### Rating: **Mature**

### Archive Warning: **Graphic Depictions Of Violence**

### Category: **M/M**

### Fandom: **Star Trek: Alternate Original Series (Movies)**

### Relationship: **James T. Kirk/Spock, Amanda Grayson/Sarek, Ben Sulu/Hikaru Sulu, Christine Chapel/Nyota Uhura**

### Character: **Spock (Star Trek), James T. Kirk, Christopher Pike, Nyota Uhura, Montgomery "Scotty" Scott, Gaila (Star Trek), Gary Mitchell, Pavel Chekov, Hikaru Sulu, Leonard "Bones" McCoy, Amanda Grayson, Sarek (Star Trek), Robert Wesley, Admiral Marcus, Christine Chapel**

### Additional Tags: **Alternative Universe - Starfleet Academy, Alternate Timelines, Slow Burn, Interspecies Relationship(s), Culture Shock, Alien Culture, Alien Biology, who is really the alien?, questions of identity, POV Alternating, adapting to Earth, Xenophobia, might follow the plot of the new movie(s) later on, world building, Academy Era, Developing Relationship, Developing Friendships, Cadets, Plot, Telepathy, T'hy'la, Vulcan Mind Melds, Vulcan Language, Vulcan Culture, Vulcan Kisses, Friendship, Jim is a little shit but in a good way, Jim is a dork in love, Oblivious Spock, BAMF Spock, Hurt/Comfort, Additional Warnings Apply, Angst with a Happy Ending, there is some emotional sappiness, Original Character(s), Other characters mentioned - Freeform, Nyota and Spock become BFFs, Bones is So Done, Protective Jim, Protective Spock, Childhood Memories, Tarsus IV will be mentioned, Bullying, Kobayashi Maru, Emotional Trauma, there’s no such thing as a no-win scenario, Emotional Spock, Bones is a Good Friend, Uhura is a good friend, everybody good is a good friend, Family, Drama, Space Husbands, First Meetings, Communication because it's important, Relationship Discussions, chapter 5 contains a terrorist attack, Please beware of the warnings, Original Character Death(s), Mother-Son Relationship, First Kiss, Amanda is a good mom and a BAMF okay, Plot that is slowly making more sense, Conspiracy, tw: hate crimes, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD**

### Stats:

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### t’hy’la

by **Itar94**

**Summary**

Jim and Spock meet at the Academy as cadets, and history unfolds.
A story of first meetings, tentative friendships, and findings of self.
(Spans through the Academy Era and onward.)

Notes

(2017-01-09) This is my first venue into the Star Trek fandom; I’ve been reading ST fanfic for a while now, but never tried writing it before. (Yeah I know I should probably finish my other fics before starting something new ... again ... but I can’t help it!) The premise of this fic started as a want to see more of Spock at the Academy, because I love those kind of stories, and I wondered: what if Spock and Jim met at the Academy as cadets? And it simply grew from there. I’m planning to overlap this into the 2009 movie. So this takes place is the alternate ‘Kelvin’ timeline though I’ve changed a few other things, such as the year Spock is born, making him younger than in canon. According to one source I found Spock attended Starfleet Academy when he was only around eighteen years old, and I’ve more or less kept this age and simply bumped it up the timeline to match when Jim et al attend the Academy. I use the reboot version of stardates, so e.g. 2256.20 means the 20th day (January 20) of the year 2256. I try to include a stardate whenever I make larger time jumps to make the scenes easier to understand. This fic will eventually reach past the Academy Era and onward, including (but not necessarily following the plot word-by-word; maybe only the premise or idea of) the reboot movies and the time in-between them. Maybe before, too. We’ll see. Some chapters include more sensitive content than others, e.g. violence. Some of that is mentioned in the tags. To clarify, the chapter summary will specify with warnings when applicable.

Please enjoy reading!

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(2017-09-10) It's been a gap of several months, all since February, but I've finally updated. The tag section has grown considerably and more is to come. Just a clarification: the end notes include a wordlist (Vulcan-English), which is updated with every new chapter. It's listed in the order words appear for the first time, so not alphabetically. As well as publishing chapter 10, I've updated the layout of the whole fic to be uniform and hopefully easier to read, and fixed a couple of grammatical errors where I've found them. I don't have a beta reader so there surely are more errors I haven't noticed. If you find any, please let me know in a comment so that I can fix it! Thank you.

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(2017-10-07) The fic's rating has now been raised from T to M due to violence, xenophobia, and other disturbing themes that may arise in the future.

See the end of the work for more notes.
act i :: part one

Chapter Summary

act i. part one.
Welcome to Earth.

t’hy’la

act i.

part one
nelaya
(noun)
suppression

the act of suppressing; conscious exclusion
of unacceptable desires, thoughts, or memories from the mind

San Francisco Spaceport · Earth
Stardate 2256.212

Earth’s gravitational pull is merely ninety-two point six percent of that of Vulcan, causing his steps to fall too lightly.

It will take time to get used to.

San Francisco Spaceport is a busy place. A multitude of sentients are on the move; thus far all he has seen are humanoid and an overwhelming majority of those human. Shuttles land and take off at predetermined intervals. There is constant noise: the movement of bodies, far-off music from one of the many cafés and shops in the vicinity, voices. Announcements in a multitude of Terran and non-Terran languages made by smooth undeterminable voices. It is nothing like the stillness of the Vulcan he left behind.

There aren’t many Vulcans on Earth - some ambassadors and other officials at the Embassy or elsewhere, part of the Federation. And Vulcans are welcome here, they say. They are one of the founding races of the Federation, after all. But there aren’t any Vulcans in Starfleet. He will be the first at the Academy.

He is carrying very little luggage. Vulcans do not focus on material possessions, and would not form any kind of emotional attachments to such things. Nevertheless he is wearing many layers of clothing, as was recommended by the Vulcan Embassy, including the sweater his mother knitted for him. Her farewell at the station had been graciously reigned in though he could tell she was worried. Human emotion. His father had not been there. He has not spoken with him since his final words with the board of the Vulcan Science Academy - walking away from them is unheard of, until now.

He steps off the shuttle, and for a moment, inexplicable and extremely non-Vulcan, something like desire burns in his lungs to turn back, to step into the shuttlecraft and demand the pilot return them to Vulcan. But he quenches this emotion and moves forward.

He opted to wear gloves, and is now relieved for that choice. People are anxious to get off the platform and onto the street - they push and trample ahead, some with less care than others, and he suppresses the violent need to recoil at the sudden brush of an arm, a hand, an elbow sternly suddenly against his own. He quickens his pace. He reaches the security checkpoint and the queue formed there is somewhat more orderly, and the human behind the desk smiles (in what is the appropriate Terran way though utterly alien to him) at every passenger. The shuttle had travelled past two other planets on its way to Earth, picking up a variety of passengers. Yet many of them are human. There is something about humans, their fearlessness to explore and spread and seize opportunities; something fascinating.

The security guard checks their IDs, nodding and smiling. When he reaches the desk, the guard is somewhat surprised, he thinks, judging by their expression, though he has not yet met that many humans as to be certain to all nuances. They tend to show a lot of emotion through facial expressions and gestures and the posing of the body. Vulcans, being telepathic by nature, do not have this need.
There is no trouble at the checkpoint for him, though there is an Orion who appears to be apprehended just behind him for trying to smuggle some kind of living creature in their luggage. The young Vulcan moves on, outward.

The Port opens up to a large, wide area. There are connections with flights and trains reaching to other parts of the planet, but Spock isn’t going very far.

The journey had been fairly tiresome - but he didn’t want to wait for a Vulcan craft to take him here. Vulcans aren’t ones to talk idly about rumours, but he is aware that his rejection of the Vulcan Science Academy caused a stir. His father’s silence since that moment is somewhat disconcerting. He is not used to it.

His communicator hasn’t chimed and neither has his PADD. After some time, he manages to move through the throng of people and to the outside of the massive building - without touching anyone; even without direct contact he can vaguely feel the press of so many unguarded minds. Humans are usually psi null and are not trained. The swirl, churning, rising, falling, of emotion and thought, is neverending. He grips his bag a little harder. He is aware of receiving a few curious glances.

The damp is much more prevalent than he’d realized it would be. So, too, is the cold, this time of year. It wraps itself around the coastline city unwelcomingly. Another thing it will take time to get used to. The skies are grey with a heavy overhang threatening rain. He consults his PADD, having the foresight to download a map of the city, and quickly calculates a route to the Academy by public transportation.

This, however, turns out to be unnecessary. By the street near the doors a hovercar is waiting, and a middle-aged human male approaches; he is wearing a Starfleet uniform, and his rank is Captain judging by the gleaming stars on his shoulders. He walks with certainly and something which Spock supposes could be pride. Realizing the human is walking with intent toward him, Spock slows his pace to meet him. He hadn’t been aware that anyone would meet him.

Technically the term hasn’t started yet. His arrival doesn’t quite match the schedule due planetary and cultural differences. He has received a brief correspondence from one of the Academy’s educational guidance counselors with practical information, including instructions on housing. Most first-year students have a roommate. Due to his Vulcan heritage he has requested solitary housing. A roommate might inflict negative impact on his studies, especially if they would happen to be psi null and untrained. He has yet to receive an answer to his request.

The human makes a movement as if he were to raise his hand in the customary shaking greeting of Terrans, before abruptly realizing this would be an error with a Vulcan and stopping the motion. Spock’s neutral regard of the man is heightened some. No human he has met thus far has made any such considerations. If they have ever taken into account his race and culture this has mostly taken shape in relentless, quite rude, questions.

“Mr Spock?” The man doesn’t attempt to mangle his full name.

“Affirmative. Hello,” he says, forming the ta’al. “Live long and prosper.”

“Welcome to Earth,” the human says with an easy smile, mirroring the ta’al with only some error, clearly unused to the gesture. Nevertheless, Spock appreciates the effort, even though appreciation is a human emotion. “I’m Captain Christopher Pike. It’s not much of a welcome committee, I know, but it’s not every day we get a Vulcan at the Academy. I’ve got a hovercar here to take you to campus, and if you’d like I could show you around a bit. Have you ever been to Earth before?”

“Yes,” he says, and when he doesn’t elaborate, Captain Pike frowns fleetingly.
They begin to walk toward the parked car, and the Starfleet officer is shown a lot more respect than a lonely Vulcan. No one bumps into them. The driver steps out, offering to pack the bags in the back of the vehicle. Spock allows this and thanks them. His mother would not be pleased if he were rude.

Captain Pike attempts some small talk, but realizes quickly that this is futile. Instead he describes Starfleet - most of which Spock already knows from his own research and education, of course, but it is quite refreshing to hear it from an officer rather than a computer. He also gives an outline of the Academy, its most notable professors, and the way it works. Spock wonders if Captain Pike has greeted any other newcoming non-Terrans to the Academy this way, or if this is a duty chosen at random. This cannot have to do with his father, the Ambassador, since the relation was not specified in this application, and his father doesn’t want him to be here.

Spock quickly dismisses that thought.

They pass through San Francisco, and Spock has not been to Earth since he was very young. He only saw a glimpse of the city at that time, and things constantly change. The landscape is fascinating. Not the industry or the buildings, but the hue of sky, the water. Water will never cease to be so alien. They cross over the Golden Gate Bridge, beneath its red arch, across the water. The main buildings of Starfleet Headquarters rise from the cityscape, wholly alien and somewhat like the educational centers of Shi’kahr, monuments of history and knowledge and peace - that is, at least, the claim. That Starfleet has a military history cannot be denied. One of the reasons why his father so dislikes this choice: it is entirely non-Vulcan, and Starfleet is, for all its commendations and proclamations of peace, still a structure left from times of war and fear. But today its focus lies on exploration and discovery.

Eventually they reach their destination. Captain Pike explains he has an office here at HQ but only uses it sparingly. He prefers to spend his time aboard a ship. The fleet currently consists of forty-four. The forty-fifth is under construction, in a place on the planet called Iowa. Its design is new and somewhat revolutionary, and Pike is planning its crew - he will be her Captain - and is looking to find bright, young cadets. Spock thinks he begins to understand now why Pike, and not any other Starfleet officer or professor, came to meet him. The first Vulcan to attend Starfleet - Pike must want to see whether he is worthy.

“I heard you’re taking the Science Track,” says Pike as they’ve exited the hovercar, waving goodbye to the driver. “What’s going to be your focus?”

Gripping his bag tightly, Spock follows the human across a plaza encircled by tall looming buildings. The plaza is covered in fine stone rather than concrete and long lazy stretches of grass, and it is somewhat a shock, even though he saw how colourfully green and blue the planet was from orbit. This frankly excess use of water - flagrant waste - is alien and slightly disturbing. The grass serves no purpose other than to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

“Computer programming, astrophysics, languages, and chemistry.”

“Ah,” says Pike, his tone of voice difficult to determine: Spock cannot say whether the human is confused or impressed or possibly bemused. He will need to spend more time studying human characteristics, he decides. There is plenty of time to spare if the curriculum is correct. Another shockingly alien thing: according to what he’s read, humans are mostly taught in large groups by a single teacher, and their school schedules are generally comprised of only a few hours of intense lectures and quite a lot of free time. Though their race spends a lot of time asleep - an average of eight point three hours for optimal function. They do not meditate.

There is a lot to get used to.
“Well, since you’ll graduate in 2260 -”

“2258,” Spock interrupts to clarify, and the human blinks as if he’s misheard.

“Ah. Just two years? No one’s graduated in two years.”

“I spoke with a Mrs Coleridge regarding the curriculum,” Spock says, not quite understanding why the Captain seems so shocked. He is not human, and cannot be compared to human cadets. “This will be the optimum pace for me.”

“I see. Well, then you’ll share graduation ceremony with another record-breaker,” Pike says and chuckles, shaking his head, as though unable to contain his private thoughts without using his whole body. Humans.

They enter a building marked as B-30 on the glass doors. The campus is quite large, and this section is devoted to student housing. “Not a lot of freshmen live here,” Pike says as he opens the door, unlocking it with a PIN-code. Because of the so-called summer break there are no students around. Strange, to waste away several weeks instead of studying. “So I’m afraid you’re going to have to put up with the seniors, though, well, maybe it’s better that way. They’re less …” Pike trails off, as if the word he seeks is out of his reach, or does not exist. Spock has been learning Federation Standard English from his mother all of his life, yet sometimes the language is severely limited, and heavily influenced by emotion.

An elevator takes them to the third floor and the room 307. The room is sparsely decorated, which suits Spock just fine, with a bed, a desk, and enough space for his meditation mat. There are also some shelving units - in case he would prefer printed rather than digital books - and the basic utilities of a kitchen. There is also, to his relief, a private bathroom - the shower isn’t sonic but uses water. Another thing to get used to.

“There’s a communal kitchen and lounge to the left. You’re going to share it with a dozen other students once they come here, but right now you’re the only one. There’s a replicator there and some other stuff, though there are plenty of restaurants on-campus,” Pike explains while Spock places his bag on the neatly made bed. “Oh, here.” He hands him a PADD. “There’s a welcoming package, a letter from the principal and some others, and your details to use the campus’ computers. You can change the lock on the door, by the way, to use the fingerprint lock instead of a PIN. Whichever suits best. There are some comm numbers too, if there’s anything you’re wondering, or anything missing. I added mine. Not everyday we get a Vulcan in Starfleet, and if you’re really going to graduate in ‘58, that’ll be the same year we launch our newest ship - if it keeps to schedule, that is.”

Spock nods, as he has observed his mother doing when interacting with non-Vulcans (and sometimes Vulcans), which seems to be the correct thing to do, judging by the lightening of the Captain’s expression. He places the second PADD on his bag after taking a look at the PIN provided for him, memorizing it.

“Now, you’ve had a pretty long trip,” Pike starts saying.

“The journey from Vulcan lasted a hundred and two point three Standard hours,” Spock says without inflection. Now that his hands are free he clasps them behind his back. The freighter he had travelled with had been slow, only capable of Warp Three. Spock could have made the craft move faster, but the pilot would not let anyone into the engine room.

Pike smiles, though not unkindly. “Would you like to eat?”

“I would not be averse to it.”
Two red cadet uniforms arrive in a neatly folded package the next day; two meaning he can wear one and wash the other. They fit well. He also receives a communication from his mother: a short, somewhat fuzzy video file, in which she asks how he finds Earth and if he’s doing well - a very human question. He cannot answer the last, though he can answer the first.

Earth is dazzlingly alien. “It is … damp,” he says instead. He does not say that it is cold, though he’s quite certain that the admission will spur her into knitting another sweater. She does not like hiding her emotions, and he grew up with her fussing and holding his hand before he went through kahs’wan. He sends the message before he can begin to regret it, and then leaves the dorm for the campus’ library.

The library is fascinating. Despite the ease and practicality of PADDs and computers, humans seem to like gathering physical printed copies of bound paper. His mother had brought a few books with her to Vulcan and that was the manner he first began to learn to read Standard - one of the things he became proficient at earlier than most of his peers. To enter the grand building filled with rooms and rooms with books is somewhat like entering a memory: his mother hand a fondness for reading stories to him before kahs'wan. The library’s rules of quiet and stillness are welcome after the shuffle and noise of the streets. It is a sunny day, but Spock spends it indoors, reading. He catches up on Terran history and customs and languages.

Though there are no other students around, there is movement in the form of teachers, cleaning staff, and officers walking from building to building. Students will not begin to arrive for another twelve Terran days. Spock watches, and he reads, and he visits the labs as soon as he is given permission - which is quickly. Apparently the humans do not want him to be bored. This gives him time to begin his studies and perform some experiments at his own leisure.

The days pass.

It is quiet. He does not call the comm numbers; the PADD contains adequate information. He eats alone. The replicator cannot quite make any Vulcan dishes, so he finds a supermarket in the city which sells various non-Terran foodstuffs, including enough to make ploumeek shur. He prefers it to the nearest on-campus restaurant, which turns out to serve few vegan meals with flavour. The cooks know nothing about Vulcan food. He meditates. It is difficult to sleep.

He does not contact his mother on Vulcan outside of the once-a-week allotted timeslot of twenty-five minutes.

Whenever it rains, he looks out in fascination at all this water. He considers learning how to swim. If he had chosen the Command Track the physical demands would no doubt include the skill. The thought of immersing himself in water causes him inexplicable discomfort. The showers are still alien, though he has come to enjoy them somewhat: there is a soothing quality to running water, pooling around his bare feet.

The days pass.

**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco**

**Stardate 2256.224**

It is a Monday when the students begin arriving - trickling at first like fine droplets, then swirling like a torrid river. Some are in uniform, pressed and polished, while some appear much less professional, haphazard even. The majority are human, though there are a few others: a black-eyed Betazoid here, a Trill there. The once so silent corridors are suddenly full of noise. Spock resumes wearing his
gloves. He has spoken with Mrs Coleridge and, due to his heritage, he is allowed to keep wearing them despite them not being regulation, though it took some persuasion to keep it so. His mother will be glad to hear it, he knows. She was worried about the pressure of being around so many unprotected minds for so long.

He doesn’t meet any cadets face-to-face until Tuesday morning. He follows his routine, now established, though he will have to change it as the schedule now is to begin - he will not have the same time to be in the library. No matter. He has read fifty-seven books and made some comments on the material for both the Xenolinguistics I course and Introduction to Astrophysics; if the professors in those subjects are on par with their chosen reading material, then Spock does not look forward to meeting them, as it would be quite a disappointment. Perhaps the VSA would have been preferable, after all.

But no. He will not turn away. It would be undignified.

That Tuesday morning he showers, dresses, and unlocks his door. Outside there is, at last, quiet. It is 04:48 and most humans are not awake yet. He finds the shared kitchen is empty though a great deal messier than usual. After tidying up, Spock has breakfast. Someone has taken the kreyla he had made a batch of two days ago. He resolves to begin to label his boxes of food more clearly, perhaps in several languages in case there is a cadet who does not properly understand Standard.

He doesn’t expect anyone else to be awake, especially considering the rowdiness of last night. He had spent the time in his room then, telling himself that he was meditation because he needed to and not because he did not want to face anyone else.

“You’re Vulcan.”

Spock looks up from his PADD to see a human standing there. He - Spock assumes - is dark-haired and wearing no shoes; in fact not in uniform at all, but obviously in pyjamas. He appears quite tired, with shadows under his eyes.

“Evidently,” Spock says.

“Are you new?”

“Yes.”

The human blinks owlishly before extending a hand over the table. “I’m Gary,” he says. “You?”

“You would not be able to pronounce my name in its entirety.”

He does not take the hand. Clearly the human knows little or nothing about Vulcans. Gary’s face hardens into the hint of a scowl.

“Jeez. Is there any coffee?”

“The replicator does produce that, yes.”

The human walks past him, muttering on his breath - Spock can hear him nonetheless. Pointy-eared freak.

Spock gathers his PADD and leaves. The library will be open in five point six hours. He’ll meditate until then.
Classes begin on Thursday but on Wednesday there is a welcoming speech by the Principal, followed by some general information, and freshmen are meant to go. Some second-year students are also present. Spock arrives well on time. Others do not, evidently quite lost even though they have been supplied with campus maps on their PADDs. Some appear to be making an effort, at least. For humans, Spock supposes, that could be commendable.

Humans are such illogical creatures. He had thought he would have had an easier time adjusting thanks to growing up with his mother, but evidently she is a far superior specimen.

He finds a seat low down in the auditorium, to the left at the end of the first row. The room begins to fill. The humans chatter. Spock folds his gloved hands atop of the PADD in his lap. Proper lectures don’t start until tomorrow. Frankly this is a waste of time, but this is a tradition, Captain Pike had called it, something the Academy always does to welcome new students. Information is shared which any respectable cadet already would have known.

There are mostly humans, though there are eighteen non-Terrans there as well. Still: Humans are in overwhelming majority. Spock notices that no one claims the seat immediately to his right. It does not bother him. In fact, it is a relief.

Not until there is only fifty-six seconds left. Someone clambers past him and into the seat quite loudly, followed by a second person. They are vividly discussing something. Spock does not look at them, keeping his hands still and not fiddling with his PADD.

“– totally did it.”

“You’re a bad liar, Jim.”

“But I did! Don’t be like that, Bones. Hey, mind if I sit here?”

This man isn’t dark-haired but blond, and his eyes are an icy blue, and his smile is even more carefree than Captain Pike’s. It is quite disconcerting. At least he does not offer his hand. Instead he raises it into a surprisingly clumsy and inept ta’al.

Spock returns the gesture.

“Hi.” Jim grins brilliantly. “Didn’t think we had Vulcans here! Nice to meet you. I’m Jim, and that’s my buddy Bones.”

“God knows why I let you follow me around,” grumbles the other human; his hair is darker, not as ruffled as the blonde’s, and he could be somewhere nearer his thirties than twenties. “Name’s Leonard McCoy – ‘Bones’ is his idea of a joke.”

“Hello,” Spock acknowledges.

“So, watcha in for?” asks the one identified as Jim cheerfully.

Spock considers the cadet. His hair is a bit rumpled, and his uniform somewhat askew, and he is very animate as he speaks. He does not give a first good impression. “I am not ‘in’ for anything.”

“Oh - I mean, which Track are you studying?”

“Science.”

“Awesome. Hey, why aren’t you at the VSA? I thought that Vulcans only went there …”
Before he can answer, Mrs Coleridge enters the room. Everyone hushes down until, after a moment, the guidance counselor clears her throat and begins to speak.

As predicted, Spock hears no new or relevant information, though he sits straight-backed and at attention as is appropriate. Toward the end of the hour, it seems he is the only cadet doing so. The only time the human next to him perks up and does not appear half-asleep is when Admiral Marcus takes center stage to welcome the cadets by showing some holograms of famous Fleet ships, including mentioning the one still under construction.

“That’s being built right in my home town, y’know,” Jim whispers excitedly on his breath, leaning too close for comfort. Spock has to subtly lean away from him. The human’s breath is warm.

Afterward, the cadets are released for the day. Yes, clearly a waste of time. Spock gathers his PADD and leaves the auditory while Jim is busy talking with Leonard, and heads toward his dormitory. Perhaps the kitchen is in a better state than this morning.

It is not. Nor is it unoccupied. He glances inside to see a number of cadets sitting around the table and in the couches, talking. They all talk. It is a wonder that they ever cease talking to think in order to get things accomplished.

For once the thought of poorly-flavoured campus cafeteria food is a bit more appetizing than standing in front of that stove himself.

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Professor Riker’s knowledge of xenolinguistics is clearly inadequate and yet he refuses to acknowledge this. He does not acknowledge the problematic views being proposed as ‘facts’ by the textbooks. He does not acknowledge that half of the class aren’t paying attention at all, chattering or busying themselves with their PADDs or simply asleep. Nor does he acknowledge Spock’s raised hand, since Professor Riker keeps droning on and on without looking up from the board, which is cluttered without any sense of direction.

It is the first lecture. This cannot be Starfleet standard.

Spock keeps his hand raised for approximately six point nine minutes before the Professor notices. The human clearly did not anticipate this.

“Yes, cadet, do you have a question?”

“Not as such, sir. This reading material is flawed, especially concerning the learning of Terran languages if one is of non-Terran origin.”

The room, previously full of whispers, falls utterly silent. Someone is shaken out of their sleep. The board marker clatters nervously from the Professor’s old hand.

“And what exactly is wrong about it, cadet?”

Spock, who has had over nearly seven minutes now to formulate a good argument, stands up, hands clasped behind his back, and speaks. The other cadets have ceased gossiping with each other and fiddling with their PADDs - they are staring at him. Professor Riker’s face blanches steadily.

He doesn’t attend the second lecture of Xenolinguistics 1.

“Cadet Spock, do you know why you’re here?”
Yes. And no. He does not understand it. As far as he is aware, being called to an officer’s office is a sign of bad behaviour or poor studies. If this was the VSA, such an occurrence would no doubt mean expulsion. Spock stands ramrod still, hands behind his back. Captain Pike’s expression is hard to read. He does not allow to let his hands tremble.

“You can’t make your professors cry during your first day. That’s what the Principal wanted me to say so there you have it. Actually, we’ve gotten some complaints about Riker before, but - well, Starfleet isn’t picture perfect, as you might have realized. There’s a lack of funding in certain areas, a loss of focus on things that are actually important, but not everyone thinks so.”

Spock says nothing.

“You’re not in trouble, son. Don’t worry about it,” Pike says then. It is an odd manner of address, very familiar, yet Spock finds himself not reacting negatively to it. “Mrs Coleridge obviously severely underestimated you. There’s an entrance exam you’ll be required to take for the subject, but if you pass that, you can go right onto Xenolinguistics 2. In fact, if you’d like, I could arrange that you have similar tests in other subjects to see what suits you best.”

That is surprising, and also a relief. He will not have to tell his mother that he has failed.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Now that that’s out of the way - how’s everything going?”

“I do not understand the query,” Spock admits.

Pike smiles gently. “How do you find your experience with Starfleet so far?”

“It is adequate.”

“Have you got any hobbies? There are plenty of clubs. Everything’s not just about studying.”

He does remember the list mentioned in the welcoming package. Most has not seemed appealing. Besides, to waste time in such a matter is decidedly non-Vulcan.

Perhaps I will venture to explore such venues later,” Spock says.

“Of course. That’s all I wanted to hear. Command is kind of anxious not to disappoint our only Vulcan.”

“I have no complaints.”

“Don’t hesitate to call me if you do.”

Human education is highly illogical. How can they expect every student to excel to their best capacity by having as many as a hundred of them in the same room, listening to one teacher? Two students do not function optimally at the same pace - a hundred certainly do not.

His mother had warned him about this system. It is still … disconcerting. Despite having endured several Terran days in this manner, there are times when he thinks about the effectiveness of the Vulcan educational system. An institution of learning should focus on just that.

At least this Professor is much more competent at both teaching and at their subject than Professor Riker, and seems to like asking their student questions and debate with them. This also makes the students more attentive. Fewer cadets are sitting half-asleep. Even if they are human, the teacher
possesses a high IQ.

Spock sits in the first row, as per usual. He does not take notes, thanks to his eidetic memory. Dr Jacques’ description of quantum computing is both evocative and mostly correct.

“Psst.”

At first Spock attempts to ignore this noise. Then something softly pokes his shoulder. He tilts his head minutely to the side.

“Hey.”

It’s the cadet from before. Jim.

“I thought you were a first-year student?”

Interrupting a lecture to ask such a vague question is both illogical and unwise. If the teacher discovers it, Jim could get in trouble, and Spock is in no mood to be caused the same because of that. But Jim pokes his shoulder again, refusing to cease.

“Too smart for the introductory courses, huh?” Jim whispers, leaning over the back of Spock’s seat. “What’s your name?”

“Cadet Kirk, do you have anything to say to the class?”

Jim glances up at Dr Jacques, smiling charmingly, though they do not seem amused or impressed. “Uh, not right now, doc. If I got a moment I’m sure I could think of something.”

“Anything to do with computer sciences?”

“Now that you mention it …”

The teacher shakes their head. “As I was saying - to make warp calculations, a new way of computer thinking had to be developed …”

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Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.238

The replicator still cannot produce proper ploumeek shur, and for once the kitchen is unoccupied - mostly, he suspects, because it’s 02:32 in the morning. Though not all cadets are asleep at this time, campus is relatively silent. He begins making preparations only to notice that some ingredients are missing since last time shopped groceries, as he did a few times before the term started. No matter. There are other things he can make. He has become quite good at improvising when it comes to food in the last few weeks.

His mother’s last message was brief. She was going to attend an important conference and didn’t have the time to their usual allotted time for a real-time video call. Not wanting to impose, he had not asked that they adjusted their schedule. Instead he received an email. It sufficed. She is well, she wrote, and father too though Spock had not asked. He suspects it will take a long time before his father will acknowledge him again. As he cooks he considers the best reply to the message. She expects him to elaborate about his studies and how he is doing. How he feels.

He prefers not to think about emotion. The onslaught of unprotected minds through all hours of day can sometimes be -
He wears his gloves.

Someone is walking through the corridor. His ears are sensitive enough to pick up their footsteps. After a moment, doors slide open, and a human female walks in. Her dark hair is tied back in a hasty, yet elegant manner, a knot. She pauses on the threshold to look at him.

“Oh, hi. Didn’t know anyone was here. Have you seen a communicator lying around?”

Spock shakes his head negative once.

“I think I’ve lost mine somewhere here last night, and Gaila won’t let me keep borrowing hers.” The cadet is frustrated. “I’m Nyota Uhura, by the way.” She raises her hand in a smooth, flawless ta’al. “Dif-tor heh smusma.”

To speak his native tongue is refreshing, and the human speaks the Modern Golic dialect rather well for a cadet – that is the only Vulcan language variant being offered as a course here at the Academy. “Na’shaya. I am Spock. Are you a student of languages?”

“Yeah, Xenolinguistics is my main area; I hope to work as a Communications Officer aboard a starship one day,” Nyota says. She does not smile in the way many other humans do; a bit more restricted, as if she is aware that emotional human expressions mean little to a Vulcan and therefore are redundant. “I’ve never met a Vulcan before, so I hope that wasn’t too bad.”

“It was adequate. The human tongue cannot pronounce all of the sounds of the Vulcan language.”

“Tell me about it,” she laughs, and Spock wonders whether this is to be interpreted literally or if this is one of their many idioms. “Wait, don’t tell me, you’re the cadet who made Professor Riker cry?”

“It was not my intention.”

“Well, he’s kind of -” She makes a gesture with her hand, one which Spock cannot interpret. “So don’t worry about it.”

Captain Pike had said the same. Spock wonders why Starfleet would employ such a man if both officers and cadets are of the same opinion of the Professor’s teaching abilities.

“Anyway. You haven’t seen that communicator? Damn. Got to get a new one. Well, it was nice meeting you.”

Nyota leaves.

*Perhaps not all humans are wholly illogical*, Spock thinks, stirring the pasta. It is a foodstuff which many cadets seem to favour, mainly because it requires little culinary skills to make. Tomorrow, he decides, he will purchase the correct ingredients to make *ploumeek shur*.

The library is quiet when every other place is noisy. The librarians recognize him well by now; indeed, they seem pleased when he visits. He always returns the books on time and in good condition.

He finds a table on the second floor, near a window overlooking the campus main plaza. He spends a few hours there, reading and taking note of some important arguments and facts which will be useful in the upcoming course in advanced chemistry. After speaking with Mrs Coleridge, he has decided to take on a second Track, in Command, mainly because they offered some quite interesting classes there. Mrs Coleridge had practically sweated with anxious nervousness as Spock entered her
office to explain that the pace of the curriculum is too slow for a Vulcan; the guidance counselor clearly does not come in contact with many students of this caliber. Now his days are more on par with what they used to be.

The idea of a two-day weekend with a break from studies is alien. Even though cadets are supposed to keep working, few do so, and the teachers are aware. Strange.

Once more Captain Pike has ‘checked up on him’, as the human had put it. In a few weeks he will be leaving San Francisco on a six-month mission aboard the USS *Farragut*; many cadets will no doubt be flocking to see the take-off. Spock had met Pike’s First Officer, Number One, that time. After this mission Number One is expected to become a Captain herself, taking over the *Farragut*.

To be honest, Spock has not put much thought yet on the matter of starships. He assumes he will become a Chief Science Officer rather quickly, and Captain Pike has made it clear that he considers him one of the top cadets to one day serve under him. Still: he needs to make it through the first year of the Academy first. This is time for learning.

Spock has moved on from the book on chemistry and is mid-way through *Interpreting Orion Poetry (3rd abridged edition)*, almost so deeply immersed that, suddenly, he realizes that someone is staring at him.

He has become used to staring. He is the only Vulcan at Starfleet Academy. Other non-Terrans do not stare, but there is something about humans - their relentless curiosity about the unknown.

He had been warned by his mother about the dangers of xenophobia, and understood that it is, sadly, still burning and alive. There are news headlines sometimes about the Keep Earth Human League - savage attacks - crimes taking place in the street - about the humans’ own hesitance to call it hate crimes – all of that even though laws have become steadily better and more inclusive over the decades. Interspecies relationships are more and more accepted. Medical assistance is available in Federation space for couples who wish for children when genetic incompatibility complicates matters. Aliens can live on Earth, theoretically without fear of being excluded. And yet - and yet.

Spock glances up from the book.

It’s the cadet. Jim. He’s sitting by the opposite table twelve feet away, under the rays of sun streaming through the window making his hair look golden. He’s got a number of PADDs and notebooks spread out in front of him, though he doesn’t pay them any attention. Instead the cadet is scribbling something at a piece of paper and then he holds it up so that Spock can see:

**WHAT R U READING?**

Spock does not frown, though his eyes narrow slightly. Why is the cadet not using proper Standard English when it would clearly not be much of an effort?

When he doesn’t immediately produce an answer, the cadet holds up another note.

**LET ME C?**

Despite the strange vernacular, context reveals what the other cadet wants. Holding back a sigh, Spock raises the book so that the human can see the cover. He was not aware that the cadet was taking the Advanced Xenolinguistics course or would be interested in its material.

Jim’s face breaks into a wide smile, and then the cadet abandons his own table, gathering his things and walking over to Spock’s. The Vulcan is fairly alarmed. He had not meant for this conversation to
be an invitation to socialize.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt or anything,” Jim says.

“Clearly you did so regardless,” Spock says coolly, watching the cadet drop his PADDs and notebooks on the table with little care for the clatter, clamorous in the library.

“You speak Orion?”

“Affirmative. May I assist you, cadet?”

“Wow, third degree, and I didn’t even do anything inappropriate,” mutters Jim. “I never caught your name, by the way.”

“A human would not be able to pronounce it.”

Instead of displaying the distinct sourness that cadet Gary Mitchell earlier had, Jim’s smile darkens but doesn’t disappear. There is something almost predatory about it. “Try me.”

Spock relents to render the beginning of his full name in an approximation to Standard.

“S’chn T’gai Spock. See, not that hard.” The cadet is smirking.

“Your pronunciation is adequate.”

Apparently the human considers this to be high praise, and beams. “It’s a good name, by the way. Is that all of it?”

The cadet is very curious and somewhat trying. And yet, there is something …

Jim isn’t speaking with him as if he is an alien and something inherently different and therefore something that cannot ever be understood.

“My full name is not something I would disclose to outsiders,” Spock says eventually. “May I ask why you are wondering these things?”

“Uh. Right.” Abruptly Jim moves away, browsing hastily through the mess on the desk, and pulling out a PADD. The screen gleams brightly. “I’ve got this assignment, I’m writing about non-Earth cultures and I thought it’d be pretty interesting to talk about Vulcan culture.”

“Cultures,” Spock corrects him.

“Plural. Right. Make this harder for me, will you.”

“I did not intend to make anything harder,” the Vulcan says blankly.

“Ah, uh, don’t worry about it. D’you think you could be my case study? And, in turn, if you ever need help with an assignment or whatever, I’m here. I thought I’d include something about culture clashes. It’s a pretty big thing to move from another region so I imagine it’s kind of a shock to come to a totally different planet. Unless you’re born here on Earth?” Jim adds, curiously.

“Negative. I was born on Vulcan.”

“Great! So, would you be okay with it? It’ll mention no names. Just some questions and stuff about -stuff.”
“I … would not be averse to it, cadet.”

“Jim. Call me Jim.”

“All right - Jim.”

“Awesome,” Jim says. “So, I haven’t really got it all worked out yet - how about we meet over a coffee or something once I’ve figured out which questions I want to ask? Here, let me give you my comm number.” Without further ado, the cadet rips out a paper from his notebook and scribbles down a string of numbers. “How’s later this week?”

Spock clicks on his PADD, summoning his schedule to see whether any time would be appropriate for this interview. The human cadet manages to get a glimpse of the screen and lets out a low whistle. “Advanced xenolinguistics, chemistry, and computer science all at once? I thought freshmen didn’t do those courses.”

“I have been advised by the guidance counselor to take on additional courses, though you are correct that I am, in your vernacular, a ‘freshman’.”

