that make them all unique – a regular pastime for his scientist's mind.

- Hikaru smiles with the left side of his face first and has an even, unwavering gaze.
- Pavel finds it difficult to maintain eye contact with others for lengthy periods of time.
- There is an extraordinarily slight limp to Scott's walk – a result of minor nerve damage in his right leg, an accident from a time earlier than now.
- Nyota often emphasizes her words with her hands – she wrings them, she fists them, she flourishes them about and places them on her face, her hips.
- Leonard has spectacular hand-eye coordination, even while intoxicated.
- James has a number of nervous habits, including but not limited to: running his fingers through his hair, rambling, blinking more often than usual, licking his lips.
- James is also more movement-oriented and physically expressive than most, his moods often discernible in everything down to the way he holds his hands or the degree at which his shoulders rest.
- Scott has a darting eye and a skittish disposition, and he exists in an eternal state of motion and energy and anticipation apparent in the tremor in his fingers and the jump in his gait.
- Nyota moves with an air of agency and weight, her walk heavy and certain, her body a thing of precision and balance (a slightly amusing observation, considering that she is a Libra). Even her gaze appears to be attuned to her sense of gravity.
- Conversely, Pavel's center of mass seems to sit somewhere around his collarbone, for the teen frequently stumbles and blunders about from day to day – fingers clumsy, limbs awkward, steps uncertain. The only moments in which he exhibits any sort of grace are those when he is
Leonard holds a great deal of stress in his shoulders and upper back, the muscles there stiff and taught and perpetually bunched with tension.

Hikaru has a perceptible ease and a smoothness to his every action, just as one would expect from a seasoned athlete like himself.

Both Nyota and Hikaru are sinistral, while James, Scott, Leonard, and Pavel are all dextral.

Nyota has one tiny beauty mark dotting her left shoulder and another between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

Hikaru has one freckle on the crest of his forehead.

There are several blemishes Spock has glimpsed marring James' skin – one burn mark on his left arm, one tiny tear in his lower lip, one bullet wound on his left shoulder, one welt across the blade of his right, four scars slashing across his shins and calves – as well as exactly sixteen sun freckles peppered over his arms.

Not including Spock, Leonard is the tallest of them all, while Nyota is the shortest (when she is not wearing heels, that is). They are all thirty-five feet and three inches tall and weigh approximately eight-hundred and nine pounds. They have two blue, two brown, two black, two gray, and four hazel eyes between them. They are one-hundred and thirteen years, five months, and twenty days-old.

Of course, there are also the things that are not perceived so much as they are sensed and learned, all of their flaws –

- Hikaru will often form his mouth to speak and then refrain from doing so – an indicator of some internal discomfort, a lack of total security in himself.
- Pavel is constantly wrought with anxiety, nervous anticipation or its dreadful, toxic counterpart. He has not yet learned how to sit calmly with himself and breathe.
- Scott has a tendency to overestimate and overrate himself – crude, trivial misjudgments of his own astronomical strengths – an unbroken habit that will wind him up into many tricky situations.
- Nyota gives her heart much supremacy more often than not, as she is incessantly feisty, intensely intuitive, and deeply sensitive by nature.
- Leonard is given to excess in all things – excess of drink, of expression, of passion and of feeling. He is notoriously lead by his emotions and urges.
- James, naturally, possesses all of these traits.

- in addition to their gifts –

- Hikaru is a man of radiance and of magnetism, ever-broadening horizons and the beautiful reality of all things. He is honesty and diversity and light imbued in living, breathing flesh.
- Pavel has a similar brilliance and a sweetness about him, something impossibly pure and dynamic embedded within the many layers of his psyche – the intelligence, the excitement, the curiosity.
- Scott remains beset with life and vim and vigor, always raring for anything that will get him from one point to the next in the most exhilarating manner possible.
- Nyota is sharply determined and values her own liberation like no one else Spock has ever encountered, she so alive with spirit and willpower and the flame burning steadily inside her. She fits her name, as they say, like a glove.
- Leonard cares deeply for all that surrounds him, considers every life he encounters to be a precious one, one worth loving as fiercely as he might dare, rough as he may be.
- Just the same, James shares all of these attributes with his companions as well, in exceptional and varying amounts.

They are all smart, generous, enterprising people brimming with things Spock never dreamed he might want or stay up well past his bedtime considering in the darkness of the night – their brilliance, their humor, their impossible need so similar to the large banks of emptiness inside him, the spaces where he is lacking (in expression, understanding, freedom, etcetera).

He sees their need, too, sees it ever so blatantly in the way they do and see and say so many things. Hikaru's boundless diligence to excel and practice and perfect and repeat (Spock has that, too, he's very aware of it). Leonard often pushing so outstandingly hard for what is difficult and well-earned and righteous in both himself and everyone around him. Scott's many stories of adventure often tinged with desperation. The look in Pavel's eyes when he regards Hikaru a second longer than he would anyone else.

**Two nights** ago, Nyota pressed him between the passenger door of his Volvo and the thin, petite frame of her and kissed him softly on the mouth – a romantic gesture. She was warm and the night was cool and the stars were hiding behind a thin swath of clouds, and Spock knew she placed her hands on the insides of his elbows to keep him from escaping her if he planned to, and he knew many things in that moment and in the bated moments before. He knew that she enjoyed wearing his jacket when she grew cold because it was warm with his body heat and it smelled like him (and people often like to be reminded of those they love with things that are sensory). He knew that she didn't need his guidance or his tutelage – she is much too bright for that – and that she only approached him in the first place because she wanted his company, his attention. He knew that all of the times she ever kissed him before, it was not the same as it was in that moment – those kisses were reminders, this one was a statement.

And when she descended from the tips of her toes and wrapped her arms around him and gently laid her head against the flat plane of his chest, Spock knew that he loved her and that she loved him, but their feelings were not congruent, not like Nyota so wished for them to be. There was something in the sharp way she held herself and the flame she carried around inside her that made him want to be around her often and put smiles on her face and protect her from harm and appreciate the miracle of her existence (that is what love is, right?), and there was something in the way he spoke and the silent, untouchable furnace within him that made her want to own him, and Spock knew it, and he knew it because she told him so not three and a half minutes earlier.

He knew that she smiled much more than she cried, but also that she cried more often than she liked and that she did not enjoy doing so around others (she told him that, too).
And later, when they sat in his car and Spock told her why he could not kiss her back (it would have been incongruous of him to express a feeling he did not know, if he was familiar with how to express such feelings in the first place), told her that she was worthy of much more than the unrequited, unbalanced romance and all the gaping pits of emptiness he'd give her, Nyota made a breathless sound and gazed through the windshield and said to him – to everyone in the entire world, but most of all to him – “You know, I am so tired of men feeling like they don't deserve me.”

There it was: the need. He could hear it in her voice, halfheartedly reaching across the gearshift for him (for what he couldn't give her).

None of them are so needy as James, though, whose want bleeds into everything he does and says and touches without abandon, who always surrounds himself with that which stimulates him and changes him and feeds him and sustains him.

Why else would he instigate so many fights on a weekly basis?

Why else would he live in a state of perpetual motion?

Why else would he have traveled far beyond his home, his income bracket, and his comfort zone to attend one of the most upstanding universities in the country?

Why else would he call and text and pester and plead and do everything he could to make himself as irrevocable a presence as possible in Spock's once-solitary life, unless it was for the reason that he needed him, or whatever Spock did for him?

There, Spock believes, is where logic fails to provide him with a concrete answer, instead leaves him just as pensive and puzzled as he was as a child, all the questions of human nature and the complexities of that which lies outside of the realm of reason still a mystery to him (more of a mystery than it is now, at least).

The previous Friday, Spock had caught James staring at him approximately seventy-two minutes into their viewing of The Rocky Horror Picture Show – his chlorine eyes skating plainly over his face in the darkness of the room, and he had asked him, “What is it?”, because – unlike with Nyota – he at times had no idea about any of the things that existed between himself and the man at his side, their friendship (friendship) so intense and mind-altering, the time so slippery and electric between his nimble fingers when James is near.
And James smiled at him like the sun had that morning and said, “Just looking, s'all,” and Spock appreciated the urge and the feeling very well because he liked to look, too, and he congratulated himself for this rare understanding.

James then quietly said to him – to no one in the entire world, no one but him – “I was thinking that you were my best friend,” and it was the first time Spock had ever heard him speak so softly as well as the first time someone had ever acknowledged him as the wondrous, breathtaking thing that a best friend was, a title better than royalty.

Spock did not know what brought them together. He did not know what in James Kirk's wiring made his laughter so infectious or his smile such a marvel. He did not know exactly what made him so loud and childish and captivating and infuriating and why he was as taken with his grunge and all the numerous shadowy parts of him as he was with his solar radiance and his light, why James could so easily open him up and crawl deep inside him like no one else. He was not even certain if he was frustrated with this not knowing, this sudden lack of security, if it really bothered him as much as he thought it should, as much as it would, had this been anyone but James.

But he did know that James often gave things just as much thought as he did – even if it wasn't immediately apparent – and that he was at all times as open and raw as a wound. He knew all about James' childhood and how he hasn’t seen his brother in all of two years and about the endless green pastures of Riverside and his ongoing love affair with the night sky (he also knew that James thought his eyes looked like the night sky, and that's because James told him approximately three and a half days ago). He knew that James planned to be an astronaut soon and that he liked to entertain the idea of someday living on the East Coast and starting a family and raising a child, when he's older and taking Prozac on a daily basis. He knew that James was frustrated and angry and straining and that he wanted to consume and fly and combust sometimes, and he knew that desire because he found he had it, too.

He knew that James needed him – though he did not know why – now, if not for very much longer.

(It is something, isn’t it? To be needed.)

Spock had said to James how much he liked that thought, that thought of being his best friend, and James had smiled at him once more, and Spock was very surprised to discover that he felt as though he could not breathe when he had that smile, when that smile was given to him. How irrational of him to feel in such a way.

Spock spends so many minutes (eighteen, to be exact) turning the man into an equation, subtracting
this trait and that trait just to see which one makes him so bright, his own silent experiment. After every operation, he loses himself.

He then makes them – them as in the two of them – into a mathematical statement. He finds that he cannot bring himself to take anything away from it.

It is at 9:36 PM on Monday, September 30th that it occurs to Spock that he needs James, too, in a way very much unlike the natural requirement for sustenance and nourishment, a way unlike any other need he has ever experienced. There are many reasons why he would need him – his company is pleasurable, his existence both fascinating and unfamiliar, he is an excellent debate partner, he is gregarious and warm and kind –

– he fills all of the empty spaces in Spock with substance and earth and handfuls of happiness that he has never known how to accept nor how to express, beautiful jewels of wonder and curiosity, pockets of bright, impermeable halos of warmth, dark pits of heat of the non-destructive sort, too many words that were previously devoid of meaning, so much perspective and untold depth, ecstatic confusion, blind empathy, small, breathtaking touches and tastes of the sky and of the sea, for James often smells very faintly of ozone and has let the ocean make a home in his eyes, and Spock has long been aware that the average human body is 57% water, but when he is with James, he feels absolutely filled with it –

– but all the justification in the world would not sit right in Spock's stomach, not when it comes to this. This exists too much in his gut for him to try to touch it with his mind, makes no sense with consideration to all of James' numerous flaws and shortcomings and defects. Remarkably, Spock is more than satisfied with that.

The human heart is so inconsistent, and they – all six of them – frequently like to play hopskotch with theirs. Spock still does not understand them fully, not even when confronted with the wealth of knowledge he has accumulated over the month of September, the detailed profiles he has constructed in his mind.

He knows that Hikaru enjoys botany more than any other of his varied and assorted interests and that he misses the mild, dry coolness of the San Francisco bay.

He knows that Pavel still thinks of fast food as a delicacy, for his parents never treated him to it very often (something Spock can empathize with due to similar experience), and that English still feels unusual on his tongue, though he has known how to speak it for three years now.
He knows that Scott was called 'Monty' when he lived in Aberdeen and that he doesn't have a death wish, he is only determined to go out with a bang – “With my fist on Death's bleedin' ugly mug,” he says – and have stories told of his greatness long after he’s gone.

He knows that Leonard thinks that the invention of hand sanitizer has forever cursed the field of medicine and that he believes in irrational, old-fashioned things like true love and guardian angels and miracles.

He knows that Nyota loves to dance more than almost anything in this universe and that she dreams of a day when she will be the one building bridges between peoples and nations all around the world.

He knows that James has not talked to his mother in three months and that he used to pray for wings to fly away on, far and deep into the abyss of night.

He knows that James Kirk is the brilliant sun and that he is the silent moon, the two of them always slowly chasing after each other.

He knows that this is an illogical metaphor.

And at 10:01 PM, he puts a dark, heavy lid on his thoughts, lets his eyes fall firmly shut, and sleeps. He is sixty-one minutes late.

Tuesday, October 1st, 2013.

Jim Kirk is looking decidedly puckish as he snaps yet another boring, self-indulgent candid of Spock, the latest in a set of seven. He gets him in the pasta aisle, right on the borderline between the spaghetti and the ziti as he quickly inspects a box of farfelle, his glasses a half an inch further down his nose than they should be. Spock’s eyebrow quirks up at the soft, clicking sound effect his phone makes the instant he captures the photo, absent and subliminally bemused.
“James, I was under the impression that you accompanied me here to shop for groceries,” he comments without looking up, deftly turning the pasta in his hands. “Had I been aware that you planned to turn this endeavor into a photoshoot, I would have dressed more appropriately.”

Jim laughs warm and giddy in his throat, his mouth stretching into a wide, toothy grin he couldn't even think to wipe from his face. Spock has this wry, vaguely scornful brand of humor about him that often makes Jim feel dizzy with amusement, leaves a pit of entirely imagined carbonation fizzing quietly in his stomach – like Alka-Seltzer, but much, much sweeter. He's almost absolutely certain the man has total awareness of this fact and uses it against him for his own not-so-sick, not-so-obvious pleasure.

“No, no, this is great,” he croons, crossing the aisle to where Spock stands with an impish smirk. He lowers his phone just long enough to reach over and gently push Spock's horn-rimmed glasses up onto the bridge of his nose – Spock blinks several times in rapid succession and gives him a narrow, inquiring look in response – before snapping an eighth picture of the man's face, rumpled with confusion. Jim only grins once more.

“This is like, Vogue meets National Geographic.” Jim bends over the handle of his shopping cart as he flicks through the last three photos he's taken, lazily hooking his right foot around his left ankle. “The rare and elusive Spock-hipster in his natural habitat: an informal documentary.”

Spock makes this soft, humming noise that, were he anyone but himself, might have escaped him in the form of a chuckle. His voice is meticulously tinged with affection as he carefully drops the box of farfelle into his own cart and starts to push on past Jim, saying, “Ah, so you are humorous.”

“You're damn right, I'm humorous,” Jim snorts, easily moving to walk in step with Spock and cloaking his tone with thick, gaudy layers of camp. “Watch how he handles his bowtie pasta with such caution, how inconspicuously he prowls the aisles of the local supermarket, camouflaged beneath his thick, yuppie Ray-Bans and his herringbone beanie.”

“My glasses are not Ray-Bans,” Spock points out without heat as they cruise into the produce section – Jim gives him a genuinely surprised, “They aren't?” in reply – then glances over at Jim with what truly appears to be genuine solemnity... until he says, “You make me self-conscious.”

Jim knows that he's teasing him. He very much likes to be teased by him, the android (and again, he is almost absolutely certain that this sentiment is mutual).

Jim's expression goes comically mopey – all round, rueful blue eyes and his forced pout slightly
spoiled by the smile tugging at his lips – and he doesn't stop himself from giving Spock a playful poke in the abdomen when he says, not at all remorsefully, “My bad.”

You see, tomorrow is Uhura's birthday and therefore also the day of her birthday party, and both Spock and Jim – mostly Spock, really, seeing as he's one of the two people officially in charge of the whole thing, the other person being Uhura herself – were in need of some last-minute supplies as well as one loose leaf sheet full of groceries, collectively. Consequently, the duo decided to make an occasion out of it – to save gas and, of course, have just one more excuse to be occupied with one another for an afternoon. They are refreshingly simpatico in that way.

“Something tells me that you are not repentant in the slightest,” Spock comments as he deposits a bag of fresh rosemary into his cart. Jim can see the smirk hiding beneath all the sedimentary layers on his face, and oh, how he would like to have it in plain sight, to wrestle it out of its marble prison. His cheeks are already beginning to hurt from all the smiling he's been doing himself.

“What? A gut feeling?” He darts around Spock to grab a couple handfuls of the baby tomatoes Sulu requested, indulges himself in another quick, pleasing jab to the man's stomach as he does. Spock tsk, but does not flinch (a victory).

“Deductive reasoning,” he corrects. There is something particularly tender ingrained somewhere in his expression when he adds, his eyes now squarely fixed on Jim's, “Your face betrayed you.”

Sounds about right,” Jim chuckles. A brief, sheepish noise escapes him when one of the baby tomatoes slips from his grasp and onto the floor; he watches, amused, as Spock follows it all the way down and across four speckled tiles with his keen, ever-observant gaze. It's fun, seeing Spock react to the world around him (he does it so unusually, after all).

“You think I'm gonna have to pay for that?” Jim teases as he bags the remaining tomatoes with an ounce more of caution than he was using before, loosely knotting the top of the plastic sleeve before tossing it into the basket of his shopping cart. He knows fully well that he's not going to – he just wants to get as much of that perfect, unruffled sarcasm out of Spock as he can. He finds that it nourishes him, you know, like ambrosia or a Big Mac.

Spock starts heading in the direction of the zucchini and quips in a hilariously dry, apathetic tone, “We should make our escape now, lest you are obliged to.”

“You're hysterical, you know that?” Jim is snickering to himself as he follows after Spock, nearly
bumping into the man's backside with his cart before clumsily maneuvering his way around. He captures another picture of Spock once he's able to get a good one of his profile, playfully murmuring, "A masterpiece in the making..."


They proceed with their trip around the supermarket in much the same manner – lightheartedly taunting one another, Jim indiscriminately snapping photos of both Spock and himself, Spock steadily filling Jim's cart as well as his own, as owing to his eidetic memory and the fact that Jim is more concerned with pestering him than actually grocery shopping – and through it all, Jim halfheartedly attempts to think of any number of ways he could have better spent his Tuesday.

Unsurprisingly, he fails.

(Also unsurprisingly, Spock comes to this conclusion as well – he came to it yesterday, as a matter of fact.)

And yes, Jim does realize that he might be acting a little indulgently at this point, wantonly hoarding as much of Spock's time and attention as he has for the past month or so, engaging the man in this endless, greedy back-and-forth, throwing himself headfirst – no strings or parachutes attached – into them – the eerily convenient, impossibly dynamic partnership the two of them have so quickly come to occupy. He likes Spock. He likes being with him and he likes debating with him and he likes watching the steady cycle of all his non-expressions. He likes how saturated his wardrobe is with blue and he likes his objective, thoughtful criticisms of the movies they'll watch every Friday and he likes the simple thrill of touching him. He likes his quiet and his stability and his stillness. He likes his apartment and his car. He likes everything about him.

It doesn't help that Spock seems to like everything about him, too – even if he does shoot him a judgmental glare or two every now and then and isn't always overly fond of his flair for the ridiculous – and that honestly, as has been stated before, Jim's not sure he's even capable of feeling that mysterious thing people like to call shame. Watch – he'll prove it to you in just a few seconds.

They are standing in the middle of bread aisle when Jim says, thinking absolutely nothing of it, “You know, Bones has been teasing me about you for the past two weeks.” He lets out a soft, flippant little chuckle as Spock passes him the loaf of white bread he requested minutes earlier. “He keeps calling you my boyfriend, of all things. Isn't that something?”
He says this to the man he now considers to be his official Best Friend, the man who has only maintained one semi-serious yet incredibly intense romantic relationship in his life and is currently kind of-sort of entangled in the knots of one that could have been, the man who has a developmental condition that prevents him from understanding the vast extent of standard human socialization and makes it more than difficult for him to express any sort of emotion, the man Jim honestly thinks is more special and rare than any other he's ever met before in his life. He says this to that man. See what I meant, about that clinical aversion to shame?

Spock is silent for several odd, elastic, somewhat terrifying moments, his soundless calculation suddenly colored with a splash of red, temperature, discomfort, depth – a shallow pool of warm water hanging awkward and invisible over his head, a pool that Jim kind of wants to drown himself in. He blinks once, twice, considering Jim's words (which accidentally sort of turned out to be bombshells, oops) with his eyes sitting somewhere around his chin or his lips, before finally saying, with no change in tone whatsoever, “That is... erroneous.”

Initially, there is relief. No words could describe how unbelievably thankful Jim is for the fact that his silly blunder (that was not meant to be a blunder but a joke, let the record state a thousand times) did not make things as uncomfortable as it seemed it would a few seconds ago. Spock still thinks he and all of their friends are irrational, sex-crazed homo sapiens an evolutionary step below his more advanced homo superbia. All is good and right in the world.

Here's the thing, though – Jim has never been conditioned to sit well with all that's good and right. In fact, it wouldn't be too far off the mark to say that there is something about him – a certain screwed-up cocktail in his genes, the very specific combination of personality traits he just so happens to have about him, that one time he almost drowned in the English River and had his brain deprived of oxygen for a solid six minutes, or any possible permutation of these factors – that completely and utterly resists that which is not smelling faintly of trouble. Let's just say he lives his life to the fullest and has not yet figured out just how detrimental this mindset is to him, shall we?

So, due to Spock's tragic lack of an exciting or telling or otherwise interesting reaction, Jim raises an extraordinarily incredulous brow at the man, rests an arm ever-so suavely against his shopping cart, and asks, “What? That doesn't bother you? Not even a little bit?”

(Because he does want it to bother Spock that one of their friends is facetiously referring to them as secret lovers on a daily basis and has been for the past thirteen days. He really, really does.)

Spock mirrors his sassy, skeptical expression without batting an eyelid. “I see no reason why it should, as it is not the truth.” No sooner than the words have passed between his lips is he turning back to the shelves of bagged bread, which Jim cannot even begin to make himself believe are more important than the conversation they're having.
Except, to Spock, they probably are, seeing as he could give less of a shit about anything that isn't true. Wonder Bread is almost certainly truer than the not-romance they're currently discussing.

Unless, you know. Jim changed that.

Jim gives Spock a good, long, entirely indiscreet look, takes in the wide, muscled spread of his shoulders beneath his royal blue sweatshirt, the tall, broad plane of his back, his lean legs covered in a thin coat of dark hair, his exposed forearms in similar condition. The square in his jaw, the pink of his lips, the sharp jut of his nose just below the bridge of his glasses. His inky, arched brows and the raven bits of hair peeking out from beneath his beanie, lying flat against the nape of his neck. Every olive-toned, cotton-clad, Jewish-Iranian six feet, two inches of him.

It doesn't truly hit him at this point – not fully, at least, and certainly not from anywhere personal and gut-wrenching and heated – but for simplicity's sake, we will say that this is the first time it actually occurs to Jim just how attractive Spock is (and, to be outstandingly clear, the guy is a fucking ten on a scale of one to seven). Before now, that was a fact that merely existed in his mind by way of some inborn form of radar that allows him to automatically detect the presence of pretty people, in addition to Spock's status as one of the most desirable individuals at Starfleet University – not because he observed it to be true (and we all know how important the truth is, don't we?). What an intriguing development.

The smile on Jim's face is positively naughty when he remarks, just as slick and casual as can be, “You know... you're cute, Spock.” He watches – rapt with delight – as the man turns to face him once more, his eyebrow steadily sailing towards his hairline the instant he says, “There's a reason why everyone at school wants to hit it with you.”

(Is he not the most devious little shit?)

“Oh?” Spock's expression is unreadable, intense as he stares at Jim, his eyes narrowed only infinitesimally, his lips just slightly parted. Something indistinguishable passes in his gaze before he asks, voice soft and even, “What would this reason be?”

That would be a sharp wave of glee flaring up inside Jim right about now, because holy shit – Spock is fucking playing along with him, and in the most captivatingly ambiguous way possible, at that. Suddenly, this conversation is about a hundred times more fun than it was a few seconds ago (and it was already pretty damn fun).
With the most shrewd and amused of smirks and a coy little tilt of the head, Jim takes three long, deliberate steps towards Spock (who, almost unexpectedly, doesn't move away to accommodate the change) and says, “You have this...” – he pauses to give Spock another unsubtle once-over, more than aware of the way Spock follows after his gaze with his own and briefly pursing his lips once they make eye contact again – “Je ne sais quoi about you.”

It's tricky. It's tricky and it's dangerous and it's exciting and Jim loves it, this so much better than their standard brand of teasing, and Spock is just so effortlessly pulling him in (and he doesn't even know it).

Spock holds his stare as he inquires, still serene, “You have observed this?” After Jim hums his affirmation, purring like a tomcat, another pinch of that indecipherable, almost mathematical something slips into his expression and his voice takes on the slightest, strangest inflection when he asks, “And do you agree?”

The answer is yes. Jim doesn't quite know it yet, but he will soon, and it is so definitely yes.

Instead of saying that, though, he smirks, gives a little shrug, and throws a playful, “Maybe,” over his shoulder as he retreats back to his shopping cart, drawing the word out like he's tasting it as it escapes him, prolonging this game as much as he can.

While we're here, I'd like you to please note his long-standing propensity for not taking things seriously until it's much too late – that's really going to come into play in due time.

Jim only catches the tail end of the look Spock shoots him – the bemusement playing out across his features and the sharp, questioning arch of his brows – before the man is grabbing up a bag of whole wheat bread and sliding past him without a word. They don't speak again until they've reached the opposite end of the store and Jim is snapping another photo of Spock as he retrieves a pack of paper plates; the artificial shutter click lands him directly under the scrutiny of two dark, murky eyes.

“Do you suppose Nyota would favor white plates or gold plates?” he asks, offhand as anything. Jim smiles.

“Aren't the balloons going to be both colors?” is his not-answer. Spock dips his head in a brief, curt nod.
“I follow,” he says, tossing four stacks of plates of each hue into his cart.

“Grab a pack of black ones, too,” Jim instructs him, instinctively reaching out to do so himself in a moment of thoughtlessness. His hand accidentally collides with Spock’s several inches from the shelf; a sharp thrum of electricity travels up his arm, rooting him where he stands and leaving him involuntarily tense.

Spock cuts his eyes at him in a distinctively cheeky manner, says, “Calm yourself, James.” He delicately snatches the stack of plates from beneath Jim’s fingers, every inch the elegant, calculating asshole he so likes to be (Jim likes him that way, too). “There is no need to get so excited.”

Jim doesn’t know if he wants to give Spock a big old whack on the arm or an even bigger kiss on the mouth. It’s the first time he’s ever had a thought like that about the man.

Due to the outstanding possibility that neither course of action would be particularly well-received, however, Jim forgoes all smacking of any kind and just laughs, open and warm and from the very center of his chest. His tone is low and teasing as he adjusts Spock’s glasses once more and replies, “Right back at you, my friend.”

And this time, Spock surrenders him a legitimate smirk for his trouble. Jim thrills at the thought of just how horrible an influence he’s been.

The contents of Jim’s shopping cart total up to forty-nine dollars and eighty-seven cents – nearly eight bucks more than the entirety of the money in his pocket. That’s embarrassing, to say the least.

Jim is just about to start tossing stuff out of his cart – he reasons he and his roommates can live without PizzaRolls and Oreos for a week or so without too much trouble – when Spock drops a ten dollar bill on the counter without saying a thing, without even looking at Jim. That immediately sparks something prickly and uncomfortable inside of him.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, Spock,” he says without hesitation, his hand coming down on the bill before the cashier can take it and moving to slide it back to Spock, who regards him with what actually looks a little bit like irritation.

“I do not have to, but I will,” Spock coolly replies. Jim makes no attempt to hide his responding frustration.
“It's okay, man.” He pushes the dollar at Spock again, watching how the man glances at the bill like it's nothing, like it's so much less than what it actually is, and suddenly knows what it truly means to be exasperated. “I'll just get rid of some groceries and come back for them later.”

“Why would you elect to go without when I am offering to make up for the difference?” Spock asks. His gaze is tainted with that ever-familiar what-the-fuck sort of curiosity Jim seems to inspire in him at least ten times every hour or so, that confusion that always overtakes him when Jim is acting illogically or uneconomically (which, to be honest, he does pretty much all the time), and he looks at Jim like he's being unreasonable out of spite (ding, ding, ding) when he adds, “I will not require you to reimburse me.”

Much to their shared chagrin, that only serves to make things worse.

“Shit, I –” Jim cuts himself off when Spock's expression goes vaguely alarmed at the swearword, forces himself to not sound so belligerent and back up just a little bit. This is Spock, his affluent best friend with Asperger's syndrome – not Oprah Winfrey.

“I can’t let you do that,” he says, trying (and fortunately succeeding) at getting the words out in a mostly casual manner – he even works in a nervous chuckle at the end. “That's...” – he hesitates, tries to figure out how to phrase it in a way that will make Spock understand what about this whole thing rubs him the wrong way, but all that escapes him is a vague, incredibly lame – “That's way too nice.”