“We’re in the same astrophysics class,” Jim exclaims. “Nice.” He eyes the schedule for a moment. “I’m on the Command Track. Y’know, it was a bit of a bet, really. I’m going to do it in three years - only two more to go. No one else has done it before.” The last words are spoken not without smugness.

Interesting. Could this be the cadet which Pike mentioned when he first took him from the spaceport to campus, the ‘other record-breaker’? For a human, this would indeed be a challenge.

“Then we shall graduate at the same time,” Spock says.

The human releases a low whistle. “I thought I was in for a rough ride.”

Spock simply looks at him, uncomprehending. “This is a satisfying pace for a curriculum.”

“Right. Keep forgetting you’re Vulcan and, like, twelve times smarter than anyone else around. Man, I guess Command must’ve wet their pants in excitement when you signed up.”

“There was an expression of excitement, yes.”

“So - how about that coffee?”

“Friday between twenty and twenty-two hours is fine,” Spock says, indicating the blank spot. He could shift his meditation schedule, as he doubts the human would function well at his next blank spot, which is four hours later. Humans need their sleep.

“Then Friday it is,” Jim smiles. “See you then, Spock.”

And then the cadet is gone.

Spock finds he is only able to concentrate at eighty-one point four percent of his full capacity after that. He leaves the library in search for tea. That will clear his mind.
Chapter Summary

act i. part two.

The power of words.

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hishel

(noun)

stress

(i) importance, significance, or emphasis placed on something;
(ii) a mentally or emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition occurring in response to adverse external influences

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Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.242

“Spock! It’s so good to see you.”

“Hello, mother. It is good to see you as well.”

“Are you sleeping well? You look so thin and pale - are you eating? Is the weather bothering you?”

“It is … somewhat cold.” He is now wearing an extra layer of thermal underwear under his uniform. Knitted sweaters are not regulation. “I am eating well, mother.”

“I’ll knit you another sweater, dear,” Amanda says. The lines in her face betray her concern. “And your studies?”

“Adequate. My curriculum has been adjusted to more properly fit my needs.”

“That’s good. Have you made any friends?”

He does not frown, but almost. “Vulcans do not have friends.”

His mother sighs. “I know you think that, but … give it time. Even Vulcans need to have at least someone to be close to. Are you being treated badly by anyone?”

“No, mother.”

He does not mention the incident when a human cadet had thought it amusing to disrupt his chemistry laboratory session by attempting to switch his samples. Spock had smelled that something was off, and found out before anything more could occur. Had he continued the experiment with the faulty chemicals, the result could have been disastrous. But it had been avoided, and the teacher
notified, and there is no need to worry his mother unduly.

He does mention that humans are illogical, and there are some who are less so than others. “A linguistics student lives in the same hallways as I,” he amends as most things he has said thus far imply negative things about the human race. “She is quite agreeable.”

He has now assisted Nyota on more than one occasion with studying. The fact that she can hold an adequate conversation in modern standard Vulcan is also uprising and a key factor as to their continued socializing.

“That’s good. That’s really good to hear,” Amanda says, exhaling with relief. “I don’t want you to be isolated. It’s not good for you.”

“I am not. There is no need for concern, mother.”

There are times when he does not eat lunch in his dorm, but utilizes the student cafeteria near the plaza. It is usually packed with far too many people for comfort. Today, however, there are more non-Terrans than humans on site. The cafeteria has advertised for some time now that they’re doing a special non-Terran menu, including some rarer Vulcan dishes, the ingredients of which Spock has been unable to procure.

The mass of humanoids is disconcerting, but he is getting used to it, slowly, slowly. The lectures are getting easier (even if the learning method still is highly illogical).

The food is better than anticipated – they offer vash g’ralth which he hasn’t tasted since he left Vulcan due to being unable to find some of the necessary ingredients. The spicing is correct. Spock has claimed a table in a somewhat secluded corner so that as few people as possible can pass by. He has briefly considered contacting a Vulcan mind healer for advice on prolonged contact with psi nulls, but decided against it. Mind Healers are … disconcerting. And he knows his mother is aware of this illogical emotion concerning Mind Healers, and she would only worry if she found out he had contacted one.

While he eats, he studies the PADD in front of him. The essay is due in two weeks, but it seems he is the only student in the class yet to have actually begun writing it. Proofreading while eating means that he is merely making the most effective use of his time.

Humans tend to be quite loud. The two who happen to sit next to his table are no exception. At first, Spock can ignore them. They speak of nonsensical things.

A few minutes pass. He has nearly finished the food. The pair’s argument is rising in pitch, and Spock sends them a sharp look, but the two are too busy to notice. One of them is speaking vividly using both his mouth and his hands, the food forgotten.

“No, no! Zhat’s wrong,” argues the curly-haired one. The voice is young and the accent Russian, if Spock is identifying it correctly. “Look, you know your flowers, I know my warp drives.”

“Cochrane invented it and it was the first time anyone flew faster-than-light. I read it in Warp Through the Ages,” interrupts the first, the dark-haired one.

“That statement is incorrect,” Spock says.

The two pause, turning to look at him. The Russian is indeed young and stares at him wide-eyed. It could be he has never seen a Vulcan before.
“While the human Cochrane is credited with the invention of the gravimetric field displacement manifold which is the basis of the warp technology in use by Starfleet today, other cultures had developed other forms of faster-than-light travel much earlier than 2063, including Vulcans.”

“Like I said!” exclaims the Russian.

“Uh,” says the other uncertainly, “who are you?”

“I am Spock.”

“Hello!” says the Russian enthusiastically, sticking out his hand before pulling it back quickly. “Do Vulcans shake hands …?”

“No.”

“Oh. Sorry.” The cadet chuckles awkwardly.

“There is no offense where none is taken.”

The cadet nods, perhaps conflicted; it is the human way to apologize for even the smallest of errors rather than merely correcting them. “I’m Pavel Andreievich Chekov, and this is -”

“Hikaru Sulu,” says the other with a nod. “Hi.”

Spock forms the ta’al.

“Are you in the Science Track too?” Chekov asks curiously.

“Affirmative.” He had not meant to interrupt to small-talk, only correct an obvious error. To let a cadet believe a faulty fact without alerting them would be illogical. “I must return to my studies now.”

“Sure,” says Sulu, waving a hand. “See you around, I guess.”

“Bye, Spock!”

“… which is another great example of a language isolate. And that concludes today’s seminar. Please remember to read chapters five through seven until Monday, and consider the questions on the board for the discussion.”

Like a great heaving sigh, rushing through the room, there is clatter as every student gathers their things and moves to leave. The teacher remains by the lectern for a moment longer, sorting through some papers and disconnecting their PADD from the display screen.

Spock remains sitting for twenty-two seconds so that the room is quieter and clearer until he, too, stands up. He tucks his PADD into the bag slung over his shoulder. Before he can cross the threshold, the Professor halts him.

“Cadet Spock, do you have a moment?”

Obligingly he returns to the desk. “Yes, Professor.”

“I’ve noticed you’re quite well-read in the course material. Your results are more than excellent. How do you find the class?”
She probably means the time spent, not the people. “Adequate.”

“Okay,” she says, regarding him with a curious but not ill-willing look. “How about a challenge? I’ve got a lot of students this year, quite a lot of work. If you’d like I could talk with the Principal about having you TA this class.”

“What exactly would this task require?”

“You would help me with instruction and grading and some other things related to the class. If you’d like you might get to hold a lecture or two of your own. It would reflect very well on your grades.”

It does sound like an interesting challenge, and his curriculum would allow this.

“You don’t need to give an answer right away,” the Professor adds. “Think about it.”


Friday comes, and he realizes he will have to meet with Jim for his interview. He hesitates (though he does not acknowledge this fact) before sending a message to the comm number Jim had left him, asking where they should meet.

There’s an off-campus café one block down Jim suggests, saying their coffee is good, and they serve some nice sandwiches. Spock finds no reason to object this choice.

He changes from his red uniform, putting it in the laundry basket, and opts for the clothes he had worn when first arriving in San Francisco. The warmth of the knitted sweater is welcome.

Jim is waiting outside of the café. He, too, is out of uniform, wearing a pair of dark frayed jeans and a leather jacket. “It’s a fake,” the human says, gesturing at the jacket. “You guys are vegan, right?”

“Affirmative.”

The café is slightly dark and the air hot - not stifling, certainly not for a Vulcan. He supposes this is what his mother could call ‘cozy’. The walls are lined with twentieth century style photographs of old landscapes, and there are many couches rather than chairs. Jim orders a coffee, black. They also serve various kinds of tea. Spock cradles the cup of green tea and follows Jim to a spot near a window, where they can see the city in twilight. The human sets up his PADD so that he can take notes.

“So I didn’t really get around to the whole preparing-questions-beforehand part,” he says. “I’m just gonna improvise.”

Spock sips his tea.

The human swirls the digital pen over the screen of the PADD. There is something about the action which almost conveys anxiousness or anticipation. It’s hard to tell which. “Have you been to Earth before? I mean, before Starfleet.”

“Yes.” The look Jim sends him urges him to elaborate. “I have visited four times before as a child.”

“But not like permanently living here?”

“Negative. My longest visit previously was for two point three Terran months.”

Jim drinks some of his coffee. “Why? If you want to share, that is.”
“Two occasions involved visits to family relations here. The other two were due to my father, who is an Ambassador.”

“Family? Not a lot of Vulcans live on Earth.”

“They are not Vulcan,” Spock finds himself revealing. And this is a fact he does not often share. Not out of … not out of shame, he tells himself; Vulcans do not feel shame. Vulcans do not let emotions guide them in such a manner. “My mother is human.”

Jim’s eyes widen. “No way! Cool. I’d never have guessed. You’re very … Vulcan.”

“I was raised primarily on Vulcan in accordance with Vulcan culture and beliefs,” Spock says.

“So why Starfleet then, huh? I mean, the Vulcan Science Academy is meant to be the best of the best.”

“I …” He falters. Jim is a stranger. And yet there is an ease in their conversation which he has not shared with many outside of his mother. While Jim has assured him that this case study of his will not involve mentioning any personal information or names, it is still easy to figure out who he is - he is the only Vulcan attending Starfleet Academy, after all. “I did apply to both the Vulcan Science Academy and Starfleet. The Academy board accepted my application. However, I found Starfleet preferable for a number of reasons. The elders of the board implied that, given my status as a human-Vulcan hybrid, I had a clear disadvantage compared to my peers and am therefore inferior. No other non-Vulcan has ever been admitted to the VSA. They – spoke of my mother as inferior because she is human. I told them that they would not want VSA’s record sullied by a hybrid. Therefore I chose to go to Earth.”

Jim is gaping. For a moment, Spock fears the human is in disgust and shock, and will promptly excuse himself to leave.

“Inferior!?” Jim splutters. And he sounds … outraged. Shocked, but not disgusted. “What the fuck.”

Fascinating.

Spock nods blankly. “Affirmative.”

The human closes his mouth and shakes his head. “Well. I’m glad you told them to fuck off. You told them to, didn’t you?”

“I did no such thing,” Spock protests.

“Oh yeah? Cause to me it sounds like you did. Assholes.”

That is a new term to him. He assumes it does not apply to the literal definition in this case. “What is …?”

Jim laughs, though it is somewhat dark and contained. “Someone who’s clearly out of their mind. Okay, so maybe you didn’t tell them to fuck off. And they were rude to your mom? Jeez. I thought Vulcans wouldn’t be rude with the whole ‘no emotions’ and stuff - y’know, no grudges.”

“We are not incapable of emotion. We suppress them in favour of logic,” Spock rights him. “There are some Vulcans who are quite capable of holding grudges.”

Absurdly, he wonders where Sybok is - if he is even alive. He has not heard from or seen his half-brother in sixteen Standard years.
Perhaps that is for the best. Sybok is \textit{v’tosh ka’tur} - one who has abandoned logic in favour of emotion. Embracing it. He’s dangerous, and their father did not want his influence in Spock’s life. His human traits could make him slip down that path even more easily; another reason why Spock chose to go through \textit{kahs’wan} at the age of eight, whereas most Vulcan children choose to do it a few years later. He had needed to prove he was no worse than them. No less worthy. No less Vulcan.

Jim isn’t touching his coffee anymore.

“I hate that notion. Y’know, that there were these people who were – \textit{better}, and you had to live up to them.” Jim averts his gaze, glancing out the window at the falling night. The electrical lights of the city twinkle like a thousand merry stars. “My dad was like that. ‘Saved over eight hundred people – I dare you to do better’. That’s what Captain Pike said when he recruited me for Starfleet.”

“Who was he?”

“George Kirk.”

It takes a second to recall where he heard that name before. The USS \textit{Kelvin}. The disaster of the starship suddenly being attacked by an unknown enemy – whispers of Romulans, some kind of secret weapon, a ship with technology no one should yet have access to, but it has never been proved. The incident occurred before Spock was born on Vulcan, and he had taken some fascination with the story of the unknown vessel’s sudden appearance which seemed to defy the laws of physics as they are known. And Starfleet’s history courses include the \textit{Kelvin} as a major event; the Captain had sacrificed himself, leaving his First Officer, Kirk, in command, and he too lost his life that day. He had not known that Kirk had a son.

There is a certain likeness. Spock has seen photographs in the history files. Jim has his eyes. Piercingly blue, the oceans of the Earth from orbit.

What a strange, uncharacteristic thought; Spock usually does not observe the colours of people’s eyes in any such – almost poetic – terms.

“My condolences.”

“It’s fine,” Jim says, shrugging. His smile is not the same as it was before. \textit{There are variations of fine}, his mother once had said. That was true. It applies. “We’re not here to talk about me, anyway. How do you find Earth?”

“It is highly illogical,” Spock answers without hesitation.

Jim laughs. “You’re going to hate it here,” he says brightly.

Yes, his hypothesis is correct: humans are highly illogical.

They end up speaking for nearly two hours. The conversation veers from whichever questions Jim had had about his experience on Earth, about culture clashes, toward other matters.

He finds out that Jim did indeed join Starfleet on a bet, challenged by Captain Pike. They both agree that Pike is an agreeable man. Jim explains that the expression ‘son’, which Pike has used to address him more than once, isn’t demeaning or an insult, but a human way to show care even though there are no bonds of blood or family between them. As humans are such an alien species, Spock can accept these quirks of their ways.
He finds out that Jim likes 21st century movies and music, grew up on a small farm in Riverside, Iowa, and that he’s good at chess. They agree to play a match sometime. It would be a fascinating challenge. He also finds out that Jim does not like to speak of his childhood; a sentiment which Spock shares, so he does not pry. Jim grew up without knowing a father against whom he is constantly weighed and compared - that cannot be easy for an emotional human. He finds out that he has a brother who’s run away. Spock finds himself mentioning his half-brother, though not by name, as also being the ‘black sheep of the family’ as Jim puts it.

He finds out that Jim would rather not be called by his proper first name, James, nor will he reveal what the T. of his middle name is an abbreviation of. Jim is interested in languages but prefers astrophysics and mathematics and the stars most of all. He does not divulge his IQ, though Spock suspects this may be quite high for a human. (Spock had taken the test on the advice of Mrs Coleridge, despite arguing that such Earth-made measurements are hardly fair since he is not fully human.)

At 10:08, Spock realizes he had planned to do his laundry at this hour. It’s both inefficient and rude to book the facilities without actually using them. Thankfully Jim does not react poorly when he has to leave.

“Let me walk you back,” the young man smiles. “Where’s your dorm?”

“Building B-30, level three.”

“Without a roommate? Nice. I’m rooming with Bones. It’s all right, but, man, when he’s not gotten his coffee in the morning … ugh. Nightmare.”

They step out into the night air. It is chill and somewhat damp. Spock had not taken a scarf, and now wishes he had. He folds his hands in the pockets of his undertunic, burying them beneath the knitted sweater. Jim on the other hand does not seem as affected, drawing a few deep breaths as if to taste the air itself.

It is a swift nine minute walk back to campus. Being a Friday - a day when many cadets want to ‘party’ - there is a liveliness which would not occur on a Monday night. Many windows are alight. Some are open, and from them pour voices and music.

“Can we do this again?” Jim asks as they reach the gates and walk toward the plaza.

The idea is not objectionable. “Affirmative.”

“So, uh, I guess this is it. I don’t think you’re going to join the party tonight, huh?”

“I would prefer not to.”

Jim grins. “See you later, then.” Before he walks away, the human pats his back, slinging an arm over it. It’s a strange gesture, and Spock stills completely. The young man’s hands are broad and not as warm as a Vulcan’s would be, and -

Such thoughts are both illogical and inappropriate.

“That’s a human way of saying goodbye to a friend.”

Spock nods, uncertain, and makes no move to return the gesture. “I see.”

“What’s the Vulcan way?”
“Vulcans do not have friends.”

The expression on Jim’s face is unreadable. “Okay,” he says. His tone has changed. “Well. Bye then.”

The human crosses the plaza, not toward any dormitories but where some of the laboratories are located. He had not revealed where he lives.

Spock should not be wondering.

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**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth**

**Stardate 2256.251**

He has arranged time for experiments of his own in Lab 12 this morning. At 09:38, the teacher of the lecture meant to start at 10:00 sends an email to all cadets that the seminar is cancelled due to illness, and Spock realizes this is another serious flaw of human-style education. The computer governing a Vulcan learning bowl would not fall ill, leaving students to suffer for it. Albeit personally he does not suffer, since he has already read all appropriate course material. This leaves him having time for experiments for the rest of the day. A comm call settles it so that he can have access to Lab 12 for another four hours.

Spock is carefully weighing some potassium nitrate when the door opens.

“Sorry, am I interrupting something?”

He does not turn around suddenly, though he has a strange urge to. Instead he completes the task at hand, taking some notes with his left hand. “Hello, Jim,” he says without looking up. “Do you require use of this laboratory?”

“I’d sort of talked Ms Teguh into letting me use Lab 21 today, but it can wait.”

“This is Lab 12, not 21.”

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed.”

Since Jim has demonstrated his ability to both read and write, Spock cannot see how he could have confused the two numbers, especially since the two labs lie in two wholly different buildings. Lab 21 is also meant for experiments in physics, primarily, not in chemistry.

“I will vacate this lab in approximately four hours,” Spock adds. “You may use it then.”

“What’s happening?” Jim asks. He does not seem worried that he will have to wait four hours to perform his own experiments.

Spock explains in factual terms what his hypothesis is and what materials he is using, and Jim nods along. If normal human social relationships include the discussion of chemical reactions, Spock is uncertain; his mother had never mentioned such things. But there are many different humans, as there are many different Vulcans.

“Mind if I hang around? I can help out.”

“I … That would be - fine,” Spock says, for once very unsure whether that is a good idea. He does not know how proficient Jim is. They share a course in Astrophysics, though Jim is absent quite a lot of the time. Beside their conversation in the library and the café, he knows very little about him. “As
long as you do not disturb the experiment.”

Smiling, Jim grabs a spare coat and plastic glasses. At least the cadet is aware of normal security procedures. “Just tell me what to do.”

He’s sitting in lecture hall A-23 listening to Dr Klemmt speaking of the basics of warp engines, which is an interesting subject. Today he isn’t sitting in the first row, but the fourth, and Jim isn’t sitting next to him - Spock assumes the cadet, whose schedule means he should be here, is late. This is not unusual for him; yet Jim’s grades do not appear to be suffering greatly. The cadet’s mind is clearly bright and still he does not utilize his time here are the Academy to its fullest. Illogical.

Jim does not appear until half-way through the seminar, his uniform askew, and he claims a seat in the back row near the door. Only a few minutes pass until Spock feels a slight buzz in his trouser pocket. If he were human he would have frowned. He pulls out the communicator. The screen is lit up with two new messages sent in rapid succession.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
would u rather visit andevian ii or gedi prime

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
I heard gedi prime is even sweeter than risa

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**
I have no preference. Furthermore, I fail to see why you suddenly have lost your ability to utilize correct Standard grammar.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
im just so bored

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
soo booooreeed

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**
Please desist. We are attending a lecture.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
duh yeah

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
do u know how to construct a dilithium chamber for a class 4 warp core

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**
Obviously.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
klemmt apaorently doesnt jsut look at him babble

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
*apparently **just

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
ive read about this a thousand times u know, they should give us a break
**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

The knowledge of how a warp engine works is vital for a starship captain, which you seek to become.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Yeah well I know it and Dr. Klemmt doesn't Ill file a complaint

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Jim, we are sitting in the same lecture hall.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Yeah. so which one? Andevian II or Gedi Prime

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Just pick one

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

I have no preference.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Okay but I know you're lying~

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Vulcans do not lie. Please desist sending any more messages.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Pfft well okay here's the plan. Gedi sounds nicest but the Andevian view is to die for

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

How about both

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Could even swing by Delta Vega. I've always wondered if it's true about ice monsters living in the glaciers there

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

12 ft tall, big big teeth HUGE teeth in fact. From what I've heard no one has ever returned alive to stories about them so we could be the first

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

Have you ever seen snowfall?

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Please desist.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

U know what we totally have got to introduce u to snow

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Jim, you are disrupting my ability to follow the lecture.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**
wow amazing i can HEAR ur vulcan eyebrow of disapproval

Jim (0927-4339-11)
eyebrow of doom

Jim (0927-4339-11)
cause you do that thing with it, dont deny it

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Please cease texting.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sorry im just so boored

Jim (0927-4339-11)
snow fights?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
snow angels ?? gotta show u how to make one, its super easy

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I will turn off my communicator now.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ouch that hurts :(

Jim (0927-4339-11)
spock? cmon dont be like that

Jim (0927-4339-11)
hello ??

Jim (0927-4339-11)
spockkkk

Jim (0927-4339-11)
:'((

To: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2256.258
Subject: re: How are you? [Translated to Standard Federation English from Modern Golic Vulcan]

Dear Mother,

All is well. My studies have quickened their pace. They are now more similar to a traditional Vulcan regime. I have also begun assisting the Advanced Xenolinguistics professor as a Teacher’s Assistance, which further improves my grades. I yet find the human way of learning in large groups to be illogical. This does not properly challenge all students, and I have notices some cadets could require either more support or a more rigorous curriculum to maximize their capabilities. The system is inherently wasteful.
San Francisco remains mostly unchanged. It rains at intervals which are taxing to predict. The average daily temperature has dropped with 2.3 degrees.

I have now joined the institution’s chess club, at the insistence Captain Christopher Pike who believes that I am suffering from a lack of socialization outside of scheduled hours. I shall see if this attempt with sway his opinion. Visiting the club two days ago, I found it not a complete waste of time, as one human cadet proved to be an interesting challenge in tri-dimensional chess. Perhaps the xenolinguistics club would also be worth a trial period.

There is another human cadet at campus who confounds me. Human ways are quite illogical, and I find this cadet sometimes difficult to comprehend. The cadet has taken to texting my communicator number. This has once occurred while we were sitting in the same room. This human need to communicate emotionally in appropriate situations is something I must investigate further. Are you aware what purpose the use of the symbols ‘:(' and ‘::(‘ serve?

I hope all is well. I am would like to know how your work with your translator is coming along.

Live long and prosper,

Spock

Apparently this is just another way for humans to convey emotions. Those two apparently mean sadness, and it does not sit well with him that Jim would express that emotion so vividly and openly through his messages, especially since there was no logical reason to. His mother had helpfully written a brief list of other such common ‘emoticons’, though Spock doubts he will ever use any of them.

Perhaps only once to take Jim off his guard. It would be … fascinating to observe his reaction.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
there’s a party tonight at Gaila’s, wanna come?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I do not believe I would find the experience of a party to be enjoyable.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
u vulcans mightnt find things enoyable but the human
in you might. cmon? It’ll be fun. I’ll be there and therell
be drinks aplenty

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Yet another reason why I would rather not.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
right, alcohol doesn’t bite on you, I forgot

Jim (0927-4339-11)
heyy! heres an idea! I’ll bring some chocolate. that’s like
the thing for you isn’t it?
Spock finds himself staring at the communicator screen and that word, and being startled by how easily he can picture Jim’s face, the expression matching that simple single word, his eyes burning - pleading.

It is really quite unfair.

He is already regretting this decision very deeply.

The noise is very loud. This need for pounding music - if indeed it is to be called ‘music’ - so thundersome he can feel the thrum of the beats vibrating through his whole body - it is simply beyond him. A human quirk, shared by several other humanoid species, including Orions, it seems. Above the music, attempting to be heard, are many voices. Most of them shouting.

The room is packed with moving bodies, and the light has been somewhat dimmed. There is the host, Gaila, and her roommate, Nyota. Spock has only met the Orion briefly before. She had seemed disappointed to find that her natural pheromones have no effect on Vulcans, and fluttered her eyelashes in his direction in some kind of display which he could not understand at the time. Nyota, by comparison, is a much more logical and therefore pleasant individual; she seems to comprehend the cultural differences between them and respects that. She has sought his help a number of times to improve her Vulcan.

Now, she is surprised to see him here.

Jim’s presence doesn’t seem to help. From what Spock has ascertained since meeting them both, sometime in their past Nyota and Jim had a disagreement, and now they do not like being in the same room for any prolonged amount of time. The details have not been revealed, but Spock assumes this has something to do with human emotion and perhaps mating habits. They are not like Vulcans’ at all.

Jim had walked with him down the corridor to here - since this is the same building and indeed the same floor as his own dormitory, Spock had failed to see why he needed to be guided by Jim, but the cadet said it was a human thing without elaborating further. They had talked quite amicably during that brief walk. Jim’s roommate is not present - apparently since Leonard is older he does not prefer to join too many of these parties. That is what Jim says, anyway. Spock does not have enough data on Leonard to judge his character.

Jim has brought some alcohol, carrying it in a recyclable plastic bag, as well as a bar of chocolate, which is illogical since Spock had explained that he has no interest in becoming inebriated. Jim
insists that he take the bar anyway, assuring him that it is free from animal products and ‘safe’.

And so they enter the room. The door is wide open, waiting for guests. Nyota says hello, clearly startled to see Spock there, and does not offer him a drink.

Others are there too, some of which Spock recognize - the human Christine Chapel, who studies medicine and biology, and Gary Mitchell, who has not spoken with him since their first meeting in the kitchen twenty-two days prior. He glimpses Cadet Pavel Chekov - unlike their last meeting, the young man is now covered from head to toe in lavish glitter of undeterminable purpose. Cadet Hikaru Sulu is sitting in a sofa pressing his face and mouth in an unsavoury display against that of another young male, and Spock tries not to stare. He is aware that humans kiss this way - but his mother has never attempted, as far as he knows, to engage with his father this … vigorously. Their hands are also touching in ways which no Vulcan would allow in public.

“Jim! Nice of you to show up.”

Cadet Gary Mitchell hands Jim a bottle of a bright blue liquid which could be Mn’omxi wine, which is said to be very potent to certain humanoids. Spock has a sudden strong urge to take the bottle from Jim. He has no desire to see Jim imbalanced and inebriated.

“And - him,” Mitchell adds, nodding in Spock’s direction. He does not say hello. It is just as well; Spock would not extend the ta’al to him either way, even if this lingering resentment is wholly illogical.

The grinding of bodies is called dancing. Not all of the cadets are doing it. Some sit in groups, chattering at loud volume. Gaila sweeps through the crowd. Spock can see that she and him are the only non-Terrans currently present, and perhaps that is why she is after some time drawn to the corner where he is standing. Jim is somewhere else; Spock cannot see him - the cadet went someplace else with Gary Mitchell two point seven minutes ago. Spock has not moved from the corner he has found.

He nibbles at the corner of the chocolate bar. The sweetness of it is foreign, but not distasteful, and he takes a bigger bite, curious.

“Never thought I’d see a Vulcan here!” Gaila comments and grins like a predator.

“I accompanied Cadet Kirk.” The volume of the music forces him to speak at much louder pitch than usual.

“Well, seems like he’s abandoned you, sweetheart,” the Orion says, altogether too close. “Let me get you something to drink. Got to loosen up!”

“I do not consume alcohol,” he informs her, stiffly.

The Orion doesn’t reach for a plastic cup or bottle, shrugging. “Your loss.” She dances away, latching onto another cadet, a human who is easily affected by her pheromones, practically drooling.

He would like to leave.

There is no sight of Jim. He must be with Gary Mitchell. Normally he would not have an issue with heat, being a Vulcan, yet there is something very oppressive about this place, this air, this room, even though a window is open letting in a nightly breeze which is quickly lost to the mass of bodies. He isn’t wearing his gloves, and keeps his hands at his sides, unmoving, fists slowly tensing. The sign of stress is incredibly disconcerting. Usually his control is much better than this. If someone were to touch him now, intentionally or not, he fears his mental shields could slip.
A number of times a cadet or two approaches – in passing, offering an alcoholic beverage or trying to strike conversation which is extremely basic in nature; but they quickly turn away, thinking him too boring and stiff or elsewhere lacking. If this is the norm of a human party, he is not impressed or wanting more.

The chocolate bar is nearly gone now.

“Hullo there! You’re the Vulcan cadet, aren’t you?” someone shouts too close to his left ear. Spock carefully does not flinch, but takes a step back, regarding the cadet.

His accent might be of a Northern English variant but in this din Spock cannot make it out more clearly. He has to blink a couple of times, trying to clear his vision, but the headache beginning to throb behind his eyelids persists.

“Evidently,” Spock answers, wondering about the human’s observational skills and general intelligence level if he must ask such a question.

“Scotty! Nice to meet you.”

The man offers a hand. He is laughing, clearly intoxicated to some degree though he has not lost his balance or regurgitated yet, which is a side-effect of alcohol which Spock has read about. His hair is a matted dark brown and his eyes bright; Spock would judge him to be nearing his thirties rather than his twenties. Someone who joined Starfleet quite late, then, much like Dr McCoy. He doesn’t want to shake the offered hand, nor does he want to seem rude - for some reason, this man appears some pleasant that Cadet Mitchell. He does not want to ruin the possibility of further socializing with him, even if the thought is emotionally based and illogical.

“I am Spock,” he says. “Vulcans do not shake hands.”

“Oh! Right! Sorry,” the man, Scotty, laughs. It is a hearty sound. “A scientist, I presume?”

“Yes, that is my aim.”

“Engineer myself,” Scotty says enthusiastically. “Been workin’ on this transwarp beaming equation, just got to work out a couple of issues with the temporal displacement –”

“Don’t get him started!” someone interrupts, indignant; Sulu, from the sofa. He is still entangled with the other human, yet obviously not so distracted that he will not protest to what Scotty is saying. They must know each other from earlier, Spock concludes. “He’ll never shut up!”

“You shut up!” retorts Scotty, rolling his eyes at Sulu. “What d’ye know about transwarp beaming, eh, mister?”

Spock uses this moment of distraction to his advantage to make his escape. Slipping away is more difficult than anticipated. The loudness of the environment and everyone’s thoughts is like a wall, constantly rising, and his vision is somewhat askew. And there is a strange sensation in his limbs, tingling, a bit like the trickling of water just after he turns off the shower albeit quicker and not as warm or comfortable. The thought makes little sense. Shoulders and elbows push and pull and bump against his own as he slowly moves from the end of the room toward the door.

When someone grabs his elbow, he instinctively raises a hand, ready to perform a neck pinch.

“Spock! Oops, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you like that.”

He relaxes minutely, and does not nerve pinch the speaker. “An apology is unnecessary; there is no
offense where none is taken.”

It is Jim. His hair is a bit dishevelled, and his sleeves rolled up - he isn’t in uniform but wearing a casual shirt and jeans. Spock is the only one present wearing his cadet reds. Jim’s cheeks are blazing red and eyes lively, though there is something disquieting about his expression. Cadet Mitchell is not with him.


That is an illogical statement. While his copper-based blood will give him a slight hue of green in the proper light, his pigmentation is similar to Jim’s pale one.

“I will leave now,” Spock finds himself saying. He does not recall forming the sentence, and his senses are dimming in sharpness. He would like to sit down.

“Okay,” Jim says. “Well, I tried.” There is disappointment in his tone, but the expression dissipates into something else when Spock inadvertently stumbles as he walks to the door, catching himself on the wall.

“Did you eat the whole bar?” Jim asks suddenly, and a hand hovers hear his shoulder. Spock moves away from it.

That had been a bad idea. He should not have eaten that. “Affirmative.”

“Jeez, you’re drunk.”

Oh. “I see. Fascinating.” This is the sensation humans seek for pleasure? Highly illogical. His mind is slower than usual. He cannot think properly. “I - do not find it pleasing.”

Jim’s amusement fades, and he grimaces. “You gonna throw up?”

“I don’t believe so.”


They reach the door, and outside, though the sounds - pounding, rising, relentless - pour through the walls they fall significantly in volume once they’re in the corridor and the door closes behind them. Spock has to lean against the wall for a few moments - unable to calculate the seconds.

“Tell me if you’re gonna throw up,” Jim says very seriously. “These are my best shoes.”

“They reach the sounds - pounding, rising, relentless - pour through the walls they fall significantly in volume once they’re in the corridor and the door closes behind them. Spock has to lean against the wall for a few moments - unable to calculate the seconds.

“Tell me if you’re gonna throw up,” Jim says very seriously. “These are my best shoes.”

“I won’t –” Breathing through his nose, he corrects himself with effort: “— will not regurgitate.”

“One bar is all it takes, huh,” the human cadet next to him muses, not leaving or touching him. For a sharp brief moment (like thunder; a lightning strike) Spock would very much like to have Jim touch him. A hand on his shoulder. In his own.

The thought is so vivid he feels his cheeks grow warm.

Mistaking the blush for a sign of sickness, Jim’s concern is like a candle, burning next to him. Realizing that his shields are failing, Spock closes his eyes, focusing on restoring them. He cannot be around much longer if this is the state of his mind – he’ll need to meditate for the rest of the night to correct this. Regain focus. Strength. It is difficult. An effort.
“Hey?”

A hand is very, very close now, very close to his cheek, hovering in the air and Spock abruptly opens his eyes and straightens before the touch can occur.

“I need to meditate."

“Okay. Which one’s yours?”

The questions makes no sense. “Elaborate.”

Jim chuckles. “Room number. Which one’s yours?”

“Three hundred and nine.”

The walk there should have taken no more than forty-one seconds. Yet, the stairway (only twelve steps) leading from floor two to three proves to be an obstacle. Once they enter floor three, the noise is a bit further away, dulled by the layers of concrete and steel. The music is still vibrating. He can feel it in his bones. His head hurts. It should not hurt.

“And – here we are. PIN?” Jim asks. Why he is still here is a mystery. As far as Spock has understood matters, Jim liked the party, and would - should - prefer to keep socializing with the cadets there. But he isn’t. It doesn’t compute.

“Unnecessary,” Spock says, pressing his right thumb to the fingerprint reader. The lock clicks open.

The temperature difference is welcoming, but startles the human next to him.

“Damn, it’s like a sauna in here!”

“It’s the optimal temperature for a Vulcan,” Spock says, idly, stepping inside without turning on the lights.

“So this is your crib, huh?” Jim peers around, and steps inside without being invited. “Nice.” The door closes behind them. The human pokes curiously at the bookshelf, tilting his head to read the titles - difficult for his human eyes in the darkness, of course. Illogical. Spock watches him for a moment, and then he promptly sits down, right on the floor next to the door. At the rustle, Jim turns, frowns sympathetically.

“That bad? I guess you Vulcans don’t get drunk usually.”

“Negat… affirmative,” Spock says, hesitating, correcting himself in mid-speech which is a scarce and obvious sign that something isn’t right. Understanding the human is an effort. Speaking Standard is an effort. Everything is an effort. It should not be – it is illogical.

Jim disappears. Then he returns, offering a glass of water.

“I dunno if it’ll help, but it can’t hurt to try it.”

The water is blessedly cool and soothing. After taking a sip, Spock murmurs: “Lesek.”

“You’re welcome. I guess. That word means ‘thanks’, right?”

He closes his eyes. “I need to meditate,” he says, not answering the question.
“Maybe you should sleep.”

“I must meditate. You may leave now.”

Jim may not be convinced, but it does not matter. Spock stands - slowly - his head is not clear. He places the empty glass on the bedside table, and watches Jim awkwardly shuffle toward the door.

“I guess that kind of sucked. Sorry ‘bout that.”

“There is no offence -”

“- ‘when none is taken’,” the human finishes the sentence smoothly, startlingly. “You keep saying that so I guess it’s one of those Vulcan philosophy things.”

The Vulcan looks at him blankly. “Sucked?”

“Wasn’t very nice. It means – something’s so bad it should be sucked through a black hole.”

This is an explanation he can agree with. “Affirmative.”

Finally, finally, the door closes and he is alone.

After (struggling; ears ringing) changing out of his uniform into a pair of loose sweatpants, he settles on the meditation mat, lighting the candle. The scent is soothing. No position is comfortable, but he steels himself. Perhaps Jim’s advice of sleep –

He relaxes his shoulders, his arms lax, palms upturned. He will not sleep.

The candle has burned out.

Spock is dismayed. He had not meant to fall asleep. His neck is stiff from sitting up in this position; when he lost consciousness his head had lolled forward, and his back is strained. He stretches. He does not feel refreshed, though the headache has eased and the dizziness is gone.

He is famished. Quickly he showers, dresses in fresh clothes, and heads for the shared kitchen.

The party had not spread here, as such events sometimes did. Twelve days ago another cadet had invited friends to socialize in that manner and this kitchen had ended up a disgusting mess. Spock had not eaten here in the days after that.

The clock on the wall reads 06:33. Disturbing. He has been asleep for nearly five hours, and yet he catches himself nearly yawning. For once he is relieved that it’s a Saturday.

After eating, he returns to his room. Two PADDs and five books are stacked on his desk, waiting. He had been working on an essay on the regularities of Class M-planets when Jim had texted him yesterday, and he attempts to return to the work, but the sentences he writes do not form a controlled well-structured argument. Deleting the failed paragraph, he shuts down the PADD, orders the computer to lower the lights, and undresses.

He goes to sleep.

The next time he wakes up, three hours later, it’s because his comm is chiming.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
He types: *I feel* - before abruptly halting, his mind catching up, sluggishly. Feel? Deleting the word, he corrects the sentence: *I am fine.* He hits send.