Spock blinks, obviously lost (and why wouldn't he be, him being so in line with that which is concrete and rational and Jim being the exact opposite of all that at the moment?). His voice is a beat slower than its customarily speedy pace – as if Jim is a spooked animal or suffering from some degree of mental retardation or something – when he replies, right on the fence between sentiment and reason, “I am your friend, James. Friends are commonly meant to be generous to one another, are they not?”

The cashier might just roll her eyes a little at the sheer magnitude of their gayness at this point.

Now, there are a number of reasons why Jim is throwing a minor tantrum over something as trivial as a ten dollar bill. Due to the fact that he's not so good at doing this himself at the moment, I'm going to take a couple of minutes to explain them for you:

- First and foremost, there is his long-lived hatred of charity and its ability to rob him of his
intentionally inflated, admittedly selfish sense of pride and independence. Nothing like a green slip of paper to make him feel like a fucking insect.

- Then there is his oft-mentioned peeve with inadequacy.
- There's also his upbringing to consider – an upbringing in which he lived in a semi-impoverished household and was all but forced to look after himself for most of his life. **Ten bucks** might not seem like much to someone like Spock, but to Jim? That used to be the difference between eating dinner for a night or going to bed hungry, and Jim has *always* been used to having to earn that on his own or make do with what he could get.
- He doesn't hate Spock for growing up wealthy, and he doesn't hate him for wanting to help him – it just kills him to think that he doesn't have anything to give him in return (which couldn't be farther from the truth, really, but it's not like that would ever cross his mind, what with that silly inferiority-superiority complex he’s got going on).
- This whole thing feels a little too much like a rescue – Spock's fairytale car and his fairytale apartment and his fairytale bank account casting Jim's status as the Cinderella in this ridiculous extended metaphor in a moderately negative light (and, I mean, Jim has always fancied himself as more of a hero than a damsel – never mind that the opposite seems to be the case more often than not).
- Of course, then there's exactly what Jim said – it's too nice, too *sweet*, and he's never been entirely comfortable with accepting direct gestures of kindness under any circumstances, not even ones such as inconsequential as this.

But the way Spock says it – “*Friends are meant to be generous to one another.*” – well, it's so reasonable and today has been such a great one and Spock has been so pleased to be his friend and he actually *flirted* with him earlier and he just looks so puzzled and handsome and sincere and Jim really *does* like his Pizza Rolls and Oreos and Chekov does, too –

“Oh, fuck it,” Jim sighs, snatching up the **ten dollar** bill and handing it to the cashier a little more sharply than necessary. He swears to every god there is that it's the thought of Chekov and his big, shiny, adorable gray eyes that does him in.

Spock doesn't stop staring at him with the oddest look on his face – something almost like *hurt*, if he were ever capable of expressing it so openly – until after they've shoved their groceries into the trunk and the backseat of his Volvo and guilt has nearly swallowed Jim whole, torturing him with questions like, 'What the hell were you thinking, snapping at the guy with Asperger's?' and, 'Why are you always such an insufferable prick?'

( Maybe he isn't so shameless after all.)

“I'm sorry,” he blurts the instant after Spock has shut the driver's side door, the words like vomit in the way only apologies can be when they escape him. His heart sinks a little lower in his chest when Spock meets his gaze with that same awful expression of not-hurt, and without warning, he's in *panic* mode, rambling like he always does when he gets edgy like this.
“I shouldn't have jumped down your throat like that, and I promise I was just being an asshole because of my thing, I have a habit, you know, you didn't have anything to do with it –”

“You do not have to apologize,” Spock cuts him off. When it becomes apparent that Jim isn't going to stop gawking at him until he, I don't know, explains that nonsense (doesn't have to apologize, his ass), he calmly elaborates, “I clearly struck a nerve. It was my mistake.”

“Your mistake? God, Spock –” Jim can't stop the anxious, bittersweet laugh that comes unceremoniously shuffling out of him, then promptly sobers a bit when Spock starts looking at him like he's just lost his fucking mind, straightens up and says, “You didn't even know what you did was wrong, which it wasn't, by the way.”

“If my actions were not in error, why then did you react in the manner with which you did?” Spock asks, ever the pragmatist, as he swiftly keys the engine on, one arched eyebrow inclined ever so slightly in question. Sharper than a tack, as they say.

Jim is struck again by that feeling, the one where he kind of wants to throttle Spock for being so excellent but he also wants to kiss him so badly for the exact same reason. That’s going to be dropping in on him quite a lot from now on, you will see.

On their journey from the grocery store parking lot to the kitschy little Thai restaurant a good five minutes away from Orion Peaks, Jim takes the time to clarify his somewhat histrionic behavior to Spock in mostly logical terms (something he's actually used to having to do at this point, and not just with Spock). Spock remains characteristically silent and attentive throughout the majority of his explanation – until Jim mentions his apparent inability to repay him for his charity, that is.

“You fret without reason,” he says suddenly, surprising Jim with his abruptness and the hard determination thick in his voice. “There is no need for you to alarm yourself with such concerns.”

“Of course there is,” Jim argues into the smooth left turn Spock takes onto the expressway, shaking his head despite the fact that Spock isn't actually looking at him to see it. “You do me favors like this all the time. Honor dictates that I owe you for every last one of them.”

It's true – Spock has made something of a custom of helping Jim out in these small, insignificant little ways over the past three weeks or so. He picks up the tax when Jim can't afford it, and he always lets him keep the change. He doesn't bitch too much when he steals food from his plate, and he’s
never once tried to stop him or discourage him with anything more than an unimpressed glare. He waits for Jim to catch up with him even when Jim is well aware of how easily he could run faster, or speed past him, or fast-forward to the end of the conversation or whatever the situation happens to call for. He's patient and present and totally not exasperated by Jim's outrageousness, too accepting of it to be logical, and it – all of it – it's not totally out of the way or self-sacrificing or dripping with sentiment or anything, not quite kindness, but perhaps its quiet, awkward kissing cousin with Asperger's that never speaks too much at family reunions yet always manages to get the point across.

It’s nice, is what it is, and Jim doesn’t feel right not being able to at least give some of that niceness back to Spock – which, I mean, he’s certainly able to, but that’s an idea that wouldn’t register to him unless it was taking a shit on his nose… or being explicitly pointed out to him, of course.

“You would rather I neglected to aid you in ways that exert little to no strain on myself for the sake of keeping your fruitless sense of guilt at bay?” Spock asks, very quasi-kind in his methodical illumination of the various faults in Jim's reasoning. “You would rather I acted without consideration for you?”

That – like many of Spock's ultra-rational contentions – throws Jim for a bit of a loop. He hesitates for several stilted seconds, at a loss for just how to respond to that and not lose the argument (something he’s more than likely already done, with his luck). “Well...

“I help you because you are my friend,” Spock says before Jim can start babbling on like a mindless idiot, effectively shutting his mouth with the unexpected weight of his words. Spock's face is briefly bathed in yellow, then red by the warm glow of the stoplight they slow to a halt before, and his eyes are indistinguishable in the steadily growing darkness when he turns to Jim and asks, still just as calm and as composed as can be, “Why do you think you are here with me now, why we have spent this afternoon together as well as many afternoons before?”

The question is rhetorical. It makes Jim feel like a total moron for failing to see things from Spock's perspective, but in a good way, you know – he's actually sort of relieved to have been wrong this time.

“I enjoy your company greatly, James.” Spock's gaze is intense even when obscured in shadow, even while his tone is unruffled and his demeanor is serene. “Do you not realize that you repay me with your presence alone? Have you no idea how much you have...” – he pauses just long enough for it to be the tiniest bit noticeable, and his voice is only one decibel and half an octave lower when he finishes his sentence, transforms it from a question into a statement – “…changed everything.”

He's only stating facts, the truth – he's never not done that – but there's that not-kindness, that not-warmth, that not-hurt and that not-vulnerability scattered all about his words like he doesn't know
how to hold all of it in his hands or distribute it evenly throughout his sentences. And I mean, of course he doesn't know – that's not a mass he can measure with a scale or a balance. Jim knows he doesn't know. He finds that he really likes that.

“That’s supposed to be a good thing, right?” he asks. He doesn't exactly see the look Spock cuts at him, but he can feel it, feel the sharpness and the half-assed irritation sailing across the center console at him – it puts a smile on his face.

“You baffle me at times,” is Spock’s soft, toneless answer. A brief huff of a breath accompanies it on its way past his lips – a sigh of exasperation, or affection, or quite possibly both. Jim is down with either one.

“A-ha!” he laughs, leaning back against the dark leather of his seat and jabbing Spock in the shoulder with the knuckle of his left forefinger. He revels in the distinct lack of any flinching or recoiling on Spock’s part just as he’s been reveling in it for minutes and hours and weeks now, flashes the man an unnecessarily triumphant grin when he adds, “See what I mean, now?”

Spock is forced to turn his gaze away from him and onto the road ahead when the traffic light goes green; he lets a short, thoughtful silence hang over them while he drives. His face is colored with not-frustration and a radiant, unnatural emerald hue under the harsh glow of the streetlamp as he says, just very slightly pleading in the polite, impassive way he has, “Do not be difficult, James.”

“Oh-ho, yeah.” Jim’s mouth curls into a soft smirk as that ever-familiar drive for trouble, his not-so-guilty pleasure for playful banter and snarky backtalk, starts to creep up on him again. His gaze is devious and trained keenly, pointedly on Spock as he comments, “Between the two of us, I’m the difficult one.” Because it might just be one of his favorite things in the entire world to get under Spock’s skin, just like it’s also one of his favorite things in the world to watch him stumble over the inflections and nuances he never knew his voice could have, just like it’s also one of his favorite things in the world to try and guess exactly what emotion the man might be trying to convey with one of his many not-expressions… – you get the picture.

Spock gives him a long, penetrating look in the slate blue light – as long a look as he can give him while cruising steadily down the expressway – and Jim answers that opaque gaze with a sly look of his own, gives Spock a smile and a gently quirking eyebrow and a generous dose of nonverbal teasing. He’s playing with him, you know – being insufferable and impish and deliberately disagreeable like he is, and with complete and total awareness of just how right this makes him in the context of their argument – and Spock knows he’s playing with him, and he knows Spock knows he’s playing with him. Another quick beat of silence passes between them, quietly brushing its wings against their cheekbones.
“You have made your point,” is what Spock says when he opens his mouth to speak, his eyes on the road and his tone just as calm and even as it was before. He cuts a cursory, almost accidental glance at Jim the instant after that’s out of him, then swiftly returns his attention to the expressway, something sounding vaguely like resignation but looking significantly more like satisfaction taking hold of him as he adds, “I would now ask you to please be content with the fact that you are not a burden to me and accept that you are, in all actuality, quite the opposite.”

Jim doesn’t really believe him – not now, at least. Spock’s a smart, reasonable person and all, but there’s no way he could honestly claim that he – the mischief-making, cigarette-smoking, insatiably ravenous and habitually roguish little fuck he is – isn’t some sort of burden to him. For the first time ever, Jim entertains the thought of Spock being just a little bit crazy (which, to be honest, he kind of is, once you’ve put Jim in the picture).

But instead of saying all that (mostly because he knows that Spock will disagree with him again, and it won’t be a fun sort of disagreement – it will be irritating and a little dramatic and nothing he’s really in the mood for at the moment), Jim just lets his gaze idle upon the ever-shifting panels of light on Spock’s face and says – very honestly, but not the slightest bit critically – “You talk too much, you know that?”

Spock blinks once, twice, replies, “You seem to enjoy it.” The faintest touches of sarcasm and knowing not-amusement are kindling softly in his voice, like smoke curling up from a dying campfire.

Jim laughs – a warm, helpless sound – inhaling that smoke in earnest as his eyes drift away from Spock and to the windshield, then to his window and the buildings and streetlights passing just outside of it. “Can’t deny that,” he hums, and even though he’s basically conceding the argument to Spock with those three words, there isn’t a sorry bone in his body when they come out of him.

They order their pad thai and khao soi to-go – a somewhat thorny ordeal, seeing as Spock is the one who ends up taking the bill, much to Jim’s chagrin (“You know, I’m good with microwave egg rolls,” he mentions as casually as possible, shrugging mildly at the subliminally impatient look Spock levels at him shortly after) – and end up taking three trips up and down the flight of stairs between Spock’s apartment and his car before they’ve gotten all of their groceries and their food inside. Spock makes room in his refrigerator for Jim’s milk and his juice and the vegetables he bought for Sulu; when Jim threatens to start whining again, he actually tells him to shut up and eat – in his own android-y way, of course.

“I believe it would be for the betterment of both of us that you put an end to your ceaseless complaining and ate your dinner,” he says after they’ve settled down on the sofa and as he’s flicking through his Netflix library in search of a good documentary for them to watch. Jim snorts loudly, tickled by Spock’s peculiar phrasing.
“Alright, alright,” he chuckles, clumsily attempting to grasp a clump of rice noodles between his chopsticks. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“Oh, contrary,” Spock replies without missing a beat, without even looking away from the television. “I have had to tell you four times within the past thirty minutes alone.”

“Oh, Spock,” Jim coos after quietly cursing his inability to properly utilize Asian eating utensils, giving his pad thai an unceremonious stab in his frustration as he says, “I can always count on you to help me combat my short-term memory loss.”

“I presume you are employing sarcasm,” Spock comments, and after Jim hums a quick ‘mm-hmm’ of agreement, he sets the remote down on the coffee table, turns to Jim, and – like it’s absolutely nothing – takes his fingers in his own and adjusts them so that they’re in the correct position around his chopsticks, delicately pinching around Jim’s index and thumb as he instructs him. “You only move the top stick. The bottom one is to stay wedged between your thumb and forefinger.”

Jim wiggles the top stick around a little, experimental and tentative. “Who came up with this?” he asks without sincerity, carefully picking a small, slippery tangle of noodles and a couple of bean sprouts from the take-out container in his grip. “I mean, the human brain was obviously not wired to operate these things. In what world is this supposed to be efficient?”

“Would you like me to get you a fork?” Spock asks him, and – because he’s a fighter at heart (or because he’s always had an unnatural propensity for doing things the hard way, same difference) – Jim starts shaking his head almost immediately in reply, quickly cramming that bundle of pad thai into his mouth just to demonstrate his newfound prowess in chopstick-handling. He just barely catches the way Spock raises an eyebrow at him in response.

And after Spock has selected a documentary – something about the marijuana industry in British Columbia, thanks to Jim’s semi-demanding input – and sat back with his own food, Jim looks at him and says, “You know…” – he pauses until he’s got Spock’s dark, curious eyes on the smile whispering across his face, takes the time to catch another clump of noodles between his chopsticks – “Today, you’ve paid for my dinner and my groceries.” He raises his right shoulder in a short, flippant half-shrug. “I’m starting to feel a little like your girlfriend.”

Spock’s gaze doesn’t waver as he notes, ever so straightforward and matter-of-fact, “That’s misogynistic, James.”
Jim can’t stop his mouth from stretching into a full-blown grin at that, all lips and teeth and cheekbones and eyes – it’s so intrinsically Spock, he can’t deal with how much he loves it – but instead of responding verbally, he shoves the wad of pad thai he’s holding at Spock, expectant and playful and wordless.

Spock simply regards him inquisitively for a second or two, his face rapidly shuffling through a variety of familiar not-expressions (uncertainty, confusion, sheepishness, amusement) before he hesitantly takes the noodles Jim’s offering him into his mouth, still watching him like he might have just grown an extra head or, I don’t know, insinuated he was his boyfriend or something crazy like that.

(... wait.)

“Aren’t you gonna say anything about how romantic that was just now?” Jim teases when Spock doesn’t make any move to speak after he’s finished chewing, smirking lazily, indulgently across the meager bit of space between the two of them.

Spock makes a brief, humming noise in his throat, something that sounds vaguely like a period or a bookend. “I do not know what you’re talking about,” he says, and even though his voice remains objective and cool and collected, the tiny little quirk at the right corner of his lip is telling a whole different story about what he might be feeling at the moment – a story Jim likes very, very much.

And yes, Jim is absolutely, positively full of shit. Yes, this is just a game, an upgrade from their usual match of back-and-forth. Yes, they keep right on playing this game all the way through the cannabis documentary and into the kitchen and throughout the whole ordeal of making Uhura’s birthday cake – Jim flicking flour at Spock, onto the front of his sweatshirt and the bridge of his nose and deliberately smudging it away with his powdered fingers, Spock gently, mockingly chastising him and his ‘deficient hand-eye coordination’ every time he crushes an egg in his hands or accidentally whisks the dark red batter out of the bowl and onto his perfect granite countertops, Jim only half-seriously promising to lick that batter off the tips of Spock’s fingers as he carefully pours it into one of his huge glass cake pans –

Except when Jim is sliding into the cab of his truck and keying his engine into gear at around 9:32 PM – about fifteen minutes after Spock has gotten through painting these pretty little white flowers around the rim of the cake with the frosting they made – he damn near slams his head against the top his steering wheel because he actually thinks about it, then, licking red velvet cake batter off of Spock’s nimble fingers. He thinks about the way he fed Spock his dinner and how he looked with flour tainting his jaw and the ten dollar bill and that weird moment of hand-to-hand contact they had in the grocery store, so much unlike all the other casual touches they share. He thinks about Spock’s shoulders and his lips and his height and his eyes, and it’s as if his stomach is being pulled down through his intestines with a sharp, white-hot fish hook.
He is still impossibly fascinated by Spock, even after knowing him for most of August and the whole of September. He still thinks he’s weird as all get out. He’s still best friends with the man, and he’s still just as devious and chaotic and – in Spock’s words – baffling as he’ll ever be, but today is the first day he ever really looked at Spock, and today’s the first day he ever flirted with the guy, and today he fed him pad thai and baked a motherfucking cake with him, and he is so warm and stupefied with infatuation it’s almost physically painful for him to bear.

He argues with himself about this all the way back to his dorm, tries to tell himself he’s just a little overexcited about his spectacularly good day, but he quickly comes to realize several things upon grinding to a halt in his parking spot lodged between McCoy’s Accord and Sulu’s Trailblazer:

- **One** – that he actually doesn’t want to fight with himself, and,
- **Two** – that by doing so, he’s being dishonest about his feelings (which he’s been trying pretty hard not to do as of late, with varying rates of success).
- **Three** – that he’s not drunk, and he hasn’t been drunk at any point at all within the last twenty-four hours.
- **Four** – that this is nothing like what it was with Uhura, none of that self-entitled bullshit or those feelings of inadequacy or even any of that greedy, pompously aggressive brand of want he’d gotten so used to carrying around when it came to her. This is a little more on the ground than that, easier, quiet.
- **Five** – that he likes Spock.
- **Six** – that he likes Spock a lot.
- **Seven** – that this is still a game, but a game that is about thirty times more serious than it ever was before.

Jim has always liked games, especially high-stakes ones. Jim has also always been quick to get attached to others, and he is almost certainly attached to Spock at this point, so much that McCoy would teasingly call the two of them lovebirds and Sulu would refer to them as ‘the odd couple’ and he actually spends way too much of his time thinking about Spock or how Spock would react to something or what Spock might think of this or of that or how nice it would be to physically be with Spock when he’s not there. One could say he’s been attached to him since the first of September, the day he actually began to see him as a human being and not a robot for the very first time.

*God*, he is so fucked.

“Didja have a nice date?” McCoy is on him with not two seconds after he’s in the front door, eyeing him conspicuously from where he’s wrapping Uhura’s awkwardly bulky birthday present on the coffee table. He looks downright merry when he asks, eyes practically twinkling with self-amusement, “Did he declare his undying love for you in the frozen food section? Did he kiss you passionately in the bagel aisle?”
Jim lets out an airy, grunting sigh of relief as he clumsily unloads all of the grocery bags in and around his arms onto the kitchen counter, having stupidly endeavored to take all of them upstairs in only one trip. He’s just a little bit breathless when he replies to McCoy’s question with a short, succinct, “It was resplendent,” and even though the way he says it is rife with sarcasm and levity, he isn’t really lying.

“So he did kiss you passionately in the bagel aisle,” McCoy shoots back with a chuckle. His words are underscored by the sharp sound of Scotch tape being ripped from its dispenser.

“That’s really emotive for Spock,” Sulu notes just as he’s ambling out of the bathroom, hair damp from the shower he presumably just finished taking, if his lack of a top is anything to go by. He pulls on one of the t-shirts McCoy has draped over the back of the sofa – there are always four neat little piles of clothing sitting there every Tuesday and Saturday night after McCoy’s done with the laundry, one stack for each roommate – as he wanders over to Jim, teasing in the characteristically blasé manner he has, “It’s only a matter of time before he proposes, you know.”

Jim absently snatches a hand out to whack Sulu on the shoulder, only to be expertly dodged and slapped away, thanks to the man’s history in martial arts and general propensity for perfection. McCoy guffaws obnoxiously from the sofa, sarcastically pleading, “Oh, lemme be yer best man, Jim! It’s all I’ve ever wanted in life.”

“Wouldn’t you be the maid of honor, though?” Sulu asks, his indifferent poker face now tainted with the slightest hint of delight. McCoy starts legitimately cackling when he says, all easygoing and self-assured and smug like he is, “I’m totally getting bride vibes from Jim. Spock could sweep him off his feet like it was nothing.”

This time, Jim is actually able to get a good, solid smack at Sulu’s forearm, but only at the cost of receiving one in return on the back of his shoulder as he moves to shove the bag of Pizza Rolls in the freezer. “Might I remind you two of the fact that Bones is the cross-dresser in this household?” he puts in, gesturing emphatically at the picture that’s been hanging proudly on the refrigerator door for the past five days or so: a color-penciled sketch of McCoy clad in Glinda’s frilly pink ballgown and tiara, waving his sparkly star-wand around and wearing both his distinctive, irate scowl and a pair of rose-colored cowboy boots. P. Chekov and H. Sulu are scrawled in tiny, mocking script at the bottom right corner of the picture in the ostentatious ink of a glitter pen – wherever the hell they might have gotten their hands on one, nobody knows.

“That’s goin’ in the trash tonight,” McCoy grumbles amidst Sulu’s hearty, resonant laughter. “That should’ve been in the trash days ago.”
“No, no, that would crush Chekov,” Sulu argues, sincere even while struggling to stifle his chortling. “He worked so hard on that.”

“Look at the little sparklies,” Jim comments offhandedly, tracing the four-pointed stars scattered all about the picture with his forefinger. “Look at that craftsmanship.”

“Speakin’ of Chekov,” McCoy cuts in with a considerably shrill cry from his tape dispenser. “Wouldn’t he be the cross-dresser of the four of us?”

“Sweaters are unisex, Len,” Sulu replies as he digs his baby tomatoes out of one of the grocery bags on the counter. “Even if they came from the women’s section in Goodwill.”

“What about that thing Uhura made him wear a couple days ago when we were at her dorm?” Jim asks, gingerly taking the tomatoes from Sulu to deposit them into one of the refrigerator drawers. “It was like… a tank top trying to be a jumpsuit?”

“Romper,” Sulu clarifies. “The word you’re looking for is romper.”

“Yeah, that.” Jim briefly juggles the head of lettuce Sulu passes him between his hands, mentally congratulating himself when he manages not to drop it on the linoleum like the doofus he is about 65% of the time. “That wasn’t made for men.”

“That was Uhura being bossy and playing dress-up and Chekov loving her too much to say no,” Sulu counters.

“Still counts as cross-dressin’,” McCoy says, only a second and a half before Chekov comes popping out of his room, eyes all wide and jubilant with glee and cello bow in hand. Suddenly, the atmosphere in the room is about five times brighter than it was moments earlier, and all because Chekov is there and he is so obviously pleased.

“You are back!” he crows as he excitedly darts his way around Sulu and into Jim’s half-opened arms, purring happily when Jim rocks him into the hug, squeezes him around his pale, bony shoulders and ruffles his strawberry hair as he bounces over to the counter.

“Aw, you’re never that happy to see me, Pasha,” Sulu complains without heat, teasing and
nonchalant and easy. He smiles, amused, when Chekov raps the wooden side of his bow against his knuckles in response.

“I see you all ze time, Hikaru.” Chekov’s tone is playful and light as he sets his bow down to root around in the grocery bags, obviously in pursuit of something in particular. “Zat is enough for me.”

“And you wanna talk about Spock and I getting married,” Jim scoffs in Sulu’s general direction. He flinches at the receipt Sulu balls up and throws at his temple as he comes up behind Chekov and reaches around him to snatch up the package of Oreos hidden in the sea of plastic, dropping it into the teen’s waiting hands with a quick, “Your welcome.”

“You and Spock are practically – here, put that in a bowl –” Sulu quickly grabs a ceramic dish from one of the cabinets overhead when Chekov starts eating the cookies straight out of the container, then turns back to Jim and continues, “You and Spock are practically saying vows already.”

“I’ll say,” McCoy chimes in. “When’s the last time you haven’t run off to have dinner with him?”

“Gosh, and do you hear the way they talk to each other?” Sulu adds.

“Zhey are getting married?” Chekov asks.

“They’re damn near a Disney movie at this point, I tell ya,” McCoy says. Whether he’s answering Sulu or Chekov is left deliberately unclear. “What do you think, Sulu? Are they Lady and the Tramp or Beauty and the Beast?”

“You guys, really,” Jim huffs over all the chatter, irritation just beginning to ice the edges of his voice. “I appreciate how much fun you’re having – I really do – but where the hell are you even pulling this shit out of?” He might close the refrigerator with a bit more force than is necessary after he’s shelved the milk and the juice. “It’s not like we’re making goo-goo eyes at each other or anything.”

He knows they’re just ribbing him – that’s what they always do, you know, teasing is kind of a given in this household – but after the day he’s had and after all those small epiphanies he experienced in the parking lot, now that their remarks might actually have some basis in the truth, they strike a deeper chord with him – a chord he’s not entirely comfortable with having struck at all.
As luck would have it, McCoy just about attacks that chord when he says, “Are you kidding? Have you even seen the way Spock looks at you?”

A supple, uncomfortable silence rests over the four of them – soft, stifling – for one, two, three seconds before Jim asks, genuinely puzzled, “What are you talking about?”

“What am I talkin’ about?” McCoy huffs quietly, incredulous. “He looks at you like you’re the sun, the moon, and the stars, Jim. It don’t take nothin’ but yer basic set of observation skills to notice that.”

Jim’s hand goes still around his bag of Wonder Bread, his brow creasing just enough to be perceptible to Sulu and Chekov, who are watching him with expressions of mild interest and wide-eyed curiosity, respectively. He stops, then, considering McCoy’s words, trying so hard to remember every time Spock has ever looked at him and how those looks compare to the ones he gives the rest of them – Bones and Chekov and Scott and Uhura –

**Uhura.** He looks at Uhura like she’s Venus in the dawn sky, sometimes. A lot of times. It doesn’t take anything but your basic set of observation skills to notice that.

Jim doesn’t know what to say, so he opens his mouth and goes, “I’m gonna take a shower,” and he leaves the loaf of bread right where it is on the counter, and he passes Sulu and Chekov on his way out of the kitchen without another word, and he doesn’t wince at that snorting, skeptical tsk McCoy clucks at him, he swears to God he doesn’t –

“**Real** mature, Jim.” The sound of the tape dispenser clattering against the coffee table reaches Jim from where he’s digging a pair of old basketball shorts out of his closet. “Because, you know. Ignoring me is totally gonna make it not true.”

“Give me ten minutes, okay?” Jim allows himself a long, somewhat resigned look at McCoy after he’s emerged from his room, gives the man a slow, lazy smirk that is just as tired as it is insolent. “Ten minutes and I’ll be more than content to talk all about the vacation to Venice Spock and I are planning, or baby names or…” He shakes his head on his way into the bathroom, flicks the light on with a quick, pine-covered sigh. “… whatever.”

And just before he closes the door on the three of them and all of their good-natured mockery, he hears the low, grunting noise of discontent McCoy makes in his throat, hears him say, more than likely to Sulu than to anyone else, “That boy’s got issues.”
He says it affectionately, he does. And he knows Jim, doesn’t he? He’s telling the truth.

Jim leaves his clothes in a pile by the door (and the toilet, and the sink) and turns the water up as hot as he can tolerate it. He lets it bear down on him, cascade a scalding, muscle-numbing torrent down his back and over his face, and he doesn’t really clean himself so much as just stand there under the shower head until he’s weary and his nerves are shot and his thoughts are coming to him a bit more slowly, this time at an average rate instead of the NASCAR-style pace at which they usually go throttling through his head.

He’s not upset, about Spock and Uhura. He doesn’t blame Spock for looking at her like he does – he’s pretty sure he looks at her the same way every now and then, what with her brilliance and her beauty and her everything amazing. He’s not that upset about everything that McCoy and Sulu said, either – after tonight, they could very well be onto something with their jeers. Spock (Spock) actually kind of flirted with him today. Jim felt his breath against the palm of his hand as he brushed that stripe of flour off of the hard bridge of his nose. They acted a wee bit gay in the car earlier, having that heart-to-heart like they did. And, in one of his most shining moments of honesty and clarity, Jim is rapidly getting used to the fact that he is currently thinking about his best friend while naked and wet and growing progressively numb under a heavy stream of one-hundred and eight-degree water.

Yeah. This is what his pathetic life has come to.

It’s not as dramatic as it all may sound, really. He and Spock are still friends. He just needs to think about it for a little while.

A sharp rap on the door cracks the crystal shell of his reverie. “It’s been thirteen and a half minutes, Jim!”

“I’m kind of in the middle of an enlightenment, here!” Jim yells over the roar of the shower. He brings a hand up to swipe the sopping hair off of his forehead, raking it back with all five of his fingers.

“He’s gone Buddhist, Sulu,” McCoy says from the other side of the doorframe, and then the rest of his words are lost in the rush of the water and the thick soup of Jim’s psyche, swimming before him like he’s got it confined to a fishbowl around his head, afraid to let it come pouring out of him completely.

He likes Spock. He tells this to himself seventy-eight times in the span of two minutes, over and over again until he’s comfortable with hearing his mind’s voice say it at him, until he won’t be so
surprised by it or feel like he has to do anything about it anymore. *He likes Spock, he likes Spock, he likes Spock, he likes him…*

And it’s not a question of whether or not he wants to *date* him, because *hey*, he’s pretty sure that’s not something people (especially people like him) *do* – date Jewish guys with genius level intelligence that can speak more than **six times** as many languages as you and have Asperger’s syndrome and fairytale real estate and entirely too much of the color blue in their closet and might actually be some kind of asexual or celibate and look so good in fucking *sweatshirts* that it’s almost unhealthy to be around them sometimes – and really, aren’t they *already* dating, in that weird way that everyone but them can see, in that weird way without silly nicknames (except *oops*, does *android* ring a bell?) or affectionate touches (*bzzt*, wrong again) or, or *kissing* –

Jim thinks about kissing him. Raising himself up only **two** scrawny little **inches** onto the tips of his toes and pushing their mouths together, maybe getting Spock’s bottom lip caught gently above his own. That warm, dry breath he felt on his hand, it would be puffing against his lips, his tongue. Spock has only kissed **one** person before, besides his mother. He’d probably be kind of bad at it.

That kind of drives Jim crazy.

“Twenty minutes, Jim!” McCoy reminds him.

Jim hangs that stupid, *stupid* thought up on an invisible hook in his mind and makes a mental note to maybe consider it again later. He’ll figure out what to do soon enough, and until then, he’ll just continue on with Spock as he has been for the past **month** and let the chips fall where they may.

(After all, the game is afoot, and they’ve both been having so much *fun.*)

“I was thinking about Lily,” Jim announces the instant before he’s plopping down in the space between McCoy and Chekov, kicking his feet up on top of the recently cleared coffee table and slouching bodily, bonelessly against the back of the sofa. Sulu snorts sharply at him from where he’s sprawled all over the armchair adjacent.

“Said every white person ever,” he replies without missing a beat. Jim wags his tongue at the man in response, then promptly breaks into a short fit of helpless laughter when Sulu crosses his eyes and wrinkles his nose in retaliation.

“What about somethin’ hip n’ edgy, like Violet,” McCoy chuckles. A soft hum hooks on the edge of
his words when Jim takes it upon himself to lean into his side with all of his weight, temple-to-shoulder, elbow-to-hip. “You could call her ‘Vi’ and be a super-cool parent.”

“Spock would be into something more obscure and dignified,” Jim says. “Like Iris.”

“Oh, you can do better than that,” Sulu sighs, disappointment on full-blast. He crosses his ankles over the edge of his foot rest as he starts recounting from a list of hipster flower names he must have been maintaining specifically for this occasion, each one rolling off of his tongue like it’s second nature to him (which they all probably are, knowing him and his weird fetish for plants). “Ivy, Jasmine, Aster, Azalea, Dahlia, Willow, Cosmos, Caspia –”

“Ooh, Cosmos,” Jim coos, shifting his position against McCoy in an attempt to get more comfortable. He smiles when McCoy makes his life about thirty times easier for him and brings an arm around to drape across his shoulder, all but allowing him to practically lie on top of him. “Spock would like that.”

“Listen to him,” McCoy laughs. “He’s in love.”

“You know, he’d probably like Aster, too,” Sulu notes. “The name means ‘st–”

“‘Star’, because it’s derived from the Latin word ‘astrum’, also meaning ‘star’.” Jim gives Sulu a droopy, insolent wink. “I know a Latin root when I see one.”

“And thus Jim Kirk’s baneful legacy of white supremacy continues,” Sulu intones with forced melodrama, smirking when Jim lets out a high yowl of laughter and slaps a hand against McCoy’s knee, much to the man’s vexation. “Will the hate crimes ever come to an end?”

“I like Azalea,” Chekov puts in, folding his legs beneath him and glancing between Sulu and Jim with bright, excited eyes. “Is very pretty and unique.”

“Looks like Spock and I are having six kids, then,” Jim quips. He sweeps his gaze over the three of them, smiling warm and easy and exhausted. “Everyone gets a godchild.”

“Are atheists allowed to issue godchildren?” McCoy blurts, suddenly, comically distressed. Jim laughs loudly at his particular wording, scrubbing the heel of his palm against his squinting eyes. “Ain’t that against the rules?”
“Are Buddhists allowed to receive godchildren?” Sulu asks. McCoy makes a low noise of acknowledgement, raises his hand to Sulu in a nonverbal ‘touche’ of sorts.

“Spock is Jewish, you know,” Jim points out once he catches his breath, peering up at McCoy’s face, which immediately crumples into this expression that’s somehow both smirking and grimacing simultaneously.

“Has he ever told you he believes in God, though?” McCoy asks. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t, way he is about what’s logical or makes sense.” He gives a full-body shiver of absolute, total disgust (because yes, he was this close to actually throwing up the last time he and Spock spoke, and all because it was about the three-gagillionth time Spock uttered the word ‘illogical’ in his presence and McCoy has gotten really sick of that really fucking fast), then glances down at Jim for a split-second and adds, “And I was talking about you, Mister Humanist.”

“If Spock is Jewish, you’re going to have to convert to Judaism when you get married,” Sulu points out ever-so helpfully, pulling idly at a stray tuft of jet black hair poking out at the side of his head. “They don’t allow you to marry people outside of the synagogue.”

“Well, let’s just be thankful that I’m willing to go the distance for him,” Jim replies, his voice dripping with sarcasm and artificial sentimentality. That gets a laugh out of all of them, save Chekov, who simply watches Jim with the oddest look on his face – curiosity and wonder and amusement all blended together and whispering across his mousy features, softly enough so that Jim doesn’t really notice it or think about it with anything but a fleeting sense of interest until much later on (read: about a week from now).

“Whatever, Romeo.” Sulu rises, still chuckling, to his feet and makes his way over to the couch, motioning openly between Jim and Chekov. “Scoot over so we can play some FIFA, yeah?”

Jim lets out a surprised little oof when McCoy lifts his upper body up and out of his lap and dumps him inelegantly onto the couch after he’s gotten up and started moving for his bedroom, sighing, “I guess I’ll take my leave, then, before any foul play occurs.” He gives Chekov a solid pat on the back that only sounds about 75% painful as he passes behind the sofa, says, “You should head to bed too, kid. It’s after ten.”

“Oh, he’s sixteen years-old, not eight.” Sulu bumps Chekov’s shoulder with his own, smiles when the teen giggles in response. “He can afford to lose an hour of sleep.”
“Am I the only good influence in this household?” McCoy asks them (or the ceiling, if you’re going by where he actually directs the question). He doesn’t wait for an answer before he’s giving the lot of them an expansive wave and disappearing through the bedroom doorway with a grumbling, affectionate, “Goodnight, y’all.”

If there’s anyone who can infuse just as much exasperated disapproval into one measly two-word sentence as they can definitive, wholehearted love, it’s McCoy.

“’Night, Bones!” Jim calls after him as he dashes across the living room to flick the X-Box on. He glances towards the bedroom at just the right moment to catch the warm smile McCoy aims his way before he’s closing the door on them and setting off to have dreams of his future illegitimate godchild and all of his fictional voyages through Munchkinland, or whatever. One has the right to assume such things about his REM cycles – Jim certainly does, at least.

During the period between 10:13 and 10:59, Sulu defeats Jim a grand total of five times, and always with a generous amount of pomp and pageantry. Jim, bless his (poor, incredibly unfortunate, oh-so very tragic) soul, only manages to beat him once. At 10:38, after his fourth lose, Jim texts Spock while Sulu and Chekov are busy heating up a plate of Pizza Rolls and totally not canoodling with each other in the kitchen, crosses his legs Indian-style over his sofa cushion and asks him,

[txt]: I knw ur probably sleepin already, but what do u think of the name cosmos, fr a girl?

He doesn’t give him any reasoning behind the question – frankly, he doesn’t really need to. Spock will just assume he’s being ridiculous (which he is) and answer him regardless (as he always does).

And after Jim has given Chekov a goodnight hug and Sulu the middle finger (and a hug, too, for goodness sake), padded on into his bedroom, and nestled beneath his warm, dry comforter, Spock surprises him by texting him back at 11:06 PM – two whole hours past his standard bedtime and about an hour and a half after he presumably hit the hay tonight.

[txt]: It is beautiful.

Jim smiles faintly into the blue glow of his cell phone screen.

[txt]: I just knew u’d have been asleep by now lol
I thought the same earlier. Certain thoughts, however, has made sleep an impossible feat.

Jim’s pleased expression sours at that, an unfamiliar note of alarm suddenly singing through him, so similar to the suffocating swathe of concern and sympathy his encounter with Chekov enveloped him in two nights ago. He’s never had anyone to worry about like this, not until they – his friends – were all here and in his life and somehow buried deep inside him like some kind of wonderful, terribly incurable disease. How odd compassion is.

Do u wanna talk or..?

It’s awkward and it’s tentative and he sort of-kind of hates the way it comes out, but he doesn’t want to twist Spock’s arm, not when he is the way he is about sentiment – stilted, uncertain, lost. All that mass he doesn’t know how to measure yet.

That would be advantageous.

And just like that, Jim has a smile on his face again.

They talk to each other until 11:49 PM. Spock tells Jim about how Uhura kissed him last Saturday night and about how much trouble he’s been having falling asleep lately and about all of the varied and assorted things racing and stopping and lingering in his consciousness, his mind an ever-busy expressway so comparable to Jim’s. He doesn’t ask for advice or help or anything like that – he just talks to Jim, recounting these observations and these thoughts as if he might be making a formal report instead of confiding in his best friend over the phone in the middle of the night (and that’s more than okay), and Jim lays there and listens and comments whenever he deems it appropriate (which is very often, by the way), and it’s not weird now that he’s aware of the fact that Spock makes him a little crazy, and it’s not weird considering the fact that Jim’s feelings for Uhura have never been strictly platonic, and it’s not weird after he and his roommates have composed a list of names for their nonexistent children, and it’s not weird when McCoy is snoring like a freight train not nine feet away from this conversation – it’s just the way it is.

And at 11:48, Spock says with his voice hushed and warm and sleepy like Jim has never heard it before, “I believe I am adequately exhausted, now.” Jim snorts softly into the cool emptiness hanging above his face.

“Is that android for ‘goodnight’?” he asks, flattening his palm against his bare stomach.
“It is whatever you want it to be,” Spock replies, the barest hint of playfulness edging his words, teasing Jim. Jim smiles at him like he would if he were actually there to see it.

They are silent for several long, comfortable moments – sixteen seconds of blissful wordlessness, just the sound of their breathing and McCoy snoring on in the background.

And then Spock says, very calmly and very quietly, “It would be prudent of us to sleep. Tomorrow will be very busy.”

“You’re right,” Jim agrees. But he doesn’t say anything more.

Another brief stretch of silence, this time only eight seconds long. Spock makes this low, impossibly human noise over the line – a hum, maybe, vibrating right against Jim’s ear and swimming slowly down the center of his back.

“Goodnight, James,” he says, and Jim likes the way it sounds more than he’ll ever remember in the light of the sun.

“Night, Spock,” is his responding murmur, and then they are hanging up, and Jim is rolling onto his stomach and hooking an arm around his pillow and pressing his face into the warmth he finds there, and falling.

Exactly where he falls? That, my friends, is debatable.

__________________________

Wednesday, October 2nd, 2013.

Jim Kirk’s hand brushes against Pavel Chekov’s for the third time in just over a minute as they stand waiting outside of room E215, their eyes firmly fixed on the stairwell several feet away. He gently flicks his ring finger against the center of his younger companion’s palm, smirking just ever-
so-slightly when Chekov jumps a little at the contact.

“Calm down, Ruski,” he chuckles. “It’s just one day. It happens every year.”

“Birthdays are so exciting!” Chekov practically purrs at him in response, glancing up at Jim with bright, curious eyes. “When is ze last time you were excited about a birthday?”

The blank Jim draws is positively colossal. He raises his shoulders in a brief shrug, replies, “Can’t remember,” even as he continues to scour his memory for a birthday that wasn’t too marred by the fact that his dad just happened to fuck right off of this thing we call life on, lucky him, the same exact day, a birthday in which his mom wasn’t so misty around the eyes and Sam wasn’t shooting him not-very surreptitious glares across the dining room table for being born and he didn’t have the energy to care about it all as much as every cell in him screamed at him to. Maybe it was his last one, the one that sent him sailing off into adulthood (and, eventually, away from Riverside).

“I love birthdays,” Chekov hums. “All ze presents and ze decorations and celebration and –” He trails off with a wide, involuntary yawn, hiding his mouth in the palm of his hand.

“And getting to sleep for at least eight hours,” Jim snorts with a quick raise of the eyebrow. He grins at the halfhearted shove Chekov aims at his shoulder, counters it with a gentle nudge of his own.

“I am not sleepy,” Chekov insists in that adorably assertive tone he’ll take on whenever one of them will tease him like they so enjoy doing, so comical in his boyishly small voice, his thick Russian drawl.

Jim is just fixing himself to reply with something characteristically cheeky and flippant when Uhura is suddenly emerging at the top of the stairwell, decked out in an eye-catchingly red dress shirt, a pair of white, form-fitting jeans, and heels that almost put her at eye-level with Jim. She looks stunning, spirited, and decidedly nineteen (which is illogical, of course, seeing that she looked pretty eighteen a couple of days ago, and there isn’t much different about her appearance now except, except –).

Her hair is very nearly brushing her waist.

“How did you do that?” Jim blurts instead of, I don’t know, wishing her a happy birthday like any normal, polite human being would. She must know what he’s talking about, because immediately, she’s rolling her eyes at him and shaking her head the tiniest, warmest bit, her eyes twinkling with amusement and exasperation as she approaches.
“It’s called *weave*, fool.” She tilts her head in a coy expression of impudence, several of the thick, endless braids now cascading past her shoulders swaying slightly with the motion. “Black girl magic, see?”

“Can I touch it?” Jim asks, thoughtless and impulsive. He laughs loudly, raucously, when Uhura socks him in the forearm for that, grabs her by her quickly retreating wrist to pull her into tight, affectionate hug with both of his arms. The kiss she presses to his jaw has a helpless smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Happy birthday, Uhura.”

“Thank you, Kirk,” she hums against his ear, her mouth a wide, dazzling grin when she pulls away to look him in his ocean eyes. “I appreciate it, even if you *are* about fifteen seconds late.”

“How does it feel so *real*?” is his incredibly facetious reply. Another open laugh escapes him when Uhura snatches her brand-new braids out of his hand, slapping at his forearm with a good-natured scoff.

“Happy birthday!” Chekov chirps when Uhura turns to him, lets out a bubbling, impossibly pleased little giggle when she cups his jaws in her hands and drops an audible *smooch* on the skin right between his eyes. She leaves a faint, ruby-colored smudge there that mirrors the one Jim is almost entirely certain is staining his jaw at the moment, the one he has absolutely no intention of wiping off for the time being.

“Thank you, sweetie!” she trills into the hug Chekov wraps her in, squeezing the teen around his shoulders and kissing him again on the temple, and *oh*, if it were ever more obvious just how much she *adores* him than it is in that moment, Jim has no idea. He can only watch the exchange with the dopiest of expressions plastered across his face, something fuzzy and foreign and pleasantly uncomfortable oozing around the spaces in his ribs.

“I vould have brought your present, but Hikaru told me zat Spock vould have *stoned* me if I did,” Chekov says a bit sheepishly once Uhura has released him. Uhura gives him a quick *hoot* in response.

“Oh, Spock wouldn’t do *that*,” she assures him with a chuckle, hooking arms with both he and Jim and leading the two of them into their English class. She’s big on doing cutesy, charming things of that sort. “He loves you too much to stone you.”

“Our resident android is capable of *love*?” Jim briefly splays his hands in the air in a feigned
expression of shock, smirking with something that walks and talks a whole lot like self-satisfaction.
“Stop the fucking presses, everyone – Miss Uhura here has just dropped a rather shocking
bombshe–”

“Oh, shut up, you jackass,” Uhura snaps at him as they take their designated seats. She shoots him a
narrow, grudgingly amused look across the aisle. “He loves you, too.”

That doesn’t mess with Jim as much as he thinks it should, as much as it would, if he were anything
but a man of horrible timing and irrevocable irrationality. Instead, it puts a stupid, silly, impish little
 grin on his face and has him saying, with a complete and utter lack of seriousness, “If only as much
as he loved you.”

He totally didn’t mean that. 99.9% of him didn’t mean that, not one bit.

(Let’s just forget that 99.9% isn’t the definition of the word ‘totally’, okay? He’s going forget, after
all.)

They go through English in much the same manner, throwing comments with steadily escalating sass
at each other and polluting the air with their incessant sarcasm, their overabundant youth. During the
last three minutes of class, Jim conducts their peers in a rather vociferous ode to Uhura’s birthday,
and even though she pleads with him not to, even though she hides her face in her hands and even
though she sinks as far down in her seat as she can without breaking her spine or sliding onto the
floor and even though she tells Jim that she hates him, she fucking hates him so much, oh my God –
she doesn’t stop smiling once for the entirety of the hour, and that, to Jim, makes him a winner on all
counts.

He doesn’t think he’s ever seen her happier than he does the instant in which she sees Spock
standing several yards across from the English building after they’ve left class, waiting for them (for
her) beneath one of the campus’ many magnolia trees with his hands hiding in his pockets. Today,
he surprises Jim by wearing red instead of blue – a crimson-colored button-down under an
impenetrably black sweater – no doubt in light of today’s occasion (seeing as it’s no secret that
Uhura favors all shades of red).

“Spock!” Uhura cries as she goes half-skipping across the concrete walkway separating them,
leaving Jim and Chekov to catch up with her in her overbearing eagerness to close the distance
between Spock and herself. Another thick wave of astonishment comes washing over Jim as he
 watches Spock wrap his arms tightly around Uhura the moment she collides with him, watches him
swing her into his embrace like something straight out of a classic Disney film and press his lips to
the skin of her right temple in just about the warmest, most open display of affection (of any emotion,
really) he’s ever seen the man express in the two months in which he’s known him. If Jim were
being honest with himself (which he is, mostly), he’d have no problem admitting just how
disconcerting such a sight is.

(And, uh, just a little FYI for the concerned reader: total honesty is a feat Jim is quite a ways from
accomplishing at this point in our tale. Buckle your seatbelts and prepare to get comfortable, kids.)

“Happy birthday, Nyota,” is what Spock is saying once Jim and Chekov are just within earshot (and
does he know how good he has it, how lucky he is to be able to call her by her first name?), and he’s
not tense with Uhura’s arms still wrapped around his neck, and Jim isn’t sure whether his hand looks
stiff and uncomfortable or pleasantly heavy at the small of her back, and hey, is that a smile he spies
with his little eye?, but that has to be love – that elusive emotion he so jokingly claimed Spock was
incapable of not one hour earlier – oh, that has to be love coloring his expression when Uhura pulls
back to kiss him at the corner of his mouth, her palms gently cupping his jaws and it all so different
from the ultra-friendly affection she’d given Jim and Chekov earlier. This is a force of nature, what
Jim’s witnessing right now, the way Uhura brushes her thumb along Spock’s cheekbone ever so
slightly like she might not have even meant it (but goddamn, if she didn’t), the way Spock looks
down at her and he’s suddenly not all marble, a creature more like the one he was in the front seat of
his car last night.

It’s almost too beautiful not to wreck (just a little bit, though).

“Well, now, I never get hugs or kisses like that from you.” Because Jim is a literal butthole and he
aims to love in the most annoying, intrusive ways possible. He even smiles at them when they turn to
him, gives the slightly puzzled Spock shoots his way an impish little wink in response (which only
serves to intensify the bewilderment painting Spock’s features, thank the mighty heavens).

“And which one of us would you be referring to, hm?” Uhura asks, leaving one arm slung around
Spock’s neck and watching Jim with a vaguely competitive glint in her eyes – a glint Jim finds he
likes very much.

He gives her a heavy, affected shrug. “The world may never know.”

“Stay pressed, babe,” is Uhura’s responding purr. Somehow, the way she cocks her chin up at Jim
seems a thousand times sassier now that she has three dozen ropes swishing and swaying about
her head. “You’re just jealous of our cosmic connection.”

“Hey, we have connections!” Jim argues, eyes instinctively following Uhura’s hand as it comes
around Spock’s shoulder and goes traveling down to latch itself to the man’s palm, smoothly twining
their fingers together. He lets his voice take on a vaguely soap-operatic tone when he asks, “Don’t
you remember the days when we were young and stupid in love?”

“You mean the days when I was seriously considering busting you in the mouth in the middle of frat parties?” A raised eyebrow, the hint of the smirk. “Are those the days you’re talking about?”

She’s a killer, isn’t she? (– and, believe it or not, that only makes Jim love her even more than he already does, just blasts him full of that weird, birthday-filled sort of love and excitement Chekov was getting at earlier – that hybrid Jim can only scarcely recall feeling anytime in the semi-recent past. They all have a way of taking him back down all these emotional pathways he’d almost completely forgotten his soles knew the feel of over the years in the name of self-preservation, and honestly? It’s kind of nice, in that softly aching, bittersweet way remembering can be.)

“Whatever, man,” Jim snorts, rolling his eyes even though they’re mostly full of light (and seawater – don’t forget the seawater). He fixes both Uhura and Spock with a look of feigned determination. “I’ll get my sugar someday.”

“Sugar?” When Jim turns to regard Chekov, he finds the boy watching him with a near-comical mixture of confusion and amusement plastered across his face and roses steadily budding in his cheeks, and right then and there, he – a (mostly) grown man with (mostly) masculine tendencies – is very nearly overcome by the urge to do something incredibly stupid, like pinch Chekov’s cheeks or headbutt him tickle his sides or something, and all because he’s just about the most adorable thing in the entire Northern Hemisphere and he’s not entirely familiar with American vernacular yet and shit, did I mention Jim lives with him? (That much cuteness all day, every day has to be some kind of good for the soul.)

“Hugs and kisses,” Jim clarifies, indulging himself in a quick pinch to Chekov’s forearm and grinning widely when the teen giggles in response – “like that,” – he pauses to smack a kiss against the palm of his hand, smears that kiss across the crest of Uhura’s cheek – a kiss that, of course, Uhura tries (and fails) to dodge and simply ends up laughing helplessly at, her face hidden in Spock’s shoulder – “and that,” – he then reaches around Spock to crack that same palm, like it’s absolutely nothing, against the curve of the man’s ass, watches with something exponentially greater than mere glee as Spock’s expression takes a sharp hike in intensity, a whole host of emotions (surprise, confusion, irritation, intrigue) splayed quickly across his features, before going impassive and even once more, everywhere but his eyes set in a mask of careful serenity – “and that.”

Chekov lets out a high coo of laughter at the exact same moment in which Spock says, completely deadpan, “That was neither a hug nor a kiss.”

“You wanted one?” is Jim’s smirking, insolent reply, delivered without an ounce of hesitation or any shortage of the cheekiness he always keeps in surplus. It takes every bit of self-control he can muster to not promptly die of laughter at the look Spock gives him, then, half-appalled and so full of
uncertainty and fascination that it’s almost *hysterical*.

Before Spock can have a self-induced aneurysm trying to decode Jim’s slightly (read: *very*) irrational behavior or Jim can accidentally asphyxiate himself by sheer virtue of his own hilarity like he tends to do – among other things – on a daily basis, though, Uhura is cutting in with a chuckling, amused, “Come *on*, you guys.” She gives Spock’s hand a quick, insistent tug, starting off in the direction of the quad with a bounce to her gait. “I have three birthday kisses waiting for me, and you know how impatient I am.”

“You have displayed considerable patience on several occasions in the past, Nyota,” Spock comments – his own special, android-esque brand of flattery – as he falls in step with Uhura.

A high, musical laugh leaves Uhura, then, singing through the air and flittering over all of their heads with the breeze. “Don’t make me blush, now.” Her fingers tighten around Spock’s, her left thumb deftly hooking around his right and squeezing there.

She gets *more* than three kisses once they reach their table in the quad – *first* from Scott, who makes a grand show of grabbing her by the hands, spinning her around in a wide circle, and peppering smooches all over her face (much to her delight, if her giggling is anything to go by); *second* from McCoy, who settles for giving her a very polite, very Southern kiss on the hand (that Jim rolls his eyes quite heavily at); and *third* from Sulu, who catches her in a tight, breathtaking hug before kissing her firmly on the cheek. By the end of the ordeal, all of them – save her, of course – are sporting ruby smudges like gold medals on their faces – Jim and Scott on their jaws, Sulu, McCoy, and Spock at the corners of their lips, and Chekov directly between his eyes.

“I want to see those tonight, you hear?” Uhura tells them all as they’re sitting in their pre-designated spots around the table – she planted between Spock and Scott, who sits beside Chekov, then Sulu, then McCoy, and last of all Jim. “I don’t want anyone to wipe those off.”

“What if it starts raining?” Jim asks in an ostentatiously deliberate attempt to playfully contradict her, as is his informal duty as one of her best friends and the man of her not-dreams. He has a daily quota to fill, you know.

“It is not forecast to rain today,” Spock points out without missing a beat. Sulu snorts a loud, tickled laugh from across the table, as does Scott. Of course, Jim’s response is less than enthusiastic.

“Gee, thanks for *raining* on my parade, Spock,” he quips, the beginnings of a smirk catching at his lips when Scott lets out another amused chuckle and Spock shoots him another impossibly puzzled look. Those looks grow rather frequent on days in which Jim wakes up in the morning and pledges
himself to a full **twenty-four hours** of unadulterated, semi-abrasive sass and sarcasm – days that usually end with the letter ‘y’, mind you.

“**Aw, look at you,**” McCoy coos, tone dripping with mockery as he knocks shoulders with Jim. “You made a pun.”

“What if I just so happen to fall into a gigantic puddle of mud and am consequently forced to take a shower?” Jim goes on as if he’d never been challenged, raising his eyebrows to express just how unbelievably **serious** this discussion is (which is to say, on a scale of **one** to **seven**, it’s probably a **negative three**).

“That is improbable, as it has not rained within the past twelve hours,” Spock retorts in just as even a tone as before. “Therefore, the existence of mud is unlikely.”

“What if I was eating a really messy piece of cake and it got all over my face, so I had to **wash** my face in order to look presentable?” Jim shoots back, pointedly refraining from responding to Spock’s logic out of pride rather than spite.

“Why would you be eating cake before a birthday party?” Sulu asks.

“How awful wouldja have to be at eatin’ to get the cake on yer **upper jaw**?” McCoy puts in. Jim smacks the man’s hand away when it comes up to gesture at the lipstain Uhura left only an **inch and a half** from his ear – quite a ways away from his mouth, which one could safely assume he would be aiming for in the act of eating.

“What if m’ face started ta itch in the exac’ spot where you kissed me?” Scott jumps in, pulling everyone’s attention his way even though his question is mostly directed at Uhura. “Would I no’ be able ta scratch it?”

“What if there’s a fire in the science hall later and those ceiling sprinklers start spraying water everywhere?” Sulu adds.

“What if I’m giving some **major** head and –”

“**O-kay,** now’s when I’m gonna cut in and officially **ban** you from this conversation.” Uhura has to
raise her voice above the jeering and catcalling Jim’s halfway-to-obscene comment enveloped them all in, the wave of amusement and disapproval that goes sailing around the table – McCoy shoving hard at Jim’s shoulder with the heel of his palm, Sulu belatedly rushing to cover Chekov’s ears, Scott practically howling with laughter amidst McCoy and Sulu’s rather vocal protesting, and Spock still just sitting there, watching Jim as if he’s a member of some intensely strange alien species devoid of such things as logic and common decency.

“You can’t ban me from a conversation I started!” Jim argues. He lets out a quick, breathless huff of laughter, grinning despite himself as he asks, “What, is this Neopets?”

“I can’t believe you just indirectly admitted to owning a fucking Neopet at some point in your life,” Sulu balks. Jim tries extra hard to make his eyes really terrifying and mean just then (but he fails, for the most part, due to his unnatural, princesslike beauty in that department).

“No one at this table wants to hear about you ‘givin’ major head’, Jim,” McCoy grumbles with a scowl, ignoring said man when he jabs his tongue out at him in a display of insolence. “That is one mental image I could’ve gone my whole life without ever experiencin’, thank you very much.”