A minute later, a response arrives.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

*hangover is a bitch isn't it?*

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

*I fail to see the relevance of female Earth canines to the situation.*

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**To:** Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)<br>**From:** S'chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)<br>**Stardate** 2256.263<br>**Subject:** re: re: Experiences of human socializing rituals [Translated to Standard Federation English from Modern Golic Vulcan]

Dear Mother,

My studies are going well. I have begun socializing with a number of other cadets, mostly while attending lectures and the like though a number of times now this has also occurred outside of scheduled schoolwork hours. A fellow cadet tends to text me repeatedly through the day, and I am obliged to answer.

Yesterday I was invited to a ‘party’ by this cadet. The excessive amount of alcohol consumed by the other cadets was not to my liking, as well as their choice of music. I woke this morning after having slept without intending to, having failed meditating properly, and my senses are still not functioning optimally. I will not have chocolate again. The cadet who invited me, Jim, insisted that one cannot properly appreciate the ‘Academy experience’ without attending at least one party. I must disagree. It was a most jarring event, which I shall not repeat.

Otherwise all is well. The campus cafeteria has begun serving non-Terran food including some Vulcan dishes. The human meal points system is still highly illogical, especially since many humans do not follow this system, instead tending to eat in the strangest of ways and oddest hours.

Emulating human culture is difficult, though I realize that to blend easier with the Academy I must attempt to adjust to their ways.

Spock pauses, telling the computer to cease recording and transcribing. For a moment, he considers asking about Vulcan. Details. Though he disagreed with the VSA on several points, and he has not spoken with his father for a hundred and twenty-one days, since the day he stood before the VSA board of elders rejecting them, there are some aspects of Vulcan which he –

*he feels* –

There is a longing. Without rational reason and unscientific and with only an emotional basis. But that is the truth. The sky of Vulcan is emptier than Earth’s, the cloud formations less violent, drier. The sand. The sand, and the skyline of Shi’kahr rising beneath the scorching sun, and the vastness of the landscape – it was not imposing, but grand, beautiful. And he misses it. His mother, her pride
even when he spoke with her about seeking *kolinahr* and purging all emotion; seeking approval (illogical) even knowing it might hurt her (*illogical*). He misses it.

Perhaps he should ask for more.


> I hope your own experiences are satisfactory and that you are in good health. How is the work on the translator?

He does not ask for more.

> Live long and prosper,

> Spock

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**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth**  
**Stardate 2256.319**

The library hasn’t closed yet. The days are darkening, growing shorter, and many cadets have begun talking hopefully about the chances of snow. Low, of course, which Spock has informed them of. Jim’s laughter at his predictions had been bright and carefree, eyes crinkling at the corners. Spock hadn’t seen what was so funny about the chances of snow in this part of Earth at this time of year being only two point nine zero nine three percent. Nevertheless, Jim’s smiles are … enjoyable. Peaceful. (*Illogical.*)

Spock gathers the two books due to be returned, tucking them under his arm. Hesitating for a moment, he also dons his gloves. The cold creeping over the landscape is unsettling. He should purchase thicker clothing; a scarf - perhaps a thermo-insulated uniform. Perhaps that could be arranged. Yes, he will contact Mrs Coleridge in the morning about that. Lastly he grabs his communicator which is lying on his desk, pocketing it.

He doesn’t make it to the door.

He’s familiar enough with transporter technology to recognize the whirring sound. One moment he is the only one in his dorm room; the next, an Andorian is standing only a few feet away from him, between the desk and his meditation mat. It is armed with a phaser in one hand and a hypospray in the other, and Spock takes a step back, reaching for his communicator to call campus security.

It’s all over in a few seconds.

The Andorian doesn’t say anything, only fires its phaser, which appears to be set on stun. Spock only narrowly manages to duck in time, and the beam crashes into the bookshelf behind him, the energy blast causing a few books to tumble down to the floor noisily. He doesn’t take his eyes off the blue humanoid even as he flips open the communicator, dialing a number at random - it stalks closer, eyes thin and nostrils flared. If he could get close enough to subdue it with a nerve pinch –

Another shot is fired. It flares into the wall. Abandoning the perhaps more logical option to try to flee, Spock poises himself to attack instead. He cannot let the Andorian get past and into the other dorm rooms thus armed. Maybe it’s the human in him, thinking that. He can’t tell.

> “Who are you?” he demands. “What do you want?”
The Andorian doesn’t answer.

The communicator in his hand bleeps, and, after a moment, there’s a voice.

“Hello?”

He’s still gripping the communicator tightly even as he launches himself at the Andorian, surprising it; it stumbles back; he tries to fell it and take the phaser. The weapon is aimed at the ceiling and sparks fly wildly as a shot hits one of the lamps, causing it to explode, shards of plastic and glass raining down on them. He feels a shard sharply striking his cheek, and the sensation of skin breaking, a thin trail of blood dripping onto the carpet. The Andorian is surprisingly strong. Spock is too entangled to turn around in time when a second one beams into the room, directly behind them.

A sharp tingling sensation spreads from a point in his neck. His body numbs immediately as if the blood has turned to ice and lead, and communicator tumbles out from the cradle of his hand. The voice on the other side - repeating: “Spock? Is that you?” - grows dim, dim, a swirl of noise. The Andorian doesn’t need to grapple with him anymore; he can’t move. The earth falls away beneath his feet, a great darkness, and he can still hear the voice, being slowly twisted into nonsense -

“Hello? … Hello?”

He does not recall hitting the ground.
The instinct to survive is the most basic of all.

Warning: there’s explicit violence in the middle part of this chapter. There are also issues with consent concerning mindmelds/telepathic actions.

pahth
(noun)
panic
a sudden, overpowering terror
often affecting many people at once

It’s difficult to breathe. This sensation is strange. He has not felt it before.

There is a great pressure on his chest, his side. As is there is something invisible slowly depressing his lungs. Yet, this is illogical and cannot be. Fear. No. No. Vulcans do not fear. He won’t let it conquer him.

Vulcans do not feel.

He does not want to be taken before the Mind Healers again so that they’ll open his mind, ignoring his resolve, his plead (no no no) and they will remove and suppress and rearrange for the layout to be more Vulcan, and his father has said it must be done, he is not strong enough, not Vulcan enough to control himself and his emotions, it must be done, it must be done.

Control. The kahs’wan will prove that he is in control, that his emotions will not govern him. That he is strong. Logical.

He left home in the middle of night. His own test is not scheduled until he turns eleven, in the twentieth day of Tasmeen, but he is not a child any longer, does not want to be treated like a child. He is Vulcan. He is Vulcan.
He does not think about his father’s disapproval or his mother’s open concern and fear when he had asked, on that bright morning, if he could be allowed to take the test now, without his age-group, without a mentor. He does not think about the comforts of home, the security of walls, the warmth of a blanket.

He has been alone for five days now. It is rapidly getting darker. Ahead of them lies the Plains of Blood, which hundreds of years ago were crossed by Surak while battle still raged and the ground was wet with green blood. The tall unforgiving tops of the mountains behind them reach around the edge of the valley like a giant claw. In its shadow, he had found a small outcropping underneath which there is, carved out a river long since gone, a small cave. He must take shelter before the sun is set. The days in the Forge are melting and brewing like the side of a volcano, but the nights are even more treacherous. It is the cold which kills.

Eight percent of the children who enter the Forge are not expected to return. They will be taken by cold, or hunger, or a wound. The rules will not allow teamwork. Then, Spock had reasoned, where is the logic in letting a whole age-group take the test at the same time? He is on his own. If he does not make it back home, the conclusion can be drawn without need to seek his body - but he will make it. He will make it.

He had not planned on bringing I-Chaya at first, but the sehlat is loyal, and his mother had once said that the pet was a friend of his but Spock had disputed it because Vulcans do not have friends. The sehlat is prowling ahead, and they are very close to shelter when there is the distinct, deep rumble of a growl.

A Vulcan child attempting to pass the test of kahs’wan is given the choice of taking a weapon with them if they so choose. Spock had not taken one. He has I-Chaya.

The gray, leathery hide of the le-matya is nearly impenetrable, several layers thick. Its claws are sharp and its fangs poisonous, and Spock has read about them, seen holographs. Its eyes are gleaming as it leaps out of from above.

He does not scream. He will remain calm. He will not panic. And yet, there is a pressure now growing atop of, inside of, his chest. I-Chaya bears their teeth. The two predators circle each other, slowly, now and then lashing out: a test to see which one will yield. The le-matya aims for the Vulcan child, so small and young and vulnerable.

And Spock thinks: I will not die this way. I will not die this way. I will not -

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Coordinates: Unknown
Stardate 2256.320

Spock comes to. His head is pounding, and red, shimmering lights flare in front of his eyes.

No - not lights.

“Welcome back, Vulcan.”

Turning his head carefully, Spock sees the same Andorian as the one who had exited the library, along with a second one. Their antennae are slowly swaying this way and that in a signal of mean pleasure and determination. Sitting up, the Vulcan realizes that he’s curled up inside a rectangular prison: a box of merely four point five by five feet. The floor, ceiling and three of the walls are metal, like the inside of a building or possibly a ship, while the wall right in front of him is made of a single encompassing red forcefield reaching from floor to ceiling.
One of the Andorians is holding a phaser. The other is unarmed.

Spock can only reach the conclusion that this is a kidnapping; a very intentional one. To go to these lengths to capture a random citizen would be illogical.

“Why have you brought me here?” he asks.

The armed Andorian waves the phaser in a vague circle and doesn’t answer. The other turns to fiddle with a computer stationed there, and Spock takes note of the large viewscreen. This does indeed appear much like the inside of a small Cargo Hold, though the design is more Orion than Andorian. Stolen? Perhaps to make it a less obvious place to look.

“You have taken a Starfleet Academy cadet. People will notice that I am gone and search for me,” Spock says calmly, moving to sit in a more comfortable meditation pose. The floor is hard and cold, and he is glad he left his dormitory wearing his gloves. The electric fizzle of the forcefield does not bring any warmth.

“That’s what we’re counting on. That thing on yet?”

“Patience, patience. I’m setting up a connection now. Got to be careful - don’t want to be tracked.”

“I’m out of patience!” cries the first Andorian angrily. “We don’t have much time!”

“I assume you are now attempting to contact someone to demand a ransom for my safe return,” Spock comments. He is ignored.

The screen flickers. The connection obviously isn’t stable or of good quality, but the Andorian speaks anyway.

“You know who this is, Sarek. Answer, or your offspring dies!”

Ah. Spock has not spoken with his father since he chose Starfleet over the VSA, but he hears from his mother now and then how he is doing, and eight days ago Sarek attended an important meeting concerning Federation expansion; the voting on the matter would commence this week. It’s logical to assume then that these Andorians are hired by the Andorian government, or a private individual, to convince Sarek to either withdraw or otherwise change his vote. It is not a great leap to make this conclusion.

Spock doesn’t think the Andorians will have much luck. They must not be aware of his and Sarek’s … disagreement. Would that be the correct term?

The viewscreen clears, brightens, into an image. His father is stern and composed and his eyes betray nothing. He has not seen his face for several Terran months, and Spock watches closely.

“Cease this. Trying to pressure me into changing the High Council’s decision is illogical and a waste of time,” Sarek says calmly.

“So you say, Green Skin!” cries one of the Andorians. It points the phaser in Spock’s direction. “Look, we’ve got your offspring. Once we get word that you’ve changed your mind, we let him go.” The Andorian speaks as if to a child slow to understand, each word exaggeratedly punctuated. Its Standard is askew with an accent as if the Andorian rarely speaks it. “You’ve got two Vulcan days.”

The connection is cut.
The Andorians do not seem concerned about the possibility of him escaping. They take their leave, possibly to the ship’s Bridge.

After examining the interior of his cell, Spock finds very few flaws. The forcefield will not disable. He runs a hand along the floor, seeking any kind of hatch - there is a crack in the metal between two pieces of plating, and if he could get a grip of the edge, he could wedge it open to access the machinery beneath. If he could short-circuit the connection the forcefield has with the main power grid …

He tries to wedge the floor open. It does not yield, at least not at once.

The passage of time cannot be determined by outside means; there are no windows and no chronometers in sight. Spock thinks that roughly two point seven Terran hours have passed since he woke up here. He has attempted to call for the Andorians twice, demanding the right to be released, but they hadn’t even bothered to mock him. Shifting position, he meditates.

After some three hours, his captors return - checking the cell, and the computer in the corner; but there has been no answer.

They clearly are impatient.

They clearly also have overestimated Sarek’s concern for his son.

The cold is deepening. The Cargo Hold - if that is what it is - is poorly insulated, meant to carry goods and not people through the vacuum of space. Soon he has to cradle his hands in his armpits and curl up on himself to preserve warmth.

He has not eaten in over fourteen hours. Normally this wouldn’t be an issue, but right now he is spending a lot of energy to keep his core temperature at a normal level. The Andorians make no move to offer food or water, though after a while one of them leaves a ruffled, dirty blanket in the makeshift cell. It smells badly of questionable things, but Spock wraps it around his shoulders nonetheless.

Jim.

That was the voice - that was the number he had managed to dial from his contact list. Perhaps … Jim will have heard the shuffle, and made the logical assumption that something wasn’t right, and investigate. But Jim is human. Humans are illogical.

Spock closes his eyes and sighs. It will be a long, cold night.

You have (4) unread messages:

Jim (0927-4339-11)
hey spock did u just call me by accident?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
is this ur way of telling me u dont want to see the movie :/

Jim (0927-4339-11)
cuz I promise it wont suck

Jim (0927-4339-11)
It’s not at all like Spock to be late. Jim can’t understand it.

“Look, he’s probably just under the weather or something,” Bones grumbles. His roommate isn’t in the mood for this, and not just because he’s trying to study for his xenobiology test. Jim can be antsy at times, but this is simply absurd.

“I’m telling you, something’s up. ‘Sides, I got this weird call an hour ago, and he isn’t answering my texts.” Jim frowns darkly. “He could be in trouble.”

“Spock? Trouble?” Abandoning his PADD, Bones walks up and check’s Jim’s temperature with a palm, causing the frown to deepen. “Huh, no fever.”

“Bones, get your hands off my face.”


“What? Uh. I - don’t think Spock thinks so. At least. We’re not always on the same page. I’m working on that bit.”

He glares at the blonde sternly. “You’re not denyin’ it, Jim.”

“… Maybe I won’t.”

Bones sighs dramatically. “I didn’t sign up for this shit. Fuck, Jim, he’s a Vulcan.”

“What, you got a problem with that?” Jim asks, crossing his arms, suddenly affronted.

“No! Not like that, Jim. I’m not a xenophobic asshole if that’s what you think. But, he’s Vulcan, not a Betazoid or, hell, even Orion. I’ve no idea how you even make that sort of thing possible, if y’know what I mean – with their taboos against touch and general view of non-Vulcans as inferior, and, and I don’t want to think about it, so, just, no. Don’t give me any details now or ever.”

Jim shakes his head: Bones is being ridiculous. But he flips open his comm, dialing. Just in case.

Maybe his roommate’s right and Spock is sick? Vulcans don’t get sick easily; they’ve got an immune system as robust as any, so if he is sick then it’s got to be something really serious. Unless it’s different for hybrids? Either way, Jim wants to know.

It rings one, two, three times. No one’s picking up. Spock is usually efficient, answering to every message, even in those cases when the answer is a stiff and Vulcan version of ‘I’m busy, please leave me the fuck alone’.

Not this time.

The movie starts in nineteen minutes, and Spock would’ve preferred them to be punctual and should have been here twelve minutes ago to catch a hovercab with him. Jim has got the tickets ready and everything. And Spock may not know it, but Jim had planned it like he would a date - because why
not? Spock is clever and hot and Vulcan, and there’s something incredibly mouth-watering about that. Their friendship is a friendship, and at least he might get Spock to admit that one day (soon, real soon). ‘Vulcans have no friends’ – bullshit. Just like the claim that they don’t feel emotions, because Jim is pretty sure that they do, and just keep that cool unaffected exterior up for show, to appear all aloof and mysterious and shit.

He lets the comm keep ringing for a little while longer, ignoring how Bones is pointedly looking at him from the corner of his eyes. Eventually, his roommate and nowadays best friend clears his throat. “Jim. Maybe he doesn’t want to go, and this is his weird Vulcan way of sayin’ it. Guy strikes me as kinda introvert, y’know. And hella socially awkward sometimes.”

“No. He’s never missed a call,” Jim says, like an echo. “I’m gonna check his dorm.”

“Jim,” Bones tries again, but Jim walks out of their shared room. The Doctor looks at the door as it swishes open and shut, leaving the room is silence.

Sighing, he shakes his head. Once upon a time he was a bit like Jim, too, with a streak of optimism which was lost after the divorce, after he couldn’t get to see Joanna anymore - it hasn’t returned yet. (A reason probably why he tolerates Jim. He likes the kid, and he sort of misses sometimes his daughter, that presence. Jim is nothing like her but he tries to fill the void anyway.) After rooming with him for over a year, becoming fast unlikely friends ever since that fateful shuttle ride out of Iowa, Bones has gotten more and more used to his mannerisms, moods, and ways. And Jim has always slept around, wound his way from person to person, human, alien, the lot of it, leaving Bones to frantically worry about STDs and insisting that he is constantly checked because Jim has an allergy list half a planet long.

But for the last few weeks, Jim has narrowed down his focus onto one single individual. Sometimes it’s amusing; sometimes plain disturbing. Bones almost feels sorry for the Vulcan. Of all humans to following him around …

Yeah. Jim’s whipped. And it’s kind of freaking Bones the fuck out.

« … causing the patient to regurgitate their pineal gland. A solution was found in a colony on Rigel IX in 2191 where approximately 8.9% of the population was found to be naturally immune to this particular strain of the Kamaraazite flu due to the combination of two genes found on the third chromosome. Using this knowledge, scientists began developing a vaccine which by its first use in 2199 showed a 74.9% success rate. The second stage of development … »

The comm rings, interrupting his reading. It’s only been a few minutes since the door closed, and Bones considers the number for a moment before answering.

“What the hell do you want, J-”

“Bones.” Jim’s voice is terse and fraught with worry, and there’s a frantic undertone which Bones has only heard a few times. No good times. The PADD is abandoned. “Bones, you’ve gotta come over here. I think Spock’s in trouble.”

Among the top ten of sentences he’d never thought he’d hear Jim utter. “What is it?” he asks, even as he’s standing up, gathering his coat. “What’s happened?”

He wouldn’t rush off like this from anyone. But he’s a Doctor, damn it, and Jim’s best friend, and Jim may have a tendency to joke and prank the people around him as if he’s fifteen and not twenty-five - but not like this. Bones is sure of it. Something, a gut feeling, maybe just that, but he’s pretty
damn certain Jim wouldn’t call him in that tone of voice on a whim.

“I don’t know.”

He’s already out of the door, locking it swiftly behind him. Then he realizes he has no idea where the hobgoblin’s dorm is, and Jim has to guide him, taking a shaky breath and he sounds almost angry.

When Bones gets there, the door is unlocked - God knows how. Jim probably hacked his way past the lock, because Bones frankly can’t see the Vulcan handing out his security codes, even to Jim with his damning charm. He’s never seen hobgoblin’s dorm room before, and catches himself being admittedly surprised at how - well, how humbly human the place looks. Like any other dorm. The personal decorations are extremely sparse. There’s a lyre of some sort and a fancy mat in the corner by the desk, but that’s the only thing that doesn’t look Terran in origin. There are quite a lot of books on the shelf, more than an average person would own, in a multitude of languages. Of course. The Vulcan is a huge nerd. Bones shouldn’t be surprised.

A few of the books are lying on the floor, messily, and there’s something like a scorch mark on the wall. One of the lamps on the ceiling has been shattered, shards of glass littering the floor, glimmering like a thousand little stars. Not very Vulcan. Jim is standing in the middle of the room, holding a comm, and it takes a moment for Bones to realize that that’s not Jim’s own.

“Look,” Jim says, pointing, and Bones doesn’t comment that the hand is not entirely steady, and there’s a shadow of both concern and anger in Jim’s face, a darkness there which not a lot people would know about - everyone thinks Jim is this ever-happy charming southern boy. They don’t know about his childhood or Tarsus IV or none of it –

There’s blood on the floor; not a lot of it, just a few dark green speckles which definitely aren’t human.

“Okay, I believe you,” Bones says, turning to him. “Something’s wrong. What d’you think happened?”

“I don’t know. A fight? At first, when he called earlier, I thought it was just a mis-dial, but … it sounded like a shuffle.” Jim clutches the comm harder and, after a second, pockets it.

Bones shrugs; he doesn’t know, he wasn’t there when Jim got that call. He was in the communal kitchen on their floor getting himself a decent cup of coffee. “Should we call security or something?” he muses half-aloud. Jim’s kind of right. It wouldn’t be like the Vulcan to get in a fight. Aren’t they a pacific, non-violent species? That’s what the textbooks say.

Someone is walking past the open door in the corridor, and Jim calls out to them: “Hey, sorry, have you seen Spock, the Vulcan who lives here?”

It’s Nyota Uhura. Bones recognizes her since Jim had a (poorly disguised) crush for her during their first year at the Academy, constantly trying to get in her pants in various (unsuccessful) ways. Right, she lives in this building, with that Orion girl, Gaila.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, wrinkling her nose a bit at Jim.

“Look, have you seen him? Like now in the past couple of hours?”

She frowns. “No. You could check the library. What’s it to you, anyway?”

Bones intervenes. “We’re just wonderin’.”
“He could be in trouble,” Jim adds, damned him, and Uhura’s gaze intensifies. Thinking, probably, that there’s no way the impeccable Vulcan could get in trouble – there just ain’t no logic in that.

Ah, he didn’t sign up for this shit. He’s a doctor, damn it, not some kind of glorified Vulcan-sitter.

“I don’t get what kind of trouble, though,” Bones says, crossing his arms. He can’t picture the pacifist alien seeking it on purpose.

Jim ponders for a moment. “I’m gonna call Pike.”

“What,” says Uhura, flatly.

“Are you out of your corn-fed mind?!” Bones splutters. “He’s a Captain and it’s the middle of the darn night! I don’t care if you’re his unofficially adopted kid and can call favours left and right, but Jim, it might not even be -”

“Oh, it might. Look,” Jim says, already dialing, “someone fired a phaser in here and there’s Vulcan blood. Isn’t that enough evidence for a crime scene?”

Bones rubs his temples with a sigh. This is all Jim’s fault. All he wanted to do tonight was to study for that damned test, and maybe round off the evening with a glass of smoking whiskey.

“It’s Jim. Sorry for waking you, sir, but …”

Coordinates: Unknown
Stardate 2256.320

The two are discussing something in low voices in rapid, hushed Andorii.

Spock sits with his legs crossed and his palms up, eyes half-closed in meditation, making no sign that he can hear or understand them. They are indeed angry - this vote will make an impact on Andorian trading routes and if the Vulcans vote in favour for the new agreement of letting the Ferengi officially join the Federation, the Andorians will lose profit; that is at least their fear. These two are in contact with the Andorian Ambassador, someone by the name of Vyys. It sounds as if others, not just the Vulcan Ambassador, could be being pressured in a similar manner.

Politics remain the same, full of foul play.

His headache has subdued some but not wholly. He can conclude that a hypospray with some chemical was used to stun him rather than a phaser - that wouldn’t give away any noise or an energy blast that can be picked up by sensors. But they had fired a phaser, in his room. Did someone hear it?

His vision is sharp, as is his hearing, but his reflexes do not feel the same, somewhat sluggish. As if he were underwater. Is this what it is like to be submerged?

“Perhaps it’s not enough. We need to send physical proof,” one of them mutters.

“Thinks we’re faking, huh? Yeah, I see what you mean.”

They’re standing right in front of the cell. Spock opens his eyes.

One of them is holding a knife.

His heartbeat picks up pace, but he refuses to let anything show on his face, expression schooled. Pressing the controls the Andorian with the knife lowers the forcefield, while the other keeps its
phaser pointed at the young Vulcan.

“Now, don’t struggle,” the one with the knife croons, reaching out.

Spock reacts. He swipes out with his leg, felling the first Andorian, and twists to the side. A phaser beam blasts over his shoulder, crackling and smoking as it meets the metal behind him. He grabs for the nearest Andorian’s neck to perform a pinch, but is too slow. Whatever they had used to stun him hasn’t worn off.

He can’t duck out of the way from the fist. He grunts, tasting wet copper on his tongue - his lip must be broken - and he is thrown to the ground, and the Andorian holds him down, pointing the phaser at his neck.

“We said don’t struggle, Vulcan!”

“Ti’amah!”

The Andorian growls, pressing the phaser hard against his neck, against the pulse beneath the skin. It hurts.

The other one straightens somewhat dizzily. Its face is twisted in anger, and it spits on the ground. One of its teeth is missing from where its face impacted the floor as it fell.

A hypospray is procured from a pocket and administered. It doesn’t steal his consciousness this time, but his limbs grow dull, and even as the Andorian steps off him be cannot move. His breath quickens. Still, he doesn’t cry out. A weight is settled on his chest, his belly. The Andorian with the knife leans over him, grabbing a fistful of hair and tilting his head forcefully to the side. The sharp edge touches skin.

He knows Surak’s Teachings. And yet – *Do no harm to those who harm you* –

His pulse is rising. He is … afraid. Instincts, deep and raw, are urging him to fight, to defend himself. To survive. It is the most basic of all instincts a sentient being can have. He cannot stop himself from trying to move, trying to struggle and he cannot move - the drug has frozen his muscles.

The Andorian moves the knife.

Spock’s breathing becomes impossibly fast and he can feel his eyes water, in shock rather than pain. Something warm and wet trickles down his earlobe and onto his neck. It’s as if something has interrupted the nerve signals and the situation hasn’t reached his mind in full.

The Andorian’s face changes into distorted, haughty pleasure, and as it withdraws, it’s holding something in its hand. Then the two step back and the forcefield is reenabled, and the Andorian holds up its prize. It’s smiling. Spock swallows harshly, blinking to clear his vision.

“Contact Vyys. We’ve got a package to send.”

It takes six minutes before he can move again, the drug having been burned through by his system. He pulls himself up, gasping, resting against the back of the cell. Raising a hand. He forces it to keep steady. The curve of his ear ends suddenly, the tip missing. The pain is sharp. The Andorians hadn’t bothered to bind it or make sure an infection would not set in. He hopes the knife was clean.

He takes off a glove, tearing a strip out of it, and presses the cloth against the injury. The blood will soon begin to clot.
Then he lies down on the blanket, closes his eyes, and does not think about his father or his mother or Jim, who must be wondering why he hasn’t turned up and isn’t answering calls.

He must meditate.

He doesn’t dare to sleep.

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**Cpt. Christopher Pike (1973-3873-04)**

*I know you want to know what’s going on, Kirk, but you’ve got to stop calling me every two hours because there isn’t much to tell. No, we haven’t found him yet. We’re all agreed that it’s not in Cadet Spock’s character to take off like that, and we’ve got security processing his dorm now. I cannot disclose any evidence with you at this time. I’ll let you know more as this develops. I understand you’re worried, but please focus on your classes, cadet. I didn’t even know you had made friends with Cadet Spock, but I’m damn glad you have. /Pike*

**Cadet James T. Kirk (0927-4339-11)**

*thank you sir I’ll try -J*

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**Coordinates: Unknown**

**Stardate 2256.321**

Mid-morning. He thinks. 09:30. Or 10:00?

He has never in his life missed a lecture or seminar, has never planned to. Today would be … Astrophysics. He had left the notes for the last assignment on his desk, in his dorm. He had worked hard on that assignment as it was a fascinating one, and today he should be standing in front of his fellow cadets to report his findings. The human cadets in general seem to dislike all oral presentations and the like quite badly, mostly because of “nerves”. Since Vulcans do not get nervous, Spock has never had this issue at the Academy. He was looking forward to the debate the report would spark. Jim would no doubt seek to “rile him up” by engaging in a dubious question about the work. Nevertheless, that was part of the experience.

He hasn’t seen any of his captors again, though he has heard them moving about, the clanking noise of feet on steel, their voices. Not very pleasant voices. Their laughter is drawn and rough. His father hasn’t contacted them or responded to hails.

From what he can ascertain, one of the Andorians had left for a few hours before returning - presumably with the package. Meeting a contact who would take it to Sarek. This makes Spock think. They can’t be too far from Vulcan - or, rather, too far from his father’s location, if the package is meant to reach him before the time is up.

Logically, the voting will take place at the Federation’s Headquarters … on Earth.

Could this mean this ship is in orbit around Earth, or close by? The moon – or Mars, perhaps? The colony there could be avoided, hidden from, especially if the ship as got a cloaking device …

This could also mean his father is on Earth.

He should not feel the pang of regret tugging in his lower right quadrant. His father is on Earth and
has made no effort to contact him or inform him.

The bleeding has stopped. Wearing only one glove, he is now trying to wedge a finger between the floor plating of the cell. If the Andorians are watching, their surveillance is very poor indeed – they do not appear to stop him. It is quiet.

The floor will not give in.

Frustration (oh so human – he does not want to acknowledge it) begins to crawl up his spine, and he bites his lip. If he cannot open the cell by force –

If he could …

He hesitates. Spock knows he has a high psi-rating. The Mind Healers were quite surprised; the chances of him being a strong natural telepath was something they considered low because of his unique genetic heritage. The conclusion was logical. And yet – kaiidth. He is. If his telepathic ability were less, there would have been no need for him to have trained so rigorously to strengthen his mental shields, and there might not have been a need for gloves.

He has read about it, but not attempted it himself – to delve into another’s mind without consent is an abhorrent crime.

What is the human saying? Desperate times … desperate measures.

Quite fitting. Fighting back is the human thing to do; they would rather die free than live encaged.

Settling in a meditation pose but with no intention to meditate, the Vulcan closes his eyes, and focuses. The process is slow. He is patient. Is it even possible to reach an Andorian mind? He has never attempted that; he has rarely melded with anyone apart from, at a young age, his mother, and T’Pring during the ceremony of kool-ut-la, and after that no one at all. And at this uncertain distance?

But he must try.

The thought sickens him. Moral dictates that to manipulate another sentient being’s actions is just as abhorrent as an assault of the body. He will taint himself by doing this.

He must get out. He must return to Earth, and get in contact with his father, before the repercussions can get any worse than they potentially already are.

When one of the Andorians returns to check on the cell twenty-seven minutes later, Spock is ready and waiting. His eyes are closed. He feels the mind of the Andorian approaching. Without physical contact, it is difficult and taxing. His head is hurting already. You want to lower the forcefield, he suggests to it; that’s what he can do. He doesn’t possess the ability to control someone else completely or order them to do something against their will - but he can plant deep suggestions. It is an effort. His fists are clenched, and his breathing laboured. His head hurts. You want to lower the forcefield. You want to lower the forcefield.

The Andorian isn’t armed. It holds a comm in one hand, and speaks into it. “Nah, looks like he hasn’t even moved since last I checked.”

You want to lower the forcefield and offer the prisoner sustenance. You want to lower the forcefield and offer the prisoner sustenance.

And before it leaves, the Andorian suddenly halts, opening the comm again. Its voice turns stilted, forced, as if the Andorian itself is not forming the words, only repeating them. “Gehrek, should we
feed the prisoner?"

The other Andorian answers: “Whatever. Don’t want him to starve before we get word that the vote’s been changed. Check the hold, but don’t waste the good stuff.”

Vulcans do not sweat. If he had the capability, Spock is certain that the exertion would show itself now by pearling sweat in his neck and on his shoulderblades. But he can feel his limbs trembling. His energy reserves are low. He forces his eyes to open, and sees that the Andorian is now opening one of the crates on the far side of the wide room. It rifles through the metal box for a moment, before pulling out a ration pack. It could be stolen Starfleet merchandise.

You want to lower the forcefield and offer the prisoner sustenance.

The forcefield falls open, and Spock ceases thinking. The ration pack falls to the floor and at the same time he breaks his pose, flinging himself out of the cell. The Andorian is too surprised to make a sound as they fall into a heap, struggling for a moment before Spock manages to nerve pinch it. The blue humanoid slackens. Once he is certain that it’s unconscious, Spock grabs its communicator, and looks around for something to bind its hands with. Is there time for that?

He must find a way off the ship, wherever it is.

Carefully, Spock eases his way onto his feet. His body is stiff and somewhat heavy. He is forced to move slowly so that he does not grow dizzy.

It is indeed a small Cargo Hold. The door to the left is the one the Andorians have used repeatedly, logically leading to the Bridge. But before he opens it he seeks a weapon, anything to defend himself with. There are not many things to choose from, but he finds a metal bar by tearing it from the ceiling. Harmless oxygen and nitrogen pours out, with the aftertaste of recycled air, not quite fresh even though it’s been cooled. His hands and arms are sore. For the first time in a long time, he would like to sleep - deeply and dreamlessly - instead of meditate.

No alarm blares. He opens the door. The corridor beyond is empty. The ship is small, and doesn’t offer many ways to go. He follows the most logical route to what he hopes to be the Bridge.

---

**Cadet James T. Kirk (0927-4339-11)**

*its been 12 hours now haveyou found antyhing?? -J*

**Cpt. Christopher Pike (1973-3873-04)**

*We’ve just come in contact with Spock’s father, Ambassador Sarek, who is on Earth. It seems he’s being blackmailed by an unknown party, and Cadet Spock is being held hostage at an unknown location. Vulcans are lending assistance. Working on decrypting transmission now. We’ll find the missing cadet, Kirk. Please remain calm. /Pike*

**That Pesting Kid (0927-4339-11)**

*hes been fkn kidnapped bones!! what do we do??*

**Bones (0834-2834-01)**

*I don’t thinks there’s much we *can* do Jim, we’re just cadets. I’m sure they’ve got it covered.*
The door is unlocked.

Knuckles whitening, Spock grips the bar tighter, preparing to swing it if he has to. He doesn’t want to. It’s savagely violent and extremely displeasing. He doesn’t want to do it. Once the door is opened, he has only seconds to act.

It swishes open. The second Andorian is sitting with its feet propped up on the instrument board, bored. Its shoulders are hunched. A phaser rests across its knees. The light of the Bridge is dim, and the sky beyond the windshield dark and dotted with stars. The Andorians clearly didn’t anticipate him breaking free. The Andorian is drinking something foul-smelling from a flask; and it does not react at the noise right-away, not looking over its shoulder.

“All quiet?” it asks. “At least it isn’t one of those whining brats who cry for their mothers.”

He reaches out with his free hand to perform a nerve pinch. Before he can reach it, the Andorian looks up, and catches the hint of his reflection in the dark windshield, starkly - not the shape on an Andorian. It turns, gripping its phaser. Spock cannot pause to think: reacting. He swings the bar, and the Andorian cries out as heavy steel collides with its fist. There is a noise, a crack, sharply, and the phaser flies out of the Andorian’s hand.

“You! How did you get loose!” it shouts, cradling its broken wrist. “Vulcan brat!”

Without taking his eyes off the Andorian, Spock crouches slowly to pick up the phaser which had fallen by his feet, and then he aims it where he knows the Andorian’s heart is buried. The violence causes his throat to close, something there burning and rising. Disgust. Do no harm to -

He could end the Andorian’s life with the press of a finger. A little bit of pressure, and then …

No one should have that power.

“Where is this craft located?” he asks.

The Andorian does not answer.

“Where is this craft located?” he repeats, sharply.

“The dark side of Earth’s moon,” the Andorian says eventually. “Three klicks from the nearest colony.”

“You will take me back to Starfleet Academy,” Spock orders, without lowering the weapon, even if he does not ever want to pull the trigger. Violence is not the way of Surak. He focuses, like he did
before, with the guard; obey me. you want to obey me. The Andorian is shivering and paling and panting, its mind a jumbled mess of frantic thought, trying to protect itself, survive. Spock does not intend to harm it any more, but to make sure both Andorians face justice in court.

And at that moment the whole ship rocks sideways as if hit by heavy fire. The Andorian scrambles to regain its footing. Spock seizes the moment, reaching out to stun it like he did with its companion with a nerve pinch. The Andorian collapses draped over the controls, arms flailing. Quickly, the Vulcan drags the limp body off the pilot’s chair before settling himself in it, glancing at the controls. The ship is indeed Orion in origin. There is no cloaking device, or if there was it has been disabled. They have been seen - and fired upon.

Warning lamps are blinking. The ship has been damaged, though there is no hull breach yet.

Spock opens the comms.

“- unauthorized vessel,” commands a powerful voice in Standard Federation English. “This is the USS Lexington. You have parked your ship on Luna outside of any colonized area without a permit. You will be escorted to Earth immediately. Lower your shields. Prepare to be towed by tractor beam. Please comply immediately.”

He lowers the shields.

“Lexington, this is Cadet Spock of Starfleet Academy,” he answers, steadily. “I was taken aboard this vessel with force by two Andorians approximately nineteen Terran hours ago. Shields are down. I require assistance. One of the Andorians is in need of a medic.”

“A cadet? of Starfleet?” The speaker is obviously befuddled. “Please confirm.”

“Affirmative. Serial identification number is S179-276SP. I would advise you beam aboard a security team.”

“We’ll do that. Stay put. Are you unharmed, cadet?”

It is an odd and human question.

“Affirmative,” he says, and then realizes that the adrenaline is fading, and the throbbing dull pain in his head is rising again. Dark spots dance in front of his eyes. Soon he may pass out. “I may require some medical attention.”

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You have (3) missed calls from Jim (0927-4339-11).

You have (2) unread messages:

**Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)**
Answer your comm for fucks sake. You’re giving Jim a heartattack and I have to pick up the mess. Bw not a literal heartattack but just return the call, will you? If you’re not in trouble and getting me this worked up for nothing I’ll wring your bloody green neck

**Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)**
Hello, Spock. Just wondering if everything is all right? Xenoling. started 20 minutes ago and the professor is wondering where you are. We’re all pretty worried. A security team is in your dorm right now treating it like a crime scene. Please answer and let us know you’re all right
Chapter Summary

act i. part four.
Dreaming is illogical.

act i.
part four

istau
(verb)
wish
to long for; want; to desire;
to entertain or express wishes for; bid

Edge of the Plain of Blood · The Forge · Vulcan
Stardate 2245.13

It’s difficult to breathe.

But he is not injured. The le-matya lies on the ground and its side is torn open, bleeding sluggishly. A sehlat’s claw is buried in this throat. Its eyes are dim. It twitches once, twice.

It ceases moving.

There is blood on his hands. Not his own. And he should remain calm. He should remain. He should focus, be in control, and not feel. Not feel. Feel. He kneels by the body. It is still warm and the fur soft and he cannot stop himself from burying a fist in it, seeking, seeking warmth and comfort and other things he cannot put words to.

He has never completed a mindmeld with anyone before. Not properly: not on his own volition. It is not to be done with animals, with creatures, inferior, without a language. And yet.

There is pain. He can feel it, nearly cries out. I-Chaya, he whispers, I-Chaya, and there is a thought: wordless, but there is recognition there. The sehlat knows him. It now knows that he is safe, unharmed. You saved my life, he whispers. Why did you do that?

Mother,

he had once asked her when she kept using that word; reading a story from a Terran book, what is the exact definition of a friend?

When he withdraws, there is a wetness on his cheeks which should not be. It keeps welling from his eyes, and his vision is blurry and painful and he has an urge to throw himself atop of the creature and wrap his arms around it and keep it alive through the force of will, but that is illogical, irrational, impossible. I-Chaya’s whimpers are quieting, soft breaths evening out, until they are not breathing anymore. Like a candle burning out and smoke rising, dissolving. Spock removes his hand
from their head, gently, slowly, carefully. He cannot see properly.

True Vulcans do not possess the physical glands to make it possible for them to shed tears. They do not possess tear ducts.

He raises a hand, wipes his cheek to force away the wetness there. The touch of warm blood mingling with his tears is sharp and frightening (no no no emotion he must suppress feel no fear). Quickly he withdraws his hand. His pulse is fast, too fast, too fast.

A friend is someone who helps you,

his mother had answered, contemplating the question for a moment,
someone who sees you through the thick and thin … someone who makes you happy.

Vulcans do not have

Medbay · USS Lexington · Earth Spacedock
Stardate 2256.321

The Captain of the USS Lexington is the human Commodore Robert Wesley, and Spock has heard of him - naturally, as he knows the names of all senior officers in Starfleet - though he has not met him, as the Commodore has not been to Earth for nearly a year. The ship returned to the Sol system only a little over a day ago. Just in time to discover an unauthorized ship hiding in the shadows of the dark side of Earth’s moon, hiding from the Lunar Colonies. A security patrol managed to find the vessel, actually, and contacted Starfleet when they scanned the vessel for an ID or permit and found none, and instead found the ship to be powerfully shielded, beyond the capability of what the patrol’s own craft could penetrate.

Commodore Wesley is a tall, slowly graying man, and he’s waiting with his arms crossed by the beaming pad. He does not need to be here. Spock has not met a lot of admiralty yet and greets him with the ta’al even as his vision has become steadily blurrier for the past two point six hours, and standing up is an effort. The Vulcan is directed onto a gurney. When he says that he can walk on his own, the doctor ignores him. He reminds him somewhat of Leonard, though with less harsh bedside manners.

A security team of four had beamed over to the Andorian ship, finding the two unconscious Andorians, and one Vulcan in Starfleet Academy reds. One of them is a medic and instantly has Spock rushed to the Lexington’s medbay. The Commodore follows, pulling out his communicator, demanding he has to speak with Starfleet HQ right away, telling them they’ve got a cadet up here where he has no business being. Then he looks at Spock as if he has never seen a Vulcan before in his life, which Spock considers highly unlikely given the man’s age and position.

Perhaps it is the dark green blood smeared on his cheek. Most sentient beings are alarmed at the sight of blood.

Thankfully they have painkillers onboard which a Vulcan – or rather a human-Vulcan hybrid – can tolerate. The ship’s Doctor, M’Benga, works efficiently though not very quietly with sealing the injury. Dr M’Benga has above average knowledge of Vulcan physiology, having served an internship on Vulcan three years prior. If not for this they would have beamed him directly to the Vulcan Embassy on Earth for medical treatment there from Vulcan Healers. Part of Spock is relieved. He has no fondness for Healers. As Dr M’Benga works, an assisting nurse brings water and antiseptic to clean his hands; before Spock can protest, definitely not wanting to be touched, Dr M’Benga instructs the nurse to let Spock do it himself.
He wonders if he should get a prosthetic. No doubt the amount of stares will increase from now on, and he does not look forward to it.

“Now I want to know how the hell a cadet wound up on the moon in a stolen cargoship with two Andorians,” the Commodore says. His voice is gruff but not unkind. He doesn’t leave the medbay; his First Officer is in charge of docking the ship, and from there a shuttle will return them to Earth. “I wasn’t even aware we had a Vulcan at the Academy.”

“I joined at the beginning of this term, sir,” Spock says, folding his hands in his lap. “The Andorians took me in belief they could sway the Vulcan Ambassador on Earth, my father, to withdraw or change his vote concerning the Ferengi admittance to the Federation – I overheard them discussing this and mentioning Ambassador Vyys by name. I am uncertain whether the three were only ones involved. I managed to free myself from the cell by bypassing the main control circuits of the cell’s forcefield, and stunned both Andorians with a nerve pinch. They should wake up within the hour.”

“Ah, shit.” Wesley glances at the Doctor. “What about the …?”

“There’s some nerve damage,” the Doctor says. “But luckily the dermal generator has already closed the injury, and I’ve cleaned it. No risk for infection. I’m sorry, cadet, but I don’t think it’s possible to reattach anything and retain function.”

“That is fine,” says Spock stonily. “Thank you, Doctor.”

The human doesn’t look convinced.

Commodore Wesley hands him a communicator. Spock is surprised, but accepts it. “Do you have your father’s comm number?” the Commodore asks.

“Negative. I shall contact the Vulcan Embassy.”

The Commodore lets him do that. The conversation which follows is calm, factual, and wholly in Vulcan. His father is not in the building, but Spock manages to reach his aide. The package reached his father’s office in the Embassy seven point three hours ago - and he began looking. Spock isn’t sure how to take the news. To search for him was not the most logical action. He realizes this will have political repercussions. Vulcans and Andorians are rarely on the best of terms.

After he closes the communicator and gives it back to the Commodore, Spock explains that his father will meet them at Starfleet HQ.

Wesley sighs and scratches at his neck as if he’s suddenly overcome with weariness. “And I thought our return to Earth would be a simple affair,” the Commodore murmurs, before returning his voice a normal volume. “Cadet … Spock, wasn’t it? Let’s get you aboard a shuttle.”

He expects his father and perhaps one other Vulcan from the Embassy to be there. This is a political question; nothing personal. Affairs with the Andorians must be settled quickly, before it truly becomes a disaster and a matter of conflict or war.

He doesn’t expect the throng of curious cadets clamouring to get a look at the shuttle as it lands at Starfleet HQ to be greeted by the Vulcan Ambassador and two Starfleet Admirals. Some students push toward the forefront of the cluster, and Spock blinks in the sunlight as suddenly Jim and Leonard are there.

“Spock! What the hell happened? You look like shit,” Jim exclaims, throwing an arm around his shoulders. Spock stiffens. His father is staring at them. Clearing his throat, Jim murmurs an apology,
letting his arm slip away - only to rise again. “Your ear! Oh my god. What – who –?!”

“Give him some space, Jim,” Leonard says, bodily pulling the human from the Vulcan. The Doctor has his flaws, but Spock has come to appreciate his characteristics somewhat of late. The man has read and asked about Vulcan physiology and norms not merely for his own benefit - his heart isn’t stony cold even if he claims it to be.

“I would appreciate that,” Spock agrees, even though the warmth of Jim’s touch, while sudden, was not wholly unwelcome. He is still cold. He would like his gloves back, but they’re a ruined mess of torn cloth and green blood left on the moon.

“Oh! This belongs to you.” Jim pulls something from his pocket. A communicator. Handing it over, their skin almost comes in contact. The human is cooler than a Vulcan would be. Should be. Spock swallows back a shudder.

The crowd gives way to a Vulcan in traditional long robes and clasped hands. The Vulcan’s face is stoic.

“Spock.”

His father’s voice betrays no emotion. Yet there is something about his eyes, softening at the edges. It is enough to know - something, at least. That they have passed this storm, perhaps, and that his father might begin to forgive him from choosing Starfleet over the Vulcan Science Academy.

“Father.”

“This is your …? Oh. Hello, sir,” says Jim, for once not as carefree or at ease; Spock might even call the human nervous or awkward as Jim tries to form the *ta’al* – strange, how he never seems to learn it. “I guess you need a moment. I’ll just, uh, wait here for my turn.”

“You have Advanced Tactics,” Spock says seriously. “To skip classes would be irresponsible and illogical.”

He has little hope that Jim will take his advice to heart. Sometimes he is so utterly irrational and … *human*.

“Yeah, well, I don’t care,” Jim says. “Are you okay?”

*I don’t know*, Spock nearly answers. Being around humans for so long has made him much more prone to emotional thought. It has to remedied.

“Yes,” he says instead. Jim doesn’t seem to believe him.

During this exchange, his father doesn’t interrupt. Spock is aware that his gaze returns to his damaged ear. Once he is free of Jim and the other cadets, Sarek takes him aside, and Commodore Wesley orders the cadets to scatter and return to their classes.

Apologizes are illogical.

And yet. *And yet.*

The silence is heavy, somewhat awkward. Spock’s hands clench tightly behind his back. He wants to appear more like himself: calm and dignified and unmoved. His side aches. He wonders if his mother is aware of any of this happening.
“Do you have any classes today?” his father asks.

“Negative.” The medic and the Commodore had both insisted that he should not return to classes today, and that they would speak with the Principal about it - it won’t have a negative impact on his study results. Should not. Spock isn’t certain if he can focus properly.

A hovercar takes them to the Embassy. There, a Vulcan Healer gives him a second medical check-up. Unlike the human counterpart on the Lexington, the Healer doesn’t attempt to engage him in idle talk. Spock asks the relevant questions regarding his injury, how it will heal, and if there will be any side-effects from it. There is a discussion about corrective surgery. There is no way to find an appropriate donor, given he is a hybrid, but a new ear-tip could be grown in a laboratory, a copy of his other ear. It would be little more than a prosthetic as the nerve damage would not allow him to feel the tip, but Spock agrees, and the necessary tissue samples are taken. It will be some weeks before surgery can be done.

He does not seek to stand out any more than he already does.

Afterward, Sarek takes him to a secluded restaurant near the Embassy which serves Vulcan dishes. Spock eats little. Conversation is halting. He finds his own manner of speech to be altered - little details - small words; choosing to express minute emotions when before he would not have before coming to Earth. When he asks about the repercussions of these events, his father is startlingly evasive of the matter - claiming that this is not the time to debate politics. Instead they veer onto general things; his father’s work; if he and mother are well. Empty words.

“Father,” Spock asks at last. “Does mother know about what has happened?”

“Yes,” Sarek says. “She is on her way to Earth by freighter, and will arrive in fifteen point seven hours. She was … concerned, when we received the first threat.”

He tries not to let it show, but his father knows his face too well to miss the surprise. His mother’s reaction, that is foreseeable and understandable even, but for her to abandon her work on Vulcan - Sarek speaks no more of it, other than that he will notify him once Amanda has landed. No doubt she will want to see him for a prolonged amount of time and, truthfully, Spock looks forward to it; he has missed her. He has rarely spent this much time away from her presence, and Vulcan lies sixteen lightyears from Earth. Even a subspace videocall does not occur without a notable time lag.

Once they have eaten, Sarek escorts him back to campus. It is late afternoon. Spock considers the classes he has missed, and the work to be done to catch up.

He has a number of missed calls on his communicator, starting the night he was meant to meet Jim - who is the person who has left the most messages. There is one, too, from Nyota. He had missed their Advanced Xenolinguistics class which he was meant to TA. She was concerned. Illogical. Human. She will no doubt react positively if she receives an answer.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Nyota, I apologize for my absence yesterday morning. I will make certain that my absence from class will not impact negatively on your or the other students’ studies by extending the time for questions on the seminar next Tuesday. If you would still like to meet for our study session I am available on Thursday between 1:00-1:45 p.m. Otherwise we will see each other in our shared classes. Dif-tor heh smusma.
Her reply is uncharacteristically emotional and vivid.

**Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)**

I heard what happened, and I’m so relieved to hear from you. Maybe it’s better we don’t meet this week. My grades won’t suffer for it, so don’t worry about that. I’m glad to know you’re okay. Take care of yourself.

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

I shall.

He glances at the digital watch on the bedside table. It is too early to make a logical argument for sleeping. The kitchen could be empty, though. He could make *ploumeek shur* ...

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

*It was not my intention to cause you to become ‘worked up’. Your planned actions will not be necessary.*

**Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)**

Not your fault but don’t get kidnapped again. I’d never hear the end of it. Now go the fuck to sleep, it’s the middle of the bloody night. Doctor’s orders.

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

*By the logic of your own argument you too should be asleep, especially since humans require an average of six to eight hours of sleep each night to function properly.*

There is no immediate reply, though he can image the human’s irritated enraged expression. Tucking the comm away, he strips away the layers of his uniform - not cadet reds. Aboard the Lexington Dr M’Benga had acquired a standard grey uniform for him to borrow, blessedly clean and fresh, since his own reds were worn and dirtied with blood. Idly he thinks that he has to speak with the staff about getting a new cadet uniform.

He cannot eat. He’s not hungry. He is still cold.

He changes into pyjamas and settles in the bed, wrapped in all the blankets he could find in the room.

He sleeps.

---

Vulcans do not dream.

Spock can recall his first dreams: crystal clear, images, noise. So much noise. His mother said they were normal. All humans dreams, child and adult -

Vulcans do not dream.

He does not tell his peers or his father or the Mind Healers that he dreams, or how frequently. Through meditation he has taught himself to suppress them, like emotion. There are days and weeks when he does not sleep at all, and so dreams are no issue.

Last time he had a nightmare, before coming to Earth, he was eight years old and he was curled up in the sand of the Forge, seeking shadows, and I-Chaya was dead after having bled out after defending
him, saving his life. That night had been long and cold and dangerous. That was the last time he had wept, and after that he had sworn not to let emotion or attachment ruin him that way. It would not stop him. He dreamt occasionally in the weeks after that.

Tonight he dreams. It’s not a pleasant dream, though it starts that way: sitting in the library, he and Jim are talking, though the words themselves are nonsense - no, not talking. Their hands are touching, and their minds; your mind to mine; and Spock nearly rouses from the shock of such an openly emotional dream. But then he’s not in the library at all, he’s cold and cannot move and the knife descends on him;

He wakes up. The clock on the bedside table proclaims that it’s 05:22 in the current Earth timezone. Eight hours. He hasn’t slept that long since he was a child; since before kahs’wan; since before –

Unable to close his eyes again, he slips out of bed and heads for the shower. He sets the water to the hottest setting, and breathes the rising steam. The heat is wet but almost like that of the Forge, swirling and unforgiving.

He longs for sand and for a different sun as he rinses his hair. A sun in a blue sky but not blue like Earth’s. Clearer. Free.

The shower cubicle is too much like a cell. He turns off the water and steps out of it. The tiles are freezing against his bare toes and he swiftly dries himself off and finds some clothes. He would have laundered one of his uniforms if he hadn’t been taken away, and stands in front of the mirror in the bathroom for a moment eyeing his reflection.

Vulcans oughtn’t do that. They should not care for their appearance beyond being dignified. Yet Spock’s gaze glides past the occasional wrinkle, smoothing them out with his hands, toward his face. It appears somewhat sunken, pale. Frail. The green veins beneath the skin stand out starkly in the sharp artificial lamplight. The curve of his left ear ends so suddenly, flat, the angle strange. Wrong. His fingertip brushes against it. There is no pain or discomfort, only a vague hint of pressure and at the top nothing at all. The nerve endings are frayed. The scar is still so fresh it gleams an angry dark green beneath the newly grown skin.

Vulcans should not dream. Dreams are illogical.

He is well on time, as always. He claims a front-row seat, as always. For once he is very glad he does not need to take notes to remember lessons. His hands wouldn’t be stable enough to grasp a pencil or a PADD correctly.

Five minutes before the lecture is due to start, there is movement at his side. Few cadets would ever sit near him if they can help it, and he knows this presence without having to look.

“Hey.”

“Hello, Jim,” Spock says. The human claims the nearest seat to his left. Leonard is with him, gripping a cup of coffee tightly and not looking quite awake. The older man only nods vaguely in his direction, which is his customary greeting this early in the morning.

Jim usually takes up space: both auditory and spatial. Now, he is somehow subdued. It doesn’t fit him. The human doesn’t open his bag to take out his PADD or notebook, but looks directly at the young Vulcan, and his eyes are dark.

“I was really worried,” Jim confesses after a moment, voice low. “It’s not like you not to answer calls, so I checked your dorm. I … sort of hacked your dorm room lock. When I found the blood –”
Jim trails off. “I’m just glad you’re okay.” His voice softens, somewhat shakily. “At least sort of. Does that hurt?” He gestures at the ear.

“Negative,” Spock answers, suddenly self-conscious. “There is - there is a certain amount of nerve damage.”

“Okay.” But Jim does not sound like everything is okay. “You sure you want to be here? We could skip. Or you could. Not sure if I can get away with it anymore.” The human shrugs, casually. “They’d understand.”

No. No. He doesn’t want things to change, to break the rhythm. He wants to return to it as it was before - “I do not want to skip class because of these events.”

“Okay.” Again Jim nods and his eyes do not match his facial expression. “Had breakfast yet?”

Vulcans do not lie. “Negative.”

Without asking permission, Jim turns around and swipes something from his roommate’s half-open bag, which turns out to be an apple.

“Hey!” mutters Leonard then, noticing what Jim is doing. “Get your own. I thought you’d had breakfast already!”

“Not for me,” Jim singsongs, holding the fruit in front of the Vulcan, an offering. “Isn’t there an old saying? An apple a day …”

Whatever the words mean, Spock hasn’t heard them before, but the older human relents. Leonard sighs, rolling his eyes. “Fine.”

Spock takes the apple, careful not to let his gloved fingers touch Jim’s.


Vulcans do not eat with their hands. Would not. Should not. It is unsavoury, something savage, something that was common before Surak. Something … feral. But for Jim he might be willing to make an exception to the rule.

Other Vulcans do not need to know.

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San Francisco Spaceport · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.323

The freighter lands in San Francisco Spaceport in the middle of the night. As soon as she was in comm range, Spock had received a message from her, and he’d called for a hovercab to take him over the bridge without hesitation. In his hurry he had forgotten to take an umbrella. It is raining, though only lightly. The sky is dim and the stars bleak, and the shadow of the crafts moving in and out with their blinking lights is overwhelming. Despite the late hour the port is full of noise and frenzy and people on the move, rushing, and Spock threads carefully through the masses toward one of the lit notice boards.

Guided thus to Gate 17B, he finds himself waiting. The freighter carried only 29 passengers - most carry a hundred or more. But it is not a commercial flight per se, and his mother is the Ambassador’s wife, and her journey urgent.
It has been a hundred and sixteen point seven days since he last saw her in the flesh. He isn’t prepared for the dull pang in his lower quadrant at the sight of her: she is wearing Terran-style clothes, old ones, because she has not been to Earth for quite some time or procured new such garments. A shawl is wound over her hair. She is paler than she should be - than he recalls her as - even though this makes no sense. She is not ill or suffering from injury. In one hand she’s pulling a wheeled bag; little other luggage. That is all she had packed, and a sign of her stress and concern. Spock doesn’t like it. She should not need to feel that way.

Then she spots him and smiles. It is a more emotional gesture than it should be, but he does not mind. He lets her embrace him the human way, as it seems to have a calming effect.

“Spock! Oh, I’m so happy to see you’re all right.” Withdrawing the embrace, her Her hand hovers over his damaged ear. “Sarek told me what happened, but …” She trails off. “Are you all right?”

It is a publicly emotional scene, and it’s not the Vulcan way to allow it. But Spock is tired. He has missed her. “Yes, mother. I am fine.”

In her hurry she hasn’t thought about a bed to sleep in once she came to Earth, but Sarek will easily arrange something at the Embassy. As they exit the Spaceport, Amanda walks close next to him, and she doesn’t press with questions of how he feels though he thinks she would like to. Instead she smalltalks about her own work, and wonders how his studies are going, if he has socialized with any other cadets lately, and other such subjects. Somehow, Spock finds himself mentioning Jim - albeit not by name - three whole times within the few minutes it takes to enter the streets and find a hovercab.

“It sounds like you’ve found a friend,” his mother says, pleased, as the cab carries them through the nightly traffic toward the Vulcan Embassy. Amanda has contacted Sarek, who will be waiting for them there.

A friend?

Yes, that is what Jim calls them. Friends. But Vulcans do not have -

(but he is not wholly Vulcan)

“He is agreeable,” Spock says to avoids using the word altogether. “And not incompetent. There is … There are a number of other cadets with whom I have also socialized from time to time.”

Amanda smiles gently. “I’m happy for you, and proud. I know from personal experience that it’s not easy to integrate with an alien place. And your peers?”

“Ninety-one percent of the Academy’s professors are adequate teachers. I am learning … though sometimes I would prefer a more efficient computer.”

Though if he stood at attention in a learning bowl, surrounded by holographic displays … irrationally he would somehow miss having the chance to exchange textual messages with Jim. Efficient, yes. And lonely. Vulcans would not suffer from it, but humans would. That is why, he realizes, they use the system they do. They prefer to discuss things in groups over debating with an artificially created system with preprogrammed answers.

From the corner of his eye he sees his mother hide a yawn behind her hand. Even though the freighter was equipped with engines capable of Warp 6, the journey was long and tiresome.

Soon enough they reach the Embassy. Sarek is waiting inside the foyer, which is not as grand and splendid as many people tend to think. The room is large but sparsely decorated. The furnishings are
logical and sleek and simple, with the exception of the carved pillars bearing the Teachings of Surak in ancient intricate script. They pass through the wide doors, and Sarek greets his wife by touching his fingers to hers.

Then he turns to his son. “Spock. Do you require returning to the Academy immediately?”

“Yes, father, regrettably,” Spock says. “I must mediate. I have lectures in the morning.”

“Of course,” Amanda says. “Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat or drink?”

“Yes, mother.” He walks back to the doors – he had asked the cab to wait for five minutes before moving on, and he can hear the hovercar’s engines quietly thrumming in the background. He raises his hand in the ta’al. “Dif-tor heh smusma.”

Both his parents mirror the gesture, and Sarek says: “Sochya eh dif?”

The ride back to campus is brief and quiet. Spock considers his father’s mood and how he has spoken in the last few days – ever since the Andorian incident. His father has not acted similarly for years. There is something … soft about the edges: his choice of words may be stiff, but when Sarek met him on campus after he was returned from Luna, Spock was reminded of the father of his childhood. The one who had sat next to him after the time he had ended up fighting with his fellow classmates in Shi’kahr, defending his mother; Sarek had then said to choose his destiny. And Spock had. He had turned away T’Pring, understanding that no Vulcan would be compatible with him. He had turned away the VSA in favour of Starfleet. And Sarek had disagreed, perhaps thinking his wording all those years ago had been hastened and illogical.

Sarek had often disagreed, especially after kahs’wan, after which Spock would wander further and further away. In his free time, outside of his education, the young Vulcan had explored the reaches beyond Shi’kahr, the mountains, the hills, and he had even attempted to cross the Forge a second time when he was fourteen. To show them: he could do it, as well as any Vulcan.

This was the result his father had not wanted.

It strikes him, as the dark glimmering cityscape passes him by in the blurry windows of the cab, that his father had been afraid.

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**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth**

**Stardate 2256.333**

“… and the signing of the charter which ratified the Coalition of Planets, the precedent of the Federation, in 2161. The Coalition was first proposed in 2155 by the Prime Minister of United Earth, Nathan Samuels – due credit also goes to Admiral Jonathan Archer of the Enterprise NX-01 that the Coalition was ever established …”

The teacher barely pauses to breathe. Normally, Spock would have no issue following. Now his mind is wandering, and he can only focus irregularly on the lecturer’s words. It has been ten days now. Surely he must have gotten better, the symptoms receding?

But it is not so. Not always.

Sometimes, he is illogically wishing to hear Jim speak. Or even Leonard. The gruffness is … refreshing. Or Nyota, whose company always offers the exchange of knowledge and information. It is … pleasant. After spending time with them, he dreams less.
Then, he must spend more time with them: that is the logical solution.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ru free on friday 7pm?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Negative. Why are you inquiring about my schedule?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
next wednesday 7pm?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Affirmative. Again: why are you asking?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sshh it’s a surprise ;) I’ll knock on ur door at 6. wear something nice

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Doctor, as his roommate, are you aware whether Jim is making plans of some type of even this weekend of which he does not wish to inform me the details? /Spock

Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)
Hell if I know. He bothering you? And couldn’t you have split that sentence with at least one comma? Jeez -McCoy

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Negative. I am merely wondering. He asked me to, I quote, ‘wear something nice’. What would a human categorize as ‘nice’ clothing?

Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)
Oh my god. I’m not ready for this conversation

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I do not understand. Is this conversation bothering you?

Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)
ugh fine. I’ll find out what the kid is up to. No promises though. Btw ‘nice’ means something like a suit or fancy dress. Knowing Jim, something dunno kinda breathable

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Breathable?

Leonard McCoy (0834-2834-01)
yeah

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Please elaborate.

The Doctor does not elaborate, and Spock waits a considerable time for a reply. There is none. He must assume that Leonard is busy elsewhere, or perhaps has, in that irrational human way of his,
abandoned the conversation on the basis of being ‘so done’. Jim had described it with those words once, though Spock still has trouble understanding the concept in full. It is not part of the Standard Federation English dictionary.

He has to turn elsewhere for an explanation.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Apologizes for bothering you, Nyota. This is unrelated to our study sessions. I have a question regarding human culture. What is the definition of ‘breathable’ when related to ‘nice clothing’? I have been asked to wear such for an event this weekend. /Spock

Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)

I guess fancy clothing, the human equivalent of Vulcan robes, made from fabric that breathes, something a human might wear for a night out partying.

Wait, have you been talking with Kirk?

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Affirmative, if by that you mean cadet James T. Kirk.

Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)

I'm sorry, Spock, but you’re in for a rough ride (that means something difficult or trying is ahead of you). Kirk has got it read bad. He isn’t bothering you, is he?

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Negative. He is not harassing me. We have already socialized before on several occasions. I was merely confounded by the intricacies of human culture and communication.

Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)

I understand that. We could meet up sometime and talk about that, if you’d like? Not a study session, just two friends socializing.

There is that word again. Friends.

Repeated nearly as often as the question are you all right?.

And yet …

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I would be amendable to that.

“… so that basically could be an expression of joy or irony, depending on the context.”

“I see. Fascinating.”

Nyota is sipping a colourful sugary drink, while Spock contents with green tea. He has been avoiding food and drink with sucrose ever since the incident at Gaila’s party. Nyota has even attempted to apologize for that, once, when she found out that Jim invited him. Whatever wedge was between them still exists, though it seems to have smoothed out some.
Bit by bit he had found out what occurred after he was taken by the Andorians, those weeks ago. Jim and Leonard had met Nyota by accident, drawing attention to the fact that he was missing, though none of them knew how or why. At first Nyota had thought he was at the library. They had looked there, even Leonard, quite grimly and reluctantly. The next day they had attended classes (though perhaps not Jim, at least not all of them) without having seen or heard from him, and Nyota had been concerned, since being absent is unlike him - unheard of for a Vulcan.

Their conversation moves on from texting vernacular to other matters. Nyota is looking forward to the holidays; she’s going to spend them with her family. Another human thing. They have many different cultures, religions, and holidays devoted to different things, but focus lies often heavily on family and friends, and spending them with loved ones. His own mother is now attempting to convince him to spend the Terran New Year turn with her relatives here on Earth. Spock is indecisive. He has only met those relatives twice, when he was very young. He has in truth little idea of who they are now, or their views on non-Terrans.

When he mentions he will probably spend the two study-free weeks on campus on his own, Nyota looks at him sternly, as if she has forgotten he is Vulcan. She rarely does that. “You sure?” she says.

“It will be adequate, and I will have time to conduct experiments and prepare for the next semester.”

“Okay. But if you change your mind, just text me, and you could spend it with us. It wouldn’t be the first time I brought friends over,” Nyota says with a smile. “My grandmother would adore you. That’s a good thing, mind. She’s an astrophysicist.”

“I see. Thank you, Nyota, but that is not necessary”

“Still. What about your own family?”

“I have been invited by my mother to meet relatives on her side for the Terran New Year,” he acknowledges, “though I have not seen them for ten point six years.”

Nyota stirs her drink with a long spoon, idly. “Do they live a long way from your hometown? The one you grew up in, I mean.”

“Sixteen point two lightyears,” he confirms, and she looks surprised. “They live here on Earth,” he elaborates. “They … are human.”

“Oh! I had no idea. I couldn’t guess from looking at you, and I’ve known you for a while now.”

“My characteristics and physiology is predominantly Vulcan. I am raised a Vulcan. But, yes, my mother is human, and half of my genetic material stems from her.”

“That’s cool.” And she doesn’t comment further, negatively or otherwise, and he is relieved. But he has never suspected Nyota of being xenophobic. “What about your father’s family?”

“They did not agree to my mother and father’s bonding,” Spock reveals, and thinks of the High Council and their stern faces, their blank eyes and still mouths. “Though a few did approve enough so that they could stay on Vulcan without dishonour. My father is of the House of Surak, and my paternal grandmother sits on the Council. This gave them leverage.”

“The Surak?”

He nods. “Affirmative.”

“That makes your family a rather big deal, then,” she notes.
“I would assume so on Vulcan; but we are not on Vulcan.”

“Still, I think it’s pretty cool.”

“The temperature of this room is average to Terran indoors this time of year.”

Nyota laughs, warmly. “Oh, not like that. It’s an expression.”

“I see. I have heard it being used before. What is its function?”

“It can mean that something is …” She pauses for a moment in search for the right definition. “That something’s awesome or extraordinary in some way, but it can also be used to express that something is all right, that you agree with an opinion or idea. If someone’s shrugging when they say it, it’s more like: okay, fine, sure. It’s all about the tone of voice. I meant it that it is rather awesome, in this case. Some old Earth cultures would consider you to be part of some kind of royal family, you know, since Surak is such an important figure in your history, and given your grandmother is on the Vulcan High Council.”

“Fascinating. I was not aware.”

He should make sure Jim does not find out. Sometimes the human’s relentless curiosity can be quite taxing, and this is a detail which Jim would no doubt blow out of proportion, or possibly make fun of in some way.

“Anyway, about that message.” Directly and to the point, Nyota returns to the foundation of their current conversation. She looks him in the eye, suddenly very serious. “Spock, I’m pretty sure Kirk is asking you out on a date.”

He frowns. He assumes she does not mean the day of a year. That is more than illogical.

“I … see.”

“God, I’m sorry. Kirk of all people,” Nyota says, with an odd inflection focused on Jim’s familial name. That is also strange. It is not as if Jim would cause him suffering, regardless of certain oddities and mannerisms. No more than any other human. “I could talk with him, you know.”

“That is unnecessary,” Spock says. He thinks for a moment. “What is the exact definition of a ‘date’?”

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**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Hello, mother. I wish for some advice. I have been approached by a cadet in a manner which suggests he wants to take me out on a ‘date’. Should I accept this invitation?

**Amanda Greyson (1092-8248-29)**

My dear Spock, that’s entirely up to you. The question is: do you like him?

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

He is human and therefore illogical. I find myself in his company quite often, and we exchange messages. When the incident with the Andorians occurred, Jim expressed genuine concern which I found quite disconcerting but it is also a quality which makes him amendable. Captain Pike explained to me that Jim attempted to be part of the search party assembled to look for me at the time. I have
allowed him to take part of my lab sessions twice. He is emphatic, and highly emotional, but not unintelligent. I do not have a wish to cease socializing with him.

Amanda Greyson (1092-8248-29)
Then maybe you have answered your own question.
act i :: part five

Chapter Summary

act i. part five.
Fire and dust.

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone who’s read this far and left kudos and/or comments! You spur me onward.
Warning: this chapter contains violence and original character deaths due to a very violent xenophobic hate-crime. The most explicit parts are in the middle section of the chapter.

act i.
part five

an’kharh
(noun)
fear
the feeling which occurs when one is in danger
or when a particular thing is frightening

Foothills of the L-langon Mountains · The Forge· Vulcan
Stardate 2245.21

Law dictates that in order to pass the kahs’wan, the Vulcan child must survive within the Forge for ten days without outside help, food, or water.

Spock leaves home in the late of night, using the emergency transporter which his father has installed in their house, travelling out of Shi’kahr and into the wilderness in the flash of a second. I-Chaya refuses to leave his side. And to be truthful, Spock is glad of that. He does leave a message, telling his mother there is no need for her to feel emotionally concerned for his well-being; he will pass the test (or he will not, and should he not she will not know until it is too late). It is a gamble using the transporter, because of the instability of the electrical sandstorms often rising and falling in the vast canyon. He lands on the outskirts of its western edge, by the Gateway. The redness of the sand is stark and beautiful and terrifying. He will cross it. He will prove that he is Vulcan.

He does not return for ten days.

On the eleventh day, his father arranges search parties. It is the logical thing to do. Spock tries to avoid them. He means to return to Shi’kahr and his home and the soothing calm of his mother’s
presence on his own. He will not give in. He will not yield.

He does not want to leave I-Chaya behind. He cannot bury the sehlat, this companion who he found and tamed when he was only four years old, who has so faithfully stood him by. He does not have the tools nor the energy to do so. His throat is parched. If he felt safer he would have meditated, but he does not, and he has not slept. Other le-matya may be lurking in the darkness, drawn forth by the scent of blood and corpses, and Spock has little choice but to turn away.

Illogically, illogically, emotionally, he does not want to. He reigns in the tears which had flooded so freely, removes his hand from where he had managed to reach into I-Chaya’s fading broken mind as the sehlat lay dying, and resolves to never cry again.

They find him on the twelfth day. He has lost count of the miles his feet have trampled. His father is there, and there is something beyond the coldness of his eyes. It is difficult to understand, and difficult to bear. Spock realizes he must be suffering from dehydration as well as hunger.

You have done well, Spock, his father says, without inflection, as a vehicle carries them back to Shi’kahr. The words are heavy, as heavy as the storm winds engulfing the Shival Flats in spring. Even if your choice was illogical, you have passed the test.

His mother tries to embrace him.

No, he says, stopping her. I have passed the Ordeal of Maturity. I am not a child anymore. He stops her, and he wishes he could imprint on his own and hers and everyone’s minds: I am Vulcan.

And he tries not to think about what it would feel like to have her arms around him in that human gesture ever again after that.

Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.339

People are staring. He understands, one some rational level, why. And part of him does not understand at all. He cannot comprehend fully, as he would not have done the same as them.

(Broken. Half-breed. Not whole; he wants to be whole; he has only ever wanted to be whole.)

The hours continue to roll forward. The days fall back into their established rhythm of being: lecture, seminar, meal time, meditation. Repeat. Sometimes, he tries to exchange an hour of meditation with sleep, but finds little rest. Dreams - illogical, unwanted. They keep invading.

He thinks, more than he should, about Jim. The human is an enigma, and in so many aspects difficult to pinpoint. He is … wild. It should frustrate him. Often enough it does, but yet he keeps returning to his presence. Something soothing about it.

Jim has not looked at him differently since he was returned. Other than once expressing a deep, perhaps even anguished, sentiment to hurt the Andorians, Jim has not talked about what happened. He has not commented on Spock’s minutely changed appearance. He does keep insisting that he eat and sleep, as if he were human, following the same laws and patterns.

Unpredictable and wild.

They are both …

Neither are who they have been dictated that they should be.
The surgery is performed under general anesthesia and takes only twenty-two minutes to complete. The Healers at the Vulcan Embassy at the heart of the city are competent and swift in their work. The scar will heal, in time, and in a few months the seam will be entirely invisible. But there are no nerve clusters under the freshly grown skin. Though flesh, grown in lab and based on his own genetic sequence, has been reattached, it is not the same.

*Kaïidth.* He does not ask for a mirror. The Healers do not offer one.

His mother is waiting outside of the room, and albeit she has trained herself to appear calm, especially around Vulcans, there is concern in her eyes.

“It looks good,” she says, as he allows her to inspect the injury. Sarek stands to the side, quiet.

“It is adequate,” he replies.

“You are smothering him, *ashalik,*” his father intervenes, and his tone betrays nothing but the choice of word *is* emotional. Spock looks at him; his father’s facial muscles do not move. “He is no longer a child.”

“Well, he is my son, regardless,” his mother retorts, “and at this moment I reserve the right to my judgment.”

“Acknowledged, my wife. Shall we depart?”

People are still staring. That quiet way, out of the corners of their eyes, indirectly. Little things.

The scar will soon fade, become invisible. Only he will know that it is there. That knowledge will be like a secret. But it is not a good secret. It is not like the whispered smile of his mother when she read him another Terran bedside story even though his father had tried to discourage her. Sarek did not want him to become more human.

Sometimes, at intermittent intervals, Spock has entertained the notion - ridiculous and implausible and terrifying - of stripping away those human parts, of rearranging his genetic structure entirely and unravel it and make it perfect and wholesome. And once he had mentioned it, when he was a child, and his mother had been concerned and his father had said that Healers - geneticists, specialists, the best that Vulcan had to offer - had made certain that his creation had stemmed from the best of both parents and that his DNA was a unique masterpiece in its own right, and Spock had not believed them for a single heartbeat. How can he believe in such a truth, when every other evidence shows the contrary? How can he believe that?

If they had truly wanted him to be perfect, they would have made him wholly Vulcan.