“Well, I’m so sorry if seven perfectly competent adults can’t handle a little crude humor,” Jim says, not very apologetically. “Which is, you know.” He affects a brief pout. “A tragedy.”

“‘Perfectly competent’?” McCoy snorts in the same instant in which Sulu points out, “Chekov isn’t an adult.” There isn’t too much heat behind his words – understandable when they all have a habit of forgetting the boy’s age, no thanks to his towering intelligence and the fact that he can hold drinks just like the rest of them (which is to say, not very well at all, with the exception of Spock and Uhura).

Jim simply purses his lips at Sulu’s knowing, smug expression – an expression he will take great pleasure in somehow forcing off of his face tonight, God willing – before turning to Chekov and asking, point-blank, “Chekov, do you even know what head is?”

Uhura, McCoy, and Sulu all give one vociferous, simultaneous exclamation of, “Jim!” (which, honestly, is a reaction so singularly representative of their collective friendship it’s hilarious) as Chekov’s expression contorts into something confused and uncertain, as the teen asks, tone measured and meek, “Pardon?”

“Do you know what it means to give head?” Jim reiterates, struggling in vain to keep the smirk on his face from bordering on maniacal. Remember what I said, about loving in the most annoying way possible? Classic Jim Kirk here, folks.
“No, I do not zhink so,” Chekov replies without a smidgeon of the bashfulness he would have if he was aware of the sexual nature of this discussion, his cheeks a solid, oblivious shade of porcelain. He peers curiously across the table at Jim. “What does it mean?”

McCoy is just starting to protest against any and all continuation of this conversation – “Jim, I swear to god if you tell him, I’m gonna wring you like a…!” – when Jim throws a silencing hand in the air (nearly knocking McCoy upside the head while he’s at it, the doof) and says, with an air of assumed authority, “That’s a lesson I’m gonna leave up to Sulu.” Cue an extraordinarily exaggerated wink at said man. “For later.”

“Sure, Jim.” He says it with absolutely no feeling, as Jim’s relentless jackassery for the past two months has rendered him just a little dead inside. (Unless you consider ‘thoroughly done with Jim’s shit’ to be an emotion, that is. Sulu probably does.)

“At night, I mean,” Jim adds, raising a teasing eyebrow at Sulu. “In the dark.”

“I gotcha.” A curt nod, not even the slightest quirk of the lips. Jim fails to be deterred.

Eternally diligent and, as per usual, impish to a fault, he leans across McCoy and funnels his hands around his mouth as if preparing to share a secret, then promptly whisper-yells, “In your bed,” across the table with the intention that the Queen of England be one of the first to hear his words. Jim and the Queen keep no secrets, you see.

There’s only about a two-second delay before he’s getting bopped rather forcefully in the ear with the back of Sulu’s hand, sending him colliding against McCoy’s chest and the table into another uproar – this time one of mostly unanimous laughter (and when I say ‘mostly unanimous’, what I mean is ‘everyone but Spock’, since the man seems to have some sort of allergy that prevents him expressing his amusement with anything more than a whisper of a smirk, and even so, he doesn’t look all that tickled by the display).

“Oh, ow.” Jim cups a hand over his battered, ringing ear, makes a show of leaning far and away from Sulu and generally looking as pitiful as possible, all pouty lips and wide, wounded eyes and voice dripping with mock-indignation. “You’ve injured me, brother.” He presses a melodramatic hand to his heart, beseeching in his best, admittedly decent (albeit incredibly dorky) Prince impression, “Why you wanna treat me so bad? When you know I –”

“Oh, shut up,” Sulu cuts him off with a flippant wave of the hand, lips twitching. “It was a love tap,
you overgrown man-baby.”

A comfortable, companionable wordlessness only intercepted by the occasional chuckle or two settles over the table, then – easy, leisurely, intimate in that way public silences between more-or-less best friends can only be. It is abruptly broken about forty-five seconds in by the sudden gasp that comes bursting out of Chekov, whose face has gone redder than a beet and whose palms are clasped over his mouth in embarrassment when everyone turns to look at him. Obviously, he just realized what it means to give head, or at least got some idea of it.

The ensuing laughter leaves most of them winded and grinning like fools.

So Jim is an insufferable, obnoxious little fuck in an ongoing love affair with blue comedy and outdated pop songs. Sulu continues to be flawless, McCoy is still cranky, Chekov will never cease to be adorable, and Uhura is nineteen years-old and more beautiful than she’s ever been up until now. Scott is clearly enamored with all of them and Spock may never stop looking at Jim like he’s the most fascinating thing to walk the planet. They all love to tease.

There is a brief competition over who can give Uhura the longest, tightest, most gratifying, groan-inducing, or otherwise pleasantly painful hug once she and Sulu are forced to head off to work – Chekov squeezing her as hard as he might, McCoy deferring to his own natural gentleness and uncanny knack for embracing, Jim managing to keep a monopoly on her for a full three minutes (which only come to end after she’s started huffing especially loudly about the time and threatened to ‘punch him in the dick’ at least twice). Scotty, however, seems to win this one with an encore of his very public, very loving display of affection from earlier – an act that actually brings Uhura to tears, much to everyone’s surprise.

“It’s only eleven-thirty, you guys,” she laughs, grinning uncontrollably as she brings a hand up to wipe at the moisture collecting in her eyes. She sweeps her gaze about the six of them once, twice, dragging a thick spell of devotion like a sheet of gauze over them when she does. “I’m not supposed to be this happy, yet.”

All of them go speechless with shock in the wake of her tears. It’s the first time any one of them has openly cried in each other’s presence, really, and even though it’s alright (it’s so alright, it’s unbelievable) and even though they’ve all got approximately one-hundred and thirty-three individual instances of crying between them and even though Uhura’s tears are ones of joy – breathtaking, helpless joy, in fact – they still strike the lot of them silent and awed, especially seeing as they’re all collectively to blame for them. They stand in a loose semicircle around Uhura for several bated moments, hovering in that fuzzy, somewhat asphyxiating place between elation and anxiety – all nervous smiles and too-sentimental glances and touches of embarrassment that are only okay because they’re experiencing them together, just as if the seven of them were all alone instead of smack dab in the middle of Starfleet Campus. Just as if they were all made for that sort of shared
embarrassment.

(And I mean, of course they weren’t made for it, or for each other. To think that anything but a grand deal of good timing, patience, understanding, and chance brought them here would be utterly illogical. It’s a nice idea, though.)

Chekov is (again) the one to break the silence. “But it is your birthday.” The ‘of course you are’ goes unspoken, but not unheard.

And, naturally, that only makes the tears flow a little easier. Naturally, Uhura plants the umpteenth kiss on Chekov’s now amply-lipstained face. Naturally, they all start turning into one gigantic pile of mush right about now – stupid smiles a given at this point.

“I love you guys, you know that?” Uhura punctuates her statement with a shimmering smile, a quick squeeze of Scott’s forearm and a brief rap against Jim’s. “I’ll see you all tonight, yes?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Almost all of them reply simultaneously, laughing nervously as soon as they do.

A pleased, melodious little hum comes bubbling out of Uhura. “That’s what I like to hear.” Her gaze lands on Spock, then, grows infinitesimally warmer. “Don’t be late, you.”

Something like a smile graces Spock’s face when Uhura leaves a parting kiss on his jaw. “Certainly, Nyota.”

They all watch her leave in a rosy sort of daze, blissfully unaware of anything but the sway of her braids and the way she links her arm with Sulu’s like she would the rest of them, were they in his position, for all of a minute and a half. It occurs to Jim within the span of this minute or so that they’re all a little (a lot, actually) smitten with her, that if it weren’t for her, they’d be that much less likely to be the septet they are now, and Chekov might not feel as home here, and he might not have learned humility or how to feel happy for another human being even at his own expense, and Spock might not even be his friend or in any apparent state of possession of the heart Jim knows is there, as much as McCoy or Sulu might deny it. That’s got to be Uhura’s fault, that he’s not all nuts and bolts anymore, that they’ve managed to stick together like gnats on flypaper for the six weeks that they have.

And, hey – there’s the fact that she loves them, too.
“Do you zhink she will like ze photo album?” Chekov asks, instinctively looking to Jim for an answer (which is, you know, just teeth-rotting in Jim’s mind).

Because Jim is suffering from temporary mental retardation due to the semi-intense internal monologue he’s got going at the moment, however, McCoy is the one who ends up replying. “Kid, I’m pretty sure she’d like a pile of dog doo if you’re the one who gave it to her.”

Spock’s eyebrow twitches upwards a snatch. “That is a rather extreme observation.”

“Figurative language,” McCoy huffs the slightest bit defensively, throwing Spock a look of tempered, if not particularly friendly, disdain. “Use it or lose it, bub.”

“Why would I resort to utilizing crude and hyperbolic expressions when I could simply state my thoughts in plain terms?” Spock shoots back without missing a beat. If you listen very closely, you can hear the distinct clang of a boxing bell in the background – here we have a certain Spock Grayson in the blue corner, armed with pure logic and his own distinctive flavor of ultra-nuanced sassmastery, and Leonard McCoy in the red corner, ready to deliver a verbal smackdown if the vaguely infuriated look on his face is anything to go by. Round eighty-three, ladies and gentlemen.

“Plain terms’?” McCoy lets loose a derisive snort that could knock a grown man clean out, were it an actual physical jab. His tone is positively drenched in sarcasm when he adds, “What’s yer definition of pedantic, I wonder.” He feigns a full-body shudder. “The horror.”

“You were well aware of my meaning, Leonard,” Spock replies, looking just the tiniest bit haughty as he cuts his gaze at said man. “There is no need to be contemptuous.”

“Contemptuous’, Lord have mercy–”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Jim comes out of his reverie saying, making a show of thrashing his hands around in a manner he hopes is authoritative (but mostly just ends up looking a little ridiculous). He wedges himself between Spock and McCoy, using his shoulders and attempting in vain to ignore the fact that both men are just slightly taller than him (and he’s pretty tall himself, which just goes to show you that McCoy was born to grow up to become the Second Great Wall of China and Spock has legs that go on for weeks and weeks and weeks). “Daddy’s getting tired of his babies fighting all the time.”
“Ain’t no trouble in a little banter between friends, Jim.” McCoy says it with his own trademark good-natured scorn, shooting Spock a pointed glance as he does before turning to Jim and giving him a semi-knowing look. “You would know.”

“I must agree with Leonard, James, unlikely as it may seem,” Spock concedes, his tone ambiguous in the hypothetically sarcastic way that always, always manages to piss McCoy off (even more than the simple fact of his existence normally does, that is), and while we’re here, allow me to illuminate the fact that while the man is more than capable of being a mocking bastard to Spock, as soon as that becomes a two-way street, his already-limited patience has virtually no hope of surviving for more than two seconds at a time. McCoy’s lips thin rather… contemptuously, then.

“You say that like it’s so damn unpleasant fer you,” he snaps, ignoring the fact that Jim is a very tangible, very present presence between him and Spock and glaring right past his nose at his dark-eyed counterpart.

“You are not certain of my attitude,” Spock notes, clinical, straightforward. “You now see the value of clarity, I presume.”

“You know who’s really nice?” Jim blurts out before McCoy can, I don’t know, blast his fucking ear off trying to curse Spock out or spontaneously forget he exists and start throwing punches in Spock’s general direction – which he is most certainly in at the moment. “Chekov.” His gaze lands squarely on the teen, moving quickly to Scott shortly afterwards. “Scotty, too.” Jim slithers from between his bickering friends to sling both arms around Chekov and Scott in a deliberate display of camaraderie, grinning and squeezing around Chekov’s middle and Scott’s shoulders as the former’s delighted giggling clashes with the latter’s brash, amused laughter. He cocks his chin up at Spock and McCoy, who are watching him with expressions of bemusement and exasperation, respectively. “Maybe they’ll be my new best friends.” He’ll pretend for now that Spock’s expression doesn’t change at that, infinitesimally enough that no one but Jim – who’s taken to studying his face often enough that he might be considered an expert in its many nuances soon – could really notice the difference.

“I vould like zat very much,” Chekov comments like he’s unable to help himself, effectively widening the smile on Jim’s face and drawing a short, hooting laugh out of Scott.

“I’m with the Russian on tha’ one,” he concurs with a hearty smack on Jim’s back. Bones huffs loudly in response, eyes rolling, jaw tightening. He’s trying his damndest not to smile – Jim can tell.

“I’m just – crushed, Jim, really I am.” He presses an insincere hand to his chest, pouting theatrically. “Who am I gonna have to sabotage my study sessions and wake me up in the middle of the night because you’re havin’ weird cravings for corner store burritos now? What will I do now that I can’t
“Oh, fuck off.” Jim says it without heat, releasing Chekov and Scott to shove playfully at McCoy’s chest before immediately moving to clasp his jaws between his hands and – to the man’s extreme annoyance – leaning in to plant a kiss anywhere he can get one, cooing, “You looove me.”

“Yeah, I’ll dropkick yer faggot ass, I love you so much,” McCoy shoots back, jerking his head back and away from Jim’s seeking lips and grasping his wrists tightly in an attempt to wrestle him away. His irritation gives way to a trophy of a laugh – sharp, golden, every inch begrudging – when Jim’s mouth catches his stubble-coated jaw, but just as quickly, he’s socking him in the stomach and twisting away from him, glowering affectionately as Jim doubles over with both laughter and pain. Meanwhile, Scott and Chekov back Jim in a chorus of breathless chuckles and helpless giggling, whereas Spock has resigned himself to simply staring at them all as if they’ve lost their minds (which, of course, they probably did years ago, or at least in the moment when they all stumbled upon each other) and generally looking agitated, fascinated, and (spectacularly) impassive all at once. Such is a relatively normal day in the life of Jim and these people he likes to call his friends.

“This is an abusive relationship,” Jim snickers, swiping at the tiny bit of moisture that’s accumulated in his eyes. “I’m an abuse victim. I need counseling, I need therapy, I need social servi–”

“James, might I draw your attention to the time?” Spock cuts in without warning – terse, sudden, but not particularly harsh. “You will need to be making your way to work soon, as it is approximately a quarter of an hour until the start of your shift.”

“Oh, damn.” Jim digs his phone out of his pocket to briefly confirm the time, lets out a low whistle when he discovers that he, in fact, only has about twelve minutes (ergo, no time at all) to get from here to the auto shop. “No fucking shit.” He peers curiously at Spock, a smile catching at the corners of his mouth. “How’d you know that? The time, I mean.”

Spock dips his head just a bit – an indicator that he’s about to say something somewhat immodest yet entirely factual (and therefore impossibly amusing to Jim). “I make a habit of remaining incredibly perceptive about such things.”

“Uh, you mind if I check yer pulse right quick? Just to make sure there’s a person in there?” McCoy shakes his head in bewilderment and disbelief. “Does yer diet consist in any way of oil or gasoline products, Mister Tin Woodsman?”

“Hey, if Spock wasn’t my trusty little android, I wouldn’t have realized that I’m about five minutes late for work and you’d be awfully disappointed at my failure as a functioning adult,” Jim points out,
winking amicably at Spock and smirking when the man’s slightly severe expression softens in turn – again, just enough that only Jim is able to tell, just enough to warm Jim to his core. “What would I do without you, huh?”

“‘Crash and burn,’ I believe is the popular colloquialism,” Spock replies with one of his polite, quasi-kind not-smiles. His face takes on a tinge of amusement when he adds, “Further evidenced by the fact that you are still dawdling here.”

“Modern romance, folks,” McCoy mutters to no one in particular. Jim gives him a swift punch in the forearm for that while Scott indulges himself in a tickled fit of laughter and Chekov tries (and fails, for the most part) to keep his blushing excitement in check.

“I’m gonna go be a grown-up now, okay?” Jim chucks a hand under both McCoy and Spock’s chins, simpering in the ingratiatingly naughty way he has. “Play nice, kids.”

“Alright, mom,” McCoy grumbles with a sneer. “Try not to get too fired once you get to work.”

On an impulse, Jim tugs Chekov to him and plasters a loud, wet smooch to the skin of his temple, smirking as the teen goes positively scarlet in the cheeks as he starts off in the general direction of the parking lot. “See? Chekov doesn’t mind it when I kiss him.”

“Didn’t yer mother ever teach you not to put yer mouth on everythin’ with a pulse?” McCoy counters, sounding just as unimpressed with Jim’s near-constant flirtation with all things breathing as he always does.

Jim spins on his heel to quirk his eyebrows at his friend, walking backwards even as he replies, “What mother?” There’s no gravity behind the statement, and it’s not like he’s upset or anything – he just knows what throwing Bones’ words back in his face will do for him (that is, put him on top of this whole conversation, and – as we all know well – it’s all about Jim Kirk coming out on top, isn’t it?).

McCoy’s expression sobers into something like hardened lava – one part irritation, two parts warmth, all parts tough love for Jim – while Spock gives Jim a long, inscrutable look – obsidian to McCoy’s basalt.

Why does he feel more at home under their steady gazes than he ever did in Iowa?
Heaven only knows.

“I’ll see you guys later!” Jim throws over his shoulder, tossing a brief peace sign in the air as he retreats. He makes it to work with only **two minutes** to spare… after running a **couple** of red lights and remaining **seven miles** firmly above the speed limit on his way there, mind you.

And he might think a little too hard about the way Spock was staring at him. Was he the sun in his eyes today? He’s not all that sure.

He might be a little too anxious for tonight to arrive, and this might be the first birthday party he’s going to in **years**.

That might freak him out a little (but it also might make him **ecstatic** – the jury’s still out on that one).

Uhura’s kiss keeps on buzzing against his jaw right through the entirety of his shift.

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**Wednesday, October 2nd, 2013.**

Spock Grayson carefully brushes a lock of hair from his forehead as he pens in the solution to problem **sixteen** of his accelerated calculus homework – $$y' = \cos x \sin x - \sin(2x + 2y) / \sin(2x + 2y) - \cos y \sin y$$ – slouched gently over the desk in his bedroom and listening to the faintly pulsing music streaming steadily from across the hallway. It is currently **6:29 PM**, and Nyota has been occupying his bathroom for approximately **twenty-seven minutes**, ‘**putting her face on,**’ in her words (an expression she quickly clarified to mean that she would be applying her makeup after being confronted with the vaguely puzzled look Spock gave her). They will be departing for the party in **forty-one minutes**. The party itself will begin in about an **hour**.

Spock looks up at the sound of his cellphone vibrating at the corner of his desk, swiftly taking the device in hand and laying his pen down flat against the desktop in one quick, fluid motion. He quickly scans the text he’s just received, instantly correcting any grammatical mistakes and spelling
errors as he reads it.

[text]: Does a denim shrt count as dressy casual??

[text]: I suppose it would depend upon the style and quality.

Spock works through two more problems with ease. Nyota has been in the bathroom for thirty minutes when his phone vibrates once more, this message consisting only of a picture of James clad in faded denim button-down with a darkly-colored patch stitched onto the right shoulder, the photograph having been taken in a full-length mirror. He takes a moment to appraise the shirt to the best of his ability (which, of course, is limited by the fact that he cannot actually see it with his own eyes and that the lighting in the photograph is less than optimal).

[text]: I do not doubt that Nyota will find it passable.

James responds with another picture, this time a somewhat shaky one of Leonard with his middle finger raised to the camera and a characteristically vexed expression on his face.

[text]: Bones says hi lol

Spock feels the corners of his lips tighten ever so slightly – a touch of something warm. His features do not budge.

[text]: I return the sentiment.

[text]: Is that a burn i detect?

[text]: (burn means insult btw)

The sound of the toilet flushing from behind the closed bathroom door temporarily catches Spock’s attention without alarming him or slowing his fingers as they race across his phone’s touchscreen keyboard.
I am aware of the meaning of that bit of vernacular. However, I would prefer to keep the status of my comment ambiguous for reasons I am sure you understand.

Sassy much?? :P

Two semi-important things to note at this particular moment in time:

× One, that the use of that specific emoticon never fails to baffle Spock, for it is highly improbable that anyone would arbitrarily stick their tongue out after making an otherwise normal comment if they were having a face-to-face conversation (to be honest, though, James of all people seems more liable than the average person to do such a thing);

× And two, that yes, he is being sassy. He’s quite aware of it, too.

James texts him a picture of Pavel, then, flashing the camera a wide, silly smile and sitting cross-legged atop a laminate counter Spock recognizes as the standard for all Starfleet University dorms.

He says privet (at least i think thats what he said)

How is he even real spock omfg lookat how cute he is

Another unidentifiable bundle of something registers in Spock’s consciousness, much closer to his gut than to his lips and not quite as spicy as it was before. These bundles have been rather present and numerous today, he has noticed, with no real certainty as to what the exact charge of this observation is. It is most likely neutral.

He was conceived by his mother and father. That is how he is real.

Please inform him that I return his greeting.

His reply is followed shortly by a photograph of Hikaru with his head emerging from a gap in what is more than likely a shower curtain, as his dark hair is sudsy with shampoo and he is presumably winking around water that has run into his eyes. His hand is raised in some sort of signal that Spock is not entirely familiar with the meaning of – his thumb, index, and pinkie finger extended while his middle and ring fingers remain curled forward.
It is at the exact moment that Spock is hitting the send button that the bathroom door swings open with an audible *whoosh*, prompting him to turn approximately **178 degrees** in his desk chair to face Nyota across the open doorway. She has her cosmetic bag tucked under her left arm. Her hair, earlier left to cascade down her back and over her shoulders, is now piled atop her head in a slightly asymmetrical bun. Her eyes are lined with tiny black wings, their lids shimmering with gold, her lips a darker, deeper shade of red than they were before she escaped into the bathroom.

“Am I an artist or am I an artist?” she asks, smiling in that way people seem to when they are not wholly aware of it. There is the beginning of a bounce in her step when she closes the majority of the distance between herself and Spock, leaning into his face on the pretense of giving him a better look at her work (but more likely because she enjoys the charm of being close in proximity to him). Spock does not feel the instinct to recoil from her as he would were she anyone but herself; his skin has since learned to stop crawling in response to her nearness.

She is beautiful, so he tells her so. She would have been beautiful if she had not done anything to her face (he does not tell her *that*, however, for the comment seems trite, and he is sure she is already aware of the truth in it).

In response, Nyota makes a purring, gleeful sound in the back her throat that arouses yet another measure of sensation within him, one he is a bit more receptive to identifying in its warmth and its simplicity: affection. She is easy to be clear around because she is honest – not as uncomfortably, unsettlingly nuanced as the rest (*the rest* meaning *everyone else*). Or, at least, she tries to be for him.

“I need your opinion,” she announces, dropping her makeup bag on the desk behind him with one hand and taking his in the other. She gently leads him to his bedside, where she has **three** party dresses spread out over the comforter – one a floral sheath with a flowing skirt and a sheer neckline; another a simple, strapless black a-line with a flaring skirt; the last a form-fitting halter dress heavily accented with red and gold ruching.

(A small note: Spock is only familiar with these design elements because of his mother’s considerable influence during his formative years.)
“The first one is really pretty and festive, you know?, but I almost feel like it’s a little too casual just because of how busy it is, and it would probably work out better for me if I just dressed it down a little and wore it to class tomorrow, and then this one is almost perfect, except I don’t know if it’s too simple and whether or not that’s what I want for tonight, because I want to look classy, but I don’t want to downplay it all because it’s my birthday and I feel like I’m entitled to something a little flashier like the gold one, but is it too flashy and sexy to be dressy-casual? And should I care about that, or should I just go all out?” A pause. “Did I lose you?”

Spock is silent and thoughtful in the few seconds in which he considers the aesthetic value of each dress and Nyota’s rambling (albeit not at all confusing) commentary on the matter. As Nyota expressed distinctly positive feelings towards the dress in the middle, that is the one he indicates with a succinct point of the finger.

Nyota lets out something like a sigh – it is relief and pleasure and affection all at once; she knows well how to synthesize and condense several distinct emotions within her exhalations. “Of course, the black one,” she says. “That’s the most logical choice.”

Spock refrains from pointing out that such a choice could not be logical as it is based on subjective considerations. For it to be logical, one would have to consider the occasion as well the exact atmosphere in which Nyota would be wearing her dress – by that line of reasoning, all three choices are equally sound. Spock also realizes, in that moment, that she did not actually need his opinion – she simply wanted him to agree with a decision she’d half-made in her mind already. That is something very much like her to desire, something very sentimental and secure.

“Can you help me out here?” When Spock turns to look at her, she has the hem of her t-shirt clutched in one hand and is gesturing to the bulbous mound of hair carefully teetering atop her head with the other, and she is peering up at him with just a hint of something triangular and sharp in her face – hope, perhaps. She is approximately four inches shorter on flat feet than she is in heels – her eyes now level with Spock’s chin instead of his nose – and she is saying to him, “I don’t want this,” the hand motioning to her hair briefly flails in emphasis, “to fall apart.” And then she raises her arms.

It is not hope sharpening her expression, but apprehension – an understandable reaction. Spock is careful and efficient as he grasps her t-shirt in his hands and lifts it in one swift uptake over her head, assiduously avoiding her bun when he does. His eyes are politely focused on the bookshelf several feet behind her as he hands her back her shirt.

“You know…” Nyota chuckles softly to herself as she slips into her dress in his peripheral vision, not much more than a four-limbed mass of black and brown from where he can only barely see her. She is smirking when she tiptoes back into his direct line of sight, holding her dress up around her bosom at its sides and smirking at him in a way quite unlike the others smirk – when James does it, he is self-satisfied and naughty and wanting; when it is Leonard, he is expressing grudging amusement; when it is Hikaru, there is smugness without the promise of mischief; and when it is
Scott, there is simple glee – and the quirk in her lips is lined with love and tenderness and spice, and it is so odd that Spock has learned to see such things in just a smile without the aid of words. Her head tilts as if temporarily weighted down by the burden of her affection; with an air of innuendo, she says, “You don’t have to be such a white knight all the time.”

Spock feels the muscles shift beneath the hard skin of his face in response – 14% of a smile nowhere near completion unfolding – and he tells Nyota that he believes she is never not deserving of such respect, and that is why he would never fail to give it to her.

“Oh, a man after my own heart,” she sighs with a feigned sort of theatricality and all the romantic cadences of old Hollywood starlets Spock is perhaps unusually familiar with, throwing him a quick, coy little wink before turning her back on him and asking, “Zip me up, please?”

Spock does. His knuckles brush against her spine without him meaning for them to, but she does not flinch or shiver or do anything but give him a bright, airy smile once they are facing one another once more. She steps exactly seven inches away from him and gives him a brief, faintly modelesque swirl, hands on her hips and elbows jutting out in perfect acute triangles, the skirt of her dress fluttering softly with the motion. Her toenails are the same shade of maroon as her fingernails; this is something Spock would have never known had they not ended up here, had she not been so determined to make his acquaintance.

“Still beautiful?” she asks, smiling at the exact instant in which she, presumably, becomes fully aware of the rare adoration Spock can feel cooling against his cheeks like a facial mask. It is so strange and so tricky, sometimes, to be so entirely moved simply by another’s appearance – Nyota in a dress on her birthday, Pavel blushing and breathless with glee over his chicken tenders at Enterprise, Scott drunk and mirthful on the arm of his sofa, James smiling easily across the doorway at him in the darkness of a Saturday night.

Spock’s reply is a positive. Curiously, this seems to both please Nyota and trouble her, for when her expression changes, it is that same pyramid of hope-apprehension from before – a pyramid that suddenly becomes outstandingly sharp when she says, half-teasingly, “And you’re sure you’re not helplessly in love with me?”

There is no pressure in her words, and not nearly as much disappointment as simple self-deprecation, which distresses Spock because it is both un fitting of Nyota to feel any way at all critical of herself and difficult for him to reconcile that this – this simple discrepancy between their vocabulary, she meaning something only slightly different than what he does when she uses the word ‘love’ on him – this could shove razors up under his skin and make him want to change the way he feels, which he has never wanted except to make it so that he could not feel at all (and that is something he has never divulged with anyone).
It is loathsome to him, that Nyota should want to use his bathroom to apply her makeup and that she should want him to zip her dress up and that she should be interested in his opinion on what she wears to her own birthday party, and that she should want him to have an executive role in this birthday party and that she should want to telephone him for all sorts of trivial matters and that she should want to be warm and present and ever-so beautiful while in his company, and that she should let herself feel such things as anger and grief and disappointment (“I’m not pissed off, okay, don’t feel bad, this is just my thing,” she says, and isn’t it curious that people always blame themselves for their anger when he is almost entirely certain it is partially his fault?) and shed tiny, burning tears when she cannot sleep for the sake of her own racing thoughts and the irregular beat of her heart (and he knows she does this occasionally because she told him she does, and she told him she does because she wanted him to have this intimate part of her even when he cannot fathom to hold the intimate parts of himself sometimes) – and all of this is loathsome to him because it is him that shares this equation with her and not someone else, someone more worthy, someone capable of becoming the constant she is so deserving of, someone over whom she could cry and her tears would actually get her somewhere in the end. Oh, how it pains him to think about those tears.