(But then his mother would not be his mother anymore.)

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*San Francisco City Theater · Earth*

*Stardate 2256.343*

The establishment is popular, and it’s doubtful they could have found seats if Jim hadn’t booked them ahead of time. Spock, feeling beside himself in his borrowed suit, did not expect all of this. Jim’s messages had been so vague. The human isn’t wearing his cadet reds but is clad entirely in black, and he may have done something with his hair; he’d smiled wide when he’d seen the Vulcan. The hovercab ride had not been quiet. They had discussed various things unrelated to the Academy,
such as interesting scientific findings recently announced. Not until they reach the building does Jim reveal their destination or its purpose.

“A musical?” Spock asks, spotting the gleaming letters blinking over the entrance of the impressive building. A mass of people are already there, also dressed up fancy, or at least cleaned up, and not all of them are human.

“You betcha.”

The inside of the building is reminiscent of an Earth hundreds of years ago, with shimmering chandeliers hanging in the high ceilings and thick red carpets adorning the floor and stone carved in intricate shapes, while the outside is very modern, sleek, all concrete and glass. Inside, it is as if the air has changed. People are waiting in line or standing in groups, talking in soft voices. There is no background music and the insulation of the walls is good enough to shut out all noise from the busy street. Jim leads them to a queue, and eventually they reach a desk. The Benzite behind it flicks their barbels in acknowledgment - their equivalent to a polite human smile - says hello, and asks how they prefer to be addressed.

“He/him, please.”

“Me too. I’ve booked two seats. The name’s Kirk,” Jim says, showing his ID when prompted.

“Here you go, sirs.” The Benzite hands them two datachips, glowing blue, with name and seat numbers temporarily printed on them. “Please take note that recording inside the hall is not permitted. Have a nice evening.”

“No problem. Thanks.”

As they move toward staircase B, Spock turns his head toward Jim. “When did you purchase these tickets?” he asks, curious as well as … No, he cannot name this feeling.

Avoiding to answer directly, Jim shrugs. “Someone owed me a favour. C’mon, row nineteen, it’s that door over there. Shall we?”

“Very well.”

They end up seated in the same row as a Denoluban married group, which always consists of a multitude of individuals, and, on the other side, two Earth women who are holding hands, one of them wearing a dark headscarf with inset gems around the ridge of her neck, no doubt adorned in this manner for their outing. A nagging thought begins to grow in the back of Spock’s mind, as he watches the pair’s interwoven hands, and then realizing that Jim is sitting right next to him with his hand, open and free, so close by. Almost as if …

As if …

His communicator chimes.

_Amanda Grayson (1092-8248-29)_

_Hello Spock, I hope I’m not disturbing you. How are you doing? If you have the time, I would like to visit you at the Academy tomorrow._

_Spock (0934-5294-42)_

_Hello, mother. I am available tomorrow night after six p.m.. I am currently at the city’s theater about to watch a musical show with a fellow cadet who convinced_
me to accompany him on this outing. The experience might teach me more about human ways. I cannot answer any more messages as the show will begin in three point six minutes.

Amanda Grayson (1092-8248-29)
Of course. Have fun, dear!

The experience is not unpleasant, surprisingly enough. The music is well written and the lines well thought out, and the actors are good at what they do, or at least that’s how Spock perceives it. He has not attended a play or musical before, and has no previous knowledge or experience to draw from. But Jim’s reactions indicate that it is good. Not only that, there are emotions almost like nostalgia or old joy crossing the human’s face every now and then. Perhaps he has seen the musical many times before. It carries through deep themes - human themes - emotional themes - of belonging, of overcoming fears, and of love.

It is so thoroughly human, and yet not, because many of the actors are not. There is a Betazoid, even an Orion female, a Benzite, and others. Part of Spock is pleased to see this. The culture and thus entertainment of Earth is still predominantly human, in all of its forms.

Someway through the first act, Jim’s hand has snuck closer to his own, where Spock has them loosely knotted in his lap. Suspecting that the outing would involve being around many other people, he had opted to wear gloves. The new ones he’d bought in the week after … after the Andorians. The memory of them is fleeting, sharp, and he suppresses it immediately. He does not shiver. For his closeness, Jim does not actually touch him.

There is an intent there - a question - which Spock has difficulty deciphering. And at the same time no difficulty at all. The human wants to touch his hand. Is he aware of the cultural significance behind this action?

He should be. Jim has proved to be surprisingly knowledgeable about Vulcan culture. He keeps asking questions. He should know, by now; be intelligent enough draw conclusions. After all, he knows the reason behind the gloves - a Vulcan’s hands are most sensitive, containing many more nerve endings than any part of the human body.

And yet.

The musical begins to near its end. It is late, and the sky outside must be dark. Sometimes the audience claps or sings along, when urged by the actors on stage to do so. The finale involves a lot of bodily contact and glitter.

There is a loud noise. It is not part of the music, and Jim startles next to him, and the Vulcan thinks - no, he did not mishear. That was the noise of a phaser being fired. It is heard again, and the door on the west side of the audience suddenly is forced open, and bright light from the corridor streams in. Three humanoids in white are standing there. Most of their bodies are covered, apart from their heads, and some of them are wearing whole or parts of body armour, of the old Terran military type which Spock has seen illustrated in history books from the Earth’s more violent past.

Someone is shouting, and a phaser is fired once, twice, three times. Someone screams. Someone wails. There is a young child in the audience, and they begin weeping - Spock’s ears are sensitive enough to discern its sobbing shaky breaths.

“Nobody move!”
The voice is a growl amplified through a speaker. More humanoids have entered the wide chamber. The actors on stage and orchestra below are frozen, quiet, in horror. The humanoids - no, Spock sees it now: they are human, Terran, of Earth - they spread out, standing at uneven intervals around the stage, the audience, turned both ways. All of them are armed, some with more than one weapon, not all of them phasers. There are older weapons there. Not energy-based.

Next to him, Jim tenses. It is still dimly dark, the lamps in the ceiling unlit. The play isn’t over. On the stage, one of the human actors begins to rise. A beam of green light flashes, terrifyingly intense and bright, and the actor falls back down, unconscious.

“Everybody shut up!”

Jim’s left hand has begun to move to his pocket. Communicator. Yes, they must get a signal to Starfleet, notify them that -

“If anyone tries using their comms, they’re dead. Anyone tries anything, they’re dead!”

Jim does not cease. His movements are slow. He does not pull it out, but Spock thinks he might be trying to flip open the communicator while still hidden and dial without looking. Difficult. His breathing has quickened by twenty-nine percent. If he is seen …

A thought reaches him, distantly. Those garments. Humans. Armed. KEHL. Their attacks are usually not this open. This is only a few blocks from Federation Headquarters. Close to every alien Embassy in this city. If -

“Now listen carefully,” the leader of the group says. He is carrying a heavy bag slung over his shoulder. What could be inside of it? “Everyone human is going to leave this room. And every alien freak is going to stay put and not move.”

People gasp, whisper, murmur. The child is still crying. The terror is so tense and strong that Spock can taste it. Jim’s free hand touches his wrist. Tugging at it.

“Move! Move!” orders the human in white, swinging his phaser so that all can see it. A warning.

One by one, in groups or alone, some of the humans in the audience begin to rise. Some are too horrified to do so, and some remain sitting for other reasons. No. No. Jim has to go. Spock can calculate that the attackers mean to do harm to and possibly execute every non-human left behind and if Jim doesn’t go -

“C’mon,” hisses Jim.

There is no time to argue. The female couple ahead of them also move. Spock’s pulse thunders. This is different from the emotions which he felt rising when on the moon in the clutches of the Andorians. Different. Intense. He is not alone. He looks over his shoulder; the Denoluban family isn’t moving, and Spock realizes, abruptly, that within five minutes none of them may be alive. None. It is illogical and unfair.

Did Jim manage to get a call through?

They are reaching the end of the row, and as they turn, the female couple sees them, and in the light falling from the open doors, one of them sees Spock. Her eyes are wide and wet with terror. She looks at his ears, and suddenly, she turns. “Maddie,” gasps her partner. “Don’t.”

There is a lot of movement around them, and the gunmen haven’t spotted them, and before Spock or Jim can do anything to protest, the human has unclasped her headscarf, pulling it off. This is a breach
of her personal beliefs. It is illogical -

She thrusts it at him, and intent is abruptly clear. He is not human, but if he were to hide his prominently Vulcan features he might be able to blend in - appear human enough. Enough.

*Lesek,* he thinks, no time to make words aloud, averting his eyes from her hair, and the human does not say anything either. The girlfriend reacts by shoving off her jacket and covering her partner’s hair with it. She grasps her girlfriend’s hand tightly, with such intent that Spock aches. There is not much time. In the few seconds the action took, the crowd has surged forward, and the lights are brightening ahead, and Spock throws the finely woven cloth over his head, similarly how to his mother would wear it on Vulcan - a sign of marriage - and pulls it lower, to shadow his arching eyebrows. Jim’s hand returns to his wrist, and he allows it to be clasped. He can feel the human’s breaths. Uncertain. Adrenaline.

The child is still crying.

The human actors have been forced off the stage. The Betazoid, the Benzite, two Andorians, a Ferengi, and the Orion female are held there at gunpoint. Unable to move. Unable to -

The door is fifteen feet away. Beyond, stretching above the crowd, he sees the nightlight from the street and the glimmering chandeliers of the grand entrance and the red-carpeted stairs. Ten feet. Jim’s grip is like steel, as hard as the human can muster it to be. Five feet. There is a gunman by the door, and he lets the humans go, one after the other. The human’s face is vicious and cold. Two feet.

The phaser is pointed at his chest, where a human would have their heart. A hand reaches out to tear off the headscarf, and for a fleeting moment, clear as crystal, Spock can imagine the coldness of the marble floor against his cheek. Jim opens his mouth to cry out.

The shot is never fired.

Something is thrown into the stage. It arcs through the air, lazily. The actors and musicians scatter and flee. Spock gets only a glimpse of it. Suddenly, Jim has grabbed his arm, his shoulder - *get down!* *get down!*

The explosion is deafening. Spock loses his balance.

Chaos breaks out.

A haze, grey and tasteless, spreads from the stage rapidly. Gas. *What …?* No time. Jim tugs him to his feet, and they are running, the crowd is running - trying to. One of the gunmen fires, the one by the nearest door, and Spock doesn’t calculate odds of success. His hand is already up, grabbing the barrel of the phaser, twisting it upward, and he reaches out with his other hand. Finds the spot.

The human collapses, unconscious, and Spock drops the weapon. His hands are not as steady as they should be. Jim shouts his name, and they are running outside. The air is thinning. Difficult to breathe. His throat hurts, a raw pain like knives, and his eyes are watering against their own volition.

The Benzite who had manned the desk is lying stretched over it, eyes wide open and glazed over. Illness claws up his chest at the sight, the glimpse. The Benzite’s hands are limp, empty. There is a burn mark that shouldn’t be there in the center of their forehead.

“Starfleet Security! You are surrounded -” booms a grave voice, and now he can see, now he can hear the whine of the craft in the air above, the sirens. The sirens. They nearly fall down the stairs. Jim is still gripping his wrist.
Starfleet. Officers in grey and red. Beyond them, streets cut off for the rest of the block, are several ambulances. It is raining slightly. The air is clear and free, free, free.

People are crying. Calling names.

He hears phasers firing. Heavy heavy bursts. People fleeing. So many people. He cannot tell how many, how many have made it out of the building.

“Oh my god,” Jim is gasping, whispering, as if stuck on repeat. In shock, Spock’s mind supplies. The human is experiencing a natural reaction after trauma. “Oh my god -”

The explosion rocks the ground. The building rumbles. Dust rises. Steel and concrete and stone churns.

Then there is utter untouchable stillness, and a single siren wails at a distance.

He can no longer hear the child crying.

You have (2) missed calls from Amanda Greyson (1092-8248-29)

You have (3) unread messages:

Amanda Grayson (1092-8248-29)
Spock are you all right? Are you still at the theater?
It’s on the news that it’s been attacked. Please turn on your communicator and return my call.

Amanda Grayson (1092-8248-29)
Please tell me you’re all right

Amanda Grayson (1092-8248-29)
Spock, please respond

They are looked at by a medic, who insists to drape an orange blanket over their shoulders. Spock, dazedly, realizes he is still wearing the headscarf and now pulls it off. The woman who had given it - he has to find her and return it.

“Sit down,” orders the medic, impatiently. A tricorder is in her hand. It is unnecessary; he is not injured.

“I must go and find -” Spock begins to say. Is ignored.

“You’re in a state of shock. What’s your name?”

Jim answers for them. “We’re both cadets at the Academy. Jim Kirk, and this is Spock. Have - does anyone know who -?”

“Keep Earth Human League,” Spock answers, stonily, and the medic glances at him sharply. Takes note of his non-human features. “I recognized both their manner of dress and acting. It … it is the logical assumption.”

“Jesus,” Jim breathes. This name means something. Spock cannot make the connection right now. “Okay. I … I got to call Bones.” The human pulls out his communicator. It is broken, the top
snapped off; it must have occurred as they were running, crashing through the crowd. “Shit. Spock, d’you -”

Without thinking he hands him his communicator. He had kept it turned off in his pocket. Jim dials. After two or three chimes, the call is answered, and Spock listens, observes.

“Spock, what d’you want now -” Bones starts saying, voice raspy and dim but unmistakable.

“Bones! Bones, it’s me,” Jim interrupts sharply. “You gotta turn on the news. There’s been an attack. KEHL. Spock and I -”

“Oh my - hell. Fuck. Where are you?"

“We’re fine, we’re all right.”

“Okay. Okay. Where are you, Jim? Answer me, damn it!”

“The Theater. That musical, that - y’know. We’ll, we’ll come to you.” Words unsteady. Jim glances at the Vulcan next to him, and then at the medic. “Can we go now?”

“You’re both in shock. And the officers will want to take statements.”

“We are cadets at Starfleet,” Spock says. “Take note of our names and they will find us at the Academy. Leonard McCoy, Jim’s roommate, is a doctor. If we are in need of further assistance he will provide it.”

The medic is not fully convinced, perhaps, but there are others who need more care. Wounded. Dead. The medic writes down their names and serial identification numbers on a PADD, before releasing them. Jim tries to lead them toward the end of the blockade, past the groups of injured, the officers and police, the ambulances. But Spock stops him.

“The human female,” he says suddenly. “I must return this to her.”

“Spock, I’ve no idea where she is, or who she is …” Jim looks at him helplessly. If she is alive. If she escaped the building. The building is gone. Rubble.

The Vulcan has a perfect eidetic memory. He recalls the human’s face and her terrified but determined eyes, the unnecessary bravery. If the gunmen had found out what she had done, she would have risked her own life even more. And yet she acted.

Humanly.

“Look, we’ll find her later. Please, let’s just go. Okay?”

Spock clutches the fabric in knotted fists.

They go.

---

_**Spock** (0934-5294-42)

I am unharmed, mother. We are now at Jim’s dormitory on campus. I have not been injured though a medic diagnosed both of us as being in shock.

The symptoms are abating now, at least on my part. Leonard McCoy, Jim’s roommate, is a doctor, and says neither of us are in need of medical attention at the moment.

I am fine. Please do not be worried.
Half an hour ago, several armed gunmen entered San Francisco City Theater and began firing. Eyewitness accounts state that there were at least a dozen attackers involved. Starfleet security forces along with San Francisco police are on the scene and a number of arrests have been made. At least two of the gunmen managed to escape by ramming one of the police vehicles with a black unregistered jumpship, possibly capable of hyperflight. An explosive device was planted somewhere in the building, which exploded at 9:23 p.m. Diggers are on site, and the casualty toll is constantly rising.

The pro-inclusive musical We Are All was being performed when the attack occurred, and the audience reportedly consisted of both humans and aliens. The xenophobic group known as the Keep Earth Human League have taken responsibility for the deed in an online manifesto which was posted only five minutes after the Theater was attacked. So far, twenty-nine people have been reported injured, and at least three are dead - one human, one Benzite and one Andorian. Rescue teams are still retrieving survivors from the rubble. According to reports, a Benzite named Igin Taak, who worked at the Theater’s reception, tried to stop the gunmen from entering the building at the cost of their own life. Further details are expected to arise when police and Starfleet arrange a press conference regarding these events. We have not been able to reach either for a comment yet.

Already we see the discussions on the internet trending where people are now calling for stricter phaser regulations. On the other side of the fence, debate is rising about stricter controls for non-human citizens of Earth. The Federation Council is expected to call an emergency session because of the message KELH left in their manifesto, which urges Earth to leave the Federation immediately, declaring all non-Terrans as hostile.

We now have Mr Dent reporting directly from the scene:

“Thank you, Kate. Yes, I’m standing now only a block from where it happened. As you can see behind me, a blockade has been erected to prevent the curious crowd from entering the area …”

If only he knew the human’s full name or address - it would have made this search much easier. She was not a cadet.

On the threshold, his mother is standing. Her coat is halfway unclasped, and her hair windswept and matted by rain. Before Spock can properly process the action, she has crossed the carpeted floor and cast her arms around him in a human embrace. And he finds himself too relaxed in it, too human, not Vulcan, and his breath is uncertain for a moment, rattling in his lungs.

Mother, he thinks, and knows that they are touching so she can hear him or at least sense the motions behind his thoughts. Mother, I am not a child anymore.

She withdraws, but does not release him completely. Maybe, she is thinking, and he can hear it: he can hear, and there is such warmth and emotion and genuine depth that he wants it to both cease and never cease. I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I was so worried. I thought … It was like the Forge all over again.
Jim and Leonard are openly staring. Of course. They are aware he loathes bodily contact, and here is a human woman they have never before met or seen, hugging him.

“I'm Amanda Grayson,” she says, turning a little, “Spock’s mother. I saw on the news what happened, and -” She draws a shuddering breath.

“Oh! Hello, Mrs Grayson. I’m Jim. This is Bones, my roommate.”

“Please, just Amanda. Dr McCoy? Spock’s mentioned you, but never as Bones.”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s what Jim calls me.”

She doesn’t ask how come his nickname is so different from his given name; she is used to human ways. “I wish we’d met under better circumstances.”

“Me too.” Leonard closes the door.

“Are you all right, ashal-veh?”

He lets her fuss, and does not protest at the use of such a tender affectionate term. Her fear is unsettling. It would have been better had she not known he was at the Theater tonight. Some humans are calmed by bodily contact, and his mother is one of them, and she makes certain that he is not hurt beyond a few shallow bruises which will heal within a few days. His lungs are clear from smoke. “I am not injured, mother.”

“And you, Jim?”

The question startles the human. “Uh? Yeah. Yeah, Mrs Grays… Amanda. I’m fine. Just a bit shook up. That’s all.”

Spock imagines the unmoving Benzite on the beautiful floor and the burning hole in their forehead and unseeing eyes. He does not mention it. The taste of the explosion, the air trembling, the dust engulfing them all like a cloud on collision course. He does not mention it. The sudden silence.

He would like to sleep. All of his body is tired and sore.

“Your father got a call from Admiral Marcus,” his mother says, eyes dark. “The Federation Council has been called for an emergency session.”

Expected. The news reporter had said the same. Spock has not attempted to browse for the KEHL manifesto, though it would probably be easy to find. To seek out yet another source of … of anxiety … that would be illogical.

Leonard clears his throat. There is some awkwardness, but it falls away. “Would you like some coffee or something, ma’am?”

“I - it’s no need. Thank you,” she says. Her hands are still resting on Spock’s shoulders, as if he is that little boy again and not taller than her, as if he is not an adult. Her gaze falls on the fabric in his grip.

“Mother, could you assist me? There is a human I am trying to locate.”

She stays for two hours. They speak, speak of anything but the attack. She makes Jim laugh, and even Leonard’s grumpiness briefly clears into a smile. The Doctor keeps running his tricorder over Jim and the Vulcan at regular intervals. Spock cradles a PADD, searching, searching for a clue as to
who the human is. He has found a public record, and he has a nickname or possibly the real first name of the woman, and he recalls her face. It takes a long time, and eventually his mother asks him to cease, at least for tonight. He tries to eat a little. His mother is concerned when he does not eat.

She insists on seeing him back to his own dormitory, after Leonard says he’ll make sure Jim gets some sleep. Spock in this case trusts in the Doctor’s judgment. Jim is in good hands.

His mother does not want to say goodnight. He can sense it in her, a deep unease, a discomfort. She tells him to make sure to rest well, to eat. Before she goes, she embraces him again, and there is a fleeting thought, an impression that she wants to stroke his hair (safe my boy is safe) and he assures her he is fine, again, again. It is as if she simply does not want to believe the truth, that it hasn’t sunk in yet. They had turned off the news. Most of it had not been good.

Spock cannot go to sleep. He washes his face in the sink, and observes himself in the mirror for a moment: temperature normal, yet he is somewhat pale, ashen, features sunken. There is a distraught darkness in his eyes he does not like to dwell on. He had seen that same darkness in Jim’s icy blue eyes, chaotic and confused. He goes through the routine: changing into pyjamas, brushing his teeth, lying down under the covers.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
r u asleep?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
think bones is gonna sedate me :/

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yup there he goes fetching a hypo

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I will attempt to rest, though I find it difficult. Perhaps we both would benefit from aid in falling asleep tonight.

His mind is too busy. Too bright.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
same here

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sorry it got ruined

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It was not your fault, Jim.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
people died, Spock

Something in his throat closes up, makes his breaths heavier, and there is a thick inexplicable sinking feeling in his lower quadrant. Almost as if his heart itself is malfunctioning.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I know, Jim.

And there are words of grief, ceremonies, rituals, exchanges. Yet there are no things that are enough. A part of him longs to have his mother and her presence here, her embrace. Even his father. The
rising towers of Shi’kahr, the vastness of the Forge; such sureties would’ve been a comfort right now, something to hold onto as real. Everything else is too … too disorderly, too chaotic.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Please do not take blame for this. You could not have influenced what happened.

The reply doesn’t come all at once.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

will u go to class tomorrow

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Yes, Jim, unless I am stopped by someone in authority.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

dunno

Jim (0927-4339-11)

we could skip

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I find myself seeking the normal routine of classes.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

yeah i know what u mean. status quo

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Yes.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

ok we’ll see what i do

Jim (0927-4339-11)

night spock

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Goodnight, Jim.

He cannot sleep.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Hello. Is this the number belonging to a Madeleine Naagi? My name is Spock, and I am the Vulcan who attended the San Francisco Theater two nights ago. I am in possession of something which belongs to you, and since I have been unable to locate your home address, only this number, I cannot return it. Please forward information so that I can return your belongings. Your kindness at the Theater was illogical but brave, and I am grateful. I apologize if this is the wrong Madeleine Naagi. Live long and prosper. /Spock

(unknown number) (1023-8563-28)

You’ve got the right person. I’m glad to hear that you’re okay because of all that happened and to be honest I’d kind of forgotten about it. My gf and I are in SF for a visit and we’re staying at a hotel in the city
They are holding hands, but their faces are not as bright, somewhat downcast. He recognizes them, of course. They are waiting in the hotel’s lounge, near the window overlooking the street: a normal street, quiet, rushing. Yet, there is something about it. Different. The hotel is located not far from the Theater.

The hovercab had passed it by. Spock had seen the crowd by the wide, flat steps, lighting candles and laying out flowers on the pavement. His mother said that many humans did that to pay respects and show grief and empathy. There had been holograms flickering of the lost lives’ faces.

It isn’t raining today. The young couple are dressed for a long flight, and their luggage is resting on the table. They are sitting, facing each other, murmuring in low voices in the Terran language Spock recognizes as Standard Arabic. One of the women is wearing makeup which is smeared at the edges, as though she has been crying and is too tired to redo the work.

“Madeleine Naagi?”

She looks up. Her headscarf is black, but unadorned. He hands her the headscarf, and is ready to leave after that. This was his mission, after all, and it would be illogical to spend more time than necessary here. He can taste the couple’s anger and shock, rolling waves in the aftermath of terror.

“Lesek - thank you,” he says, correcting himself. He is absent minded, much more than he should be. “For your actions.”

“And you,” she says. “I saw you tackle that man. Is … The guy who was with you, is he …?”

“Jim is fine,” he assures her, startled at this concern. It seems so many humans include so many into their thoughts beyond logical reason. They … fear. “He is in class right now. We are both Academy students.”

Both women exhale. Relieved. No more deaths. The count had risen to five this morning; Spock heard the news broadcasts in the hovercab, as the driver insisted to listen to it. Thankfully, the driver had not asked any prodding questions, though they had glanced at him, wondering if he, as an alien, could have been one of those struck by the attack.

“This is my girlfriend, Taylor.” A hand is offered by the second woman, though not by the first.

“I apologize, but Vulcans do not shake hands. We are touch telepaths.” He inclines his head slightly, a bow which some human cultures would accept instead as a greeting.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Hello.”

“There is no offence where none is taken.”

The woman nods idly, clutching her bag tightly. And she asks: “Are you all right?”

He is not ready for such a question from two people he does not know beyond appearances. “I am … fine.” And he thinks of his mother, her concern, of Jim’s hand gripping his wrist. The sensation of his pulse. The child crying in the background. There are variations of fine. “Are you two unharmed?”
“Yeah,” says Madeleine with a shaky sigh. “We’re, we’re going to be okay.” She laughs, which seems to a human defense reaction when in stress. “Think I’ve spent the whole morning on the comm, letting the family know we’re both okay.”

That is good.

“I must go now,” Spock says. “I have a lecture to attend.”

“Of course. It was nice meeting you, Mr Spock. Thanks for contacting us.”

He holds up the ta’al. “Live long and prosper.”

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Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.346

« ... current toll of seven dead and thirty-two injured, a small number of those severely. Emergency hotlines are in effect for affected family and friends. If you have lost contact with someone who you believe could have been there, please call number 029-33-111. Yesterday, as well as today, saw many people mourning and in shock. The immediate area around the Theater is now off-limits. Mourners have lit candles on the steps leading to the Theater in solitude for the souls lost in this savage attack. This afternoon, a protest rallied in the streets outside of Federation Headquarters in response to the xenophobic reactions which rose on the internet shortly after the attack.

More recent reports on the attack of San Francisuco Theater have come in, answers some questions as to how this happened. At 9:02 p.m. Wednesday night, three human males entered the lobby of the Theater, killing the receptionist, Mx Taak. Then a jumpship arrived, landing on the street outside of the building, and several humans entered and began to flush people out. They singled out humans and non-humans with the purpose of trapping the latter in the building with an explosive device. Starfleet security and police arrived on scene at 9:16, having been alerted by an anonymous call which Starfleet identified as coming from one of their cadets, who was in the Theater’s audience at the time. Shortly thereafter the majority of the audience was evacuated from the building as it was stormed by officers; however not all managed to escape as at least one of the gunmen committed suicide by setting off an explosive device manually, causing the ...

“Will someone shut that depressing shit off?” a cadet grumbles.

Spock, too, is relieved when a hand is waved and the television channel is switched from the news to an innocent commercial advertising hair dye.

He cannot focus. He is sitting in the cafeteria, a book open, reading and eating a slice of pizza which has been made with Vulcan ingredients - an interesting combination. But toward the food tastes less than usual, somewhat dull. He seems to pick at it with his fork more than actually eat it. He rereads the sentence he was in the middle off when the news reporter had begun speaking in the background.

“Spock?”

He looks up. This is unexpected. “Hello, Nyota. May I assist you?”

“The club meeting started half an hour ago. I’ve been looking for you, and you weren’t answering your comm.” She frowns a bit.

Oh. He had not realized. He - he had forgotten. This is a grave error. Perhaps he should have slept instead of meditated last night. “I see. I … I will not be attending the Xenolinguistics club today. Will this be an issue?”
“Oh, no, it’s fine. It’s just for fun,” she says. She … does not know about the Theater, he realizes suddenly. She does not know that that was where he and Jim went three days ago. Jim had said he did not want to spread the word if necessary, and Spock had agreed. He does not want to be stared at. “That was it, really. We were curious; you’ve never missed a meeting since you joined. Is everything okay?”

The same question, again, again. If only it would cease.

“I am fine, Nyota. I am … somewhat distracted.” And he has to reveal it, for her sake. Humans are relieved by words and actions and embraces, and he cannot give her the latter, but he can offer words. Truth. “Jim and I were at the Theater when the attack occurred, and the event remains on my mind.”

“Oh my god.” Nyota sits down heavily, nearly falls into it, her eyes wide. She doesn’t focus on anything but him for a moment. “I didn’t know, I didn’t realize that - shit.” She has never before used an expletive, even such a mild one, in his presence.

“I did not wish to cause you any undue concern, as we were not harmed,” he explains, feeling the need to do so. “That is why I did not alert you to the fact.”

Returning to his normal life, the normal routines, the rhythm, had been difficult after the Andorian incident. The questions had continued to stream in. This is even worse. This is worse; he is not the only one affected.

“I should have realized, when you said yes to that date. Oh, god. Spock. I’m sorry. Were either of you hurt? Should you even be at the Academy?”

“Physically we remained unharmed. Others …” Others were not. Others died. In human vernacular, they had been lucky. “Both Jim and I are fine,” Spock repeats.

After it, after, once they’d reached Leonard’s dormitory, Jim had gasped and nearly wept; stoically reigning himself in. Then he had thrown himself on one of the two beds, dramatically, and looked at Spock, dust and dirt in his hair, and said (wryly, on the edge of laughter, hysterical) - *Every time we plan to hang out, you end up in trouble. Maybe I should stop asking.*

Spock had tried to argue; Jim may have contacted him about outings both that time and when the Andorians kidnapped him, but Jim’s own decisions had no impact in either case. It was simply … bad luck. But he had been too tired. He has asked instead if Leonard and Jim kept any tea in their dorm, and Leonard had fetched a cup from the replicator, and then offered Jim to drink from a bottle of hard alcohol. They had not spoken much, until his mother had appeared unexpectedly.

He had realized, then, that he does not want Jim to stop asking.

“Okay. Just, don’t hesitate to call, if there’s anything - whatever it is,” Nyota says, and there is a fire in her voice, burning like the Vulcan sun itself.

*Lesek. It is unnecessary.*

Unlike most humans, Nyota understands that statement without taking ill.

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**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

*chess in rec room 9 in 20min?*

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**
I will meet you there.
act i :: part six

Chapter Summary

act i. part six.
Vulcans do not have [...]
There are candles lit in the corner. The hall is wide, and silent. Spock has prepared for weeks for this moment. His father is there, and his mother, and his grandmother as a representative of the Council. On the other side of the room stand T’Pring’s parents. They have all gathered to witness Telan t’Kanlar.

He has never mindmelded with anyone before on own his, without outside aid, without being pried apart from within. His father has no desire to, other than with the purpose to teach him how to build shields. His mother is concerned; he can feel it. She has berated him for reading her mind by accident. He is trained, and yet, and yet, there is something trying to break free. If he were human, Spock would be nervous. He tries not to acknowledge it. He will not acknowledge it. He know his telepathic ability is strong, strong enough. The Mind Healers will assist if necessary. The bond of koon’ul will be made. It is decided.

It is a logical match.

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**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth**

**Stardate 2256.350**

The first snow consists more of rain than of snow. It still causes the cadets to look out the windows of the lecture hall and gasp and point, as if, for a moment, the majority of them retreat to some childhood memory or distant dream.

Spock does not understand this fascination. Snow is cold and uncomfortable. It causes problems: road blockage, frozen drains, collapsed rooftops. It is - intensely cold. When Cadet Chekov proudly announces that he grew up in subzero temperatures often reaching all the way down to minus forty degrees Celsius and plans to return there to celebrate Hanukah with his family, Spock swears to never visit that part of Earth.

Jim is happy though. The cadet insists to drag him outside one afternoon and make balls of snow and fling them at other cadets, son starting an all-out war. Spock does not actively participate. He cannot see the attraction in the event, albeit the redness of Jim’s cheeks and his bright smile are quite fascinating to look at. Instead he had informed the cadets of the risk of frostbite. For once, both he and Leonard had been of similar mind.

It is noticeable that several major Earth holidays are approaching. Despite the looming finals, causing most cadets stress, they are all talking about it. The janitors even decorate parts of the hallways with fake pine trees and numerous dangling lights in long rows. People are singing strange songs. Illogical. He can sense it raises Jim’s mood, though, and even Leonard is not as sour. Their final class is on a Tuesday.

The Theater is being repaired and rebuilt. Spock has seen it on the news. He has not passed the place by, but he knows that Jim did, lighting a candle there, along with Nyota and several other cadets.

They have not attempted another outing outside of campus since then. Jim is superstitious, it seems, and taking irrational blame for the events which have occurred, as if their presence or absence would have made a difference. It is illogical. Spock tries to make him see this, but Jim refuses to understand.

Jim is too (painfully painfully) human.

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He had tried to argue that it is unnecessary: with the Principal, with Admiral Barnett, with Leonard. He will meditate. He could … he could even speak with a Mind Healer, seek old rites, the removal of memories. He doesn’t want to go near a Mind Healer ever again but that is not the point.
The human psychologist cannot comprehend the mind of a Vulcan. How they do feel, deeply deeply, and how each memory is crystal clear and he can still taste the smoke. And Jim has gone there, once or twice, at the insistence of teachers, and Spock thinks there was a long-range communication with Captain Pike involved as well. Captain Pike is the only one Jim is truly on good terms with.

If they do not pass these evaluations then they may not be allowed to complete their educations in time.

Spock does not want to be here. He does not say it. He sits, straight-backed and face tensely unmoving, in the too-soft chair. The curtains are half-way drawn and the wide windows reflect the morning cityscape, the campus below. Cadets in red are moving at various rates from hurry to laziness to their classes.

“This procedure may not yield any results,” he is compelled to tell the human.

There is a notebook, open and empty, on the table next to her. Dr Ogawa has an orderly appearance, and her smile is disconcerting even though she keeps it small and gentle. It swiftly fades into seriousness. She is looking at him, and he strains his shields not to pick up on her presence. He is wearing his gloves. Usually, that reminder of cloth against his skin is enough. “I realize that, and this isn’t all about results,” she says. “The point is not a label or a swift diagnosis. I’m here to make sure you’re going to be all right.”

She is a Mind Healer of the human kind, he supposes - and he has read her credentials. She has a weak psionic ability; some would class her as an empath. But she cannot read my mind, he thinks, wearing the thought like a shield. She cannot touch me.

“I am aware that what I experienced at the Theater would be classified as a - traumatic event,” he says, hesitating a millisecond to utter that word. “But this is unnecessary. I am not human, therefore your knowledge and skills are redundant.”

“I know, and I admit I’ve never diagnosed a Vulcan, but I have met a few,” she says. “There aren’t that many here on Earth. I’ve been speaking with a Dr Senva at the Embassy, and could arrange a meeting.”

Senva. A Vulcan Mind Healer. Spock knows; it is the same, the same name. When he was five years old and - “I do not want to see a Mind Healer.”

This reaction prompts something; means something to the human. “I see. Can you tell me why?”

He does not. “This is unrelated to what happened at the Theater, which is what I was sent here to talk about.”

Dr Ogawa doesn’t take the bait. “Okay, I won’t talk with Dr Senva. Have you met him before?”

Vulcans do not lie. “Yes,” he says after a moment’s pause.

The human doesn’t take notes. If this is a good sign or not, he isn’t certain. If she had been a person he knows … But he doubts Leonard would be better, because there are things he is not certain he could ever tell Leonard or any other human he is familiar with - friends? friends with?

“Whatever is said in this room stays here. You don’t have to be afraid.”

“Vulcans do not fear.”
Dr Ogawa’s expression turns somewhat wry. Her approach is direct, so direct and sharp and perhaps it is because she has met Dr Senva and other Vulcans. She is aware of … She knows things. Spock resists the urge to look away. “Tell me about Dr Senva.”

This has nothing to do with the Theater. This has nothing to do with it. “Dr Senva is a distinguished Healer of the Vulcan Medical Institute.”

“That’s just the mere facts anyone could find in an updated archive,” Dr Ogawa points out. She waits; gives him time. And he realizes that she will not back down so easily. “Did you meet him on Vulcan, before the Academy?”

“Yes.”

“Is he the reason you’d prefer not to talk with a Mind Healer?”

Spock tries tries tries not to move or give away his vulnerable position. His fists clench tighter in his lap. Will the truth truly be kept here as a secret between them? Confidentiality - that is not how it worked on Vulcan. Works. With Mind Healers. If a patient is diagnosed with a mental disorder than it will be no secret, it is no secret because Vulcans are telepaths and even the strongest shields cannot hide a broken mind, and - “… Yes.”

“Okay,” she says, gentle and firm all at once. “No one’s going to force you to see one.”

“I thought I was sent here to speak with you about the Theater,” says Spock.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

No. No. No. What is there to say? An attack beyond their control. “I do not see how this discussion about Mind Healers is relevant.”

“Humans generally feel better if they talk about their experiences with someone, especially in events like these.”

“But I am not human.”

“But your mother is human, correct?”

He has to acknowledge that. “Affirmative.”

“Therefore, there is some part of which is human, maybe just a sliver.”

Human. too human. too human (not enough) - “Yes; but the majority of physiology is predominantly Vulcan. So is my mind.”

“Is it truly?” she asks, openly.

And he has to look a way, for just a moment, and he glances past her and through the window. The office is situated on the fifth floor and it is a sunny day and he can spot the glimmering water of the bay.

“It is how I have been raised,” he admits at last.

She nods. “The pressure of the society we live in, and the people we are surrounded by, can be very tough. We’re given duties we don’t always want to fulfill. And if we don’t fit the norms, we’re
Punishment. It has been dealt to him on multiple occasions. Was the attack yet another instance? KEHL wanted to punish them for being non-human and not enough not enough not enough. They had not cared or shown empathy. All that mattered to them was that here was a room full of aliens and they needed to be eradicated - punished - removed. “Yes,” he whispers, and his voice is too hoarse and too uncertain and he doesn’t like it, he wants it to stop. He wants it to stop. He has to focus on his breathing for a few seconds, to make sure he doesn’t cease.

“All of that is beyond our control,” Dr Ogawa says.

“But it is not,” he argues.

“Oh, yes, we can conform and adapt,” she agrees. “But not always, and often it’s harmful to the individual to do so. A person must be allowed to be their own.” She pauses. She still hasn’t taken any notes. Perhaps she thinks doing so will unsettle him, make him unfocused. She cannot know how aware he is of this room this space each breath each slight movement everything.

“The attack on the Theater occurred because KEHL wanted to punish non-humans for being on Earth.” For existing, he doesn’t say. “Rationally, I know this. Yet, I - I cannot compute with those actions.”

“It’s difficult to understand because you’re an emphatic being,” Dr Ogawa says. “It means you’re not cold or unfeeling.”

Cold. unfeeling. cold and in control. Vulcan. “Maybe.” The human in him. The human which he had tried to train into obedience and silence forever and tear away with his bare hands. “But the attackers were human, and humans are emotional.”

“I’m afraid humans have a tendency to fear or even hate things we don’t understand. This fear breeds violence.”

They do not have a concept of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations and even Vulcans are forgetting that. They accept differences but do not embrace them if they come too close; not too close. “Sometimes … it is the same with Vulcans.” And he recalls being spat at, being called a freak, he recalls Stonn and the others mocking him for his human human human eyes and his ability to cry. He recalls the Forge and his father’s distant approval and how nothing is ever good enough. He recalls trying to find a way, when he was a young boy, of cutting the human part of his DNA away.

When he looks at her again, Dr Ogawa’s frown betrays concern, and as far as he can read it is genuine and not merely out of a sense of duty. It is irrational. Illogical. The good human things.

“Do you feel guilt about what happened?”

“No, as that would be illogical.” And yet. And yet. The screaming. “It was beyond my control.” If we had not come to Earth.

And Jim, so illogically, is feeling guilt.

“Is it the human way to feel guilt about a thing like this?” he asks.

“Sometimes, yes. We’re not always very rational, and emotions can get the better of us,” Dr Ogawa nods. “This struggle, is that something you’ve noticed often in yourself?”

“I am not - I am partly human. According to my peers, those traits are not in my favour.”
“That’s what they say about it, but how do you feel?”

His mother would ask the same question. She would seek these answers as if they’re valid and important and valuable, and he had avoided it each time, and he had thought about kolinahr and the emptiness, the wholeness that it would bring. To be empty is to be whole. It is uniform. It is undivided.

He falters. “I … I do not know.”

Vulcans do not feel. Vulcans do not …

“Should I be feeling a particular thing, Doctor?”

And she cannot answer that clearly. “You can only feel what is valid to you.”

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To: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
From: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
Stardate 2256.351
Subject: re: re: Holiday plans [Standard Federation English]

My Dear Spock,

We’ll be leaving the morning on New Year’s Eve. I have explained your and your father’s dietary needs so don’t worry about that. Are you sure you don’t want to come sooner after your last exam this year? You don’t need to partake in any Christmas celebrations, but I treasure every moment with you, and I don’t want you to feel unwelcome in any way.

Aunt Cassie is very excited to meet you - she hasn’t seen you since you were a little boy, you know. Don’t worry, I’ll talk with her about boundaries, especially touch, and she’ll respect that. Your cousins are also curious, and I’m afraid I have to warn you that they will probably ask you a thousand questions a minute about Vulcan and the Academy, especially little Ella who is nine years old and too young to have met you.

Keeping my fingers crossed that all goes well for you with your finals. Please say hello to Jim and Dr McCoy from me.

Loving you always,

Your mother

“… an inherently complex case-marking system with twenty-two ways to mark the noun. This means the language does not utilize prepositions, for example, the same way Standard Federation English does, nor is the word order as strict. When compared to …”

He thinks the lesson goes well enough. It is only the third seminar he has held on his own. The Xenolinguistics Professor agrees with this assessment, though she says that he must not rush things. The human cadets will not be able to follow the pace he is used to. Today, he tries to do that. Slow down. Take it easy, as Jim would put it. The Professor had not explicitly told the attending cadets that he is a first-year student and younger than most of them; this is not his own usual class, but another group of third-year cadets. But he is the only Vulcan on campus. It would not be difficult for the cadets to find out who he is.
He will not let his session with the psychologist distract him. He is tired, like a deep ache settled into his limbs, but will not acknowledge it.

He has no slept for nine days.

One of the cadets has raised a hand, and he indicates for them to ask their question. For a second, as the student opens their mouth, he imagines - irrationally - that they will ask something unrelated to the subject at hand: about his Vulcan heritage, about the Theater, about - something. But all they want to know is if Kolari truly has no way to express simply ‘yes’ and ‘no’ without layers of ambiguity.

The seminar passes without error. As the cadets file out, Nyota, who had been attending the class, approaches.

“Hello, Nyota. Do you have a question about the material?”

“Not really,” she smiles. “Just wanted to check how you’re doing. I liked the seminar, it was very good and well-structured.”

“Thank you, Nyota. I am well.”

“Actually, if you’ve got the time, would you like to have lunch with me today?”

He mentally reviews his schedule. “That is possible. I have one more class before lunch break.”

“Me too. See you by the foyer around twelve?”

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To: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a).
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com).
Stardate 2256.352
Subject: re: re: re: Holiday plans [Translated to Standard Federation English from Modern Golic Vulcan]

Dear Mother,

Spending the weekend at campus is adequate for me. I will have time to use the laboratories and the library extensively for my personal research, as well as continue with my studies. I have spoken with the guidance counselor about this matter, and she agrees it is the best way for me to maximize my effort at the Academy. This way I ensure that I will be able to graduate in 2258 as desired. On a more personal note, I will be relieved to have some time for myself. Being around this many unprotected psi nulls, especially considering current events, is taxing. Once they leave, the silence will be welcome. Please do not worry about me.

I will go with your and father to Aunt Cassandra’s residence for the allotted time as decided. That will be enough for me. I am glad that you will speak her and the others about not touching us. I must admit that I am somewhat curious how Aunt Cassie and my cousins have developed since I last saw them ten point seven years ago.

I will extend your greetings to Jim and Leonard. They will be well-received.

Live long and prosper,

Spock
Someone is knocking on the door. Few people have ever done this before, and for a moment Spock wonders if it is a cadet who is lost. Nevertheless, he rises from his meditation mat and goes to open it.

It is a cadet - though not a lost one. “Hello, Jim.”

“Yeah, hi. I heard you’re gonna stay here over the break, but I’m leaving tonight, so. Here.” Something is thrust in his hands: a package, wrapped in fragile paper decorated with miniature starships on a blue (highly inaccurate) starchart.

Bewildered, he looks at the other cadet. There is a fascinating red tint to Jim’s cheeks. “I do not celebrate Christmas, therefore this gift is redundant.”

“Then it’s just an ordinary gift. When’s your birthday? Could say it’s for that.”

“I do not celebrate my birthday by receiving gifts either,” he reminds the human, who chuckles.

“Oh, well. Not giving me an answer, huh. When is your birthday?”

He calculates quickly, including the difference in orbits of their planets and length of their days. “It would be equivalent to stardate 2237.6.”

Jim pauses. “Hang on. You’re - you’re nineteen.”

“My Standard age is not equivalent with my Vulcan age, since Vulcans mature faster than humans do. You must be aware of that.”

“Wow. Now I feel dumb.”

Spock, still holding the wrapped gift, frowns. “That is an illogical statement.”

“It’s just, you’re the smartest person on campus and, like, the best cadet - though I did totally beat you in Tactics - and you’re nineteen. Wait until Bones hears about this!”

“A limited age does not negate intelligence,” Spock reminds him. “Furthermore, I would prefer if you did not mention my age to Dr McCoy, since I can predict that his reaction will include at least one expletive.”

He invites Jim inside; it is illogical to let him linger in the open doorway. He asks he would like some coffee or other drink, but Jim declines; he is in a hurry. He hasn’t begun to pack yet, which is a sign of the human’s stress with dealing with finals. Carefully, Spock unwraps the gift - ignoring Jim’s advice to tear at the paper carelessly - and it revealed to be a box. Inside of the box, there is a tricorder. It is of a recent model and quite advanced. Spock weighs it in his hand, looking at the human, unable to properly determine his own emotions.

“This is an expensive gift.”

“Yeah, well, if you’re going to be a science officer you’re gonna need it.”

“My thanks. I have not prepared a gift for you.”

Jim smiles. “Don’t worry about it. Expect to get another present in eighteen days.”

“For what purpose?”

The human rolls his eyes at the question, his grin brightening. “Because then it’s your birthday.
Duh.”

Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2256.353-.364

Jim (0927-4339-11)
watcha doin ;)

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am currently in Lab Eight conducting a chemical experiment. What are you doing?
And
I do not comprehend the meaning of that symbol - does it still depict a smile? For what purpose have you switched the colon to a semi-colon?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sitting on a bus to iowa it takes foreveerr :/ cuz the flight got cancelled and ok only like 5h but still like how can we have the capability to build starships and all buses r still slower than the 21st century shit? ok maybe not slower cuz back then it took like 30!! fkn hours?? o.o and shh thats a secret u figure it out ;)

Jim (0927-4339-11)
im bored, tell me smth funny

Spock (0934-5294-42)
You are aware I do not possess the same quality of humour as most humans, and to tell a joke would be most uncharacteristic of me.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
then tell me smth boring

Spock (0934-5294-42)
That would be an illogical request, since you are already expressing boredom.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ok ok outlogic me will u

Jim (0927-4339-11)
what kinda experiment

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It is a simple experiment to determine the temperatures of exothermic reactions. Dr Ye’el has asked me to partake in a number of seminars next semester and recreate this and other experiments for a practical demonstration for the class.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
nice

Jim (0927-4339-11)
how is it over there is it lonely?
It is good to have access to the school grounds without other cadets disturbing my work, as it puts less of a strain on my mental shields.

That is appreciated but unnecessary. I am studying an additional condensed course in quantum computing mechanics over the next few weeks, and expect to pass the test shortly after the turn of the new year. I will also take a test in Astrophysics 3 in order to receive enough academic credits.

That is appreciated but unnecessary. I am studying an additional condensed course in quantum computing mechanics over the next few weeks, and expect to pass the test shortly after the turn of the new year. I will also take a test in Astrophysics 3 in order to receive enough academic credits.

Indeed. We will see each other in approximately eighteen point seven days.
Jim (0927-4339-11)
dunno maybe, i mean i haven't been here for a year. whatcha up to now

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am in the library, currently reading about Dr T’Pan’s theory on subspace morphology. Are you well?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yup gonna go shopping later

Jim (0927-4339-11)
kinda lonely

Jim (0927-4339-11)
without bones and every1. cuz hes wherever visiting his kid

Jim (0927-4339-11)
and you're on campus

Jim (0927-4339-11)
but!! i can make whatever mess i want without anyone telling me what to dooo~

Spock (0934-5294-42)
That does not sound very productive.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
i mean to be very very opposite of productive this week, spock. cuz thats what holidays are about

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I see. Human culture continues to be abstractly fascinating.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
16 days

Jim (0927-4339-11)
u think i should invite my brother sam for chirstmas i mean its pretty soon and ive got zero plans. i should invite him

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I believe you should do what you consider to be best in this situation. From what you have told me, you are in regular contact with your brother, and therefore as a human may feel the emotional need to confirm your close relationship to inviting him to socialize.
Jim (0927-4339-11)
that's a logical argument

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Of course. I am Vulcan.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ok so ill invite him

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Has it occurred to you that there is a certain inefficiency in questioning me on things about which you have already made up your mind?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
it gives me emotional security :)

Jim (0927-4339-11)
13 days~

Jim (0927-4339-11)
how did ur test go??

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I have yet to receive the final result, but the reactions from the teachers overseeing it were mainly positive.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
omg was it an oral exam? sht i hate those things

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Yes. A computer had been programmed in likeness to a Vulcan educational examination program, and three professors were only observing, not asking questions. I must admit I prefer this method over the standard human ones. To sit in a hall with a hundred other students and attempting to concentrate on a written exam with so many others present can be quite grating.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah know what u mean. was it hard?

TO: Jim (0927-4339-11)
Not particularly. I was well-prepared.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
how does a program like that work?
At the school I attended in Shi’kahr, each student would perform their daily educational hours in a yerak t’orenau, the computer of which is programmed to suit the individual’s needs, intelligence level, goals, and focus. Therefore no student could exchange places with another.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
guess it mustve been a shock coming to earth

Jim (0927-4339-11)
i mean our education isnt that logical

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It took some time to adjust. I had suggested this way of testing a few weeks ago, and the professors have talked about introducing the concept to other Academy students who might benefit from the approach.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
maybe some people would like it. id hate it. no offence but hte thought of being crossexamined by a computer like that kinda gets to me

Spock (0934-5294-42)
No offence is taken. I assume many humans would feel this way, and many of you would perform quite poorly due to stress in such a situation. You are merely different. This does not necessarily have to be a flaw.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
stress is what we live on

Spock (0934-5294-42)
What?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
students. we. us poor poor souls esp at finals week but really like always, we live on stress, we sleep in it, we eat it

Spock (0934-5294-42)
That is a strange and irrational description, yet quite evocative. There are counselors to speak with if you are feeling so stressed that you cannot perform adequately, you know.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
been there done that. could probably write a book

Jim (0927-4339-11)
do u ever get nervous or stressed

Jim (0927-4339-11)
btw u dont have to answer just this inquisitive human asking

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I do not mind the question, Jim, when it comes from you. Perhaps my own experiences of what constitutes as stress differs from your own, but I have felt it. There is always some
pressure when an examination is performed, especially in one where one’s future is at stake.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Have you been doing well?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah just enjoying the quiet, looking at the farm and stuff. grew up here yknow. town hasn’t changed, i took a bike ride thought. the freeeeedooom~

Spock (0934-5294-42)
A bike ride?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yup :) motorbike if thats what ur wondering, 4 cylinders, this sleek nice frame. its an old antique, has got proper wheels instead of those antigrav things

Jim (0927-4339-11)
will show u one day ;) nothing like a ride like that

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Then you should continue to enjoy yourself. I am planning on returning to my dormitory now to make myself a meal.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
want ideas?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I would not object to that.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
tiramisu *yum*

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Jim, that is a dessert.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
so?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
11 days

Jim (0927-4339-11)
r u havng fun

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am in the library. I have read another three books since our last conversation yesterday. Are you well?
Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah out metng some old buddies n stuff

Jim (0927-4339-11)
good reading?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It is adequate. The library’s section on astrophysical phenomenon is nearly as accurate as the Vulcan Science Academy archives.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
whoa whoa wait hold up u know the archives? uve been there??

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I occasionally visited them during my education as a child in Shi’kahr.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
awesome

Jim (0927-4339-11)
whats it like

Jim (0927-4339-11)
vulcan, whats it like

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Hot.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
all ur words n all u say is *hot*??

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It is not an inaccurate description.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
8 days

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It is unnecessary to keep counting down as we are both aware of the time.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
196h 33 mins 8 secs

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I see it is pointless to ask you to cease this behaviour.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yep :)
I must correct you then that it would have been forty-three minutes at the time your message was sent, not thirty-three.

-Am I to assume you desire to engage in a virtual game of tridimensional chess?

Very well. Knight to b1(4).

Further inland and significantly more to the north than San Francisco, there is snow here, in great heaps on the ground and swirling through the air. He has to wear both thermo-insulated underwear and a thick coat to compensate. They had to fly from said city to Quebec via a commercial flight, and Spock and Sarek had been the only non-humans on it. It had been a loud and uncomfortable craft. He is glad the flight took only twenty-seven minutes. He does not understand why his Aunt chose to settle down in this place instead of someplace … warmer.

Aunt Cassie is waiting by the airport, and she embraces his mother first, kissing her on the cheek. The display is vivid, emotional, and warm compared to the frigid landscape. Then she greets Sarek and his son with a well-practiced ta’al, though she doesn’t speak Vulcan.

“That’s so good to see you, Sarek. And my, how you’ve grown, Spock! Come on, let’s get inside the car before we freeze our ears off.”

That is unlikely to occur, but Spock agrees. The hovercar is quite small, a family-sized vehicle, and there is a girl sitting next to the driver’s seat, peeking out the window curiously. Spock estimates the child to be eight point seven Standard years old or thereabout, and her hair is dark and eyes wide. When she notices Spock looking in her direction, the girl ducks. They get in the car, and Aunt Cassie introduces the girl with a smile. “This is Ella, my youngest. Say hello, sweetheart.”

“He-hello.” It is more of a squeak than a proper Standard word.

“She’s a bit shy, sorry. You’re an idol of hers, Spock.”

Perplexed, Spock nearly frowns. “I am?” He must consult a dictionary of the exact definition of an ‘idol’.

“Yeah. When she heard you’re going to the Academy, Ella insisted that she’s going to go there one day herself. Isn’t that right?”

The child nods but doesn’t say anything.
Oh. She does not have the same bearing a Vulcan child her age would have, and he is not certain how to interact with her; if he should even attempt it. He exchanges a confused look with his mother, sitting between him and his father in the backseat. Amanda smiles.

The hovercar’s engine rumbles, and they are off. The roads are cluttered with people on the move. Spock watches the city fascinated as they move through it. It has not changed much since their last visit a decade earlier. A few more buildings; others are gone. But on the whole, its likeness is not confusing. Albeit he has never been here before during winter. The cold is pervasive. He is glad of the thick mittens, and that he remembered to pack all of his warmest clothes, including all the sweaters his mother has knitted for him.

As they drive, Aunt Cassie talks. Her voice is high with an interesting lilt, though not so that it is hard to understand, and she talks about her husband, Robert, and their children, their work, their hobbies, ever-going and never-stopping. She has two sons and two daughters. The eldest, Clara, is about the same age as Spock, and, according to Aunt Cassie, an aspiring sportswoman. Ella, the youngest, likes science - for now; apparently young humans change interests and aspiring dreams as swiftly as they change clothes. The middle ones, Richard and Rachel, are twelve-year-old twins, and ‘up to trouble as usual’. The statement is unfamiliar, since no Vulcan child would cause trouble, at least not once they have gotten past the age of four when they truly begin to grasp the meaning of emotional stability, control, and logic.

It must be a result of the flawed human educational system, Spock quietly decides.

After a while, they reach a house on the outskirts of town. It is not spectacular or grand, but homely enough, Aunt Cassie explains, and there are lights blinking over it. It has been decorated with garlands. The windows are shimmering with lamps. The front lawn is covered in layers and layers of white, though the snow has been stirred and formed into odd shapes - three round balls stacked onto one another, with the middle one adorned with two sticks sticking out of it, and the top one has a number of stones of uneven sizes placed in it, as if to form a crude render of those emoticons Jim uses; this one a smile.

Noticing his glance as they unload their baggage from the hovercar, his mother explains: “That’s a snowman. Must be Ella or the twins who made it.”

“It bears little resemblance to a humanoid,” Spock notes.

“It’s not supposed to be an anatomically correct representation.”

“I see. Interesting.”

Little Ella, whose initial shyness seems to have loosened up a bit during the ride, suddenly runs shrieking toward the house. It is nod a sound of pain or terror, but, apparently, of joy. Spock tries not to stare. Yes, he recalls now: when he visited, as a twelve-year-old, the only other child in the house, Clara, had behaved erratically like that much to Spock’s frustrated confusion. Sarek had not been here that time, and now his father walks quite stiffly toward the house, carrying a bag in one hand and lightly touching his mother’s hand with the other.

“Here we are,” says his aunt, leading them through the front door. Though colder than his own dormitory and how he prefers it, the warmth is great compared to the outside, and Spock removes his woolly hat with relief. Coats are hung on hangers and shoes taken off, which is how Aunt Cassie prefers it in the winter - logical: this way snow and dirt will not be dragged inside the clean house.

It is fascinating, being inside a Terran house. The Academy, for its origins, is an educational institution, its halls and rooms and corridors functional. So are the shared common rooms and
kitchens; there is little warmth there and sparse decorations. Here, on the other hand, everything is lived in. The walls are darker in colour, not stark white or grey. There are a lot of photographs. Some are simple two-dimensional pieces in colour, other are miniature holograms which cannot be cheap. All depicting the members of the family, including its pet. It is not a sehlat, of course. The cat, Aunt Cassie informs him, is named Mister Tucker although it is female; it was Ella’s idea.

Clearly the child lacks in naming and possibly observational skills.

Aunt Cassie had been shopping before picking them up at the airport, and she and Amanda go to the kitchen to unload the groceries. Sarek follows. If Spock understands his father correctly, he is for once in his life, despite all of his years of experience as Ambassador, quite at a loss, in an alien place. It is rare to see his father like this. His father is always keeping the air of knowing all and being in full control.

Spock realizes that Ella is peering at him from behind a potted plant. He holds up the ta'al. “Hello. I am Spock.”

The girl nods quietly. Then she says, hesitatingly: “D’you want to look at my models?”

These are much more accurate than the snowman. Spock approves. Fifteen starships of various origins adorn the bookshelf. There is a sixteenth under construction on the desk. This room is decorated vividly different from the other living areas Spock has seen thus far: the wallpaper depicts some kind of caricature of an animal in bright colours, as does the coverings of the bed. The desk is covered in little things: brushes and pencils and packets of glue, pieces of plastic - remnants of the model building projects - and tubes of colour.

“May I examine this one?” he asks the child, gesturing at the small version of the USS Kelvin, one of the Federation’s most historical vessels due to the violent end it met. Captain Pike even wrote his dissertation on the subject of that destruction.

“Yup.”

Spock carefully lifts it off the shelf. There is a small accumulation of dust on the dish. “It is quite accurate,” he says. “Scaled in one to twelve thousand five hundred. Correct?”

“Yup. How d’you know that?”

“It is quite simple. The USS Kelvin NCC-0514, like all of its class vessels, was two-hundred eighty-one point two seven three meters in length. This model depicts it as being - and this is a rough estimate - twenty-two point five zero two centimeters. It is a simple calculation to make.” He returns the model to its place. “Have you constructed these yourself?”

The child nods. “Yup.” She points at another one, which is jammed between a book about the prehistoric dinosaurs which once roamed the Earth several million years ago, and a photograph of the cat Mister Tucker. “That’s my favourite one.”

It is not a Federation vessel but a Klingon warbird. The colouring is somewhat inaccurate, but that can be because of lacking source material.

“Mommy says it’s bad ’cuz Klingons are bad, but it’s wicked.”

“Wicked”? This is not a term I am familiar with.”

The girl gasps, sounding genuinely taken aback. “You don’t know wicked?!”
“Negative.”

“Weird. What do Vulcans say?”

He could say that Vulcans do not express sentiments like wickedness, but this is not entirely accurate. Knowing Jim has taught him something. So instead he says: “What is the exact definition of ‘wicked’?”

“It, uh.” Ella has to think for a moment. “Something, like, cool.”

_That_ is a word he is familiar with, thanks to Nyota. “‘Fascinating’ - we use the word ‘fascinating’.”

This, apparently, the child approves of. “Wicked! D’you build any models?”

“I see you’re getting along with Ella,” his mother says as they’re eating dinner sometime later. He has now said hello numerous times: to the twins, to the older daughter, and to Aunt Cassie’s husband, Robert. It is a very human family. No non-Terrans live in this neighbourhood, and Starfleet and its shining ships seem very distant here. They hear things on the news or on the internet, and sometimes there are visitors - traders from faraway, explorers - but that’s about it.

“She is very enthusiastic about her miniatures,” Spock says. “She has expressed her desire to become a pilot in Starfleet.”

“A pilot, huh?” Robert says. “Last week it was science officer. Let’s see what it is next week.”

What a strange countenance. Humans let their children run so wild, even when they are attending school. Vulcans are much more restrained. Though, Spock decides after a moment, he is not the best example to compare with. He did, after all, turn away the Vulcan Science Academy in favour of the illogical choice of Starfleet, with its inefficient ways of teaching.


“It is adequate,” Spock says. He does not know what to say, and looks toward his mother for support; she smiles, nods. _Go on_, it means. “I find find the educational system inefficient at times due to the fallacy of some of the teachers.”

“It is to be expected,” his father says. Despite the fact that they are now on speaking terms, his father does not agree which his choice to reject the VSA. "They are human, are they not?"

“Yes, for most part.”

“Okay, so we’re a bit dull,” says Aunt Cassie. Thankfully, she does not appear angry or upset.

“That is an incorrect statement. I find humans socialization to be quite fascinating.”

“Wicked,” corrects Ella.

“All right, dear,” says Robert lightly, reaching for another piece of pie.

Sarek has already finished eating. Spock, quite used by now to share meals with humans who want to speak for a long time eating, has not yet cleared his plate, eating strategically in order to save time. It is quite awkward to not eat while others due, and to leave the table would be perceived as rude.

Conversation shifts to other matters. Robert works as a technician, and complains briefly about his superiors’ incompetence, and Aunt Cassie tells him not to think about that during the weekend at
least. They ask his father about his work as Ambassador, and his mother on her research and development of a more efficient universal translator.

Something brushes against his leg. Spock nearly drops the fork. He had not sensed anyone approach -

Oh. It is the cat. Mister Tucker settles by his feet as if that is a good spot to rest. He tries to relax again, but his nerves feel frayed, open, suddenly so vulnerable, and he cannot lower that intensity of focus. Every breath, every noise, everything is sharp.

His mother is glancing at him. While the others are busy talking, she quietly asks if everything is all right. He nods, not trusting his voice. He resumes eating, though slower than before, appetite lost.

When will he cease reacting thus to every unexpected thing? It is illogical and consuming energy. He must meditate thoroughly tonight.

After the pie, there is dessert. He does not touch anything but the fruits, since there will not be added sucrose in those and no risk of a poor reaction. The talking continues. The human like to talk. Listening, he thinks about what Jim could be doing. They have not spoken much lately, other than playing virtual tridimensional chess; thus far, Jim has won one match, and Spock two.

Is he too sitting around a table, eating well, with family or friends? He has a brother, and his mother is still alive. Though Spock knows very little of them. Jim does not like to talk about family. Perhaps Jim is alone. The thought does not sit well with him.

The communicator in his pocket buzzes.

It is not a chess move.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
i cant handle anymore of this shit

Spock looks up, but the others are busy talking. He can take the time to respond. Jim’s choice of words is concerning.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Jim? I do not understand your meaning. Please elaborate.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
she ignores me and everything i do for years and then she waltzes in
as if everything is ok and shes in charge

Spock (0934-5294-42)
To whom are you referring?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
my mom

Jim (0927-4339-11)
shes not like yours, spock. ur mom is awesome. its like mine has forgotten
how to be anything but a commander

The messages arrive in rapid succession. This is troubling.
It takes approximately two minutes before there is a reply.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ha good luck with that lol

Jim (0927-4339-11)
no but seriously Ive tried and its not going well

Jim (0927-4339-11)
we jsut ended a fourhours shouting match. I left the house. shes taken over the farm as if it belings to HER and not my dads family and ME since sam doesnt want it

Jim (0927-4339-11)
I just dont know what tf to do

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am sorry Jim. I would assist you if I knew of a way to do so.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah i know. already helps talking wth u

Jim (0927-4339-11)
youre a good friend spock

Jim (0927-4339-11)
dont let anyone tell u otherwise

Spock finds himself staring at the message for several seconds, and there is an inexplicable unwordable warmth spreading from his lower quadrant and belly, through his limbs, all the way to his fingertips.

It is not unpleasant.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I also consider you to be a good friend, Jim.

His mother had warned him that there would be fireworks. Though now banned from use by private individuals, due to the dangers involved, the city council arranges a show around midnight. Thankfully, Spock has had the time to invest in earplugs. It might be beautiful to look at, but it will be painful to anyone with a Vulcan level of hearing. Indeed, most humans seem to agree.

They do not need to take the hovercar anywhere; the house is situated on a hill, and from here they can see quite well; they gather on the lawn, by the snowman. The adults carry a glass of champagne each, even Sarek. He will attempt to emulate this human tradition for his wife’s sake. Spock’s hands are chilled even with the mittens.

The quarter of an hour to midnight, the first rocket is shot into the air, and it explodes into a shower of gold. The next one is purple and green. It rises and falls, dancing. The youngest children whoop and point. The elder is recording the lightshow with her PADD, perhaps to make a post to social media, as Spock has observed humans doing it at the Academy whenever something they found
interesting or funny occurred.

The night is clear, and stars visible. Far, far away, there is a glimmer of lights indicating the Stardock in orbit around Earth.

Each rocket is brighter, grander, and more complex in its display. They form flowers and other patterns in blue, yellow, red. It is … fascinating. As they reach the final minute before midnight, the humans begin to count down. Spock has to move now and then; his toes are very, very cold.

“- ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four -”

His communicator chimes.

“- two - HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Jim (0927-4339-11)

;*

He is forced to remove a glove to reply. The others are cheering and drinking from their glasses; Spock had refrained from taking one.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I do not understand what that message means. Please elaborate.

Jim does not respond by explaining what the sequence of symbols mean.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

happy new yyyyeeaarrr pleasee dont let it suuuuuck~

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I highly doubt that it will.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

What is the meaning of the symbols :*? Is this another emoticon?

“Who’re you texting?”

Standing right to his left, Ella is looking at him intently, as if he is an object at a museum needed to be studied.

“A …” Spock halts. Hesitating. Who is Jim, truly? Which is the correct label to use?

Jim. Vulcans do not have friends. But he is not wholly Vulcan. Bonds of friendship are illogical.

Then why is he in contact with not only Jim, but Nyota, and even Leonard as well? Illogical. and yet.

“A friend.”

“Oh, okay,” the child says. Then comes the important question, which seems to be her current measure of approval: “Do they like to build models?”

The rest of the house is asleep. Spock did not bring a proper meditation mat, but the blow-up mattress is adequate, and he asked Aunt Cassie if he could borrow a few candles. They are not
Vulcan, and the scent of their burn is different, but the glow is welcome. His mother and father are sleeping in the guestroom next door. The blinds are open, and he can glimpse the stars if he keeps his eyes open. He does not, for several minutes.

He does not sleep. He has not slept since the Theater. His mother knows about that, and it concerns her. He had argued that Vulcans require far less sleep than a human, and he is not - And he had not been able to finish the argument, but conceded, and said I will try. So far he has been unsuccessful.

It is nearing four in the morning when he deems himself more rested. He stands, dresses, and prepares to go downstairs to prepare breakfast, is as proper of a Vulcan guest. His hand is on the handle when he gets the message.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

gedi prime or andevian ii?

It is a familiar question. Why is he posing it? And Jim should not be awake. He is human, and needs his sleep, or he might fall ill.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

sorry if i woke u

Spock (0934-5294-42)

That is all right. I have finished meditating for tonight. Perhaps you should sleep if you have not done so yet. As for your question, I still have no preference. What prompts it this time?

Jim (0927-4339-11)

never been to either and im thinking about our 1st mission

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Do you mean our first possible mission with Starfleet as officers aboard a ship?

Jim (0927-4339-11)

yeah, or once i make captain. i wanna go someplace nice to hold hands w u

Jim (0927-4339-11)

shht didnt mena to send that wait hold up fkc

Something is stuck in his throat. A difficulty to breathe. Jim is well-aware of Vulcan customs; he knows the significance of hand-holding. He knows that … he wrote that …

Jim (0927-4339-11)

shit shit sorry sorry

He must reply. Now. Before Jim thinks that he made an error which is unwelcome; an error. It … it is not. Spock struggles to formulate an intelligible message. He begins to type: Jim, do you - no, he backtracks, deletes, starts over. Jim, are you asking -

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I would not be averse to holding hands with you, Jim.

Holding his breath, he waits. Waits. A minute passes.

He writes a second text.
Vulcans do not lie.

And finally:

Jim (0927-4339-11)
are you sure…?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Yes, Jim.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
wow. ok wow. omg. i don't know bout u but im kinda hyperventilating over here cuz i know this is a big deal for vulcans

Jim (0927-4339-11)
and its a big deal for me

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I understand. I was aware that you asked me on a date on stardate 2256.343 and accepted knowing this. At least that is how I interpreted your query after Nyota explained the definition of a date to me.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
you did?? omg ive been a fool i thought it was gonna take like another year to get this far

Jim (0927-4339-11)
omg i can finally ask

Jim (0927-4339-11)
spock, do you want to be boyfriends?

This term … he has heard it before. Yes. Briefly. That is what Cadet Sulu called the human male - Ben: his boyfriend. And Nyota has once mentioned that she would like to have one, or perhaps a girlfriend, one day. He had not comprehended the statement, as he was certain that Nyota has several friends who also happen to be male, and others who happen to be female. Perhaps he has misunderstood the definition of the word.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I do understand the meaning of that term. Please elaborate.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
it means to be together, together-together, dunno how to put it

Jim (0927-4339-11)
exclusively dating, no one else involved, just us


Yes.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Yes, I would like that, Jim.
act i :: part seven

Chapter Summary

act i. part seven.
My mind to your mind.

act i.
part seven

k’oh-nar
(noun)

[i] fear of emotional vulnerability and exposure; feeling of being completely exposed in some way;
[ii] fear of losing control; an unnatural fear of losing control in an extremely intense, emotional situation

Shi’kahr · Vulcan
Stardate 2244.119

It is meant to be a logical match.

When their minds touch (suppressing craving afraid detached coldly coldly) upon the initiation of Kan-Telan, he can barely feel her. What he does feel - it does not lay the foundation of a logical match. Vulcans do not sneer, nor do they smile. T’Pring is emotionally detached, as she should be. But she notes the weakness of his mixed heritage, and that it would be illogical for her to tie herself to someone so incomplete and obviously inferior. He lacks. He lacks. He cannot argue against that. He may achieve things, but the Council ascribes that to chance; as a result of him having to work harder than his peers due to genetic disadvantage. Flaws. He will never be enough.

Spock feels nothing.

They cannot form a Bond. Not deep enough for koon-ut-la. Not deep enough for Telan t’Kanlar. Not deep enough. Nothing resonates. He is neither happy nor displeased. He feels nothing. Detached. Should be. T’Pring is. Her thoughts are clear: he is not Vulcan enough. They are not meant to be.

They do not ask for assistance from the Mind Healers.

His father will be displeased; the logical reaction. His grandparent, too; the had hoped for a traditional Bonding for him, something without issues or questions. Complacency. And his mother. Her concern will grow darker. If he cannot Bond with one of his own, then what productive use is he to his people?

Perhaps - it will be for the best. He is flawed. And the chances of him being able to successfully pass on his genetic material is less than twelve percent. It is more logical to let T’Pring Bond someone else, someone who has a chance, someone who is her equal in all measures. Not inferior. It is logical.
They do not form a Bond. They are silent as they rise, and T’Pring - were she human, he thinks, recalling visits to Earth as a young boy; she would express relief. She does not.

Spock cannot properly categorize his own emotions. Cannot label them. He sets them aside, as he has been taught to do. Control. control. The ritual is ended prematurely, his grandmother T’Rama declaring the koon’ul to be null. He watches T’Rama rise and say farewell, forming the ta’al. He watches T’Pring and her family take their leave, and the doors heavy close; briefly letting in the light of Vulcan’s sun, bright and hostile.

He watches, and does not speak.

There will be other opportunities, his father says later, when they have reconvened at their dwelling, and food is being served.

Spock is doubtful, but does not say it.

He is half-human. He may not even ever have to endure pon farr. A large part of him does not ever want to have to endure it.

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Quebec · Canada · Earth
Stardate 2257.1

It is the Vulcan way for the guests of a house to rise before their hosts in order to prepare breakfast. Spock has become quite well-versed in Terran foods by now and in making at least some of them.

He is distracted. The conversation with Jim was - unexpected, welcome, frightening all at once. There is an emotion bubbling under the surface that he cannot properly name. Should he tell his mother? His father? He isn’t certain. Perhaps … it can wait. He and Jim must meet and speak face-to-face first. Define this new step.

Spock is rummaging through the fridge when his mother appears. Her hair is a bit damp from a recent shower, and she is dressed in a thick heavy bathrobe and a pair of slippers. She murmurs a quiet good morning and squeezes his arm - not quite an embrace, but almost - and joins him. Shortly afterward, Sarek walks downstairs. Together they make certain there is food on the table for when the rest of the family wakes up. Like with many humans, this takes a while. It is well past sunrise when Aunt Cassie and the others are awake. When the youngest children are on the move, a sudden liveliness and noise returns to the house.

Little Ella insists on speaking more with him. She is visibly disappointed when he says he will return to the Academy later today. His mother of course already knew this and had warned Aunt Cassie. A plane ticket has already been booked.

“I have an upcoming test,” he explains when asked.

Aunt Cassie nods while chewing on a sandwich. “Oh, that’s got to be quite stressful. I mean, you’ve barely had a break, have you?”

“This has been adequate.” Truthfully, he wants to return to campus as soon as possible. That is where his … his friends will be.

His mind is on Jim. He finds that he is poking at the food in a far too obviously distracted manner, and forces himself to regain composure, and adjusts the grip of the fork in his hand.

After breakfast and tidying up, Spock returns to the guest bedroom and begins to pack. He had not
brought much. Every now and then, he glances at his communicator. His and Jim’s conversation had continued this morning, but he can feel a certain tenseness. They’re uncertain in a new way. Insecure. It is illogical, and yet.

Four hours later, his mother, father, and Aunt Cassie sees him to the airport. The others had said goodbye earlier. Little Ella had shyly asked if a hug was okay and, when Spock said so, she’d briefly embraced him and said that he must come back and build a model with her someday. It is unlikely, but he’d nodded anyway and said that he would try to, if he had the time. The old car rattles a bit as it carries them through the snowy streets. The traffic is heavy, and they hear the airport before they see it: a great rumble in the air.