Selfishly, he is glad for her presence in his life. She has opened up avenues for him and inside of him that would have been scarcely addressed if she was not there and if she was not her and if she was not so determined to make a change for the better in everything and everyone she touched. If it were not for her, he would not be so accustomed to, if not necessarily comfortable with, exercising that bone of altruism inside him, teetering on the gloriously terrifying edge of not sure how to feel and not sure if that is good or bad. Of course he wants her to stay.

But that previously mentioned altruism makes it absolutely excruciating to watch her simultaneously fulfill herself with and wound herself on their relationship. It makes him wish that she had been part of a different tour group on August 4th, 2013, or that he had not so graciously volunteered to guide the incoming freshman at orientation, or that she had perhaps decided to attend some other prestigious college somewhere many miles away from Albany and Starfleet and him. It makes him wish that she had a different type – James and his boundless charisma and enthusiasm and arrogance and humor, or Hikaru with his collected, practiced excellence, or even Scott with all of the eccentric, whimsical charms he carries about him – charms Nyota loves in just the same endless way Spock loves her (how cruel) – it makes him wish that she could be taken with them and their attributes as she is with him (and all his emptiness).

He loves her so much. It is sometimes impossible for him to hear over the sound of it at night.

“I’m –” It’s the crack in her sentence – not the words themselves – that gets him to turn the volume of his thoughts down a bit, to stop standing there rendered mute in his turmoil. “I’m sorry, Spock.” Her knee comes forward for a moment, but she does not step towards him, instead brings her hands up to form a visor over her face, shielding her features without completely concealing them. “I’m a stupid girl.”

Spock verbally disagrees with her. She is quite the opposite of ‘stupid'.
“I shouldn’t say things like that to you. That’s not fair.” Because she has still not closed the distance between them, Spock does so himself. She almost deflates with relief.

Spock informs her that it pleases him that she is as straightforward and frank as she is. He does not say anything, though, about how damning the truth can be – he is sure she knows of the dual nature of honesty.

“See, that’s not fair either, though.” She smiles up at him, but it is an expression of hurt just as much as it is one of amusement. “You’re too good to me.”

Spock tells her that he does not believe he is good enough. That lowers a heavy curtain of sobriety over her features.

“And that’s why you’re too good to me,” she says.

He is not sure he understands. He does not like not understanding (and he so rarely understands anything when dealing with them – other people).

His displeasure slips temporarily into the background of his consciousness, however, when Nyota steps directly into his very, very personal space and loosely drapes her arms around his torso, holding him to her but not holding him tightly. It does not take more than a moment for him to return her embrace, circle his arms around her shoulders just like she taught him it was okay to. And he can feel her sigh hard into his chest when he does.

So he says, “I want tonight to be perfect for you.” The statement is lacking; he adds, “I want you to be happy.”

Nyota laughs against him and the sound is filled with joy. “I am happy,” she replies, tilting her head up and resting her chin against his sternum. “Do you want to know why I’m happy?”

Spock nods.

“Because today I am this much closer to changing the world someday,” she says. “When I was a little girl, I used to pray for the day I’d turn nineteen because I knew I’d be wearing bigger, taller
shoes. And how old am I?”

“Nineteen,” he replies.

“I’m happy because this is the first time I’ve ever worn this dress and I’ve been waiting for the right opportunity to wear it for three months now,” she says. “I’m happy because I’m about to go off and have my first classy, beautiful adult birthday party, and I’m happy because you helped it all come together. I’m happy because I know all of our friends will be there, and I’m happy that we’re going for gelato afterwards, and I’m happy that you give so much of a shit about this that I can actually see how frustrated you are for once.”

His face has betrayed him. Spock silently muses that James is rubbing off on him a bit too much.

“I’m happy because of you,” Nyota tells him. Her arms tighten around him, her mouth presses into a faint crescent moon; she shakes her head and peers up at him and lets her voice grow assertive and proud, lets heavy stones drop into her sentences. “You’re here and we’re together and we’re good, okay? I don’t want you to feel guilty about me, because I’m fine, I promise.”

“You are not always fine,” Spock points out, very matter-of-factly.

Nyota huffs a breezy little laugh, her smile growing just the slightest bit. “Nobody is always fine.”

The way the words leave her, as if she is so certain and secure in their rightness, as if such an admission is normal — acceptable, even — it shakes Spock to the very core of him. He doubts he will ever feel at peace again now that he is in possession of such knowledge — the knowledge that it is alright to not be fine.

“I want you to be my friend,” Nyota says.

“I am your friend,” Spock notes.

“I want you to be my friend and not feel bad about it.” Nyota clarifies, helpful and earnest. “I don’t feel bad about it.” She angles her head against her left shoulder and smiles at him, fingers curling against his back. “This is a guilt-free friendship, you hear?”
Spock hesitates, half-entangled in the throes of his earlier remorse. “If I could change the wa–”

“Don’t.” She squeezes him briefly, holding his gaze with the intensity of her own. “You don’t have to promise me anything but exactly what we have now.”

There is something distinctively comforting in those words. Spock nods his assent, then suddenly feels breath he’d been just barely aware of before now come rushing out of the cage of his chest and out into the air above Nyota’s head, taking with it a degree of the anxiety that has come to steel itself to the bones of his ribs and his spinal column. Nyota’s mouth stretches into a knowing grin.

“We’re okay,” she asserts, laying her forehead back against his breastbone. “We’re okay.”

Spock does not believe her entirely, but it is spectacularly pleasant to hold her there and listen to her declarations and count each time her breath pushes their bodies infinitesimally closer, so he does not feel any motivation to argue with her.

Eventually, Nyota is smiling her one-note smiles again – not those grand symphonies with their endless permutations of melody, the ones where Spock must struggle to identify each cacophonous note – and she is picking out which shoes she wants to wear and putting in a new pair of earrings and perching on the edge of Spock’s bed with her laptop carefully balanced on her knees so that she can give the playlist she composed for the party one last inspection, checking it for length and atmosphere and anything she might have missed. Sporadically, Spock will hear the first thirteen seconds of a song come streaming from the tinny speakers at the bottom of her laptop before Nyota is either clicking the song off or moving on to another one, nails ticking faintly against her touchpad.

“You don’t think anyone will object too much to Al Green, do you?” she asks him as he is passing into the room, just now returning from the task of carefully placing the cake he and James baked the previous night into a cake box.

Spock points out that it is her party, and that she is free to choose whatever music she deems appropriate for the occasion.

“Smart answer.” She gives him a squinty smile over the top of her laptop. “I think everyone needs their own personal you for party-planning.”

Spock is tempted to point out the ethical and moral implications of human cloning, but he chooses not to in favor of drawing the curtains shut and checking his cellphone both for the time and for the
text James more than likely sent him while he and Nyota were preoccupied. It is exceedingly difficult to end a conversation with James (not that Spock actually wants to 83% of the time).

The time: 6:49 PM. Twenty-one minutes to departure.

Number of text messages: a whopping thirteen.

**[txt]**: U just

**[txt]**: Take my fucking breath away sometimes i swear to god spock

**[txt]**: How is it possible for so much sass to be imbued in one human being i mean come on now

**[txt]**: Science has gone too far

**[txt]**: Where are u now mendel

**[txt]**: Is sass genetic???

**[txt]**: Whoever u settle dow n and have kids w someday is in for a world of beautiful, infuriatngly sarcastc infant versions of you and i will be there laughing LOUDLY at their pain

**[txt]**: Bones says youre only mean to me because u love me

**[txt]**: You love me right spock??

**[txt]**: <3~?

**[txt]**: Wow tht looks a little like a penis
[txt]: Please tell me to shut up before i say smth really embarrassing

[txt]: Actually the next time i ever ramble to you like this via text ever again i need u to stare really hard at me w your scary scary eyes and not stop for at least twenty minutes

Spock spends approximately **one minute** and **eighteen seconds** reading the influx of messages and then attempting in vain to ascertain just how he feels about them. He is only able to determine that there is undoubtedly both confusion and affection there, somewhere in the tangled mess James' lack of grammar and proper spelling and sense of propriety and self-control has left his stomach in. There may even be amusement there, too (which is odd in that Spock is rarely if ever amused, but not odd in that James is always the **one** thing in his life that has managed to amuse him to the degree that he has – and what a high degree that is).

[txt]: Shall I reply to your messages chronologically or alphabetically?

[txt]: Im just gonna pretend i did not totally just spit orange juice everywhere

[txt]: I thnk u have a condition called chronic sassmastery syndrome and u should get bones to check that out for u aSAP

[txt]: Except no dont do that

[txt]: Your sass keeps me young and supple ;)

Because James is yet another unbearably, impossibly loud love that keeps him awake at night, Spock indulges himself in another quick, momentary **14%** smile that does not breach the surface of his features. He is almost glad for the fact that there is no one to look upon his face in that instant, and the customary discomfort of feeling is a bit slower to come to him this time around.

“Please tell me that’s Kirk,” Nyota says suddenly, her words briefly underscored by something poppy and synth-driven. “He isn’t already drunk, is he? If he’s texting you about how hot the Disney Princesses are again, I’ll shit.”
That was quite an interesting conversation, to say the very least. Spock turns on his heel to face Nyota, his smile rather uncomfortably (and mostly involuntarily) working its way up to 25%, and notes that he does not believe James is inebriated, as his messages are still easily decipherable and not the garbled masses of various letters and numerals they would be were he currently intoxicated.

“And I just knew he’d be that one guy to show up to my party already tipsy.” She does not say it with anything resembling the disappointment Spock thinks should be there, based on her words alone; there is a soft, faintly pleased smile curling her mouth at the corners. “Oh, hey!” Nyota gives an excited little bounce, tightening her grip on her laptop to ensure that it does not go toppling to the floor before placing it on the stretch of mattress beside her. An old classic fills the air the moment it’s down, and Nyota is getting to her feet and beckoning him over with an emphatic wave of the hand and a surprisingly irresistible, “Get over here and dance with me, you.”

It is easy for Spock to pocket his phone and take Nyota into his arms, then, for they have sixteen minutes left to waste and he cannot for the life of him think of a response to James’ text that does not make him want to crawl out of himself so that he does not have to share his body with the sheer mass of his own unease and he knows Nyota loves to dance with those she holds close to her heart and it is her birthday – she deserves this many times over – so he clasps her right hand in his left and places his other palm against the small of her back and lets the slow, easing tempo overtake them for the next three minutes or so.

At some point after the second, ‘I’ll be so alone without you,’ goes gently drifting over their heads, Nyota says to him, “You better dance with me again at the party. I can’t let you just stand in the corner and look angry and unimpressed the whole night without some sort of payment.”

Some hidden, sequestered part of Spock is secretly thrilled that these are the conversations their time spent together winds them into. He tells her that he would be glad to dance with her at the party if that is what she wished.

“Yeah, but will you dance dance with me?” Nyota asks, and, because it is blatantly obvious that Spock can in no way feasibly discern her exact meaning simply by the emphasis she put on the first ‘dance’, she adds, “Will you get down and shake that perky little ass on the floor with me?”

Spock has to let out a quick breath of almost-laughter at her ever-so apt description of his posterior. He admits that it is quite unlikely that he would engage in such an activity.

“One day, baby,” Nyota says with a note of promise in her voice, gently detangling her fingers from his in favor of winding both arms around his neck and pulling him down into a quick, tender embrace. “One day, I’m gonna get you to wine with me and it will be glorious.”
Again, Spock is surprisingly lacking in any urge to contradict her, taking into account that he is about 99% positive he would never, ever do the dutty wine even if Nyota sincerely wanted him to, as there are certain lines that just cannot be crossed. Instead, he hums in something that is neither assent nor disagreement, or anything but simple acknowledgement, really, and presses his lips and his chin against her temple without kissing her there. She seems to enjoy the gesture greatly.

The next thirteen minutes are spent loading the cake, disposable cameras, laptop, speakers, masks, and the decorations they have not yet taken to the ballroom into Spock’s car, closing the curtains and locking the doors, and piling into the front seat of the Volvo, anxious and excited and optimistic and doubtful in all sorts of varying amounts between the two of them. Spock gives Nyota full reign over the sound system, lets her synchronize her iPod with his stereo and shuffle through her library until she finds something to her tastes, and just as the sound of Frank Ocean begins to fill the car, Spock knows how he is going to text James back.

[txt]: Always a pleasure to enrich your life, James.

Wednesday, October 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2013.

Jim Kirk catches a glimpse of himself in the driver’s side window of his thousand year-old truck and announces, with absolutely no pretense whatsoever, “I need a haircut.”

“Yes? You need fuckin’ driving lessons.” McCoy slams the passenger door a tad bit viciously; the truck whines pitifully in reply. “I swear, yer gonna need a general anesthetic to get me in a car with you behind the wheel ever again.”

“Hey, man, it wasn’t so bad.” Jim easily strolls around to McCoy’s side of the truck, smirking in that reflexive way he has, like being full of shit is just a habit for him now (and it kind of is). He digs his wallet out of his jacket pocket in pursuit of quarters to feed the parking meter with. “You know no one follows the speed limit.”
“You were doin’ fifty and the speed limit was thirty-five, Jim,” McCoy retorts snappishly even as he retrieves his own wallet to help Jim out, his eyes two identical pools of hatred and disapproval for everything Jim chooses to be. Such is the usual. “Let’s not even talk about the thirty-six thousand accidents you almost got into and the fact that your change oil light was havin’ a goddamn rave the whole time.”

“That light has been broken for years, Bones,” Jim points out. “And I know how to take care of a car.”

“Too bad you don’t know how to drive one.” McCoy lets out a sharp huff of laughter when Jim’s fist catches him in the forearm, returns the gesture with about four times as much force as he probably intended. “I’ll gladly switch places with the Russian on the way back.”

Almost as if on cue, Sulu’s Trailblazer comes turning around the block and sliding into the parking spot behind Jim’s Chevy at that exact moment. Jim rubs absently at his steadily bruising arm and eyes Chekov as he bounces out of the passenger side of the car, says, “So you’d rather our resident angelic forest creature died in a horrible car accident? You’d cut into his precious alone time,” – he says it with no shortage of innuendo – “with Sulu just because you can’t handle a little casual speeding?”

“A month ago, all you could talk about was how Sulu was gonna spoil the kid’s virtue or sinfully deflower him, or whatever,” McCoy says a bit too loudly, ever-so tactfully ignoring the glare Jim aims his way. “In a way, him bein’ subjected to yer nonexistent driving skills would be the lesser of two evils.”

“Uh, Pasha’s not riding back with Jim,” Sulu’s disembodied voice comes piping in from the driver’s side of his car. The four of them cluster around the parking meter Sulu is due to empty his spare change into, each with a gift in hand (or under arm, in McCoy’s case). “Sorry, Len, but I think I’m marginally more okay with the idea of going to you and Jim’s funerals than Jim and Pasha’s.”

Under his breath, Jim intones, “That’s fucked up,” as McCoy turns his physical assault against Sulu, who – not very unexpectedly – dodges him with ease and says, “At least there would be more poetic justice if it was you and Jim! Best friends dying together and all that good, super homoerotic stuff.”

“Oh, nobody told you?” Jim sidles over to Chekov, who for the most part has just been looking slightly confused and extremely tickled by the way all of them have been talking about him up until now. He throws an arm around the teen’s shoulders and shoots a self-amused smirk in Sulu’s general direction. “Chekov’s my new best friend.”
Sulu turns to McCoy, inquisitive. “Doesn’t that break your heart a little?”

It takes a second or two for McCoy to blink at the lot of them as if coming out of a light stupor and say, a beat slower than he would usually, “Oh, I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you over the sound of Jim ruinin’ my entire life with his existence.”

“What’d I say? Abuse, Bones.” Jim watches with more pleasure than he’d honestly care to admit as Sulu gingerly steals Chekov from his grasp, hooking their arms together (much to Chekov’s delight, if the vaguely dazzled look on his face is anything to go by) and tugging him towards the dance hall across the street. It’s then when he first notices Spock’s Volvo parked directly in front of the building. “Any more and I’ll have to start singing Prince again.”

“Lucky for me, I love it when you sing Prince.” There’s something in the line of McCoy’s shoulders as he leads the way to the dance hall that looks incredibly amused from behind, under the yellow light of the street lamps and the glow of the paper lanterns hanging from the dance hall’s awning. Jim doesn’t resist the urge to sling himself across those shoulders, palm pressing against the warmth of McCoy’s collarbone as he launches into his second impromptu performance of the day – “I gave you all of my love, I even gave you my bodyyy…”

“Really, Jim, there’s no possible way you could have been anything but the biggest queer on the face of the planet,” Sulu is saying once Jim and McCoy have caught up with him and Chekov at the entrance, clutching at each other and crooning through the chorus of Why You Wanna Treat Me So Bad? with unprecedented fervor. “First time I ever laid mine eyes on you, I was like – yep, King of the Fags, here we go.”

“That’s a slur. Those are slurs.” Jim tilts his head affectedly, nudges his elbow into Sulu’s side. “How would you feel if I walked around calling you ‘oriental’, chink?”

“White people aren’t allowed to be assholes, my friend. You’ve had ninety-nine percent of human history to do that,” Sulu replies as he breezes his way into the dancehall. “I have special privileges due to my minority status and inherent coolness.”

“Says who?”

“Says affirmative action.”

Yeah, let’s all pretend Jim doesn’t pee himself laughing at that in the doorway just then.
As soon as he’s regained some control over his bladder and his lungs, however, he can take a good look at his surroundings and appreciate, really… what a bang-up job Uhura and Spock did decorating the place.

It’s all atmosphere, magenta paper lanterns suspended in the air, gold, helium-filled balloons hugging the ceiling, and heavily-ruffled streamers of black and gold stretching from wall to wall and brushing against the floor, hanging down over an open doorway at the rear of the miniature ballroom. There are small, circular tables with wine-colored tablecloths and flowering gold centerpieces spaced along each wall and a thick blanket of smoke crawling over the floor like a sheet of small stratus clouds, and somehow, it looks like there’s a constant concentration of glitter floating around in the air, steadily shimmering in the relatively dim lighting of the dance hall. Soul music from an as of yet unknown source is playing at a volume loud enough to be comfortably jolting, what with the acoustics in the place, and no one else is occupying the ballroom yet (which is mostly unsurprising, seeing as they’re about ten minutes early).

“Hellooo?” is what comes bellowing out of Jim’s mouth before he can really help himself or curb the whole urge of birthday Uhura now that sweeps over him the instant he’s been inside for more than thirty seconds. That exclamation alone sets off an unexpected barrage of ‘HELLOOO’’s and ‘UHURAAAA’’s and ‘BABY LET ME LOVE YOU DOOOWN’’s from all four of them – a glorified mating ritual that goes on for almost a whole minute before Uhura is emerging from the curtain of streamers across the room a little wild around the eyes, looking almost as thrilled as she does when she’s verbally kicking Jim’s ass with the sheer power of her feminism and political correctness, and probably more beautiful in a strapless black party dress than Jim has ever seen her before (and this is a feat she manages to accomplish daily).

“If you all don’t shut the fuck up –” She pauses dramatically, both hands raised in the air as she savors the looks of amusement and affront on all of their faces. “– and come give me the biggest hug of all time, no party for you.”

They don’t need to be told twice. In no time, they’re all one huge tangle of arms and perfume and birthday presents and excited-nervous-blissful laughter in the middle of the dance floor, Chekov’s face tucked against Uhura’s neck and his arm caught around Sulu’s abdomen, Sulu butting foreheads with Jim over Uhura’s left shoulder and gently palming the curl-infested crown of Chekov’s head, Uhura firmly crushed in the double fold of Jim and Chekov’s arms and chuckling breathlessly into the dip of Jim’s collarbone, McCoy’s chin perched atop Jim’s head and his freakish bear limbs binding all of them together in a gigantic human rubberband of sorts.

“Would it be inappropriate to sing Happy Birthday now?” Jim wonders aloud, grinning widely when Uhura’s arms tighten around his middle and Sulu gives him a look of mock-surprise across the meager two inches of space between their faces, a short gust of minty breath hitting him head-on when he does.
“Oh my God, Len! Jim actually gives a shit about what’s *appropriate* now.”

“M’ pretty sure Aristotle called this moment *peripeteia* twenty-three hundred years ago,” McCoy laughs.

“That’s for *later*, when we cut the cake,” Uhura replies, pointedly ignoring both Sulu and McCoy’s comments in a moment of rare courtesy towards Jim. She raises her head to smile appreciatively at him, peering up past his chin to meet his eyes. “Which, by the way, you and Spock did an absolutely *beautiful* job with.”

“Uh, I’ll go on the record and say that Spock was about ninety-eight percent responsible for how awesome the cake turned out.” They still haven’t all stopped clinging to each other like some kind of weird, oversized covalent molecule. “I was too busy trying to –” Not lick the batter off of his fingers or anything, oh-ho-ho, definitely not *that*, Jim reminds himself with a quick, exceedingly innocuous cough. “– rediscover how physical chemistry works.”

“And admiring his sultry brown eyes,” McCoy supplies helpfully from over Jim’s head. “Don’t forget that.” Jim decides it’s a great time to step back directly onto McCoy’s left foot right about then (because *great*, now he can’t be Spock’s friend without everyone in the whole world reminding him of his undisclosed quasi-crush on him or Spock’s sultry brown eyes, isn’t that just fucking *awesome*).

“Hey, don’t feel embarrassed,” Uhura laughs as McCoy lets out a thundering, ‘*FUCK,*’ and goes stumbling off into the void of the ballroom that isn’t them and their epic, entirely too long group hug. “Spock’s got those perpetual bedroom eyes of his, man, I’d be gazing into them too.”

“When did I *ever* say I gazed into Spock’s eyes?” Jim ask-yells, only half-irritably, at the same moment in which Sulu comments, “I think Uhura is the only thing keeping this conversation from being *way* too gay.” Meanwhile, Chekov has taken to giggling uncontrollably against Uhura’s shoulder and McCoy is off loudly declaring his eternal hatred for his ‘*best fucking friend, James Tiberius Kirk*’ from somewhere behind Jim.

It’s all nothing if not terribly heartwarming (in that *infectious-like-your-very-favorite-disease* way only your best friends can be, that is).

Once they all manage to tear themselves away from each other, Uhura takes Chekov’s hand (who takes Sulu’s, who takes Jim’s, who takes a steadily grumbling McCoy’s) and leads them through the curtain of streamers from whence she came into a much smaller, squatter room – one with white fairy
lights rimming the ceiling and a semicircular drinks bar running along one wall – and then into another even *smaller* room off the side of that one. This one looks more like a lounge than anything else, with couches and armchairs arranged around a coffee table in the center of the room and the lighting low and warm enough to either be really romantic, really cozy, or really sleep-inducing depending on the mood you’re in.

“Just put the presents there for now.” Uhura motions briefly to the coffee table, which is already occupied by one slim giftbox (that is *obviously* housing a piece of jewelry) in shiny silver paper. She lifts a plastic crate full of masks straight from your 16th century masquerade ball (or your local Hobby Lobby, same difference) from behind one of the armchairs to plop it down on the seat and hums, sounding the slightest bit proud, “You guys get first dibs on the masks since you’re early.”

Chekov makes a noise that highly resembles a purr or a chirp of some sort and practically bounces over to the crate (and really, Jim’s earlier comment about him being their own little forest creature becomes startlingly true whenever the kid gets excited about anything) while McCoy goes about making everyone look like shit by propping up his absurdly large gift against the table because it’s literally *too big* to go on top of it and Uhura gives him this look like she might just *kiss* him or something.

“This is going to be the first one I open.” She runs her hands longingly over the festive floral paper covering the monster, watching McCoy with hearts (actual *hearts*) in her eyes. “I can just *feel* how perfect it is through the wrapping.”

“Watch it’s something really tiny and stupid and he just put it in a huge box to get you all hot and bothered.” Jim says, a helpless grin hooking at the corner of his mouth as he watches Chekov slip on a mask with gold-edged cat ears and six wire whiskers protruding from the nose. He just about has a *heart attack* from the adorable when Chekov turns to him, positively *beaming*, and curls his hands beneath his chin in what has to be the most cavity-inducing cat impression ever performed in the history of the universe, *ever*.

“Uh, don’t throw shade just because *your* gift is small.” Uhura retorts, drawing from those endless reserves of cynicism and disapproval for Jim’s entire existence lurking somewhere deep in her soul since now it’s apparently appropriate for her to make Jim’s life three-hundred times harder for him again, her brief quota of generosity suddenly, not very unexpectedly reached. Jim wouldn’t have her any other way.

“Trust me, Uhura, it’s small in size but big in...” – McCoy pauses dramatically to press a hand to the center-left of his chest, and it’s kind of funny how anatomically on point the positioning is – “...*heart.*”
“Yeah, it’s the gayest gift of all time,” Sulu throws in like it actually needs to be said. He deftly grabs Jim and Chekov’s hands as he comes up behind them to dig up a mask for himself, chuckling, “Quick, quick – prayer circle so the room doesn’t go up in flames when you open it.”

Jim makes a show of ever-so dramatically yanking out of Sulu’s grip, rolling his eyes quite athletically and busying himself with grabbing a mask from the crate when Sulu only snickers and musses his (slightly unkempt) hair in reply. “Haven’t you heard, man? Homophobia isn’t trendy anymore.”

“I’m not homophobic,” Sulu argues with a long, pointedly obvious glance in Chekov’s direction – one that promptly has Jim spitting laughing in response to. “I’m just having a field day with your boner for all that is Jewish and male and sits somewhere on the autism spectrum.”

“And is a huge pain in the ass!, wherever the hell he is,” McCoy adds, always quick to lend a hand.

“I’m sure Jim wants him to be a pain in his ass,” Sulu quips. He barely has time to get out of Chekov’s general vicinity before Jim is launching himself at him with the intention to, I don’t know, forcibly shut his mouth by kicking him repeatedly in the face or something. It’s the only way any of them will know they love each other.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Uhura pipes up as McCoy moves to shoulder Jim and Sulu apart, raising her palms in some sort of infinitely pacifying, infinitely authoritative gesture and yet just barely containing her smile when Jim looks her way. She places two delicate hands on her hips. “I don’t want any fighting at my party.”

“It’s funny you said that when your party is basically a testosterone-fest,” Sulu chuckles from behind Chekov, who he is currently using as a human shield (which, you know, is ingeniously seeing as nobody would even consider laying a hand on the kid – especially not Jim).

“At the moment, maybe,” Uhura replies with a brief shrug. “Wait until all my girls get here and we’ll see just how long your testosterone-fest fares.”

“We’ll see how long Jim stays gay for Spock, too, what with all the feminine charms in the air,” McCoy puts in. All he does is give up a heavy, whooping laugh when Jim shoots him a long, vaguely miserable look from where he stands by the masks, tired and drawn and so unbelievably pitiful that it’s actually kind of shocking a surprise thundercloud doesn’t spawn in the space above his head and start raining down on him right then and there.
“I’m going to walk out of this damn party.” Jim turns to Uhura when she makes a soft, nebulously disappointed little noise, lets a heavy sigh and a whisper of a smile escape him when she walks over to enfold him in her arms, squeezing gently around his neck and resting a hand at his nape. “I love you to death, Uhura,” he breathes against her shoulder, “but I’m about to just walk out of this fucking party, I swear to fucking god.”

(And if you would all just take a quick look at Chekov, he actually looks really, really scared that Jim’s about to do just that.)

“When we tried to separate him and blankie so soon,” Sulu hums. “You see this? This is every fucking day.” Jim tries and (remarkably) succeeds at not smiling too much when Uhura gives him a somewhat patronizing look for his trouble, her lips set in a small mockery of a pout.

“Let ‘em hate, sweetie,” she trills with her characteristic, easy perfection and a quick, dizzyingly warm squeeze at the nape of Jim’s neck that does wonders for his already boundless adoration for her and everything about her. “They just do it ‘cause they love you so much.”

“Yeah, we love you, Jim,” Sulu chuckles, smirking softly in that mostly-deadpan way he always seems to operate in. “You should be thankful that we care so much about you that we’re willing to make your life a living hell all the time.”

Before Jim can bark out an irate reply, Uhura is effectively recapturing his attention with her hands tenderly cupping his face and a sharp, suggestive, “Although…” the word trailing off for what could either be emphasis or suspense (or both). She gives him a deeply imploring, innocently curious look that seems suspiciously coupled with the way she’s just holding him like she only ever does Spock, all wide-eyed and sweet and affectionate and too uncompromisingly lovely to be true (to be Uhura) –

“I am interested in these rumors about your little hard-on for Spock,” is what she says, in what has to be her most shining moment of being the Best Worst Friend on the Face of the Earth. Her head gives a little tilt. “Was it the eyes or the voice that got you first?”
And up until this very moment – **eighteen years, five months, and two days** into his pathetic existence – Jim has never before been so consumed with the desire to sucker punch the living _fuck_ out of a woman (and, for the record, he _has_ had the urge before – those women in question being his mother and, as you all may remember, Uhura once before).

“I need a new fucking set of friends, I can’t fucking –” Groaning, _seething_, Jim tears himself away from a wildly giggling Uhura and shoulders past McCoy in the general direction of **out of this room and away from these minor demons** without really thinking about it, just graciously letting his feet carry him off like they have some conscious awareness of the anger-induced stroke he’s about **three and a half seconds** from having. Almost as an afterthought, he throws a quick, “And my hard-on is definitely _not_ little, for your information!” over his shoulder as he goes. A raucous, collective laugh from Uhura, Sulu, and McCoy follows him on out through the doorway.