His father does not hug him. His mother does, and Aunt Cassie shakes his gloved hand and says it was lovely to see him and urges him to visit some other time, all in an air of familiar pleasantries, so humanly, so human. Sarek and Amanda will stay here for a few more days. His mother does not get many chances to see her sister, after all, as they usually live planets apart. They linger, watching him go through the security check and walk toward the gate, and he thinks they may wait until they are sure that shuttlecraft six-one-eight is in the air.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
queen to a1(2)

Spock (0934-5294-42)
That is a risky move.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
im a risky guy

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Bishop to a1(2) takes the queen. Checkmate.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
shit shouldve seen that coming. guess im out of luck :/

Jim (0927-4339-11)
next round tho ill win ;)

Jim (0927-4339-11)
are u boarding now?

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Yes. When will you return to San Francisco?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
im gonna hang around the farm a bit longer

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sam and my mom left already so i guess its just me and the corn now

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am sorry that you could not reconcile. I notice that it is hard on you.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
it's ok im used to it. maybe someday in the future. but i dont owe her anything.
Students are returning to campus. It is not an unwelcome invasion of the silence.

His mother will spend another two months on Earth along with Sarek; then they will both return to Vulcan. They have duties. Spock understands. They will return, though, in time for his graduation next year. His mother would not miss it, and she will no doubt persuade Sarek to be there as well.

He has spent hours on the communicator with Jim - speaking. Just speaking. The human’s demeanor had changed a bit in the last five days, and it was disconcerting. Spock had explained that he does not seek change in that manner, and he does not want Jim to alter himself; there is no need for it. The human is anxious, he reveals; nervous. As if suddenly he had felt inadequate and not enough. The declaration of their relationship is a big step for the human.

It is for him too.

He has not informed his mother or father yet of this development, as he is not certain how to do it. He needs to talk with Jim in person first. He … he would like to meld with him. To see if they truly - If it is a logical match.

Yes, he must speak with him: about the Vulcan ways, about koon’ul, about kal’i’farr. He cannot wholly abandon the ways of his people, and neither can Jim for that matter. And his father would not like to find out that his son has created a Bond si-kun-utik. Yes, they must speak. It is difficult over comm. Jim agrees.

They both could be a little afraid, and unable to properly put it to words. Jim does not like to talk of emotions, even for a human who is vividly emotional; and Spock is raised the Vulcan way.

Can this even work?

He has not seen Jim in person for eighteen days and five hours and fifteen minutes. He cannot seem to stop counting the seconds.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ru in ur dorm

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Negative. I am in the library. Have you returned to San Francisco?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
not yet stuck in traffic

Jim (0927-4339-11)
but should get there tonight, like 7:30

Jim (0927-4339-11)
meet u then outside my dorm? :)}
Jim (0927-4339-11)
c u <3

When receiving the last message, Spock opens his PADD and connects it to the internet. Hopefully this search will be more successful than his previous research into emoticons. Opening a search engine, he types « definition of <3 ».

It takes a little while to find relevant information. But eventually - *Oh.*

Fascinating.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
*I return the sentiment.*

Jim was not late. The human had lied. When Spock arrives at his and Leonard’s dorm room at two minutes past half eight - according to Nyota, human politeness indicates that one should not be *too* punctual - Jim has evidently had the time to unpack and made some kind of attempt at cleaning the room, or at least picking up the laundry from the floor. There is something quite strange about it.

The human greets him with a hug after asking it’s okay. Spock allows it. The contact is brief, but warm, and not entirely unwelcome. His breath is hot on his neck. He suppresses a shiver.

For some unfathomable reason, Jim is wearing a paper hat. He waves open the door.

“Surprise! Happy birthday!”

The last time his mother attempted to celebrate his birthday the human way was the day Spock turned three. He does recall it, in clear-cut images, as if carved into his memory by a knife. There had been candles, and gifts, and singing of a rhyme.

Jim is smiling. It is quite distracting. His dormitory does not look the same as before. The desk has been cleared from various litter and PADDs and pens, and instead there is a cake standing in the middle of it, glazed and white and atop of it, Spock can make out, are letters in Standard Federation English spelling out an uneven *happy birthday spock*. It is surrounded by twenty tiny candles in many colours.

Of course. He had revealed the date of his birth. An error.

But the human is smiling, oh so hopefully, and he had arranged this out of kindness and not to mock him.

“I know,” Jim says, closing the door, “you said you don’t celebrate it.”

“I did.”

“But you’re living with us irrational humans now, so get used to it,” Jim says lightly. “Come on in.”

Nyota is present, and she’s dressed quite nicely, and her hair adorned, and she congratulates him with a smile. Leonard is there too, and the human is looking a cross between annoyed and amused. He is seated in the sofa reading something on his PADD. “ Couldn’t talk him out of it,” the human says with a shrug.
“I see. Then I believe it is appropriate to say thank you.”

“Yeah. Ever had birthday cake?”

Jim goes to fetch a knife or something else to cut the cake with, leaving Leonard to interrogate him. Nyota, too, appears interested.

“Yes,” Spock answers. “Lastly when I was three Standard years old.”

Shaking his head, Leonard snorts. “Vulcans.”

“Our traditions are different from yours, but they do not carry less merit.”

“That’s not what I meant. Sit down. Jim’s been insufferable about this. You’re lucky, y’know.”

“I am?”

“Yeah,” Leonard says wryly, “I managed to talk him out of throwing a big party.”

Nyota nods. “He was going to invite half of campus.”

Yes, Spock can see why that would have been a bad idea. “Then I appreciate that you intervened.”

Again, the human simply shakes his head, and mutters something about babysitting.

Jim insists on filming with a PADD as Spock blows out the candles. He assures him that there’s only a limited amount of added sucrose content in the cake, and date plums have been used in the recipe. It is not unappealing, although the taste is still a bit too sweet to be enjoyable. Leonard opens a bottle of wine of unknown origin. Jim also insists to play music - though at a moderate volume - something from the 21st or 20th century of a genre called classic rock. It is quite fascinating, as his mother had not favoured that genre; Spock has grown up having heard of some Earth composers, but nothing like this.

Conversation moves from how their holidays have been spent and onto how they hope their upcoming semester at the Academy will be spent. Nyota converses with him in Vulcan for awhile, and her language skills have certainly gotten better since the first time they met.

Through it all, Jim sits next to him. It is, almost, like before; as if they are sitting in the library or the cafeteria, surrounded by - surrounded by friends. Nyota and Leonard … they are friends. Yes.

He has not seen Jim in person for eighteen days and seven hours and twenty-nine minutes, and not touched him in all this time. Now, the human’s hand brushes against his own, briefly, and heat rises to Spock’s face, and it takes effort to control that reaction. He will need to meditate on it. The sudden loss of control was …

Eventually, Nyota leaves. They have classes tomorrow. An early start. Leonard begins to tuck away the dishes. A large portion of the cake is still uneaten, and Spock can imagine that, if left in the common kitchen on this floor, it will be gone by this hour tomorrow. He does not mind that. It might provide someone brief pleasure.

For a minute, they are on their own, as Leonard goes to the common room to return the cutlery. The silence is mixed with tension. If he were human, Spock might fidget. Jim’s gaze is flickering.

“Spock -”

“Jim.”
“You first.”

“Very well. I must admit I am not certain how to proceed. Vulcans do not court the way humans do.”

“Yeah, well. We’ll improvise.” Jim pauses. Glances at the door. Leonard has not yet returned. Then he looks at the Vulcan again, and down at their nearly-touching hands. The human raises his. Gently traces the top of Spock’s with a fingertip. The Vulcan has to swallow back a shiver. “This is like kissing for you, isn’t it? ’Cause this is were you’re the most sensitive.”

“That is an accurate description.” He finds his voice weaker than usual.

“So if we held hands in public, would that be like making out in public?”

“I believe it is too early for that,” Spock says, faintly alarmed. This is moving quicker than anticipated, all of a sudden. Maybe he isn’t ready. Maybe he isn’t.

“Oh! We don’t have to. If you don’t want to yet. It’s just, I’m human, and I might be stupid and not think and try to do that,” Jim says, hurriedly. “Touch. You gotta tell me to stop when it’s not okay, yeah?”

“I will not mind if you ask, but I might decline you. It is nothing personal, Jim. Likewise, you must inform me when I overstep.”

“Yeah. Let’s take it slow. This is kinda new to me too. I don’t really do … I mean, this: relationships. Nothing serious like this. Never really have. I don’t want to fuck up.” At Spock’s inquiring gaze, the human elaborates: “Make a mess out of this, uh, ruin it. I don’t want to ruin it.”

“Neither do I. I have never attempted to enter a relationship before, either.” No. Not entirely true. “Not since my Telan t’Kanlar.”

“I don’t understand,” Jim admits. “My Vulcan isn’t that great. Something about bonding …?”

“The Bonding of Children I believe would be the literary translation into Standard. All Vulcan children are Bonded at the age of seven at the agreement of their parents.”

“Oh. I didn’t know anyone actually practiced arranged marriages anymore.” Jim’s eyes widen dramatically. “Wait, then you aren’t …?”

“No. It - the ritual was never completed. The Vulcan girl my parents had arranged for me, T’Pring, and I were not mentally compatible, which is necessary for a Bonding to occur, and none of the other attempts afterwards ever were fulfilled. Jim,” he says, seriously. “A Vulcan Bond involves a mental link; without that one cannot be … There is not proper Standard word for it. Without proper compatibility, to achieve this link is very difficult. If we … Jim, there is a possibility that we are not …”

The door swishes open, Leonard returning, wholly unaware of what has just transpired. During their conversation, they have - without thought - moved closer, and he can feel the human’s body temperature, their shoulders not too far apart, and he can hear Jim’s breathing, almost his heartbeats, dull and faint through flesh and fabric. Words freeze in Spock’s throat. Jim is looking at him sharply, and his eyes are still wide. It is difficult to catalogue his expression, to make sense of them.

Perhaps inviting the conversation onto such matters was a bad idea.

“Okay,” Jim says then. Leonard glances at them, frowning.
The human clears his throat. He looks at them, and at their touching hands. “Am I interrupting somethin’?”

“Negative,” Spock answers.

“Yeah,” says Jim at the same time.

The Doctor raises an eyebrow, crossing his arms. “Am I or aren’t I?”

Jim shrugs nonchalantly, shifting, moving again. The tension eases somewhat. “We’re just talking.”

“Oh, jeez,” mutters the human suddenly, rolling his eyes. “Jim, for the love of God, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Spock cannot make sense of that statement.

Evidently, Jim can. “That’d be hella boring, Bones.”

“… happy to include a visit to a Shipyard for this class. Next month we’ll be visiting the construction site in Riverside, Iowa, where Starfleet’s newest flagship is being built.”

A chorus of murmurs briefly breaks out. It takes a moment for them to silence. Beside him, Spock can sense Jim smiling in excitement.

“All right, settle down everyone. It’ll be a two-day trip so you’ll have to pack for that. We’ll be transporting by shuttlecraft so you don’t need to think about tickets. Since we’re staying overnight you’re going to be rooming in two:s and three:s.” A cadet holds up their hand. “Yes, Ms Rand?”

“Can we choose who we room with?”

“It’s already been decided. But if you can’t go for some reason you’ve got to notify me by this Thursday at the latest,” the teacher warns.

There are a few disgruntled or disappointed groans at the announcement that they are now allowed to choose their temporary roommate. Spock also feels some disquiet about it, but perhaps the teacher has taken his Vulcan heritage into account and paired him with someone tolerable.

As they leave the lecture hall, Jim keeps up his steps with him. The human is visibly happy about the prospect of going to see the Shipyard. “It’ll give me a chance to show you my hometown,” he says with a grin.

“I admit I am curious about what it is like there,” Spock says, exiting the corridor and turning in the direction of classroom for the next class which begins in fifteen minutes. He adjusts the bag slung over his shoulder where he keeps his books and pens and PADD. Jim, on the other hand, is not carrying a bag. The human at least brought a notebook this time though this does not always happen.

“Most of it is boring, but the Yard, yeah, it’s cool,” say Jim. “Y’know, it’s only a few miles from the farm where I grew up.”

“Then you must have visited the Shipyard before.”

“Yeah, but never got to peek beyond the fence though. And we’re gonna see it, Spock! It’s gonna be great.” The human is practically bouncing in his step. “What d’you have now - maths?”

“Yes.”
“Then I’ll see you later. Have fun!” Jim waves a hand, lingering for a moment too long, and then leaves. Spock looks in the direction the human is going, watching the cadet swiftly being taken by the masses of moving reds, and continues onward to his destination. The image of Jim’s smile and the excitement in his voice stays, though, like an imprint on his inner eyelids.

They do not have another chance to speak more about their relationship and the details of Bonding until two days later. They are both busier than most other cadets with classes, as they are both taking an individually condensed, fast-paced version of their respective courses. Jim needs to sleep at night, too. They exchange messages. It is not as effective as it had before felt, as if some kind of element is lacking. But eventually there is a blank spot in Spock’s schedule corresponding to a break in Jim’s own.

They agree to meet and play chess. Jim has a board - a simple two-dimensional one - which he brings to Spock’s dorm. Here they can talk alone.

Neither can focus much on the game.

“That thing you said,” Jim says after some time, moving his rook. “About … about bonding. How’s it work? And how are we gonna work?”

Spock considers the query for a moment. “Vulcans are telepaths. We need a mental link for a Bond to work properly, and normally, this link is predetermined since childhood.”

“The, uh, tuhankanlar?”

“Telan t’Kanlar. The parents or Heads of the family decides them.” He moves a pawn, taking one of Jim’s. The human glances from his face to the board and back again. “It is rare to be without koon’ul - betrothed would be an equivalent word, I believe. Yes. Three attempts were made for me when I was seven years old, but no one was compatible.”

“I’m sorry.” And Jim sounds genuine.

He looks at the human, curious at this reaction of empathy. Jim could react otherwise. Shrug, or even display jealousy. And yet … “There is no need. If I wereBonded were T’Pring, I may not have rejected the Vulcan Science Academy, since I would have a reason to stay on Vulcan. In which case, we would not have met.”

Jim doesn’t seem to know how to respond to that.

“I’m, I’m happy to’ve met you too, Spock. I guess it was kinda … not love at first sight, ’cause that’s just cheesy, but, yeah. I didn’t just want to meet for your that case study, Spock. You’re interesting, and clever, and there’s something I can’t really put my finger on. Anyway. What about the bond?”

Jim hurries over the words. Nervous? Spock tries to determine it. It’s difficult to.

“Once a Bond is decided upon and all agreements signed, both Vulcans wait until they are adults and one of them - there is -” Outsiders do not know if it. It is taboo to speak of it, and Spock has look away from Jim’s face. “A Time comes when it is time to consummate that Bond. Ku’nat’kali’fee.”

The human nods slowly, as if in thought rather than as a conscious action. "I think I get it. Love doesn’t really enter the equation.”

“It is assumed that both parties will reach a comprehension and affection for one another. We are not unfeeling.”
We feel. We feel, most deeply, most savagely, most violently -

“I didn’t suggest that. It just sounds very traditional to me, parents deciding stuff for you.”

“Perhaps, but it is our way. Of course, it does no longer apply to me in that sense, since I am no longer seven years old. And there have been instances of *si-kun-utik* … extramarital affairs, although that is rare. Remarriages have occurred if a Vulcan’s Bonded dies. That is what happened when my father married by mother.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“Few do,” Spock says. “We are a private people. You realize, Jim, that I am telling you much more now that most outsiders will know of Vulcans in a lifetime?”

“Yes. And I’m honoured.”

“And you need to know, in order to understand. Unless a Bonded dies, Vulcan marriages are for life. We do not practice divorce. In fact, if both parties are adults and in agreement, then all that is needed is for a mental link, *tel*, do be made during mindmelding, a brief marriage contract to be written - and this is not obligatory - and two individuals will be considered Bonded in accordance to Vulcan law. Do you understand?”

Jim exhales quietly.

“This is a pretty big deal,” he says at last. “Shit. I - I don’t think I’d realized just how big. For you and me.”

“There is no logical reason for you to have realized until now,” Spock soothes him. “Vulcans do not speak of these things to outsiders, but you must know in order to make a reasonable decision as to how to proceed.”

Neither of them has touched the board in over five minutes.

“If,” Jim murmurs, thoughtfully. “If we do this, then we’d … we’d be married.”

“Essentially, yes.” If by ‘this’ Jim means giving consent to a Bonding. “I understand it is a notable thing for humans, too. And most Vulcans do not fulfill a Bond until they are in their thirties, as we age slower than humans, although in childhood we develop somewhat faster.”

“Oh. Okay. Let’s not rush it, I agree. So, what’s the limit here? I mean, is - is kissing okay?”

“That will be fine. We cannot display too much affection in public. I … I have not yet informed my parents of this decision. I cannot assure that they will agree on this matter.”

Perhaps his mother will; yes, she’ll understand. She is human, and she married Sarek, not wholly for logical reasons, Spock is certain now. But his father? Will he comprehend? Jim is not a very logical, rational human being. He is emotional, can even be volatile. He is not like Amanda Grayson at all. He does not hold a notable profession or position yet, and Spock is aware he is of the House of Surak. The Council may disagree.

Jim is surprised. “Could they really stop us?”

“Yes, at least if we choose to Bond openly.”

“You mean we could elope? Wow. Shit. I, I hadn’t - shit. Sorry, it’s just a lot to take in.” Jim
hesitates for a moment, looking at him, the flicker of a frown shadowing his face. “Could you get in trouble for this?”

“I believe your definition of ‘trouble’ is different from my own; I am already in trouble, as you put it, from choosing Starfleet over the Vulcan Science Academy. If I were fully Vulcan, perhaps reactions would be different. There was some dissent when my father and my mother married. As I am already half-human, the reactions will be less severe if I reveal that I prefer a human t’hy’la.”

“What’s that mean? that word?”

“It is difficult to translate. It is someone who is in your mind without departing, a companion for the rest of one’s life.” Parted and never parted;

Jim wets his lips, trying the word out, tasting it. Something in Spock’s side contracts and swells all at once, and emotion he cannot name makes his body temperature suddenly feel warmer around his core. “T’hy’la. I like it. Kind of like soulmates, I guess.”

It is a beautiful word, to imply two katra being closely wound together not wanting to let go.

“Is that what we’d be?”

Perhaps they already are. “Yes.”

“Would it help if I said that I’m kinda terrified when all this starts sinking in?” Jim says, somewhat helplessly. He moves a chess piece more or less at random.

“It is only logical to be honest in this matter,” Spock says. “I am also … This is new to me too, Jim.” To contemplate theories is one thing. To actually act on them something else. “I agree that we should take this slowly. There is time. To rush into something we are not ready for is illogical.”

“Yeah,” Jim agrees, sighing, relieved. “I guess we’ve both gotta get used to it. It’s not just like having a boyfriend.”

“I am not certain I can make an assessment of the truth of that,” Spock comments, "since I have never before had a boyfriend.”

Moving a bishop, he takes Jim’s queen. Immediately the human’s alertness is directed toward the board. Spock does not smirk, but there is a certain amount of smugness in his eyes.

“Checkmate.”

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Bridge · USS Constellation
Stardate 2257.19

The Bridge is alight and busy. The screens are full of data, which is rapidly processed, and decided upon. Each detail carefully thought out. The Captain orders the opening of fire upon the enemy ships; it is of little use. The enemy’s shields are too strong. They are firing torpedoes. Venting atmosphere. Deck twelve. Sealed off. An alarm is blaring, flashing red, behind them, around them, all around them. The Captain is calm, never losing his composure, never faltering. Each decision is exact and logical.

This is a scenario which cannot be overcome other than by dying. There is no logical way to beat it, nor is anyone expected to. He follows the logical path.
He orders the crew to evacuate. He remains in the Captain’s chair, which is expected of him. He will comment the crew for their actions. He is aware that, according to the laws of the simulation, the shuttles will be overpowered before he can react to it, before Starfleet can be warned, before anything. He will not be able to save the crew or himself or the ship.

He does not falter from the logical path, and he does not allow his breathing to quicken or heartrate to harden in a sudden surge of adrenaline. He is alone.

*Kaiidth.*

The world explodes.

Spock fails the Kobayashi Maru.

Admiral Barnett, overseeing the test, commends him for his actions. He did his duty well. They had not been certain if he would take this test, since he is not aiming toward captaincy, though he has added several Command Track courses to his curriculum. Their praise is warmer than any praise from the Vulcan Science Academy could ever, would ever, be.

Jim had volunteered to be part of his testing crew, as well as Leonard, Nyota, and Chekov. Afterward, as Spock struggles to control his body and calm his breaths and not panic, Jim and Bones are with him. The Doctor runs a tricorder over him, as if predicting how close to slipping over the edge he truly is.

“Blood pressure eighty over forty; heartrate two-hundred and ninety beats per minute … That’s fast even for a Vulcan, Spock. Your body temperature is a little high. ’Bout point four degrees. I can fix a hypo.”

“That is not necessary.”

“Okay, well, if you change your mind …” The human waves the tricorder in a vague pattern.

Perhaps, when Jim took the *Koabayashi Maru*, he had panicked. Responded in a human way: a rush of adrenaline; the urge to survive.

“It’s just not fair,” Jim mutters. The human has already taken the test once before. They are sitting in the cafeteria, the day after. Spock thinks he has recovered. His hands are steady, and his voice too. If he eats less than usual, Jim either does not notice or does not comment on the fact. “I mean, what’s the *point*?”

“It is stated within the parameters of the test,” Spock says, mildly. “It is to face and overcome fear.” He is Vulcan. There is no need for such a test. And yet - it proves. It proves that he is Vulcan, and that, although he has chosen this path, although he has chosen Jim, he has not forgotten *kahs’wan*.

“Still think it’s a rotten test. It should be winnable!”

“Not all things are, Jim.”

“Well, I don’t believe in no-win scenarios.”

Two weeks later, Jim takes the Kobayashi Maru for a second time. The human fails it, of course.
Spock cannot understand - but he can; he can. Jim is human and stubborn and has such a bright bright will, urging him to be and survive and exist. The simulation takes nothing of this into account. He has heard that some cadets have refused to take it. Others have begun crying in distress when realizing its futility. Spock did none of this things. Neither did Jim. No other cadet has attempted it twice - it is illogical.

But Jim is like a flame, refusing to be quenched, by wind or water or the raging torrent of a storm.

The human is not unlike himself. Spock does have a vague memory of being a child, and his father berating him and punishing him for once again sneaking out in the night and wandering the mountains. You have a proud core that will not yield, Sarek had said.

A human quality.

______________________________

To: Amanda Grayson (amgrayson001@vn.a)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2257.38
Subject: re: re: Social relationships & companionship [Translated to Standard Federation English from Modern Golic Vulcan]

Dear Mother,

There is an important matter which I must inform you about. I have entered a relationship with the human Jim. I am aware these news may be unexpected. Jim and I have spoken at length about how a relationship of ours would function, as we come from two different cultures. I have explained to him about Bonding. Jim has not been deterred by this, although I sense some anxiousness in him about this matter, due to the rarity of human relationships lasting a lifetime in the manner of Vulcans’. I wanted to tell you, mother, and ask for advice on both our behalf.

When you and father married, how did you proceed? You are human, and so is Jim. There are some things we cannot properly communicate yet.

From a human viewpoint, our relationship is not at a turning point yet, according to Jim. We have not mindmelded nor been intimate. The latter is a subject which I have not yet breached with him. Jim and I have agreed to take things slowly, and not rush into something unfortunate. However, I have begun to realize that

He pauses. Hesitates. Is there a word for this emotion?

I am ready to meld with Jim. I do not wish to cause him harm or distress. I do not wish to miscommunicate with him.

I ask you not to inform father yet. Please advise.

Live long and prosper,

Spock

______________________________

Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2257.39
He steps out of the rising steam, turning the spray off. The morning is still early, but he has booked an hour in Lab 9 before the first seminar. Briefly toweling his hair, he quickly dresses in the black thermo-insulated underwear which he always wears under his reds; albeit his room’s temperature is higher than the average dorm’s, it feels quite chilly to step out of the water shower, especially in the morning. Starting to gather his notebooks which he will need for the experiments, Spock considers how to break the fast. There is still some ploumeek left in the fridge, enough for at least one potion of shur. Yes, that would be …

There is something off. A smell. Yes, he can feel it now. He turns toward the vent in the upper left corner by the door, and the smell is stronger here. It is almost like - smoke. Smoke; not of wood burning, but of broken plastic, and scorched fabrics. It’s coming from the corridor.

A siren goes off. He stiffens, startled, and for a moment he does not hear the alarm but the noise of an explosion and the voices silencing -

No, this is not the Theater. That is over - there are no phasers firing.

This sound is different. Taking a deep breath, he focuses. It is very loud, sharp. Wailing. It is difficult to be aware of anything else.

Then it registers: fire alarm. This has not happened before, though he has read the drill instructions. In case of an emergency, all cadets will assemble on the parking lot outside of building A-02, and await further instructions. Spock drops the notebooks. On instinct - no time to think about it; the noise is gaining in strength, so loud he must cover his sensitive ears - he grabs the communicator from where it is lying on the bedside table. Then he opens the door.

There is smoke: it is not a drill.

Other students are now awake. One or two are in their reds; they must not have gone to sleep last night, studying or doing something else which he has by now learned which humans are prone to. Most are just as unprepared as he, clad in pyjamas, hair tousled. Some of them try to speak, but the alarm is too loud. A cadet tries to take the elevator, but the building’s computer will not let it engage. The stairs are cramped with people.

He does not hear it, but feels the vibration of the communicator.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

wtf u hear that?? dont deserve this fkn wakeup call

Jim and Leonard’s dormitory is in the building next door. The alarm system is tied to the whole campus; it is doubtful there is more than one source of the fire, though, unless it was planted, which is illogical. Spock cannot answer the message right away.

They reach the doors. It is still dark outside; the sun has not risen.

It’s cold. He had not taken either socks or shoes. That was a mistake. There is no snow, nor is it raining, but there is a wind creeping over the city and it carries with it an unforgiving cold. Out here, the alarm is somewhat dimmed, echoing between the walls of the buildings. The cadets gather in groups, walking toward the checkpoint where soon a teacher or officer will appear to call out names and make certain no one is left inside. He can finally lower his hands from his ears.

Spock (0934-5294-42)

Yes Jim. There is smoke in the corridor outside of my dorm. I am outside now. Where are you?
To his right, he can pick up some recognizable voices, and he heads toward them. Nyota, Gaila, a
cadet he recognizes as Janice Lester, and Chekov are standing under a lamppost on the edge of the
parking lot, huddled together. It seems he is not the only one who is cold, and did not have the time
to grab a jacket. Though the humans are wearing shoes.

“… can’t believe it,” Nyota is muttering on her breath. “Oh, hey, Spock.”

“I bet it’s Gary again,” says Gaila.

“How would Cadet Mitchell be responsible?” asks Spock.

“’Cause he does stuff like that,” answers the Orion. “Fucks things up for the rest of us. Probably took
a smoke in his dorm or something.”

“It could be a false alarm,” Chekov points out. He does not live in the same dormitory, and the
human seems the least bothered by the cold of them all.

Spock shakes his head. “That is incorrect. I smelled smoke. It seemed to originate from the third floor
of B-30.”

Gaila is horrified. “Ah, fuck. My wardrobe!”

Also the other cadets are concerned; Nyota for her PADD and new communicator left up there, and
Janice Lester for a science project of some sort which she had apparently been conducting in her
dorm in her spare time, all of her notes.

Briefly, yet too long to be an entirely Vulcan thought, Spock thinks about his books and his lyre, and
the sweaters his mother has knitted for him. Then he forcibly dismissed it. To become emotionally
attached to material things is illogical. Items can be replaced. Lives cannot.

Eventually, they both hear and see a number of firetrucks approaching. There is also an officer
walking around, taking note on a PADD of every cadet present.

Where are Jim and Leonard? They should be here now. Hugging his arms around himself and
suppressing a shiver, Spock scans the area. There are so many cadets, and the light is dim - though
the latter is little problem with him thanks his eyesight which is enhanced compared to a human’s.
There is no order, no lines, no queues. Everyone is huddled together and chattering and moving. He
cannot see Jim’s blonde hair or hear Leonard’s grumbling voice. Where are they?

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

> What is your location? I am standing with Nyota under
> the third lamppost from the west.

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

> Have you left the building yet?

Nyota is pacing, waving her arms to keep blood circulation going and therefore her temperature
raised. Janice Lester and Gaila are speaking in low voices, sometimes looking up or pointing in
various direction. Discussing who started this, no doubt, and glancing at possible suspects in the
crowd around them.

“Ugh, if this is Gary’s fault I’m gonna …” the threat trails off. Nyota had ceased pacing, suddenly.
She is turned toward building B-30 and B-31. Spock follows her gaze.

There is fire. The colour glimmering toward the sky is unmistakable. It is crawling along the far wall of the third floor of B-31, and the wind is carrying it over to the neighboring structure: the source of the smoke. He had been in error: the source of the fire came not from his dormitory but from - Jim, Leonard. They live on that floor. There is too much noise to hear its roar clearly, but if he focuses his senses, Spock thinks that that - yes, that is the sound of a blaze. The smell is sharper now. Other cadets are noticing, turning around, staring. Some, armed with PADDs, are filming it. The firetrucks have parked now and various humans in fireproof garments exiting the vehicles, unloading gear, pulling out hoses. A craft circles the air above, shining a white spotlight on the immediate area.

“Oh my god,” someone shouts. “Look!”

Someone is trapped on the fourth floor of B-31. The window is closed - jammed shut perhaps - Spock can see two silhouettes there, struggling behind it. There is a thick layer of smoke.

Officers and firefighters push the crowd of students back. He picks of words, at random: an order to get a ship here, a transporter unit. Yes, they need to transport them out of there right now -

Jim has not yet answered his message.

The conclusion to make is logical, and something in his lower quadrant turns cold and painful at the same time. His feet are like carved from ice, but he no longer feels it.

“… got it! I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

It is Cadet Montgomery Scott, elbowing his way forward. He is carrying a bag slung over a shoulder, bulky and heavy. The human nearly crashes into a straight-backed Starfleet officer in grey, who reacts by attempting to stop the cadet from crossing the line of firemen creating a circle around the two buildings.

“What’s this, cadet? Step back, let us handle -”

“It’s a thing I’ve been working on in me spare time, adjusting - ack, nevermind the details!” Scott exclaims, putting the bag down, and unzipping it. There is a square object there. “It’s a portable beaming device -”

“We’ve got no time for nonsense,” says the officer, a weathered male human Spock recognizes to be Admiral Barnett.

Scott does not listen, but activates the computer of the device, and a screen lights up. Spock finds himself drawn forward, and as he moves, Nyota follows. The Vulcan reaches the human in eight point three seconds.

“Do you require assistance?”

“Hang on, I’ve got it,” the human says, not looking up. “Aha! Three lifesigns inside there. See? Now let’s just …”

“There’s not even a beaming pad!” says the Admiral. “This is ridiculous. We’ve got a ship with a transporter on its way, and ladders -”

“Ladders? Twenty-first century nonsense. This is much safer,” says Scott, makes a final check of his equipment, and presses a button. “Step back now, please. Energizing.”
The figures by the window are taken by white light. A swirling glow appears on the grass below, and people are backing off, clearing the area. Then, three humans materialize, one shortly after the other. There is soot on their faces and in their hair.

Leonard stumbles. “What the -what-”

The human does not like transporters; he has complained both about that and space itself multiple times (and Spock has argued with the human about the logic of applying to Starfleet when one suffers from astrophobia). Next to him is Jim, and they’ve got a third cadet, half-unconscious, slung between them, and Spock can only conclude that the two must have tried to help the cadet, and in doing so been trapped.

“Told ya,” Scotty grins, and pats his machine if it were a faithful sehlat.

“Did we just get plucked apart atom by atom by that thing?!” cries Leonard, glaring at Scott. “Ugh, I don’t feel right. Like my innards have been through a grinder.”

“A simple ‘thank you’ works too.”

Spock cannot speak for a moment. He catches Jim’s gaze. He cannot see any direct injuries or burns -

The human coughs. A medic is upon them. Right before they are shuffled into an ambulance, though, Jim looks at Spock and then at Spock’s bare feet. The human blinks owlishly.

“Spock, why aren’t you wearing any shoes?”

They are not allowed back in their dorms for the rest of that night. Instead, the gymnastics hall as well as two lecture halls are quickly arranged with blankets and pillows. Spock cannot sleep, nor does he want to. But they are not allowed to roam free without permission.

Many others are unable to sleep, too. Janice Lester, Nyota, and several others settle in the middle of the gym floor to play cards - someone managed to get hold of a deck - and he is urged to join. He declines. He has not heard anything more from Jim, who along with Leonard and the third cadet have been taken to the medical wing. They inhaled quite a lot of smoke.

Cadet Scott is curled up in a sleeping bag, fiddling with a PADD, when Spock approaches him; not the only cadet to be on his feet. Some students are out like lights on the floor; most are not. A replicator has been set up in the far end of the room and a queue has formed toward it. There is a rising and falling lull of conversation.

“When did you construct your beaming device?”

The human sounds pleased at the question, eager to answer it, and could perhaps enter a long technical harangue of details if properly motivated. “Oh, that’s simple. I’m actually working on a transwarp beaming device. This is just the starting prototype.”

“The science to make that possible is not yet discovered,” Spock points out.

“I’m aiming for a Nobel,” Scott grins.

“Ah, the prestigious human prize.” Spock regards him for a moment. “Thank you for beaming them out, Cadet Scott.”
Scott scratches his neck. “Couldn’t just sit there on my arse, could I? And it’s just Scotty.”

“Very well.”

“Spock, right? Remember you from that party, and there’s not a lot of Vulcans ‘round here.”

“That is correct.”

“You any good at physics?”

The human’s definition of ‘good’ probably differs from his own. “My skills are adequate.”

“You wouldn’t mind having a look at my equation, then?”

Next day, they are allowed back in their dorms - at least the cadets who had housed in building B-30. The other one is damaged, and uninhabitable. This is a problem. One hundred and six cadets are suddenly without housing. This is solved by making a deal with a hotel in town not far from campus while repairs are undergoing. Some cadets also offer their own rooms for a friend or more.

Spock finds himself doing this. He seeks out Jim in medical wing. The nurses let him inside; he is a respectable student, and will not cause trouble. He finds Jim and Bones in the same room, the latter noisily complaining that he is a Doctor and therefore doesn’t need one. Neither of them is seriously hurt. Spock is relieved. There is a bruise growing on Jim’s chest. A piece of falling ceiling. He had rescued a Cadet Tyler, and Leonard had attempted to rescue Jim, and if not for the swift actions of Cadet Scott it is possible none of them would be here.

Spock does not want to think about it.

His offer is met with grumbling thankfulness from Leonard and a careful brush of hands from Jim. He moves into the touch. It allows him the certainty to know, to know that Jim is here and alive.

Of course, there is the issue that he is Vulcan, and they are not. He asks the computer to adjust the temperature of the room by lowering it five degrees. After speaking with Mrs Coleridge to arrange things, extra mattresses and blankets are procured.

Jim mourns the loss of his room and his PADD. “I had half an essay on that thing!”

“Did you make a back-up copy on the network?”

“Yeah, well, but only like three days ago.”

Spock unlocks the room. He will change it from primarily using his fingerprint to a PIN to lock it, so that Jim and Leonard can access the room - they need much more sleep than he.

Leonard examines his room. He has not been in here since the incident with the Andorians. Since then, the lightning fixtures and carpet have been replaced. There is no sign of old trauma or blood. The Doctor looks at the bookshelf, the orderly desk. Spock has rolled up his meditation mat to make room for a mattress there. He can meditate in bed if need be.

“Is that a lyre?” Jim points. “Cool.”

He is glad to see that it is undamaged. He has possessed that instrument since he was twelve years old. “Affirmative.”

Jim plucks a couple of strings. “You never said you played.”
“I was not asked.”

In the background, Leonard rolls his eyes. “Have you got a replicator?”

“Only a basic model, by that shelf.”

“Does it do coffee?”

“I am not certain, as I have not attempted it,” Spock says. “I would not recommend its tea.”

“Great, they suck over here too,” the Doctor concludes grumpily. “Great. I had my perfect blend over there. I guess it’s all smoked-in now and water-damaged. I’m gonna go get something to eat. You coming, Jim?”

“Nah, gimme a sec.”

Leonard leaves.

“Y’know,” Jim remarks, looking at the closing door, “with Bones here, this could get hella awkward.”

“Vulcans do not experience awkwardness.”

“Yeah, well, I do. Though it’d be kinda fun to see his expression if we suddenly made out in front of him.”

Spock frowns; at least what he would constitute as a frown, not moving many of his facial muscles. “I cannot see how that would be ‘fun’.”

Humans breathe very loudly. They snore. This, Spock had not taken into account when he made his offer. He shifts, again, on the bed. He cannot focus enough to meditate, and there is too much noise for him to fall asleep.

Someone is grunting. No, it is more of a moan. It comes from his left. The corner where Jim is curled up on a mattress. Spock glances at him. The human is lying on his side, and he is frowning deeply. He is murmuring something.

Jim has never told him that he dreams. Of course, all humans do, so it might just be one of those details which is not relevant to mention.

It does not seem to be a pleasant dream. Occasionally, Jim’s hand twitches, or a foot. Spock does not want to listen in. This is not his dream, and he has few good experiences with them. Last time -

“No … no …”

“Jim,” he says, softly. The human doesn’t react. He is caught. Slowly, Spock moves into a sitting position and throws the covers aside. “Jim, you are dreaming.”

The words are mushed up, strange. But he can pick up the words burning and fire and hurts it hurts and he reaches out a hand, meaning to stir Jim into wakefulness by touching his shoulder. He does not reach him. Jim is gasping. Then, suddenly, sharply, the human is screaming. He is thrashing, violently. There are tears staining his cheeks: in the dim darkness, Spock can see them, but a human might not. The coldness the sight causes him is difficult to explain and terrifying and extremely emotional. What could Jim be experiencing? Has this happened before?
It causes Leonard to wake up. And unlike Spock, who is at loss at what to do, the Doctor reacts as if this - this has happened before. The human kneels next to him. “Jim, wake up. Wake up. Computer, lights at ten percent.”