He’s not really going anywhere, really – this is autonomous, his swift exit from the room, done simply so he doesn’t end up actually _hurting_ any of the horrible, _wonderful_ people back there by carrying out his sudden yearning to bust Uhura’s face up or quite literally ripping Sulu a new one or frightening Chekov by being his own awful angry self, or whatever, and _yeah_ – that’s fucking _new_ for him, deliberately protecting the people he cares about from his own innate shittiness.

(There’s also the fact that he’s starting to feel those telltale signs of anxiety, but to be honest, it’s a lot easier for him to shrug off his sudden departure as him being irritated and conscientious than it is for him to explain to everyone that he kind of has An Issue – one that only McCoy knows about, mind you.)

_Yeah_, he’s a little pissed. If you weren’t able to tell before, it’s a fairly common occurrence that the lot of them try their very darndest to outwit and out-sarcasm and out-aggravate and out-agitate each other at least **140%** of the time. It’s their species’ (the Undergradus Snarkus, to be exact) primary way of showing affection, you know. But – most likely because they’re all on some special kind of high from the sheer thing of it being Uhura’s birthday today – the joking and the playfulness has gotten to the point where it’s cutting and relentless and _difficult_, and – due to the semi-infuriating fact that everyone seems to be latching onto the idea that Jim has, _gasp, a crush_, which, as a young adult in undergraduate school, will for several years be one of the most embarrassing predicaments he could have ever landed himself in, further evidenced by the fact that Chekov’s **sixteen year-old** (and entirely too obvious) infatuation with Sulu is totally adorable while Jim’s (markedly unconfirmed) fixation on Spock is just _laughable_ – a huge portion of that (cutting, relentless, difficult) mockery is getting ever-so conveniently dumped on him. Even McCoy and Sulu and Uhura with all of their startling maturity couldn’t resist chasing after a bone like that (and really, Jim wouldn’t be able to either if he were in their position, mongrel that he is).

But, as we know, it’s _all_ about Jim.

And Jim likes to be in control and on top and sitting pretty. He’s not there right now.
And Jim is (much as it pains him, much as he’d rather take a stroll into midday New York traffic than openly admit) kind of touchy and kind of prideful and really, really crappy about dealing with incessant criticism and ego-bashing, no matter how teasing and good-natured said criticism and ego-bashing may be, given all the time he’s spent with his saint of a stepdad and his dear, beloved brother.

And as much as he told himself in the shower last night that he was fine about all this, and as fine as he really, truly is about all this when Spock is around, it does irk him that he’s into someone the second time this year and all he’s getting is shit for it, again.

And he didn’t even actually tell anyone he liked Spock – is he just not allowed to be a little obviously attached to a person without everyone automatically assuming he wants to hop right into a Disney movie with them? Because that’s kind of what it feels like.

And he is, once again, transparent and foolish and angry and a joke. Just like he’s always been.

That is the thought Jim’s raven of a mind is circling over when he notices what he (and presumably everyone else, save Uhura) missed as he was coming in here earlier – Mister Tall, Dark, and Jewish himself, back facing Jim as he carries out what seems to be his unofficial duty in every party Uhura throws – mixing margaritas and mai tais. Oddly enough, Jim’s anger starts slowly trickling away just at the sight of him.

Actually – it isn’t that odd at all, not when Spock is kind of like an anxiolytic and a stimulant and a simple breath of fresh air all at the same time.

Stealthily, Jim slinks up to the bar and folds himself over it, crossing his arms over the bartop and lightly resting his chin against them. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knows that Spock’s probably more than aware of his presence, what with his freakishly awesome, almost catlike sense of hearing and spatial awareness, but that doesn’t stop him from taking his time to just watch him like it totally isn’t creepy in the slightest to gawk at your best friend with boundary issues while he salts the rim of a margarita glass or anything. It’s stress-relieving, you know, to indulge in a little harmless ogling at a guy you’re pretty sure is asexual at this point.

But, because Spock is a lot more fun when he’s facing Jim and giving him eyes like he’s not sure whether or not he’s tantamount to a Nobel Peace Prize laureate in greatness or just about the most annoying, puzzling organism on Earth (not to mention the fact that Al Green is singing at Jim from somewhere around or beyond the ceiling, crooning, ‘let’s stay together,’ at him like he knows exactly what he’s up to and what kind of thoughts are sailing through his head at the moment), Jim decorates his face with his customary smirk and purrs, “Hey, bartender.” Because now it’s apparently
Something weird happens, then – another delayed realization on Jim’s part as he watches Spock jump a little (so he didn’t know he was there) before the muscles in his back forcefully ease and relax, his shoulders inching down from their previously tense, bunched position that Jim honestly did not catch at all until right the fuck now, and before he can really think to be concerned or confused, Spock is turning to him with his characteristic expression of serenity and impassivity, silver-white Venetian mask hiding the upper half of his face (which makes it hilariously, impossibly more difficult to discern any emotion that might be playing out over his features).

“Hello, James,” he says. Jim decides he’s being playful again.

“Oh, you know me?” He tilts his head ever so slightly to the side in an attempt to be coy, but is probably just baffling and annoying to Spock (which, of course, also works). “I don’t think we’ve met.”

Spock’s eyes might (no, definitely) narrow a little through the dark eye-holes in his mask, lips twitching in what? Irritation? Amusement? A combination of the two that Jim seems incredibly adept at teasing out of him? The answer isn’t entirely clear when Spock replies, tone a little more android-esque than Jim is comfortable with, “I am quite certain you are aware of my identity.”

And I mean, it goes without saying that Jim has gotten more than used to Spock’s woodenness, that he actually likes it more than he initially thought he would. But it’s kind of important to note that over the past month or so, Spock has picked up all sorts of not-inflections just from being around other normal human beings as much as he has been – not-inflections that are currently nowhere to be heard in his voice. And that’s kind of troubling.

“Come on, Spock, play with me,” Jim half-pleads, straightening up and – without thinking – reaching over to lift Spock’s mask off of his eyes and onto his forehead. Fortunately, Spock doesn’t flinch away like Jim feared he would, and that small victory has Jim grinning and gasping, “Ah! – I thought that was you.”

Spock blinks at him, the muscles of his face stilling beneath Jim’s fingertips. “Your sense of humor escapes me,” he says, like he’s admitting some grave shortcoming.

“That’s cool,” Jim soothes with a shrug. “I’ll still try to make you laugh.” He lets Spock take his wrists and pull his hands away from his face without anything but a beat of understanding, of sympathy – he knows Spock isn’t a fan of being touched (but it’s not like that’s going to stop him from doing it in the future).
Spock’s eyebrow twitches as he turns back to his drinks, says, “I do not laugh.” The ‘you know this, you uncultured cretin,’ goes unspoken, but not unheard.

“Oh, one day you will,” Jim promises, resuming his previous position of hanging over the bar so he can ever-so conveniently stare at Spock’s ass and the crazily attractive V of fabric in the back of his shirt where it tucks into his pants. “If it’s the day hell freezes over, you’ll laugh.”

A momentary, involuntarily forgettable sort of idea flits through Jim’s mind the second after he says that: will he and Spock actually be friends long enough for Jim to see him laugh, to make him laugh? It’s a perfect thought, really, perfect enough for Jim to almost get really stuck on it, but with the way friendships are and how great he’s been at them in the past (i.e.: not great at all) and this just his first year in college and time such a tricky thing, well – maybe it’d be better if questions like that went unasked.

The thought is gone just as quickly as it came when Spock notes, “You do not believe in hell.” Jim doesn’t know whether or not to roll his eyes or smile, so he tries to do both at the same time (and ends up looking like a complete moron in the process, not that anyone’s there to see it).

“Colloquialism number thirty-two, Spock: ‘when hell freezes over,’ meaning ‘with little-to-no chance of ever happening’,” Jim clarifies without heat. “See also: ‘when pigs fly’, ‘with a snowball’s chance in hell’, ‘when monkeys fly out of my –”

“Ho ye! Candygram!” comes bellowing from the front at that exact moment, and Jim barely has time to stand up straight and turn around before Uhura is – in a feat most would consider a work of magic or witchcraft – dashing out of the lounge and into the ballroom on six-inch pumps and squealing, “Scotty!”, her arms already spread to wrap him up in a hug before she’s even out of the room. Jim has to blink a few times to make sure he didn’t imagine it all.

McCoy’s head appears in the lounge doorway, then, his eyes immediately landing on Jim, and Jim isn’t entirely sure whether the man is actually as irritated as he looks or he’s having one of his facial spasms where his expression just gets stuck looking like he smells something rotten. Each scenario is equally likely. “Good to see you didn’t actually run off like a baby,” he says.

It’s only because of Jim’s brief, meditative session of unabashed ass-ogling that his vision doesn’t go red at the corners. “So nice to hear you have so much hope for me, dear friend.”

Several biting comments, a penetrating look from Spock, some drunken affection from Scotty
(because yes, he’s only just walked through the door and his blood alcohol level is already getting up there – almost like intoxication via osmosis, if we ignored the fact that Scott is the literal definition of a casual drinker), and three, seven, twenty people later and the party is in full swing, the music bumping at a floor-throbbing volume, the table in the back stockpiled with gifts of every color, shape, and size, and the air thick with damp, human breath and lots of ‘Oh my god, hey!’s and ‘Nice to meet you’ and ‘So you’re that guy’.

Those in attendance include Uhura’s roommates –

- We all remember Gaila, don’t we? Jim (and his hands) certainly does, and it doesn’t take long for the two of them to pick up right where they left off at Uhura’s last party, declare themselves each other’s favorite person by way of their both being extremely charming and extremely beautiful and extremely in the mood to party, and take to shamelessly hanging off of each other – arms around hips and shoulders and midsections, fingers locked around wrists and waistbands and other fingers, mouths undoubtedly on each other at least 45% of the time (which is kind of weird but also really fucking awesome, considering that their obscenely transparent relationship primarily – but not wholly – consists on how much fun they can possibly have with each other and that they’ve maybe only interacted with one another twice before now, which, wow – Jim doesn’t think it’s even legal to be this lucky or this pleased).
- It turns out that Uhura also happens to room with the lovely Christine Chapel – a young woman who, for the most part, Jim, Sulu, and Chekov primarily know as a startlingly beautiful ‘Chris’ (which is always uttered in a voice that never fails to make it ever so blatantly obvious how smitten McCoy is with her) whose favorite color is periwinkle blue and who apparently has a lot of personal problems, who dreams of being a nurse and has a bad habit of neglecting herself (so much that McCoy has taken off in the middle of the night to check on her more than once in the past two months), who has been one of McCoy’s closest friends for the past year and who Jim will occasionally wave at and catch tiny glimpses of when she and Bones are having hours-long conversations with lots of shoulder-to-shoulder action out in the hallway or on the fire escape, but never in the apartment – ‘I can’t have her scarin’ off or abandonin’ me because Jim is a total abomination and Chekov is too adorable to resist,’ is what McCoy has said on the matter.
- Then there is a Janice Rand, who quickly distinguishes herself by joining the impossible ring of frivolity and sarcasm everyone seems locked in all time with a vengeance, easily holding her own in a playful argument with Sulu (who is, as we all know, the Grand Duke of Wit) and throwing back drinks with Scotty without a semblance of discontent, and hey – if she seems a little too fascinated and appalled by the who’s, when’s, and how’s of the many fights and squabbles Jim has gotten into this semester (which total up to well over twenty-five at this point), that’s a-okay with Jim, who is always happy to tell stories about his scars and bruises and has been more than used to that particular line of questioning and the according reactions since he was just a seventh grader with a perpetual black eye and a massive chip on his shoulder.

– and Uhura’s not-roommates (otherwise known as friends, acquaintances, the occasional complete stranger), some of the most notable of which being –
Tall, dark, and (woah, woah, woah) freakishly handsome (not to mention smart, and charming, and absolutely irresistible to the majority of the females present) Jabilo M’Benga, who arrives on Chapel’s arm and wastes no time in locating McCoy and announcing just how unfathomably appalled and disgusted he is at the ‘three-thousand years it’s been since he’s seen his white ass’. It quickly becomes apparent that not only is he just kidding, but he’s actually McCoy’s former roommate and best friend that Jim, Sulu, and Chekov never knew about before tonight – a fact that leaves Jim smarting and simpering and suddenly sort of-kind of jealous in that totally accidental, entirely selfish, six-feet deep sort of way that he only makes apparent by becoming at least five times more of an annoying prick to McCoy, and hey, what do you know? Apparently Spock knows the guy, too (cue a little surprise heartburn on Jim’s part).

Carol Marcus from Uhura’s calculus class and – to perhaps the shock of everyone present (most of all Jim) – Jim’s honest-to-god childhood. The last time Jim saw her, Carol Marcus was shipping off to the United Kingdom after spending five years living in Riverside with her grandmother while her father – in the apt words of a precocious seven year-old with the most peculiar accent Jim had ever heard up until that point – was ‘sodding off all over Europe and Asia’ on business that was apparently more important than raising his own daughter (a circumstance Jim can rather painfully empathize with, not that he actually cares to explain that tonight). A good chunk of the party is spent catching up and what ifing and taking stock of all the things that changed and all the things that didn’t – they both grew out of their awkward prepubescent lankiness really, really well and their respective accents are both a bit thicker, but Jim’s eyes are just as ‘stupidly pretty’ as Carol remembers them and Carol’s mannerisms are just the same – the toothy smiles and the tilts of her head and the identical sway of her hips when she walks.

Charlene Masters and Tonia Barrows from an Introduction to Sociology course that sounds a whole lot more like Starfleet University’s Biweekly Hour of Gossip after the two of them make it outstandingly clear that they know everything about everyone at the party, and then some, and spend the majority of the next three hours trading meaningful glances and making probing, slightly one-sided conversation with everyone (which garners a several varying and hilarious reactions from everyone – most notably frank, entirely too naïve honesty from Chekov, an odd combination of irritation and amusement from McCoy, borderline hysteria and total bullshit from Jim, and what might be classified as outright hostility from Spock).

Also from Introduction to Sociology is Elizabeth Dehner, who has the strange and magical ability to make the temperature of a room drop about fifteen degrees and leave everyone within a three foot radius of her feeling like specimens under some kind of freaky psychoanalytic microscope with her tendency to suspend almost all social niceties in favor of alluding to every ulterior motive of every partygoer she comes across. It doesn’t take long for her to discern that McCoy’s intentions towards Chapel aren’t exactly platonic, or that Chekov is kind of wild about Sulu, or that Spock actually hates 98% of everything about this party but he’s here because he loves the girl it’s for. Just as well, Jim only spends about five minutes in her presence before he’s got the whole no eye contact or direct acknowledgement of her existence whatsoever thing down pat.

Thankfully, Dehner’s icy, Freudian assault on Uhura’s guest list is tempered a little (a lot) by her plus-one, who also happens to be her boyfriend, who also happens to share several classes with Jim, Sulu, and Chekov and whose GPA and unabashed snark, charm, and occasional jackassery rivals Jim’s in a way that borders on amusing and freaky or just plain uncomfortable, depending on what day of the week it is. Whereas Dehner sort of floats through the party like a human iceberg of sorts, Gary Mitchell gives off the impression that he’s been everyone’s best friend for at least five years and has the uncanny ability to simultaneously make aimless conversation with, disorient, and dazzle the hell out of anything
with a pulse. That **fifteen degree** drop in temperature? Nothing on the uncanny, almost drugging warmth Gary seems to radiate.

- And so on and so forth.

As for our lovely main **seven**?

- Uhura spends most of the party being **nineteen** and fabulous and generally hitting her stride and doing what she does best – connecting with people. She floats from guest to guest and group to group on a cloud of birthday bliss, shaking hands and kissing babes, snapping selfies and collecting good wishes, taking turns dancing her ass off to Beyoncé and Lorde and Blondie with anyone brave enough to keep pace with her and eagerly chatting up those who aren’t. It’s safe to say that she positively **glows** through the room the whole night through.

- McCoy, by the way, is completely **lost** to just about everyone but Chapel and M’Benga (mainly Chapel) for around **96%** of the night, the **three** of them moving through party like a singular unit that’s occasionally integrated by Jim, Gaila, Sulu, or Chekov and only split in the event that **one** of them breaks off to grab a drink or take a quick bathroom break. Jim might catch McCoy and Chapel holding hands a **couple** of times throughout the evening.

- Meanwhile, Scotty hosts story time at the bar, passing the time alternating between recounting the wild and varied tales of his last **three years** of college, sharing gossip (read: bullshit) about his current and past professors, and playing an aggressive game of fizz buzz with anyone who happens to be in his immediate vicinity at the moment.

- Spock **also** keeps to the bar, but whereas Scotty takes full advantage of all the attention centered around that area of the dance hall, Mr. Grayson here valiantly deflects as many attempts at conversation, probing questions about his grades, his schedule, and his sex life, and otherwise unwelcome social contact as he possibly can by wordlessly mixing drinks, assaulting everyone with his eyebrows, and occupying himself with… whatever the hell it is he’s doing on his phone.

- Sulu, Chekov, Jim, and Gaila institute a **four-hour** polygamous marriage and remain attached at the hip for most of the party, bouncing between the bar – where Sulu keeps Chekov’s hands off any and all whiskey (although, curiously, vodka and rum are fair game), and Jim and Gaila team up to play a little game called **Let’s Shamelessly Flirt With Spock and See How Hard It Is to Make Him Blush** (which, by the way, it’s impossible) – the dance floor – where Gaila and Sulu waste no time in making everyone feel like deep-fried shit with their superior gyrating skills and Jim and Chekov just sort of not-so-secretly **lust** after them and try to keep up – and the food table – where, of course, they indulge in both the finger food and the company and conversation such finger food brings them.

“I just don’t get it,” Gaila muses from where she’s reclining in her chair, fingers idly fooling with Jim’s as they rest in her lap. Overhead, Lana Del Rey croons out her usual bumping ode to cocaine and sugar daddies. Cocaine-encrusted sugar daddies. Cocaine daddies. **Yeah.** “Are you and Nyota like, witches or unicorns or something?”

“Unicorns that can magically make Spock’s hard ass fall in love with them, you mean?” Sulu pipes in with a touch of reluctance, having been forced to momentarily surface from his mojito. He gives both it and Jim a quizzical look through the eyeholes of his mask, adding, “And are you his new
drink-mixing muse? Or has he always just been…” – he pauses to give his cocktail another good, long sip – “Fucking ace.”

“We made a cake together yesterday, did I mention that?” Jim knows he has. Twice. “Taste that –” He lifts the square of red velvet to Gaila’s mouth and watches her sink her teeth into it and lick the crumbs from her coppery, glossy lips with something like delight, smirking when he asks, “Does that taste like me?”

Gaila hums thoughtfully. “If you taste like rich, beautiful, sweet, sweet heaven topped with angel jizz and a generous side of awesome – yeah.” Without warning, she sweeps forward and drags a solid lick against the exposed skin of Jim’s face, leaning back just a bit to peer somewhat curiously at him. “Yeah,” she decides. “Not really.”

“I need you in my life,” Jim moans gleefully as Sulu makes a smooth attempt at not choking on his drink across from him, winding an arm around Gaila’s thighs where they lay atop his and tugging her snug against him when she brushes her lips against his cheek. “Why doesn’t Uhura ever bring you around?”

“Probably because she’s afraid I would sleep with all of you and ruin your big gay friendship,” Gaila replies with her usual, impossibly endearing cheerful sort of bluntness, carefully carding the fingers of one hand through Jim’s disheveled hair and carefully balancing her mai-tai over her knee with the other. “She gave me the impression that Spock is the jealous type, which – judging by his personality – he probably is.”

“Oh my god, he would be,” Jim woefully agrees, oddly both thrilled and vaguely distressed by this revelation.

“You say that like you could actually sleep with him, though.” Sulu winces the instant the words are out of him, throwing an apologetic glance at Gaila (who doesn’t look at all insulted, honestly). “No offense, I mean. It’s just that you’d think he would have already, uh… taken you up on your offer if he was interested.” A beat. “I would have.”

“Hey, back off, pal,” Jim growls only half seriously, his arms tightening protectively around Gaila. “She’s mine.”

“Uh, I distinctly recall this being a polyamorous relationship,” Sulu backfires with the barest hint of a smirk.
“You don’t have to fight over me, guys,” Gaila soothes, deliberately working her fingers into Jim’s scalp and eliciting something that sounds a whole lot like a legit purr from him. She gives both of them a bright, innocuous smile. “I’d gladly sleep with both of you, no problem.”

And somehow, that’s simultaneously the sweetest and most shamelessly erotic thing anyone’s ever said to Jim. Operation Suppress Surprise Boner begins in five, four, three, two…

“Yeah, Uhura’s right,” Sulu laughs good-naturedly, draining his drink in a matter of seconds and thumbing at the leftover moisture on his lips. “You’d have us at each other’s throats in no time.”

“Seriously, though, Jim.” Gaila’s eyes are unflinching and earnest on Jim’s even from behind the obnoxious green-and-gold glitter of her mask when she says, redirecting the conversation in a way Jim really sort of hoped she wouldn’t (back to Spock and the dastardly charms he and Uhura have apparently cast over him, that is), “I really don’t get it. You and Nyota aren’t even alike.”

“Sure they are,” Sulu argues with a peculiar air of urgency. “They’re smart, they’re bitchy, crazy about loud rap music. They both have a thing for Jewish guys…”

“And here I was thinking you’d be nice and say something like ‘they’re hot’.” Jim shakes his head mournfully, lays it in the nook of Gaila’s neck and shoulder, where he can silently surrender and inhale her fruity shampoo and pretend Sulu isn’t every bit correct on all accounts (like Sulu isn’t always right, perfect angelic smug bastard he is).


“So Spock likes smart, bitchy, hot people that are into him?” Gaila is asking before he can say anything shocked and nonsensical, however. She purses her lips, almost pouting. “I’m all of those things and he’s never looked at me like he looks at you two.”

Jim refrains from pointing out the fact that Spock doesn’t actually want to sleep with Uhura. He also refrains from mentioning that Spock probably doesn’t want to sleep with him either. He also refrains from voicing his opinion that Spock might just be asexual or celibate or some kind of Buddhist monk, considering his stubbornly vacant track record with Starfleet’s student body. There’s a lot of refraining going on here.

“Unicorns are the only feasible explanation,” Sulu muses after a short stretch of silence. “Yep – they have to be unicorns.”
Several calm, undisturbed moments pass before – in his first time speaking since this absurd discussion began – Chekov casually notes, “Spock vould not like unicorns because zhey are,” – he pauses to emulate Spock’s deep, toneless baritone (which is, by the way, fucking hysterical when it’s colored by his thick Russian accent) – “‘illogical’.”

And maybe it’s all the drinking they’ve been doing or the ridiculous conversation or the slightly surreal thing this night has turned out to be, and maybe it’s the fact that Chekov actually doesn’t make fun of anyone ever or that he’ll forever be the most outstandingly adorable thing on the face of the planet, and maybe it’s any combination of these things or none of them at all, but for whatever reason, that has Jim, Sulu, and Gaila all howling with laughter and attracting the attention of several partygoers hovering around the food table and their lopsided circle of chairs.

“It couldn’t have been that funny,” someone in a feathered blue-and-gold mask says from above them. Macaw mask, green-and-black plaid shirt, vaguely uppity tone – it (surprisingly) doesn’t take Jim’s alcohol-addled brain to put two and two together and identify the stranger as none other than Gary.

“Fuck you,” Gaila crows in a tone that suggests anything but legitimate irritation – something that has a wide, amused grin unfurling across Gary’s face. “We’re drunk and he’s adorable.”

“I’m not drunk,” Jim protests, pouting, at the exact moment that Gary asks, “What’d he say?”, glancing between Gaila and Chekov with an air akin to that of a cat caught between two choices of prey. It’s more interesting than it is disconcerting, honestly.

Jumping a bit at the sudden, newfound attention (and spilling some of his blue lagoon into his lap when he does, poor thing), Chekov straightens up and clears his voice, a slight flush just barely apparent on his cheeks in the low magenta light. “I said, Spo–”

“Hey, now,” Sulu cuts in before the teen can say any further, his hand raised in the universal gesture for ‘wait a damn minute’. “Let’s not disparage our friends in front of strangers.”

A mock-scandalized gasp escapes Gary, then, his eyes twinkling with both mischief and pseudo-horror. “‘Strangers’?” he echoes, cocking a hip against the food table and fixing Sulu with a needling look. “I had just convinced myself that we were at least acquaintances, you know, after the fifty some class periods we’ve spent together. Colleagues, maybe. Associates.”

“This is just his way of determining whether or not you’re worthy of membership in the inner
sanctum,” Jim says, grinning when Sulu aims a half-hearted punch at his bicep. “Phase one – he repeatedly undermines your morale just so you want to get in even more. It’s like dating.”

“Man, I like your statuses on Facebook,” Gary whinges. “You’re in my Tumblr crushes. This is how you repay me?”

“Nobody told me you had a Tumblr,” Gaila pipes, wagging an accusing finger in Sulu’s face.

“Nobody told me you had a Tumblr,” Sulu counters.

“Since when is Sulu in your Tumblr crushes?” Jim asks Gary around Gaila’s thick, curly mane of hair. He tries (rather unsuccessfully) not to start spluttering like an idiot when some of it gets in his mouth.

“Since his blog was fucking hilarious; i.e.: always,” Gary replies, deadpan. Then he smirks. “Don’t worry, though.” – a wink – “You’re always my favorite.”

“Proof, proof, proof,” Jim demands, making grabby hands in the general direction of Gary’s pockets (where his phone presumably is). “I need hard evidence so my ego doesn’t up and die right here and now.”

Thus, the next seven minutes or so are spent bending around each other and over one another’s smartphones – Jim loudly declaring his satisfaction with the whopping 18% of Gary’s Tumblr love he’s getting and verbally wondering, “How fucking weird is it that we have the same phone case?”; Sulu and Gaila exchanging urls, the former commenting, “Nice boobs,” after several moments of browsing and laughing wetly when Jim replies, “I’d know.”; Gary glancing over at Chekov once every thirty seconds or so to ask him questions like, “How old are you?” and “Where are you from?” and “Are you even allowed to drink?” and “Can you say ‘take me to pleasuretown’ in Russian?”

Their little powwow comes to a premature end, however, when a distinctive Scottish accent goes hollering over the cacophony, “E’rybody git yer arses t’ the back, stat!” (and yes, just in case you were wondering, Scotty’s accent does get exponentially thicker the higher his blood alcohol level rises), and before Jim knows it, Gaila is dragging him up and out of his chair with the strength of someone about twice her size and 97% of the partygoers are psychotically chanting, ‘PRESENTS, PRESENTS, PRESENTS’ in an attempt to summon the Great God of Birthday Gifts on their way to the lounge, Uhura at their helm and currently acting as the high priestess of this operation.
“Can we include Gary in our group marriage?!?” Gaila yells over the din and directly into Jim’s ear, slinging her arm about his shoulders when he hooks his around her waist. Elizabeth conveniently decides to make an appearance right about then.

“I wouldn’t say so,” she half-snaps from where she suddenly appears at Gary’s right, somehow radiating both irritation and frostiness in tandem. Gary shoots Gaila a quick, fleeting look of ‘whoops’ and ‘too bad’ and ‘your loss’, one she responds to – in a moment of either extreme bravery or borderline insanity – with a reassuring pat (read: stroke) on his jaw.

They’re all cramming themselves into the slightly too-small lounge before any claws can come out, though, everyone scrambling for seats around the table or wedging themselves into the tight spaces around it. Uhura, of course, is throned at the head of the gift table.

“Where’s Spock?” she asks, eyes scanning the throng of partygoers for his dark form as she carefully unravels her bun to let her hair trail down her back and over her shoulders. “I need Spock and – oh!, there you are…” – she beckons him closer with an impossibly graceful wave of her arm, gently pats the vacant seat next to her – “And Gaila, where’s Gaila?” A vaguely devilish grin graces her features when her eyes land on M’Benga as he, McCoy, and Chapel arrange themselves on an armchair across from her; she levels a commanding finger at him. “You need to keep your fine ass in my direct line of sight at all times, you hear?”

M’Benga lets out a bashful sort of laugh, giving Uhura an obedient little tip of the head and replying, “Yes, ma’am.” Once again, Uhura proves to everyone that she is forever and ever the queen of everything.

Meanwhile, Jim is lifting a giggling Gaila over the legs and feet of people blocking her path to the birthday girl, depositing her in the seat on Uhura’s other side before climbing on over there himself and swinging her into his lap. Uhura gives him a narrow look.

“I don’t recall requesting Gaila with a side of Kirk,” she says.

“Oh, you love him,” Gaila retorts, purring happily at the kiss Jim plants on her jaw in reward. “He has a nice lap, you know. Very comfy and warm.”

“In that case, remind me never to give it a test drive,” Uhura chuckles, and before Jim can realize he’s supposed to be at least a little offended, everyone gets really noisy really fast and Scott is pushing McCoy’s hilariously huge present Uhura’s way and Jim is already too happy to get seriously mad, too happy with Uhura’s smile and the beautiful igneous light in her eyes and Gaila all perfect and plush and really fucking great-smelling in his arms and the sight of McCoy so obviously (for
once) pleased to be borderline cuddling (cuddling, McCoy’s perpetually grumpy, crab-infested ass cuddling!) with Chapel and Sulu and Chekov a familiar, stupidly, ridiculously pleasing presence at his right and the warmth of a couple of daiquiris making his blood buzz pleasantly, and, and –

Tonight he’s in the Empire State and somehow, that’s even more glorious than it was the night he got here, more glorious than it was the night he and McCoy blasted Bruce Springsteen up in their room loud and long enough for 87% of the people occupying their dorm to declare their undying hatred of them for a week, more glorious than it has been all the nights he’s worn out his welcome at Spock’s apartment and watched history documentaries with him over beer he can’t even afford and Jewish food he can’t even pronounce half the time (“Tee-glah? Tay-glah?” “Teiglach.” “That’s what I said.”), more glorious than it has been the nights he and Scott have watched The X-Files in the older man’s dorm and Scotty has drank him under a table until he’s seriously channeling Lazarus the next day trying to drag his zombified ass to class, more glorious than it was the night he and Chekov almost broke each other’s legs learning to figure skate on the kitchen floor and Sulu drove them to the nearest corner store to buy them popsicles for their trouble, and Chekov laughed and laughed and laughed so beautifully and breathlessly when Jim let him climb onto his back and ride him around the parking lot like a packhorse while Sulu watched from the hood of his car and smiled softly around the acid green of his ice pop, and goddamnmit – as much as it’s been said before, Jim has six best friends now and he’s counting off more as we speak, and he honestly has no idea how he got here, really, not when three short months ago he was getting lost in endless, silent Iowan fields and spending nights counting the stars in the sky and the minutes he passed drunk and the bruises he sported and every 2,394th point he scored on the SAT (and not the small town of people he surprised himself giving a shit about, destination: insignificant, population: him), and there was never traffic in Riverside like there is here, there were never chic, swanky lounges, there weren’t the wonderful distractions and the up-to-date textbooks and the availability of shopping malls and the honest to god expressways, and there certainly weren’t accents like McCoy’s or Chekov’s or Scotty’s, weren’t beautiful-mysterious-fascinating men like Spock or beautiful-magnificent-brilliant women like Uhura, and there weren’t the silly and the sad life stories, wasn’t spending long nights doing homework and writing essays, wasn’t actually being challenged by his education, wasn’t wanting to know anyone else or thinking anyone else better than himself, and there wasn’t having anxiety attacks with someone actually there to breathe with him, too (“S’okay, Jim – in and out, in and out,” in McCoy’s quiet drawl), there wasn’t wanting so badly to penetrate alabaster walls and erode ancient riverbeds and etch smiles onto marble faces, there wasn’t the possibility of people actually liking him, and there wasn’t getting beat up at bad parties or having a blast at great ones, there weren’t birthdays without guilt, there wasn’t this.

And, you know, it might be the daiquiris or the light or the conveniently semi-sappy music playing (still from God knows where) or just the intoxicating smell of Gaila, but Jim is actually this fucking happy right now and he very well may drown in it all. And that’s not so bad.

“How much fucking tape did you put on this monster?” Uhura is giggling – giggling like she only ever does when she’s far too elated to care – as she gingerly claws with shiny, fake nails at the ugly fluorescent pink wrapping McCoy’s gift is trapped in. Spock’s hand darts into Jim’s admittedly limited view from where he’s peering over Gaila’s shoulder to help Uhura peel away at the packaging while everyone else laughs (a little evilly, in Jim’s humble opinion) at their plight.
“I was a lil’ distracted last night,” McCoy chuckles, throwing a glance that looks suspiciously meaningful in the general direction of Jim and Sulu. “Jim was tellin’ me… a cute story.”

It *would* be like McCoy to be a dick when he’s getting high off of his not-girlfriend’s mere *presence* and he’s had slightly too much to drink. Or just when he’s, you know, *breathing*.

“*Oooh*, do tell,” Uhura trills, a little giddy around the eyes, as Spock relieves her of the duty of excavating McCoy’s present. An encouraging (*bossy*) elbow digs briefly into Jim’s side. “I like stories.” She gently *boops* Gaila on the nose, grinning when she laughs in response. “I like cute things.”

There are about *forty* eyes that are very loudly on Jim at the moment and Spock is like a *foot and a half* away from him. Plus Uhura is a (lovely, brilliant, amazing) relentless asshole. Plus he didn’t actually *tell* McCoy *anything*. That would be a *no*. “*Eh*, I think I’ll pass,” he says, blithe and easy.

“Was it inappropriate? Was it unfit for a lady’s ears?” Gary asks in the out of fucking *nowhere* way he always seems to operate in, and uh, yeah, again – a great resounding ‘*no*’.

“That’s sexist,” Elizabeth quickly retorts, no eyelash-batting, no beats missed, nothing but straight-backed honesty from where she not-quite rests in the curve of Gary’s arm. Jim surprises himself with the sudden *love* he feels for her and her icy existence (not to mention the weird churn of *déjà vu* in his gut – “I’m starting to feel a little like your girlfriend.” “That’s misogynistic, *James*.”).

“Oh, I think I’ll pass.” Gary replies, somehow jamming a lot more remorse and genuine *apology* in that dumb little ‘*oops*’ than Jim has ever in… pretty much anything.

All attention in the room goes back to Uhura, however, when this high, beatific noise starts singing out of her, something more like a melodious *yell* than a shriek or a keen. An audible *gasp* can be heard from several partygoers when Uhura pulls her gift from Spock’s grasp – a breathtaking framed print of pink-and-purple art deco people erecting sharp, towering structures in the shadow of an imposing Egyptian sphinx, something Jim vaguely remembers McCoy mentioning the Harlem Renaissance while talking about several days ago. A brief beat of silence passes, and then –

“I… how did…” Uhura’s words die momentarily in her throat, a helpless smile overtaking her features in their wake. Her voice is half an octave deeper when she settles for, “I can’t believe you did this,” raising her eyes from the print to where McCoy is sitting across from her and miraculously managing to sound both oddly heartbroken and… *ecstatic*, almost. Awed.
And to be honest, Jim will never fully understand Uhura’s reaction – he can’t, just isn’t equipped to, hasn’t lived her nineteen years and seen the things she’s seen and felt the things she’s felt and worn the skin she’s worn, and he doesn’t have the same relationship with McCoy she has and he doesn’t have the same relationship with her McCoy has, and he doesn’t even know how Uhura is about her relationships, really, and they are so alike but they are still so different, and he’ll never be in Uhura’s life quite the way she is. But there’s no real wanting for understanding or anything but simple pride – both in her and in McCoy – when Jim can see that Uhura’s eyes have gone a little shiny and he can practically hear her heart thudding with feeling in her chest, and when McCoy looks really, really at peace with the world – not like he’s thirty seconds from ripping his hair out or has about a million things on his mind or really just wants to get some sleep or is sated with alcohol, only chill because he’s slightly intoxicated, buzzed and therefore right as rain for the time being – he looks like he gets Uhura’s reaction and he’s glad it is what it is and the rest of the night could come to pass any way it wishes and he’d be okay with it.

“I certainly hope ‘this’ was the right thing,” McCoy says, warm and a little bashful in that hilariously Southern way he has, and Uhura is letting out another joyful little noise and a laugh like she can’t help herself, delicately thumbing at some of the excess moisture pooling at the corners of her eyes in a way that deliberately avoids her eyeliner.

“Oh, but it’s so right it hurts,” she replies, pressing a palm to her heart, and then she smiles with all her teeth and it’s as if everyone in the room has been temporarily incapacitated by the sheer beauty of her. Her open, elated expression gives way to something impish and teasing when she sweeps her gaze across the partygoers, quips, “Good luck beating that, everybody.”

It’s not like all the other presents suck, though – Uhura keeps on beaming and oohing and ahhing and even laughing at the steady procession of gifts she rips into: a set of crystal wine glasses from Scott (“So y’ don’ haveta keep buyin’ tha’ plastic shite.”), several pairs of dangly earrings from Rand, a dodecahedral terrarium from Sulu, a couple of shiny books with pretty covers from Chapel. She’s particularly thrilled by the Quelf game from Charlene and Tonia and the pair of extremely tall, extremely sexy stilettos Gaila bestows upon her with a loud, wet-sounding kiss on the cheek – and just, let it be known to all that Gaila seems to kiss everyone she’s even only marginally fond of, and that makes her more than just fun to Jim (it makes her wonderful) –

“Oh, please, please, please don’t tell me this is what I think it is,” Uhura half-whines, not very seriously, as she picks at the wrapping covering Jim’s gift, a smile semi-permanently engraved in her face at this point. “This feels like vinyl. Is this vinyl?” One audible rip later, and she’s got her answer – her hand shooting up to present, “A real, live mixtape, ladies and gentlemen!”

“What did I tell you?” Sulu pipes in on Jim’s right, just as cheeky as can be. “Gay as hell.”
Jim indulges himself in an enthusiastic *shove* to Sulu’s shoulder as Uhura eagerly scans the tracklist taped to the back of the vinyl case, giggling wildly when she very loudly observes, “Oh my *god*, is that Phil Collins?”

“Phil Collins is’a Grammy-Awar’ winnin’ artist,” Scotty comments helpfully, giving Jim an… indiscernible wink from across the table. (Is it moral support? Is it drunken flirtation? We just don’t know.)

“Billy Joel!” Uhura squeals instead of replying, vigorously shaking the mixtape in Jim’s face like *no*, he hasn’t seen it before at all and just wouldn’t be able to fathom the meaning of *Billy Joel!* unless he was half a centimeter from getting slapped in the eyes with a goddamn CD. “Soggy, pasty white *Billy Joel!*”

“Billy Joel won some Grammies, too, hon,” McCoy supplies, and really, Jim might groan a little at his friends’ attempts at… what? Sticking up for his shitty, inexpensive gift? He’d honestly rather everyone have a good laugh over it and then forget all about it in the plethora of other *much greater* presents that Uhura’s already opened and has yet to open, *two* of them lying side-by-side on the table practically glowing with superiority over his *zero*-dollar mixtape. At least he had a thought, and at least it kind of-sort of counts.

“That is a *Hall and Oates* song right next to *T.I.*!” Uhura marvels with a grin, grabbing briefly at Jim’s shoulder and shaking him with surprising force in her excitement. Her expression is tickled and amused with her impossibly bright brand of *glee* when she adds, “I’m not a psych student or anything, but I think you are *majorly* projecting with this CD, Kirk…”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Jim retorts without much heat. He makes a valiant attempt to ignore the *insanely* infuriating expression of intrigue that is so suddenly on Elizabeth’s – excuse me, *Freud 2.0*’s – face and the way *99%* of the party guests instinctively huddle closer to Uhura in hopes of suddenly gaining the ability to bend their vision all the way around to inspect his dumb fucking mixtape’s tracklist (which, for the record, sounds fucking *jammin’* at *9:30* on a *Monday* night, thanks very much).

“This is so…” Uhura laughs for the *nth* time that night, the sound breathless and well-worn, absently rubbing her thumb across the back of the vinyl case and then the front when she turns it over. To Jim’s surprise, she finishes the sentence with a firm, decisive, “*Good.*” She turns to him, then, looks him right in his face and smiles at him like she’s never done before, like this might actually be the *first* time she’s seeing him even though she’s been using the same eyes on him for the past *two* *months* or so, and those eyes are a little wet again, so open and warm and that same heartbroken-happy they were earlier when she says, “Nobody’s ever made a mixtape for me before.”
That’s the moment when Jim gets her reaction to McCoy’s present just a bit more, when he thinks about the fact that Uhura has always been a stunner and she’s obviously long been on top of her shit when it comes to all the varied and assorted people that will fall for her without knowing a thing about who she is or what she likes or what she wants to be and why, and shit, son – Jim knows all of that about her. There’s a lot he doesn’t know yet at this point – most notably, what the hell Uhura actually sees in him to keep him around – but he has what he does know and a sappy mixtape on anyone Uhura’s ever looked at who has looked at her before.

And he’s having another understated epiphany like the one he had in McCoy’s car, the one he had in Spock’s apartment, the one he had in the shower last night, all those little muted and muffled moments of realization – this whole thing, every single night, the conversations and the phone calls and the text messages and the dinners at Enterprise and the teasing in English class and the movie nights every Friday and Sulu very patiently teaching him how to make pizza dough and Chekov swearing quietly to himself in Russian over a stubbed toe and Scotty’s lighter igniting the end of his waiting cigarette and McCoy’s hand a steady pressure against the place between his shoulderblades when he’s trying so fucking hard to reteach himself how to breathe at night and all of Spock’s non-expressions and non-nuances and his cooking and the silent purr of his car and the space Jim will occupy on his couch and the fingerprints Spock will let him leave on his refrigerator door and the photographs it houses and Uhura diligently beating feminism and equality and common sense into his head like it actually needed to be done, like he actually needs to be convinced of something he already believes in – it’s all about giving and taking small pieces of themselves to and from each other. That’s what it’s been about since they all happened to be in the same place at the same time, probably even before that.

And now Uhura is looking at Jim differently, again. And that was the point of the shitty, zero-dollar, dumb fucking mixtape in the first place. And that’s not so bad either.

Because it’s him and because self-control is forever a foreign concept to him, Jim just smirks something devilish at her and says, “I guess I popped your mixtape cherry, then.” He takes a special sort of pleasure in the positively anguished groan that comes out of McCoy, then.

He’s surprised again when Uhura doesn’t roll her eyes or make a face or call him an ugly name or dish out one of her usual responses to his usual nonsense; rather, she kisses him – corner of the mouth, hard enough to leave lipstick in her wake, just like the ones she gives to Spock, no shame nor hesitation nor deception involved – and tells him, “Thank you.” And then she kisses him again. “I love it.”

And right then and there, Jim has the distinct sensation of his chest melting open and full of hot air and rare, complete, total satisfaction with the world, or the rest of the night at the very least. He only just barely regrets the fact that he can’t seem to stop smiling like an idiot.

Spock’s gift is beautiful, stupidly perfect and expensive and Uhura, moreso than probably anyone
else’s (and keep in mind that McCoy’s print and Gaila’s stilettos were more than suited to her) – a pendant with pair of scales etched into it suspended on a semi-thick gold rolo chain, just flashy enough so that it isn’t obnoxious and yet still manages to be the epitome of opulence, long enough so that it rests right on Uhura’s collarbone when she gets Spock to put it on her, astrology and style and sentiment – all of which she’s absolutely crazy about – all rolled into one flawless gift. When she kisses him, it’s directly on the mouth and very, very visible, and it does wonders to accidentally trick everyone into thinking oh yes – they’re together, aren’t they? They have to be – they look way too amazing with each other not to be, and Spock didn’t even reject Uhura’s kiss (which, I mean, is great).

And then she’s down to the final present, and Chekov is like a circuit seconds from shorting at Jim’s right, buzzing with electric anxiety and a near-audible will she like it, will she like it, will she like it?.

“To: Uhura, from: Pavel,” Uhura dictates from the gift tag, tossing a quick, warm smile Chekov’s way over her shoulder before setting to free what’s beneath the magazine paper wrapping, unknotted the ribbon and tearing through the packaging to reveal – “A photo album.” (With an abundance of flowers on it, might I add.)

A beat of silence passes – almost scarily – before Chekov explains with his typical, ever-rare sense of perception, “So you can remember everyzhing. So you won’t forget.”

They didn’t think of this year like that before, really, not even when they were all snapping pictures on their smartphones and scrolling through their text histories (well, at least Jim does that). Those were for Facebook and Tumblr and a sense of wellbeing – not for remembering, at least not specifically – and they’ve all passed that age or that point in their lives where that kind of shit starts to lose its relative importance – Jim and Uhura are extremely talented at looking directly ahead and at better, brighter things instead of turning back, and Sulu hasn’t ever been big on personal documentation when he exists so much outside of himself and in the ever-changing big picture that his fixed points in life really shrink in importance most of the time, and both McCoy and Scotty have already had their life-changing, groundbreaking, soul-searching first year of college and left the desire to find themselves and make memories the day they ended it, and Spock – Spock more than likely thinks that kind of sentiment is absurd anyway.

But Chekov is still a teenager – a teenager attending college two years earlier than he should be and with one of the highest IQs of anyone Jim’s ever met, albeit, but a teenager nonetheless. And obviously, he cares about remembering, and he’s hoping they’ll still know each other more than a couple of years from now, and he might be a little naïve for investing so much optimism in that (and Jim kind of feels sorry for him, there, sorry for the hypothetical day they won’t know each other anymore and how let down Chekov will almost certainly be), but that’s all fine – inspiring, even. It might actually make a difference in the long run.

Uhura’s face goes soft and sincere again, the torn wrapping crumpling beneath her hands when she
lets them rest atop the album in her lap. She nods **once, twice**, more and more of these tiny little bops of her head like she can’t seem to deal with how **right** Chekov is for several **seconds**, and she says, “Thank you, sweetie.”

Chekov’s responding smile is bashful and pleased (and so, so very **bright**).

“You know what?” – suddenly Uhura is alight and excited, back straight and eyes eagerly scanning the room. “Where’s the disposable cameras? We’re documenting this **immediately**.”

It isn’t long before Scotty spots one of the Kodaks abandoned on the bar, and then it’s a struggle to get everyone maskless and jammed in and around and on top of the seats surrounding Uhura’s designated throne – Uhura grabbing Spock to cram into a single chair with her and pulling Jim and Gaila flush against her right and McCoy, Chapel, and M’Benga against her left, Sulu, Chekov, and Rand perched gingerly on the floor in front of her while Scotty and Carol and Gary and Elizabeth and the rest of the party corral at her back and Tonia does her damndest to get the lot of them in one shot, catch their smiling faces and their tongues stuck out and their vulgar expressions and their facetiously-thrown gang signs. By the time the impromptu photoshoot is over, they’ve all gone a little blind from the flash and, for the most part, can’t seem to stop laughing at each other.

There’s more dancing, of course. Uhura makes a point of getting everyone to dance with her at least once – once **more** in some cases – before the night is up: fast and loose and liberal to a backing synth beat with Sulu, swinging and bopping to Motown with McCoy, bouncing and jamming to something poppy and up-tempo with M’Benga, absolutely **killing it to Single Ladies** with Gaila and Rand, slowing things down a bit with Chekov and Scotty and the sweet sounds of Grouplove and Billy Idol, Cyndi Lauper underscoring her dance with Chapel and The Outfield streaming loud and spirited overhead while she and Jim link fingers and rock across the dance floor, Jim’s mouth near Uhura’s ear when he tells her how he drove to Albany exactly **two months** ago to this same song on repeat, Uhura so pretty and pleased when she basks in the romance of that.

Uhura effectively saves Spock from his self-imposed imprisonment behind the bar when she drags him out for a long, indulgent slow dance. It’s hard not to watch them while they twirl cheek-to-cheek in the center of the floor, swaying like they’re in high school but not – too elegant for it, too grown up, too not shy about her hands on his neck and his hands on her hips and the small of her back, too perfect and precise and easy in their footwork. It’s hard not to feel pride in watching it, too, where Jim lingers by the food table and alternates between following them with his gaze and looking for McCoy and Chapel where they’re dancing as well, not quite as graceful or poised but still just the same amount of **into each other** that makes watching them feel both amazingly exhilarating and kind of voyeururistic in the way that’s only appropriate because Jim is in **three** different kinds of love with **three** out of the **four** parties involved.

And yeah, there’s a little aftertaste of sadness mixed in what Jim might be feeling – a cocktail **three** parts delight, **two** parts contentment, **one** part bitterness, another part wonder – but he’s more than
down with riding it out while it lasts and listening to Chekov gush to Sulu about how joyful Bones looks and M’Benga tell them stories about last year, all the back-and-forth, coy, skirting-around-their-feelings, literally-too-dumb-to-live bullshit McCoy and Chapel went through and his nightly prayers that they’d get a fucking clue already; listening to Gary and Elizabeth argue quietly from several yards away, Gary’s every remark punctuated with a patronizing ‘Lizzy’ and Elizabeth’s every response prefixed with a ‘Don’t call me that’; listening to the music, the thrumming, the bass; listening to his unusual lack of verbal thought.

McCoy and Chapel’s mouths are moving as they dance, curved into small, perpetual smiles. They’re talking to each other, foreheads brushing, McCoy’s hands politely at her waist and Chapel’s arms careful around his shoulders, every inch the picture of chivalry. And they look really, really happy.

By contrast, Spock and Uhura aren’t talking at all, but they don’t look awkward or uneasy or detached in the slightest. Spock’s eyes are lidded or closed – Jim can’t really tell in this light and at this distance – as Uhura’s head rests against his chest and her arms wind snug around his neck. It isn’t happiness, but it doesn’t look like it has to be, not really.

Gaila materializes halfway through Jim’s sightseeing session with her hands insistent on his shoulders and her mask nowhere to be seen, squeezes him firmly and says, no questioning involved, “Dance with me.”

Jim is more than happy to.

They (meaning: Spock, Jim, McCoy, Sulu, Chekov, and Scotty) help Uhura assemble all the disposable cameras, trash the wrapping paper and the discarded ribbon, the streamers and the balloons, the paper plates and the plastic cups, and load all of her presents into the back of Spock’s car after the last of the guests have passed around phone numbers, hugs, and kisses (which turns into a sort of hilarious ordeal when Gaila plants a fat one on Spock and everyone – including Spock himself – pretends not to be too appalled) and departed. Ten minutes and some ill-advised buzzed driving later and they’re all ordering gelato at a tiny overnight bistro a couple of blocks from the dance hall, seven slightly overheated college students peering through the glass display case and giggling stupidly at each other’s choices and the light and the night and everything else at 10:46 in the evening.

“Who the fuck would eat flower-flavored ice cream?” Jim blurts at the sight of rose-, violet-, and jasmine-flavored gelato, briefly remembering his conversation with McCoy and Sulu about he and Spock’s hypothetical children from the night before. The clerk behind the counter – a short slip of a girl with gigantic horn-rimmed glasses and green hair that screams hipster superiority – shoots him an exasperated glare that he could honestly not give any less of a shit about.
“Correction – flower-flavored gelato,” Sulu comments, nudging Jim briefly in the side. “And it doesn’t sound like it would taste so bad.”

“Oh, yeah? I dare you to eat…” Jim pauses to give the display counter another quick appraisal. “Rose fucking gelato.” You’ll find that it’s extremely common that he regress back about six years to the tender age of twelve. “I’ll get down with good-old strawberry.”

“Rose and green tea it is, then,” Sulu tells the clerk, who seems to actually glow with pride at his love for unconventional, gross-sounding flavors.

Meanwhile, Uhura is giving McCoy a rather enthusiastic beating, crying, “Why! Didn’t you! Introduce me! To! Your hot! Friend! Before!” and punctuating each fragmented exclamation with a backhanded slap across his bicep.

“I! Thought! Chris! Would! Have! Done that!” McCoy replies in a teasing, imitative tone, halfheartedly moving to grab at Uhura’s wrist in a feeble attempt to salvage his arm. He breathes out a mock-sigh of relief when she puts a halt to her assault to pay for her gelato, says, “I thought it was up to girlfriends to set other girlfriends up.”

“You’re best friends with him!” Uhura shrieks with this frenzied, spidering gesture of her hands that somehow manages to express just how very offended she is by McCoy’s apparent lack of common decency, eagerly snatching her tiramisu gelato from the countertop. “He’s from Kenya. I’m from Kenya! Do you realize I have never met another person here! In America! Let alone going to the same school! That is also from Kenya!? And is fine as hell!?”

“Well, jeeze, I’m sorry, hon!” McCoy laughs as he follows Uhura to a secluded little booth in the corner of the bistro. “Jay isn’t really into dating and I was under the impression that you had… a different type.”

Everyone – save Spock – seems to catch the momentary, deliberate glance McCoy throws his way. Everyone – save Spock – bursts into laughter in response.

“I hate you, you ass,” Uhura giggles, shoving playful and firm at McCoy’s chest and then turning to Spock’s quietly perplexed expression and taking his hand, pulling him into the booth beside her and saying, “He’ll get into dating if I have anything to do with it, I promise you that.”

“Oh no, everyone, Uhura’s on the warpath,” Jim teases from where he takes a seat on Spock’s other
side, the **seven** of them all working to cram into the booth on each side of the table. “What was that song they used to sing in the Cold War? *Duck! And cover-*”

“He gave me his number, you know,” Uhura half-yells with a glaring look at Jim, who just raises his hands defensively and puts a cute face on. “And he danced with me *three times.*” She turns her attention to McCoy once more. “Do you know what his sign is?”

“Excuse me?” McCoy asks the question around the plastic spoon in his mouth, so the words come out all garbled and awkward. “Is that slang fer somethin’ or…?”

“When’s his birthday, is what she means,” Sulu supplies at McCoy’s left, scraping around at the bottom of his cup for any leftover pink-tinted gelato (which he’s been devouring without an inkling of disgust for about a minute now, by the way).

“Oh.” A quick beat of thought. “May 4**th**.”

Uhura’s features pinch for a second, then – “Damn. We’re paradoxical.”

Jim briefly runs his tongue along his front teeth, sucking at the strawberry seeds that have jammed themselves between them and saying, “You know astrology is bullshit, right?”

“It’s *fun* bullshit, though,” Uhura retorts with a short flourish of her spoon.

“Which of us woul’ be compa’ible, eh?” Scotty asks, ducking his head around Jim to meet Uhura’s eyes. “According t’ your stars.”

Uhura hums pensively, considering everyone around the table with a thoughtful, scrutinizing gaze. “You and Jim are harmonious,” she replies.

Jim lets loose a high, startled, “*Ha!*”, moving to sling an affectionate arm around Scott’s shoulders and *squeeze.* “C’mon, baby, let’s elope.” He grins wide and helpless at the braying, hysterical laughter that comes ripping out of Scotty at that. “Vegas, here we come!”

“Jim and Sulu are harmonious, too,” Uhura adds, amused, her expression tickled when Jim reaches
across the table to caress Sulu’s cheek, when Sulu blinks wide-eyed and lovestruck at him in reply. “Jim and I are opposite signs, which makes us complementary,” she purrs with a playful wink his way, then hooks her arm around Spock’s and says, “Same with me and this one.”

“And why is it that you haven’t married me yet?” Jim implores. He’s about as far from serious as you could possibly get, but for some reason, he’s really, really desperate to know the answer to that question. For hypothetical purposes, of course.

Instead of answering him, though (which, actually, is becoming sort of an annoying trend here), Uhura turns to Scotty and announces, “We’re really compatible. Ooh!” She aims a sparkling grin at Sulu, bouncing briefly in her excitement. “So are we!”

Sulu *hmms* warmly, nods his head as well as his spoon once in her direction. “I agree.”

“Len and Pasha are also super compatible?” Uhura’s tone is tinged with something like incredulity when she glances between the two – the former of which looks somewhat appalled, the latter more bashful and surprised than anything else – and she raises her shoulders in a brief shrug, explains, “Cancer and Pisces are trine.”

“What about me and Bones?” Jim asks around a mouthful of gelato, gargling the confection against the roof of his mouth in a moment of *twelve year-old* vulgarity. He shoots McCoy an exaggerated, devilish leer across the table – something he only gets an exasperated eyeroll in reply to – and hums, “There has to be something there.”

“Aries and Cancer are square,” Uhura replies matter-of-factly. “Your signs are clashing.”

“That explains a lot,” McCoy exhales amongst Jim’s melodramatic whining, all pouting lips and fingers tracing imaginary tear tracks down his cheeks.

“You and Chris are compatible, though,” Uhura soothes. “I almost forgot that she’s a Pisces, too.”

“Get it, Len!” Sulu blurts out like he can’t help the exclamation, snickering when said man socks him very audibly in the arm and spreading his hands in a wide skyward arch as he says, “Tell her your love was *written in the stars*.”

“What happens when ze signs are ze same?” Chekov asks, a little eager, a little jumpy. Jim can’t quite
decode the excited glint in his eyes until he notices exactly who those eyes are on – that is, him and Spock: both Aries. (And he was just starting to think Chekov had his back in this whole stupid charade.)

“Oh!” Uhura flicks herself in the forehead in self-deprecating expression of ‘duh!’, chuckling breathlessly as she replies, “Matching signs are about as compatible as you can get.” She narrows her eyes the slightest bit at the two on her right. “Especially when your birthdays are as close as they are.”

Where Jim expects an explosion of jeers and jabs and teases and mockery and everything aggravating and humiliating under the godforsaken sun from Sulu and McCoy, all he gets are these surreptitious smirks and slightly raised brows and the quietest little hum (of satisfaction? amusement? pure douchebaggery?) out of Sulu. Where he expects some kind of reaction – any kind of reaction, even just a small one, even a little quirk of the eyebrow or some kind of change in his eyes, where he’s the most expressive – out of Spock, he gets… absolutely nothing. Not even a second glance. Not even a twitch.

That, my friends, simply will not do.

In spite of every cell in his body screaming at him to let it go for the sake of his ego (which will no doubt get completely slashed in the following two weeks if McCoy and Sulu have anything to do with it) and every cell in his body screaming at him to let it go for the sake of Uhura (because yeah, if tonight has proved anything it’s that she’s still in love with Spock) and every cell in his body screaming at him to let it go for the sake of Spock (who is probably way tired of any prolonged social contact at this point and may or may not hate him for all the flirting he’s been doing with him tonight), Jim doesn’t stop himself from turning to him and words he doesn’t think about for even three seconds from bursting unfiltered and playful out of his mouth, saying, “I guess that means we should cut the bullshit and bone already.” Because shame is a thing that cannot exist in the same space as the x amount of ounces of alcohol he’s consumed tonight and his eternal drive to make Spock react (and god, does he need Spock’s reactions like the air he breathes).

It’s safe to say that he’s a little (read: very) let down when all Spock does is blink, cut his eyes at him, and reply, “You yourself previously stated that astrology is invalid.” And then he blinks again.

(Is he really that used to people openly inviting him to have sex with them? In all likelihood: yes.)

“Well, aren’t you romantic?” Jim snorts with an edge of irritation that doesn’t reach his eyes even a little bit, and he watches Spock watch his eyes for one, two, four whole seconds, can practically see all the small calculations and measurements running through his head in that short span of time before Spock is turning away from him again, back to the ever-so-interesting spot on the table he was
studying before he was pulled into the bane of social interaction.

“I guess I’m not getting any godchildren, then,” Sulu mutters, quietly enough so that everyone can hear him. He’s a great friend that way.

“Wait, what?” Uhura shoots Sulu a questioning look as McCoy proceeds to choke on the last of his gelato in a rather violent fit of laughter. “Did you just say godchildren?”

“Well, see, last night Jim was talking abou–”

Sulu’s enthusiastic storytelling meets a premature end with Jim’s spoon bouncing off the bridge of his nose, followed by his empty cup, followed by Spock’s empty cup. The rest of the conversation progresses in much the same fashion, until everyone has had someone’s plastic spoon or a gelato-soaked cup thrown in their face and Uhura is practically shrieking through her laughter, “Stop, stop, stop – I think Scotty’s going to die!”

They all walk the two blocks back to the dance hall mostly entangled in each other – Chekov and Sulu with linked arms, Jim brushing shoulders with McCoy and Uhura, Uhura nestled in the warmth of Jim’s jacket and Spock’s arm wound snug around hers. Goodnight takes about fifteen minutes in the chilly October air and with all the alcohol and sugar and affection in them having them huddling close and complaining about ugh, classes tomorrow and belatedly marveling at the success of the party and relentlessly flattering Uhura until she’s tearing up again, legs covered in gooseflesh and eyeliner threatening to run. She gives them all good, long hugs and short kisses on the cheek before they go, and when it’s Jim’s turn to bid her farewell, he holds her extra tight and takes his jacket back from her with a generous dose of apology and tells her happy birthday again like that’s not cute or whatever, and it’s hard for him not to fall the slightest bit apart when she winks at him and says, almost like she’s reassuring him, “You did good tonight.”

And wow, that’s new.

Spock looks cold and uncomfortable (and maybe, maybe even a little sad – or is that Jim’s imagination and the light conspiring against his powers of observation?), so Jim gives him a pinch on the arm and the warmest smile he can manage on his way back to his truck and prays to some higher power that Spock doesn’t actually hate him after tonight, and he doesn’t really think about Spock’s comfort zone or his oddness or his near-tangible discomfort or anything, but he does actively hope that he’s (they’re) okay, and that has to count somewhere, right?

Chekov is the first in bed when they get home – Jim actually thinks the word, all four letters of it, when he considers their cramped little apartment now – out of his party clothes and into the most
comfortable and warm-looking sweater Jim has possibly ever seen in his life, and he mumbles something sweet like goodnight and then he’s nowhere to be found in the quilted nest that his bed has turned into, and they all say a small prayer for the massive hangover he’s going to wake up with tomorrow morning, bless his soul.

Sulu is next, after he’s worked through three quarters of a water bottle, adjusted the thermostat to something pleasantly balmy, carefully removed some of the quilts from Chekov’s cocoon – “So he doesn’t overheat,” he explains when Jim and McCoy give him quietly questioning looks after he’s dumped a couple of them in the armchair in the living room – and given McCoy a solid thump on the back and Jim a quick squeeze around his shoulders as he passes behind the couch and on into his and Chekov’s room, saying goodnight with the line of his shoulders instead of his words.

When McCoy rolls into bed, Jim rolls in with him, squeezing in at his side and on his back on the twin-size mattress and tangling their legs together when McCoy grumbles about the space.

“I’m pretty sure yer bed is just as acceptable as this one, Jim,” he huffs, maneuvering his arm to fold behind his head and miraculously managing to not elbow Jim’s face off. It’s kind of amazing how much energy he still has to be disgruntled and pissy even after their amazingly busy day, like he’s always in possession of these small reserves of anger fuel lying in wait to be drawn upon at any given time. Jim thinks he kind of adores it.

“My bed is all the way across the room and I want to talk to you,” is Jim’s half-murmured reply. He shrugs, grinning when the action teases a sharp laugh out of McCoy thanks to the shoulder he’s shoving right up into his armpit, his words chuckled as he adds, “And you’re warm, whatever.”

“Go sleep with Spock, you fag,” McCoy retorts, but he says it like he’s saying ‘stay’, or ‘you’re alright’, or ‘I love you’, so the spaces in Jim’s chest don’t start stinging in reply.

Several noiseless beats pass – the TV is off in the living room, McCoy is the only one of them who snores, and it’s 11:37 PM, thus: total silence – before Jim turns his face into the space between his and McCoy’s and says, “You asked Chris out, right?”

Even in the darkness and with just the view of McCoy’s profile, Jim can see the way his features soften and gel at the mention of Chapel, and the quietest sigh passes between his lips a moment before he replies, “No.”

Then they’re silent again, the customary one, five, ten seconds before –
“She’s not ready.” (Jim knows how long to wait before McCoy – brave, honest, lionhearted McCoy – can muster up the courage to talk – it’s always been ten seconds.) “That’s alright, y’know… she should be allowed to take her time. I can give her her time.”

“She deserves it, Jim,” McCoy replies faster than Jim expects him to, and yeah, Jim knew he would say something like that, could practically hear it in his head before the words came out of his mouth. He believes McCoy, too.

But because he doesn’t say that and because McCoy’s eyes are on the ceiling – not his face – McCoy keeps talking, says, “You don’t see how much she feels, how hard she feels. I swear, I can get so damn angry about it – it just makes things harder for her, y’know, like when yer a kid and it’s like yer just livin’ in the eye of a hurricane – but I…” He sighs again, rubs a tired hand over his tired face. “She wouldn’t be her if she wasn’t like that.”

And Jim knows exactly how McCoy feels about her.

Jim shifts his leg against McCoy’s, says, “She was happy tonight, though.”

McCoy’s mouth turns up at the corner and his eyes close. “Yeah, she was.”

Jim’s mouth turns up at the corner, too. “So were you.”

McCoy opens his eyes again, angles his head just slightly to the side without turning to Jim completely, and says, so out of the blue it takes Jim a moment or two to actually process it, “You were okay, right? You weren’t too shook up?”

And Jim has to think about just what McCoy’s asking him before he can give him an answer, has to remember that he has An Issue that McCoy is exceptionally aware of and the fact that that such Issue actually did flare up a little tonight, and I mean, objectively he knows that McCoy really, really gives a shit about him, but it still shocks the hell out of him when he makes it apparent. Nobody has made that sort of thing apparent for him in a long, long time.

“I was fine,” he says, half-lying because it makes him that much more assured in the vague truth of
his answer. McCoy’s hand is a phantom pressure against the center of his back in that moment, and just the fact that he can smell him while he’s so close is enough to put a seal on the state of temporary calm he’s achieved.

McCoy still looks at him, though, a significant, penetrating look made of the same basalt Jim saw in his eyes earlier, but then he sighs for a third time and murmurs, almost like he’s not even sure he wants Jim to hear it, “You feel so much, too, y’know.”

He says it affectionately, he does. And he knows Jim, doesn’t he? He’s telling the truth.

Jim gives him a lazy, oddly lingering wink and another ticklish shrug – one McCoy only lets out a soft hum of laughter in response to this time – and his voice is low and sugary when he says, “Ditto.”

And it’s weird, how Jim thinks then that if McCoy were a girl or more intoxicated or his brother or Chekov, he’d probably do something like hug him, maybe, nestle a little closer to him if anything. But because he’s McCoy and because of everything they are, he just rewards Jim with an exhausted, knowing smile and doesn’t make any move to wiggle away from him or detangle their legs, and somehow – for the same exact reason – that’s just as great as it would be if it were a hug.

“You and Chris will end up together – I can feel it in my bones,” Jim says after another stretch of silence, surprising himself with just how serious he actually is (and really, he’s kind of made a career out of not being serious at this point). Of course, then he lets out a brief, snorting laugh and adds, “Ha, that was funny. Because you’re my Bones and all.”

“Where the fuck did you even get that from?” McCoy is still smiling when he asks the question, his voice pleasantly colored with that weird, almost indefinable brand of bewildered by Jim’s absolute and utter ridiculousness it carries about 75% of the time.

“You don’t know?” Jim twists half onto his side to look at McCoy face-on, expression vaguely incredulous through the irrevocable gauze of amusement he can’t seem to rid his everything of after tonight’s events. “You don’t remember the day I met you? When I said, ‘you’re gonna be an old –’”

“‘An old sawbones’, ” McCoy finishes with a heavy air of realization, and it’s one of those perfect moments where things fall into place for both of them at the exact same time – Jim grinning wide and stupid at McCoy across the five inches between them while McCoy just watches him and looks sleepy and proud and affectionate.
“And then it’s like…” Jim trails off for a few seconds, suddenly uncomfortable with the weight of his thoughts, but because he’s tired and still a little intoxicated and because this is nice, actually, just talking to McCoy so honestly like it’s so hard to do when they’re all busy trying to be witty and clever, he picks the sentence right back up and says, “Your bones support and protect you, you know.” His grin softens into a mere whisper of a smile. “It just kind of makes sense to me.”

McCoy’s face does the same thing it did when Jim first mentioned Chapel, that thing that makes Jim think of ice cream on a summer day, or butter on hot toast, or root beer in the cornfields of Riverside, or Sam – and uh, ouch, that’s a memory he runs away from really, really fucking fast – and he doesn’t say anything in reply, but Jim more than hears the thank you vibes he’s radiating loud and clear.

Jim leaves him to sleep, then, slides out of McCoy’s bed to go on and take his place in his own, and as he’s turning onto his stomach and shrugging his comforter over his shoulders, McCoy rolls onto his side and reminds him to, “Get some sleep, kiddo,” because he knows Jim’s nocturnal habits and his relentless irresponsibility and lack of self-preservation just as well – if not slightly better – than Jim himself.

Jim just chuckles, says, “Goodnight, Bones.”

And yeah, he does have friends. Six of them, to be exact:

- An android,
- A grumpy would-be doctor,
- A girl made of caramel,
- A San Francisco paragon,
- A Ruski,
- And a lemon-bearing Scot.

And for the very first time in his relatively long eighteen-year life, they really, truly belong to him – even if only for the next eight months, if he’s lucky. Even if only in the deepest recesses of his heart.

He spends the next forty-five minutes or so depleting the remainder of his iPhone battery, scrolling through Tumblr and crawling deep into the bowels of Cracked.com while his iPod quietly plays Uhura’s mixtape for him in the background. When his battery percentage is down to 16%, he’s struck with the sudden urge to investigate what she said to them all earlier, about the stars and their laws of chemistry, see just how much he likes that bullshit.

Of course, among other things, she was right about Aries being most compatible with Aries. That
makes him a little nervous and excited and exasperated with himself all at once.

**ARIES HOROSCOPE: OCTOBER 2013**

This is a big month for you, Aries, and it involves others as well as yourself. Your desire to be in the sole possession of your own unique destiny is well-justified, yet partnership is an equally essential ingredient for you in this period of major change. The essence of life is more than just the surface components, and that deeper factor consists of one peculiar paradox: you need others and are even constrained by that need, yet you have nothing to limit you but your own evolving self-identity. Similarly, as the month progresses, in one way your path lies clearly before you, but in another you are confused and just barely feeling your way.

The new moon on October 4th foretells a partnership, whether it's for personal or professional reasons. You may work closely with someone to further your career, education, finances, or personal relationships. Because Uranus opposes the new moon from your sign, this could be a time of changes, challenges, or even endings with a partner. However, new moons mean possibilities and opportunities — you may become open to new partnerships the likes of which you've never experienced before. Don't be afraid to pursue someone eccentric, unique, and novel.

**Keep in Mind this Month:**

*Expressing what you want from others is the essential first step to clearing the air and getting the most out of your relationships.*

Jim rereads that last line a good seven, eight, nine times, turns it over and over in his head, lets it sit and rest and float and fester. And he thinks so hard about Spock while he does it.

Just before he formally, officially declares it all bullshit and his battery hits the 9% mark, before it turns 12:38 and McCoy’s snoring soars from disgruntled bear right on into freight train territory, Jim shoots Spock one of his trademark short, nonsensical texts and calls it a night, plugging his phone into its charger and burrowing deep enough beneath his comforter so he’s not shivering anymore, so he’s not thinking, so he can coast on that beautiful plane of tired happiness he’s been existing on for the latter part of tonight until finally, finally, sleep finds him.
Thursday, October 3rd, 2013.

Spock Grayson is finishing off his third cup of chai green tea and his second episode of House when Nyota walks into the living room and removes his mug from his hands without any explanation or apparent reasoning, sets it down cleanly on the coffee table and then turns her tired, searching gaze on his face. The room is dark and the television is low, and it is 12:15 in the morning. He believes he is losing his mind.

“You know it’s past midnight, right?” Nyota asks him, very quietly and very gently.

Spock murmurs his assent. He carefully arranges his displaced mug so that a coaster rests beneath it.

Nyota watches this – this neurotic, compulsive, uncontrollable behavior that he cannot stand though he cannot stand not to go without just as much – with the faintest of smiles on her face, and it makes Spock think that she is amused by his complex, and he does not know how much that angers him, only that it angers him at all. Her hand is relaxed and casual on her hip, her hair tied up in a vibrant paisley scarf; she says, “You should get some sleep, babe.”

He does not chafe at the pet name, but at the night itself. He has to consciously remind himself this before he tells her that he, in fact, cannot ‘get some sleep’. He’d have started to do so approximately an hour ago if he could, if his head and all that fills it had let him.

Nyota’s expression becomes soft in the darkness, then – it takes Spock several moments to categorize that specific emotion, still mostly unidentifiable, under the blanket term of sadness, or something similar to it. She drifts closer to him without seeming to move her feet or her legs, without seeming to move at all – fascinating – and asks, “Are you alright?”

He considers the following for several long moments:

- His answer.
- The time (12:16, now).
- His sleep schedule; moreover, how disrupted it has been for the past three days.
- All of the formless, invisible, intangible, but impossibly noisy things like insects, or needles, or fingernails brushing along and beneath his skin and at the corners, no – the very center of his
mind, converging upon him, gnawing with loud, gnashing teeth at his carefully set control and his barriers and the place at the core of him where he is calm, where he keeps himself calm.

- His odd shortness of breath – not hyperventilation, but a shallowness that is far from optimal.
- The extremely illogical sensation that he might end, soon.
- The definition of a panic attack.
- The night and the party and all of the voices and touches and gazes and colors and questions and noises and noises and noises it was been filled with, far away from the stillness of here, Apartment E09, Orion Peaks, Albany, New York, The United States of America.
- Gaila and all of the hair he desperately wished to tuck behind her ears when it escaped from her barrettes in awful messy curls that cascaded down her shoulders and around her neck, her wanting eyes he desperately wished not to be under, her uncanny ability to ask all the piercing and knowing and deliberate questions in the world when they are in a small dance hall on Nyota’s birthday or in the library during her free period, bent over Advanced Mathematical Concepts and her hair still a whimsical mess in those moments, too, more like her than any other attribute she might possess, save for her honesty.
- Pavel and all of the drinks he should not have mixed for him tonight, and the strange anger-irritation-confusion he feels towards James and Hikaru and Leonard for letting the teen consume the amount of alcohol he does, and the hangover he will have tomorrow morning and how that will somehow be his fault, and only he will blame himself for it.
- Nyota and all of the minutes she spent swaying silently in his arms like she was trying to convince both of them that she belonged there, and her talk of dating Jabilo when she still looks at him the way she does, and how her actions sometimes refute her words when she is emotional, or intoxicated, or both, and how frustrating that is, how frustrating it is to care so much and not in the right way, and how she is now standing before him and they are in that exact place they were before the party and no, he should not be frustrated anymore.
- James and every last infuriating, enraging, captivating contradiction about him, and yes – Spock heard his denial in the next room before the party started, heard his disgusted, frustrated sighs in response to the prospect of being interested in him, and it would not bother Spock so much if he were not so uncomfortably used to that at this point, if James had not spent the rest of the night making every sort of variation of what Nyota has often referred to as bedroom eyes at him across the bar, if he had not made the comments he made and suggested all that he had, if he had not spent the past three weeks touching him with the kind of boldness only T’Pring has ever used on him before, if he had not looked at him with those ocean eyes before, and told him so much about the inner walls of his mind, and pressed his thigh up against his while he sprawled next to him on the sofa on which Spock now sits, called himself his ‘girlfriend’, forced himself into his every Friday night and every other fifteen minutes of his life with a text or a call or a surprise visit or the simple (no, the very complex) thought of him, been so indefinable and unforgettable and distracting and noisy, and honestly, he makes Spock childish on hectic days and nights like this. He makes Spock believe he knows exactly how Nyota feels in regards to him, in regards to both of them.
- What his father would have said about all this.
- What his mother would have said about all this.

His answer is a short, definitive, ‘no’.

Nyota’s expression takes on more of that peculiar sad quality approximately three seconds before she is reaching for him, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet and saying, “Come on,” and it is after Spock realizes where she intends on leading him that he removes himself from her grasp with a
brief request that she ‘wait’. She leans all of her weight against the wall of the hallway as she watches him carry his emptied mug into the kitchen to store in the dishwasher, then turn off the PlayStation 3 and the television, then return to her side so she can take his hand again and guide him into his bedroom, which is illuminated only by the yellowish light of the lamps shining down over the sidewalks outside peeking curiously through the blinds. He is surprised when Nyota pulls him into his bed beside her, but not unpleasantly – only with a thin air of confusion.

“What’s wrong?” she asks once she is situated before him, one arm pulled up against her chest while the other rests in the space between them on the mattress. Her eyes are intent on his face in the low light; he can feel her breath puffing softly against his chin. “Did something happen at the party?”

Instead of answering, Spock gets lost in the exceptional oddness of this – him sharing a bed with another person, having a sleepover the likes of which he’s only ever heard talked about in stories like fairytales to him for how foreign they are. Nyota slept in his bed the night of August 31st, of course, but it was different, then – he wasn’t lying six and a half inches away from her, couldn’t feel her body heat and smell her shampoo, and there are so many more coffee dates and phone calls and stories shared between them, now.

“Spock.” – she cracks him out of his reverie ever-so-gently, her hand sliding further across the mattress so that she is not quite touching his chest, but the very slightest of movements could make it so that she was – “I love you, but I’m not going to have this conversation with myself.”

She reminds him so much of his mother in that moment.

“It’s okay to talk about it. Even just for the sake of talking itself.”

Spock expresses the lack of security he feels in that ideology and the vast potential for wasted energy it holds.

Nyota smiles – a whispering, almost patronizing thing – replies, “It’s not wasted energy if it makes you feel better.”

He supposes that in that respect, as well as many others, she is correct. She is, after all, much more experienced and knowing in matters such as these than he could ever hope to be.

So he talks to her, just as he did to James over the phone the previous night. He tells her of his trouble sleeping and his unfamiliarity with this, what they’re doing. He tells her he believes that her
party has temporarily pushed him beyond the reaches of his own personal sanity and hurled him far, far out of his comfort zone, all his rituals disturbed, everything too overwhelming for him to compensate for with his endless mantra of calm and control and caution, and she is possibly the only thing at this moment keeping the pieces of him from splintering violently apart like they have been doing on and off every three or four months since he turned eight. He tells her ‘thank you’ for that. He tells her of his continuing guilt concerning her, and Pavel, and how Gaila’s inherent chaos unnerves and beguiles him, and how he sometimes cannot stand to live in his own skin, and he has never met anyone at all like himself, but he is glad that she did so tonight.

His cellphone vibrates on his desk across the room at that point, and because he knows with 99% certainty that it is James texting him at this unusual, ridiculous hour of the night, he tells her of everything he cannot bring himself to make sense of about him, tells her that he is a puzzle he cannot solve and somehow does not want to solve, tells her of the things he heard him say tonight and the eyes he watched him make tonight and how being in physical contact with him is so jarring and so pleasant all at once, tells her that this is all not so dire when they are together but he becomes so utterly incompetent about it all when they are apart, and he tells her of T’Pring, too, how she made and baffled and captivated him in just the same way, how the instance of this fills him with something like fear, but he also tells her of that illogical metaphor from two days ago, about the moon and the sun, and he does not like that this tiny part of him has become a poet through the sheer brightness of James, but he does not wish to kill this part of him, either.

Nyota’s hand has made its way to his chest by the time she speaks up once more, the heel of her palm pressed gentle against his breast and her eyes just as full of that same focused gravity they were when this conversation began. A pregnant pause hangs low between them before she says, the inadequacy thick on her tongue, “I’m sorry.”

Spock knows she is referring to the party. He easily dismisses the apology; it is better that he simply push the whole thing out of his mind altogether as soon as possible.

She falls silent for several minutes, then, face a mask of quiet concentration and possible remarks. Her leg curls up closer towards her stomach, her lips purse the slightest bit; she asks him, “So, are you into Jim?”

Because he is not comfortable with the ambiguity of the question, he asks her to rephrase it in more specific terms. She lets out a breathless chuckle.

“Are you romantically and/or sexually interested in our good pal Jim?” she laughs, and her tone is light and her expression is jovial, but something – his mother used to call it his heart, he believes it is a dangerous, paradoxical mixture of intuition and deductive reasoning – tells him there is apprehension, perhaps distress, lying somewhere in that question. She is, after all, still interested in him, and she is more human than he has ever felt at ease enough to let himself be.
The truth is, he does not know how he is interested in James, just as much as he does not know why. There is only the fact that he is, and that this being is loud and unruly and part of the reason he cannot sleep at night. A sixth of the reason he cannot sleep at night.

That is when a luminous, beatific smile comes over Nyota’s face and her hand curls into a loose fist against his sternum, and she says to him, so full of her instinctive, glowing wisdom and adoration for him he could not dream of deserving, “A little love is no reason to lose sleep, babe.” She huddles ever closer to him, closes the space between them on the mattress to lay her forehead against his collarbone and speak into the folds of his t-shirt, say – “We’re just your friends, you know.”

Spock delicately reminds her that they are the first of their kind as he pillows his chin atop her scarfed head without thinking about it – oh, what a relief – bringing an arm around to drape over the curve of her side. His eyelids gain several pounds in weight, suddenly, with her so close and so warm and his head so much emptier than it was before, with the sheer exhaustion of having her there, draining him of what he’s usually so full of with no possible outlet to relieve himself with.

“I know.” Nyota’s fist tightens momentarily between their chests, almost like a shared heart between them. “Still – you don’t have to be alone anymore.”

Again, she is right. She may be somewhat blind to the importance he places on his quiet and his hardness and his certainty and his aloneness, but he does not tell her that. He will leave that to himself to sort out.

At some point, it must be said that it isn’t just the Asperger’s that has made Spock an obelisk of a young man. It isn’t just the passage of time, either. Obviously, he feels. Obviously, there is something there – something loud and burning and full of fire and noise noise so much noise there in all that silence and emptiness. Obviously, silence and emptiness are not all there is to him – you see how the truth he values so much can be so contradictory?

The reality of the matter is this: Spock wants this, this loneliness, this hush, this self-imposed order. He wants this, and it has nothing to do with a psychiatric condition the general medical population cannot even decide truly exists, and it has nothing to do with his father’s hardness and insistence on his constant, unyielding excellence and invariable likeness to him, and it has nothing to do with the fact that he has no earthly idea how to express 69% of the things he is feeling 100% of the time, and it has nothing to do with the fact that growing up was so unbelievably hard for him that his heart had no choice but to up and shut itself down until further notice (which, until very recently, seemed like never) just so that it could survive, and it has nothing to do with the fact that the world has been hellbent on simply not liking Spock until he was old enough to be deemed attractive for his looks and phenomenal (not freakish, or nerdy, or cold) for his genius, his brilliance. It has nothing to do with any of that. He wants this because he wants this because he wants this.
Spock wants to be quiet and hollow and made of hard obsidian – a vase, a ghost town, a sleeper volcano. He likes his silence and his emptiness, his order, his control. He likes being an island. He hates the noise that comes along to break his stillness and the varied forms that come along to fill his vacant spaces, and he hates the chaos and the disruptions and the mess. He hates it when the ships come to shore.

Or he did, before he learned the rare and difficult ability to change his mind.

Now, he is throwing birthday parties and buying dinner for those that he loves (love, that elusive thing he could only ever put his finger on when he sat close to his mother in the evening and pretended not to mind when she held his hand on their walks to and from school every morning and afternoon). Now, he is coming to appreciate that very overwhelming, very human desire for physical contact. Now, he is rehearsing common courtesy and playful banter and there is music that keeps him awake far into the night, music with no certain melody or meter or anything but the sheer similarity of it to them – Nyota a piercing, spirited hymn or her own bright, radiant sonata; Scott an unpredictable, incomprehensible capriccio with jumping notes and frequent switches; Leonard a loud, booming aria, a mournful ballad, a soaring anthem all at once; Pavel a lighthearted scherzo, playful and lively and whimsical, composed of all the highest notes; Hikaru mostly quiet and tranquil – a nocturne – slow and easy and occasionally interposed with brief, beautiful brightness; James a colorful fantasia, or an ongoing crescendo, or a symphony all on his own, cycling and changing and turning every which way, every way Spock cannot help but follow.

He is too often confused by them all, by their faces and their words and the relentless contradiction between the two. All the various degrees of emotion in their expressions, the angles of their brows, lips, cheekbones, the circumference of their pupils mathematical equations he cannot seem to solve, for they often defy and disprove his expectations as well as his expertise. Their voices conveying a thousand unspoken words in a thousand languages everyone save him seems to be fluent in, languages no tutor or textbook could ever hope or want to teach him, all morphemes and phonemes and semantics and pragmatics he could not possibly hope to understand on his best days.

And they are not databases of concrete observations anymore – they are avatars of life and humor and passion and all that which is impossible to define with mere descriptions of their surface traits (abrasive, sarcastic, naïve, whimsical), their interests (garage rock, designer shoes, Georgia peaches, classic film), or their upbringings (stable and fulfilling, rife with confusion and wonder, bustling with activity and vigor, wasted in midair and beer bottles on the back porch). Their companionship is not museum-like, anymore, not made of glass walls which Spock is more than content to simply peer through to observe the exhibit within, no – now?

Now they watch him back. They comment, they question. They reach through those walls as if they do not exist. Had they ever existed?
Spock falls asleep safe within the confines of Nyota’s walls at **12:59 AM**, listening to her sonata play something sweet for him in the back of his mind and chasing the heels of dreams of Aberdeen and Athens and San Francisco and Nairobi and Taganrog and Riverside and Brooklyn, and it occurs to him in his very last moments of consciousness that he would like to be a piece of music himself, maybe, and he never would have wanted that before tonight.

The next morning, after he and Nyota have dressed and she is taking stock of her belongings, packing them neatly into her canvas duffel bag, he reads James’ text.

**[txt]: Aries horoscope 10/13: express yourself**

And he knows he does not know how. He knows the very thought of doing so may terrify him in the way only he can be terrified, nothing wide-eyed or shrieking or trembling about it, his own exceptionally silent sort of fear. He knows that it has always been exceptionally hard for him to even consider doing this, *expressing himself*.

But he also knows that he will try. For **six** others, if not for himself.
“Tonight, I’m going to sit out on the fire escape, eating an apple,

And I’m going to nickname the view ‘Eden’,

And I’m going to look up at those tragic stars with their pagan hearts full of mourning,

And I’m going to say –

‘What a fall.

But what light.

What impossible light.’”

– Alysia Harris.

Chapter End Notes

(lord give me strength to not let gaila and gary mitchell take over this verse so help me god)

SOME LINKS:
- uhura's birthday mixtape, for those interested.
- allrocket men mixtapes.
- my little pocket of the internet (or tumblr, same difference).
- a steadily-growing art tag.
- thoughts, headcanons, musings, and analyses related to this whole thing.
- last but not least, an inspo blog.

as you can see, i’ve gone a little wild.

comments, questions, suggestions - all are welcome here. feel free to point out any grammatical or contextual errors, my sweets. ♥

End Notes

leave me comments, critiques, and suggestions, babes.

- gabi.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!