The soft light is overwhelmingly bright, and Spock blinks. The human’s breath is calming, Leonard is administering a hypospray.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s just a sedative. Calms his heart down,” Leonard mutters. “Fuck, should’ve realized …”

“I do not understand. Does Jim often have nightmares?”

“Hasn’t told you, huh?” Spock shakes his head negative. “Course not; he’s too stubborn. I think - it’s not my place to tell, Spock, but Jim’s been through a lot more shit than most people realize.”

“He does not like to talk about his past. I have noted that he has a tendency to tell lies and half-truths about it,” Spock says. Whenever his time before the Academy has come up, Jim’s words have been unreliable at best, and often each tale embellished with ridiculous details. But his eyes had been burning with something cold, and Spock had not asked further because he has seen the same coldness in the mirror. “Will he be all right?”

“Yeah. He’ll come too soon.”

They wait. The Doctor does into go back to bed, and neither does Spock. He looks at Jim’s face as it slowly relaxes. He wants to wipe away those tears. After a few minutes, at Leonard’s coaxing, Jim stirs and opens his eyes.

“… huh?”

“Sorry, Jim,” Leonard says, the tone of voice hard to determine. It strikes Spock that Leonard is genuinely worried, deeply so, with the affections of a friend; not merely the concerns of a medic.

“Oh. Ugh. Feel like shit.”

“It’ll wear off.”

Jim glances at the Vulcan. “Did I -?”

Leonard shakes his head. “No, but you were screaming bloody murder.”

With a shaky exhale, Jim nods. “Okay. Okay. I - I guess it was the fire that set it off.”

“That bad?”

“Yeah.”

The conversation holds a secret which he is not part of. And it makes him ill at ease. Even … even frightened, for Jim’s sake. “Are you all right?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I dunno if Vulcans have nightmares, but …”

“I have experienced them, yes.” The admission causes Jim to frown and Leonard to pause for a moment. Then the Doctor stands and goes to fetch something. Perhaps another hypospray. “I have read that humans gain comfort from speaking about their experiences.”
“I’m not sure I can talk ’bout this one, Spock. It’s pretty bad,” Jim says, quietly. He sounds unlike himself. Spock wants to embrace him.

“I understand. If you change your mind, I will listen."

“Thanks.”

When Leonard returns, it is not with a hypospray, but a glass of water. Jim takes it without speaking and drinks. “You can stop hovering, Bones. I’m fine. Seriously.”

“Okay. Well, tell that to your boyfriend.”

Spock’s heart stutters, illogically, irrationally. Jim nearly drops the glass.

In contrast, remaining calm, Leonard rolls his eyes. “You’re not very subtle, Jim. For fuck’s sake, I’m pretty sure half of campus knows.”

“Oh,” says Jim after a pause. “Right.”

“Will this be a problem, Jim?” Spock asks.

“Not for me. I’m more kinda worried ’bout you. I mean, your parents don’t know, and Vulcans are traditional, and -”

“I have informed my mother, though I have not yet received a reply.”

“Yeah?”

“I … uh, guess I should leave you to it,” Leonard says very awkwardly, clearing his throat. “I - I’ll get something to eat. And, uh, Jim - don’t do nothin’ anywhere I’m gonna be,” The human leaves for the common room despite it being in the middle of the night; or perhaps he will seek companionship elsewhere. The door swishes closed. Spock had not meant for the Doctor to feel unwelcome; the human needs his sleep. He will have to apologize later.

“You were saying … your mom. Knows about us?” Jim makes a vague gesture with his hand. He has put down the glass now.

“I emailed her the day before yesterday and asked for advice. I also asked her not to tell my father, as he could either demand that we cease socializing, or will want to see us properly Bonded shortly. I have not yet received a response.”

“Ah. Okay …” Jim bites his bottom lip. It is quite distracting. “Advice?”

“On how to proceed. I …” He moves, and comes to sit on the floor in front of Jim. “I would like to mindmeld with you, Jim. I will not form a Bond without permission. I would merely … I would like to feel your mind to mine.”

I want to know. I need to know -

All those selfish reasons.

“Not immediately,” he adds. “Only if you are ready and giving consent.”

And Jim smiles, as if this is an easy decision to make. “Okay. Let’s.”

“It can be an overwhelming experience. You have no training, and you are currently in emotional
distress,” Spock warns him seriously.

“Can’t get any worse,” Jim says, quirking an eyebrow. “I’ve been thinking about it too, Spock. Since we talked. I mean, I have no experience, obviously, with anything telepathic like that. Sounds pretty cool. I’ve always been curious how it works.”

“I do not want to cause you pain.”

“You won’t. I know you won’t.” And Jim offers a hand, palm open and unprotected, so human and fragile and the skin so painfully easily breakable. “A meld works by touching the face, right?”

He cannot keep his pulse from rising in anticipation.

He raises a hand, and gently touches the nerve points of Jim’s face. The human blinks, but does not flinch back.

“Na’h, hif-bi tu throks.”

*your mind to my mind:*

---

Jim. Do you feel me?

*hesitant: awed: Yes, yes yes it feels like light;*

What do I do?

I will share a memory with you, Spock whispers, if you let me.

*A suggestion: the sun rising over Shi’kahr, as he saw if from his bedroom window. he would sit up late at night to study, and sometimes study the stars, and he has seen hundreds and hundreds of sunrises and the coulours are fascinating. Earth’s sunrises are different.*

It’s beautiful, Jim gasps, always wanted to see Vulcan. can - how do I -?

Focus.

*the sunrise is replaced with the wind in his hair and oh oh the roaring wind, he’s in the seat of an old car and Jim is just a child and he wants to be free and he’s shouting, and he’s not going to go back there, he’s going to leave. you have your father’s eyes someone mentions when he is three and five and eleven and when he’s thirteen he scrapes up the money for corrective surgery so that he can stop having them and they turn icy blue like storms over water when the wind is still. mom, mom don’t cry, please, he begs her when she screams and says that he is the last thing of George she has and now that is gone too and she is torn away by duty, I am a Commander of Starfleet, she struggles to be both, and she somehow stops being his mother. the man is broad-handed and rough but tries but Jim is too fucking angry too fucking angry to let him try and it sweeps by and he destroys the car feeling the wind the whoosh of air and he left Earth three months later because Sam had run away and without Sam without his brother he is alone* 

Jim. Breathe.

*everything is so much so raw and sharp and vividly emotional*

This is what you see? Jim wonders. I didn’t even know I still remembered -
remembered. the scent of coffee in the kitchen and firewood crackling they’d gone out camping when he was seven looking at the stars and listening to the records he’d pilfered and you look just like your father and he hasn’t seen his mother for five months she doesn’t care anymore and he leaves Earth there’s a place she’s dumped him on a colony out nowhere TARSUS TARSUS TARSUS the dark mad eyes of the executioner the burning the burning fire hunger he circles around the kids can’t let them die

Spock removes his hand. "I am sorry. I did not mean to reach this deeply."

Jim breathes, shudderingly. For several moments, the human cannot speak.

Tarsus IV. He did not know that … had never known that … Jim.

“S’ti th’ laktra,” he whispers. Jim doesn’t ask for a translation.

He grabs Spock’s wrist. “No, don’t stop,” he croaks.

“Jim,” he says. “You are crying. I cannot continue putting you in distress.”

“I didn’t even know I remembered,” the human repeats the sentence. “I … How’d you do that?”

“You showed me. I did not have direction. There is a part of your mind which still remembers, but maybe you have attempted to suppress those memories. Jim …”

“Please, Spock. Your mind. It’s. It’s soothing. It’s so quiet. Felt kinda like liquid light.”

No. No, it is not quiet. “I was shielding it,” he explains. Finds his voice lowered. Gently. “What you felt was a barrier so that I do not overwhelm you. I was going to lower it, but when I sensed the vividness of your emotions … I do not want to hurt you.”

“Then show me.”

“Jim.”

The human guides his hand back to his face, trying to place his fingertips at the meldpoints, clumsily.

“I’m a kinda fucked up human being,” the human whispers, looking him in the eye. “You know that now. Please, Spock. I’m trusting you with all this. Can - can you trust me back?”

Jim, he thinks, and wants to weep for him, as he has not done for years and years and years.

Tarsus IV. Why has he not said …?

He adjusts his hand, and relaxes.

in the chaos there is a little boy and he is gathering survivors. he’s trying to. they’re hungry and alone. the adults taken away taken dead and they are too exhausted to cry. he is oldest of them and he wants to get them out of here. there should be food but there’s none and the Federation isn’t reacting, it should be, but no ships are coming, no one will take them home, but Jim will not die here, he will not die here. the fires burn and they are nine, they are nine witnesses to the end of it all and they are broken and none of them cry for their parents because their parents are dead and Jim stops remembering for a long time after that. his mother lets him run free and he steals and hides
and cheats his way through life, and he lies, he lies to everyone and he is ready to blow it all away and he is not his father, he is not his father, he insists when Pike approaches: your father saved eight hundred lives - can you do better?

**You are your own person, Jim**, Spock tries to soothe, and he lowers a little of his own shields now, in return. Jim’s emotions are forceful and bare and unprotected. His facade is deep, but not that deep.

**Can you show me …?** Jim whispers: **show me?**

There is so much he could show: the Forge the burn of the Vulcan sun the coldness of the Mind Healers; there is so much, too much. He can keep his mind more orderly than Jim. Slow it all down. But it is still difficult. He must enter a part of himself he does not like to visit. He finds a memory, a thread. He guides Jim to it.

No mind meld has ever been like this.

*The failed attempt: T’Pring’s cold rejection* we are not to be and you are too human, she accuses him and he does not want to be, he wants to be whole.

*The burning Forge: In the falling darkness he cradles I-Chaya’s head* don’t go, don’t go, he whispers. It’s difficult to breathe. He has not felt the same reaction since, since;

*Surrounded: “Spock,” Stonn says, as he exits his educational bowl, and Spock answers coolly in control in control unafraid - he is smaller than his peers, due to his human genetic heritage - “I presume you have prepared new insults for today.” - and he knows, knows now how illogical and emotionally unrestrained the other Vulcan children were their cruelty their ignorance their burning hatred - out of control; but they are fully Vulcan, and he is not, he is not enough, and the older Vulcans do not see, do not want to see, do not care (unemotional) - and Spock is old enough now to know that the statement Vulcans do not lie is a lie in of itself.*

*Surrounded: “You are neither human nor Vulcan and therefore have no place in this universe,” Seval proclaims, no place, no place, not enough, and Spock wants to silence them all he wants to silence them all - “Look at his human eyes,” Stonn says: “they are expressing sadness.” human too human “Your father is a traitor for marrying her.” (stopped grieving left his dead Bonded behind choose a human, a human of all beings) “That human whore -”*

*And all Spock sees is white.*

*The coldness of the desert: there is blood on his hands, and on his face, and the remnants of tears in his eyes and he forces them away. it is human and he does not want to be human, he wants to be Vulcan, he wants to be whole. he wants to be whole. he wants to be whole. he wants to be whole. he wants to // Dust rises, the wind in the Forge relentless and scorching, and I-Chaya is gone and the sun is rising setting rising endlessly a circle, complete; // be whole:*

*His father, so calmly, so calmly: “Emotions run deep within our race; more deeply than in humans. Logic offers a serenity humans seldom experience: the control of feelings so they do not control you,” his father tells him later, as Spock sat ashamed while Stonn and the others walked away unpunished for it was he, not the other children, who threw the first punch, and it was he who broke Stonn’s arm in white white rage, and it was he - It is a lie. it is a lie. i t i s a l i e

*His mother, so warmly, so warmly: “Mother, may I ask a personal query?” “Anything.” I will always love you regardless, a stray thought; and it is the truth. Perhaps his mother is the only true thing in this universe.*
“Should I choose to complete kolinahr and purge all emotion, I trust you will not feel it reflects judgment upon you.”

“Spock, ashal-veh,” she says and he knows she wants to embrace him, wants him to be that child again. “Whoever you choose to be, you will always have a proud mother.”

She has taken him with her to Earth four times, and each time, there had been a growing sense, an echo: perhaps it would be better to stay here, away from Vulcan, though she had not voices the doubts he had felt in the edges of her mind and she would not, out of loyalty and duty and - love - love toward Sarek. She wants her son no harm. she wants him to be whole. she would read him Alice in Wonderland. she. she

Perhaps he should not have been. existed. breathed

he should have disappeared in the Forge after the failure after I-Chaya died

Spock, Jim whispers, horrified and pitiful and warm.

The Council of the Academy, so coldly, so coldly: “You have surpassed the expectations of your instructors. Your final record is flawless, with one exception: I see that you have applied to Starfleet as well.”

“It was logical to cultivate multiple options.”

their stern coldness their simpleminded haughtiness: “Logical but unnecessary. You’re hereby accepted to the Vulcan Science Academy. It is truly remarkable, Spock, that you have achieved so much, despite your disadvantage.”

“If you would clarify, Minister, to what disadvantage are you referring?”

“Your Human mother.” your mother human your father traitor your mother inferior

It is all right, Jim.

there are variations of fine. “Council, Ministers, I must decline.”

“No Vulcan has ever declined admission to this Academy.”

Then, as I am half-human, your record remains untarnished.”

and his father unknowing not comprehending illogical: “Spock, you have made a commitment to honour the Vulcan way.” it is what he was told to do and raised to believe, and he had little other choice, he had little other choice. a child cannot easily turn away from the wishes of its parents.

I chose Earth, and I am glad for it now.

the Vulcan way is a lie a lie a lie. All Vulcans feel, most violently, most deeply, most savagely, and it almost destroyed us all, we nearly destroyed ourselves and now we have begun forgetting. “Why did you come before this council today? Was it to satisfy your emotional need to rebel?” rebel emotional being pushed away back inferior, it is the same thing, a circle, like the rising falling rising of the sun: his peers, his father, the council, they all think the same, he is Not Enough. on Earth it was the same when he arrived that pointy-eared freak whispered behind his back - suddenly not human enough, not human enough

“The only emotion I wish to convey is gratitude. Thank you, Ministers, for your consideration. Dif- tor heh smusma.”

He withdraws.

“Jim?”
The human’s eyes are closed. Suddenly they open. They are wet with unshed tears.

“I apologize for the intensity of the meld. I am out of practice.” Dangerous. It could have ended badly. And yet. “Are you all right?”

It takes several minutes for him to speak. When he does, Jim’s voice is hoarse. “Y’know … we’re both, like, total wrecks.”

“Maybe we are,” Spock agrees. He looks at Jim’s face, and then at his hands. No mindmeld he has ever performed before has gone this deeply, been so emotional. His mother’s mind is vivid and warm but controlled after years and years of patient practice under his father’s guidance. And I-Chaya was dying and could not speak and only feel, feel, feel. T’Pring’s mind was detached, shut off, and would not let him in. But Jim’s mind an embrace.

Earth’s sun is beginning to rise.
...and unquestionably,” says one of the council members, “it is a matter of great importance.”

It’s been a long and trying day, but some days are just like that. She’d like to take a long, hot bath, but water is to be stored and saved and preserved by all possible means. A sonic shower may cleanse the body but it doesn’t really cleanse the soul.

Most days, Amanda doesn’t miss Earth. Not the details or the big picture. But some days, she misses the little things. Small luxuries like being able to take a proper bath or shower in water.

This afternoon, she joins the session in the Council Chamber and truly wishes for a bath. For water. To immerse herself in it. (Maybe she could convince Sarek to go on a trip to the Voroth Sea …)

The High Council deals with all kinds of things. Politics can be messy. Most of the time, it is slow hard work and it takes time for the efforts to visibly have an impact. It is not an art for the hasty. As Sarek is the foremost Ambassador of Vulcan, constantly moving between various worlds both within and outside of the Federation, Amanda has been welcomed into the inner circle. This has taken a long time, though. For her first years on Vulcan, her focus was about learning and adapting to this alien culture; not to get a foot in change things.

And then she had her son. She and Sarek talked so long about it. They discussed pros and cons, very calmly and logically. Her first and only child, and Sarek’s second. Sarek didn’t make a secret of the fact that he had been married before, or that that wife was dead, or that they had a son – though Amanda knows Sarek doesn’t like talking about Sybok. No one likes talking about Sybok. Oh, they had argued back and forth about that, once their son was in the picture; Sarek thought Sybok would have a negative impact. Too emotional. Spock would be too easily influenced. And maybe that had been one of those little things, in the end, that mattered, that made Spock fear his emotions even further because if a full Vulcan could fall down that incline and be punished for it, couldn’t he?
They had fought tooth and nail to have their child, and the decision was huge not just personally.
Amanda realized that, once she understood the implications of Sarek’s position, his House – the
politics - all of that. When she understood, she wanted to change things. No, she needed to. She
acted on that instinct. She learned the necessary rites and languages, she made certain to tie links with
important Vulcan politicians and scientists, and within a few years, she could enter the Council
Chamber by Sarek’s side as an equal - or near enough. Things can still be improved. They can
always be improved.

All of her life she has wanted to believe in the best of people, whether they be human or Vulcan or
even Klingon – all living things are equal in some way, she thought, and have the same rights to be,
to live, to continue. She’s a scientist, but not a cold one, not detached - her passion can be vivid and
disillusioned all at once. And she had realized, pretty early on, that Vulcans are not as unfeeling as
they claim to be. If that was the case, she couldn’t have married Sarek. An explosion of sensation
once every seven years and silence for the rest – that would never have worked; that’s not basis for a
successful, well-functioning relationship. There needs to be balance.

So, yes, she likes to think that she knows a bit about Vulcans, and quite a bit about humans, and she
had wanted Spock to have the best of both worlds. Has always wanted it, ever since they began the
fight to have him. When she’d finally finally held that tiny bundle in her arms for the first time and
felt the little child’s breath’s, she had nearly been overwhelmed, and she was determined that he
would have the best of both worlds.

But it became clear, quickly enough, that Spock would have to choose. And before the child became
old enough to grasp this, before he acquired his languages, before he could comprehend the threads
of others’ minds within his reach, others already made the decisions for him, and there wasn’t much
Amanda could do in the face of that. She was still pretty young, hadn’t much experience yet, and
was still seen as The Human Woman. That strange alien who had married the Ambassador. The
Ambassador’s wife. She was not yet considered a Vulcan citizen even if, on the paper, she shared
their rights.

Neither did Spock.

She hated it. She still hates it. Those first cold years, when she was fighting with motherhood and the
High Council and the Healers and even Sarek, because Sarek sometimes – he let it go too far. Sarek
didn’t intervene when the Mind Healers insisted that Spock needed to be controlled, instead how
merely shown how, taught. And she can still remember holding him, when he was still that little boy,
cradling him and whispering that it was going to be okay and that no one would be in his mind
anymore, no one would do that again. And it happened again, and again, until Spock learned to at
least keep up a façade of control. A shield. Layers and layers of shields.

As time went by, she was forced outside of those shields. Once he had completed the kahs’wan,
Spock refused to be called a child. Insisting. I am Vulcan, he had said, and she wasn’t allowed to
read him stories or hold his hand or embrace him anymore. And a part of her had been ready to weep
and scream at the unfairness of it all. She wasn’t ready to let her boy go.

So when he grew up and rejected the Science Academy and climbed the hills on his own and entered
the Forge before he was allowed to – this spark of rebellion – well, Amanda was pained but not very
surprised. How could she be? She’d been there, she’d seen it all happening, and she’d felt the urge to
rebel now and then too.

Sarek doesn’t quite understand. Oh, he tries. Tries to. As of late, he truly has tried. Sarek is old,
though, and his mind is stern and not as adaptable as it was before, even though it is more easily bent
than most Vulcans’ – he is not an Ambassador for nothing. There are things which are beyond him.
There is no human blood flowing through his veins.

It saddens her, though. It saddens her that instead of being able to reconcile with their son in time, on his own, Sarek needed to be nudged by their son’s kidnapping and hurting.

She’d been in her workshop when she got the urgent communication. It was unexpected; Sarek would always check in now and then, but at this hour, knowing she is working? The assistant who’d answered the call said it was important. And then they had said: *It concerns your son,* and something inside of her had turned to ice. And she had seen the videocall; and those cold Andorian voices and the blood the blood had haunted her dreams for days and days afterward. She hadn’t thought about consequences. She’d thrown herself on a ship, the first one she could find, and she’d barely been able to sleep. When she’d seen her son, finally, finally, at the Spaceport, she had not been able to stop herself from embracing him the human way because she’d needed to know that he still breathed.

Their relationship is better now. At least Sarek and Spock are on speaking terms. But a thing like that shouldn’t have to have been necessary to make it happen. After the attack on the San Francisco Theater, Sarek had kept in contact with his son, albeit impersonally and briefly, but it is a sign: he was worried. He was a lot more worried than Amanda has seen him for years - all since Spock left home in the middle of night to attempt *kahs’wan.* Then Sarek had ordered search parties to go after him. This time, there can be no search parties. Their son is safe on Earth; Amanda wants to believe that.

Oh, she wants to believe that.

The attack has left an echo. It is months ago, but it wasn’t the first nor the last attack by KEHL on Earth. And some people have retaliated. People acting out of fear, out of hatred - the emotions don’t really matter, the Council thinks, but Amanda does. She’s human. She knows the strength of fear for the unknown and what it can make people do.

Three days ago, the United Earth Embassy in Shi’kahr was nearly leveled by a phaser set on overload. Thankfully, the phaser was found in time by a passerby and deactivated.

“The issue remains,” says T’Rama sagely, calmly, from her position at the Head of the table. They are all so calm. She is used to it, by now, but sometimes - rarely - but strongly - it can be draining to keep up with it, because she has to make certain her own arguments are laid out as factually, calmly, coldly. “Evidence shows that this attempt was not a coincidence. Similar incidents have occurred on nine different worlds.”

“It may be so that it is unrelated to the first incident,” counters one of the other council members, Kuvak. He is one of the oldest members of the Council, a remnant of what once was the High Command which was dissolved a century ago - and things had been not so different then, if Amanda recalls her history correctly. Vulcans had tried to limit their influence on Earth, didn’t want to share knowledge and technology; they saw humans as … something not quite good enough. There was the matter of a Romulan conspiracy at the time, as well, seeking to unite the two closely related species after thousands of years of separation. Kuvak had been there to witness history in the making.

“That is illogical. The growing civil unrest is evident on all nine worlds where this has happened. In each case, a major establishment has been attacked, and in five cases also the United Earth Embassy,” Sarek says. “The only embassy, in fact, to be targeted. How would you argue there is no correlation?”

The session today is being attended not only by the Council. One representative from the *V’Shar,* the intelligence agency for Vulcan affairs, is also present. Her face is grave and guarded. "I concede with the Ambassador,” T’Pel says. “New evidence suggests the involvement of *Yeht Whl’q’n.*"
Amanda is tired. Why did she agree to partake in today’s meeting? She could’ve read the news feeds and discussed things with Sarek tonight and been satisfied. Couldn’t she?

People say Vulcans don’t feel anything. Amanda knows that’s a lie. And in recent years, she’s come to understand just how paranoid they are, that they are very much xenophobic even though they pretend not to be. After all, they aided with all the medical needs necessary in the conception of her son. After all, they let Sarek marry an outsider without much issue. After all, they proudly proclaim to be supporters of Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, a cornerstone of their philosophy. After all. It is a well-put together façade.

Earth doesn’t know that Vulcan does have its own counterpart of the Keep Earth Human League, and they want her and other offworlders gone from the planet forever. And seeing the actions on Earth and other planets has plant a spark; it has strengthened their convictions. Some are arguing to leave the Federation. Many Vulcans don’t trust humans or Andorians or anyone else. It’s been repeated in history again and again - the overthrowing of the High Command; the suppression of the Syrranites; the spy outpost on P’Jem - and she doesn’t want it to happen again. In all instances it led to the brink of open warfare. They can’t let it happen again.

“They must be found and their actions accounted for,” says T’Rama.

“Theyir last known movements positioned them on the edge of the Forge, though we look certain coordinates,” answers T’Pel.

“And you also lack numbers and other exact data. We do not even have enough evidence to prove this group of extremists exists,” protests Kuvak, refusing to see. Of course he doesn’t want to see. He is old and, by comparison, quite mild, and wants to see his planet united. His people united.

But Amanda knows her history. She tries to be optimistic, though. For her own sake, and for Spock’s.

“Due respect, Minister, but they do,” T’Pel says. “We have the evidence which you so adamantly claim we do not.”

“This can be proven,” agrees T’Rama. “Or are records of destroyed property, the eyewitness accounts, and their public displays not enough?”

“Present this latest evidence,” Sarek implores.

A datascreen is filled with data and images, and for a moment Amanda imagines the building of the Embassy turned to rubble and smoke, and shivers. It was so close, so close, and she hadn’t known until recently. She’d been at home when it happened, asleep.

She thinks about her son, and wonders what he’s doing. Attending a seminar or lecture, no doubt. What is the time on Earth right now? Early morning? The planet is sixteen lightyears away. The number is so huge and abstract somehow. Despite the connections of subspace communicators and starships that can, if necessary, cross the distance in merely a few hours - it is difficult to grasp, sometimes, that her boy, who is no longer a little boy, is so far away. She’s still not quite used to it.

As Sarek and their son are now on better terms, Sarek is more wont to ask her, from time to time, about him, since Amanda keeps in regular contact with him via videocalls and emails. Usually, there isn’t a lot to tell. Spock is busy with his studies.

Amanda is glad to know he has human friends. Support. That he isn’t alone. The two she’d met – Jim and Bones – had been good to him, and she had noticed a change in him. There is … something
warmer. Something more comfortable, as if Spock is slowly learning that it’s okay to be human, nothing like a sin, and that he is allowed to be who he is without being rejected. She approves of those friends. It makes her happy to know he’s in good hands.

But this – well. It is new.

Some part of her still thinks of him as her little boy, the one she’d read stories to. He isn’t that little boy anymore. And he is making choices for himself, and expressing – happiness. He is finding happiness.

To be honest, she isn’t certain if she can keep it hidden from Sarek. They meld every now and then. They feel each other. He will know if she keeps lying or hiding something, and this concerns her very deeply because Spock is her son, her only child, and she knows this a huge step for him.

She’s read the email twice this morning. Communication like that is slow: depending on which subspace channel is used, it can take half a minute or a day for a message to reach Vulcan from Earth, and the same back again. She’d gotten the message in the middle of night.

Her son wants to Bond. Or perhaps not Bond, not yet. But he is starting to feel ready for it.

He is growing up.

Jim – she recalls their meeting. The young man had been pleasant and warm, but shaken. It was after the attack on the Theater. No one had been relaxed. She’d like to meet with him, or speak with him at least, without that spur of fear and adrenaline. It’s not that she doesn’t trust – but Spock is her only child, and by Vulcan terms so young. Most Vulcans don’t Bond until their first pon farr, and Spock may not even experience that.

When Spock had failed to be betrothed, Amanda had been both glad and disquieted. The human in her had been relieved, because the burden of such a thing – that lack of choice – felt to her alien and disconcerting. But it also worried her because she realized the implications. Spock might be alone for the rest of his life, and if he does enter pon farr alone – he might die. He might die. Her child might die from loneliness.

Does Jim know about that? About not just the rites but the biological imperatives?

Amanda had had a hard time wrapping her head around it, at first. When she’d met Sarek, it’d been like falling into a dream. It had been slow-paced but intense. The courtship had been long, detailed, the approach very logical but not unemotional. And then, after a few months, Sarek had explained pon farr, and Amanda had been, for a moment, terrified. Terrified at the thought of the man she’d grown to love would lose so much control of himself that he might die.

That was a reason why they wanted their child to be part human. If there was a chance of freedom from that thing … Sarek said, once, that while the drive is one of the reasons the Vulcan race continues to exist at this point – that many would never mate without that primal urge – the event is so violent that few Vulcans look forward to it. What should have been a thing of pleasure and freedom has become a prison merely because Vulcans are now so rigid in their sense of logic and emotional detachment that the shock of pon farr is all the more severe.

Maybe Spock will never experience it. They can’t be certain. Though his genetics had been so carefully mapped out – all so carefully – there may be flaws. Or perhaps too few flaws, the scientist in Amanda is concerned, because Spock was essentially conceived in a laboratory and planned in minuscule detail and there was no natural progression, no natural evolution, and science has come far – Vulcan science especially – but not that far yet.
The Healers had predicted that Spock wouldn’t live to become an adult. They had urged her not to become emotionally attached. He might die suddenly, in his sleep, as an infant. He might not even survive conception, like the two first attempts. But Amanda had disregarded that advise. The human thing to do, probably, but she couldn’t help it. She wanted her child. She wanted him to be, to live.

When he crossed the Forge to pass kahs’wan, she was both proud and horrified and sad. This proud boy refuses to give up. He refuses to die. He wants to be Vulcan and nothing more.

Perhaps, the thought has crept up on her from time to time, it would have been kindlier, more merciful, if they’d let him be fully Vulcan. If they hadn’t introduced those parts of her genetic sequence into his. She would not have loved him any less. Sarek would not have loved him any less – or any more, she suspects. Sarek had followed the Healers’ advice about keeping an emotional distance.

Perhaps, if he hadn’t …

The past can’t be changed.

Once the meeting is adjourned, Amanda leaves the Council Chamber behind, ascending the stairs and walking outside to the street where a transport is waiting. She takes care not to spend too much time outside uncovered. The sunlight is sharp and the heat plentiful and there are no green lawns, no thickets of trees, no running water, not in this part of Vulcan. She might’ve gotten used to living here after two decades but she still needs to be careful. Every now and then, she must spend time in an artificial low-gravity chamber built into the house to give her bones and muscles and sinew a change to recover. The weight of the planet can be too much.

The low-gravity chamber is nothing like a bath. Oh, how she’d dream of water instead!

Once she gets home and under the shadow of the house, out of the oppressing light of the Vulcan sun, Amanda considers the email for a third time. She understands that one of Spock’s worst fears – even if he has never revealed it aloud – is to disappoint her. Asking for her approval and her counsel is a sign.

He might be afraid; he shouldn’t have to be.

She doesn’t want him to be.
He cannot look away all at once, nearly overwhelmed by the reality of this place and this time and this moment. Jim’s body heat has crept into the mattress and into the air like an aura. Despite the comfortable temperature of the room, Spock can sense him clearly. Or perhaps it is colder? His skin, where it is bare, is more sensitive than usual, and – yes, it is colder.

He sits up slowly. The human doesn’t stir.

The action causes a flash of pain to rise behind his eyelids. His vision sways for a terrifying second. Dizziness? This is not normal. A headache should easily be suppressed by mere control, but now he cannot do it. Perhaps – the meld – the strain of it. He has never melded with a human but his mother before, after all, and they had reached out for each other for such a long while: minutes: hours.

He does not order the computer to turn on the lights. It is bright enough to his sensitive eyes; brighter than normal. He is more sensitive than usual, and his balance is somewhat off. His left ear feels – clogged. Highly uncomfortable. His neck is stiff and there is an ache in his sinuses. The only conclusion he can make is that he is falling ill.

This could be a similar thing to when he was a child once catching a strain of human flu, accidentally, from his mother. It had been disruptive and annoying, especially at the time when he was young and still learning to quell impatience, but harmless. At that time, the Healers had boosted his immune system with supplements but let nature take its course so that he could build up natural antibodies. The fact that his immune system hasn’t immediately taken care of the problem, as the Vulcan body is wont to, indicates it is not the same strain.

The night of the fire. He had stood outside, in the growing cold, for over an hour, without shoes or jacket. Adrenaline had made it seem less intense than it was. Had it been summer, it might not have been an issue, but it obviously made him more susceptible to illness. In combination with the drain of energy from the mind meld ... It makes sense. If symptoms do not abate later today, he decides, he will visit the campus’ medical wing; that is only logical.

Rising and walking over to the wardrobe to grab one of his uniforms, he notices that Leonard hasn’t returned. The mattress where he’d meant to be sleeping is empty and untidy. Something like guilt echoes at the back of his mind. He had not meant to become so occupied with Jim that Leonard felt unwelcome and forced to leave. Though he doubts the human would have been comfortable to witness their mind meld. It had been very … intimate.

He steps into the shower, and turns the water to nearly its hottest setting, which a human would find quite uncomfortable. He is shivering. That is not a good sign. He goes through the rhythm: scrubbing, rinsing. He pays extra attention to his left ear, but it does not seem to help the problem.

The thought of attending lectures today is especially distant and difficult to grasp. After their meld – his thoughts linger on Jim. The vividness of those emotions. And Tarsus IV. Tarsus IV. Knowing that this is information he cannot share with anyone. Knowing that Jim went through … (a child, only a child alone without hope or promise for the future)

And Spock has to lean against the cool glass of the cubicle and simply breathe, breathe, to not be angry.

Entering the common room, he finds it isn’t empty. Beyond the kitchen area, where a few a sofas and tables are laid out in a circle around a television unit, one of the couches is occupied. Leonard is lying on his side half-wrapped in a blanket, not sleeping but idly looking at his PADD. The human’s eye movements indicate that he is reading and clearly concentrated. An empty platter and some cutlery litters the table nearby.
“Good morning,” Spock says. His voice is far more rough than it should be, and deeper, and he does not continue the sentence.

Leonard doesn’t react to this, or at least not at once. He doesn’t look up from his PADD, immersed in whatever he is reading. “Hi.”

“I apologize that you could not sleep in the room. It was not our intention to –”

“It’s fine,” the human interrupts, waving a hand vaguely. “Not the first time I’ve spent the night on the couch. Where’s Jim?”

Spock crosses the room for the fridge. He is relieved that no one else on the floor is awake yet, especially since he is not the only student to now cohabit with a fellow cadet or two, meaning the number of residents has suddenly doubled. The chaos of the common areas has gotten worse than usual. The cleaning staff must be very annoyed.

“Still asleep,” he answers; he had left a note on his PADD on the bedside table, in case the human doesn’t rise until the morning alarm goes off. The fridge is stuffed and disorderly. He fights the urge to rub at his left ear; there is also a growing itch in his sinuses. He surveys his food options, and considers using the replicator instead of preparing a meal – he is not certain if he truly is hungry. His appetite has waned.

“Rough night, huh. No, wait, I don’t want any details,” says Leonard briskly and with a sigh he looks up from the PADD.

When Spock turns around, closing the fridge and opting for the replicator, he notices that the human is frowning at him.

“Well, you look like shit,” the man remarks.

“Is this another one of your insults? It is not very imaginative,” Spock says tiredly, punching in the code to produce a strawberry smoothie. The computer whirs in acknowledgment.

“No, it’s a medical opinion.” Leonard yawns and stretches, standing up. Spock is too tired to argue that the statement was scientifically unfounded and therefore illogical. “Didn’t get any sleep, huh?”

“I have slept for approximately one hour.”

“That ain’t a lot even for a Vulcan. Honestly, you’re green.”

His hands are not as steady as they should be. Due to his deficient balance? The itch is growing, spreading through his body: reaching his chest cavity, his lungs. The food processor slot slides open. There is nothing wrong-looking about the glass now standing there, but Spock takes it a bit suspiciously. Food from the replicators can sometimes turn out to taste like nothing like it should; something going wrong as it re-scrambles the atoms. He has unpleasant memories of its sandwiches.

He takes the glass, grabs a spoon from a cupboard, and intends to sit at the table at the centre of the kitchen. “My natural skin colour is –” The itch becomes a tickle in the middle of a word and he cannot hold back a cough. Yes, definitely an infection of some sort. What was it his mother said humans often suffered from? A cold.

Leonard is still frowning. “I don’t need a tricorder to tell you’ve got a fever.”

Oh. “I see.”
“Got any other symptoms?” His PADD now turned aside, Leonard is focusing on him intently. The human sounds annoyed, but also, curiously, genuine in his concerns.

“Doctor,” Spock starts, “it is not necessary for you to make an assessment. It is not serious and if it turns out to be I will visit the medical wing.”

“Sit down and tell me. I’m a doctor. Y’know, Jim’ll know anyway once he joins the waking world, and it’s better I’m prepared.” That is a valid argument.

Holding back a sigh, Spock relents. He washes his hands, then sits by the table and lets the human being an impromptu examination. The smoothie remains untouched. He lets the human check his pulse and breathing, preparing his mental shields to be able to handle the physical contact, and the human looks at his hands and at his ears, occasionally looking something up on his PADD. Leonard grumbles that he should have had a tricorder at hand.

“I experienced some vertigo when I woke up,” Spock says. “There is some mild pain in my sinuses as well as my left ear – the third eardrum, I believe, as it is affecting my ability to perceive low-frequency sounds. My neck is stiff and aching, and I sense the low temperature of this room more acutely than usual. I did not have any symptoms yesterday, but this is probably due to my exposure to cold three days ago. Doctor, I am only a little unbalanced. This should heal on its own.”

“Yeah,” comes the verdict at last. “I think so too. Can’t tell if it’s a viral or bacterial infection, but it’s either. My advice is you take it easy, eat somethin’, drink water, and go back to sleep.”

“I have classes to attend to,” Spock points out.

Leonard rolls his eyes. “Of course you won’t skip even if you’re sick. Okay, I could probably cook up a hypo that should do the work, just some antibiotics of the kind you can handle, and you’ll be right as rain in a couple of days. You Vulcans heal fast.”

Spock nods, regretting the action since it does not help with his pain at all, and does not ask whatever rain has to do with the matter. “For which I am grateful. Am I allowed to eat my breakfast now?”

Jim does not wake up for another twenty minutes. In this time, Spock has managed to eat half of the smoothie. It was not very tasty – murky and dry, and more reminiscent of cardboard than of strawberries. Leonard, having already eaten, has left.

He stirs his smoothie with the spoon idly. His first class today is in Stellar Cartography and he mentally he reviews the assignment due today; a brief text which he had finished before the fire is to be handed in and if he had his PADD he could have rechecked it, one last time, but he finds his headache is too much. He is not certain if he could deal with the task right now. Then there’s Xenolinguistics …

After a while, as more and more students awaken, one cadet after the other filing into the kitchen. Most opt for the replicator just as Spock did. As humans tend to in the mornings, their hair is ruffled or heavily wet from a shower and most are out of uniform, dressed in slacks. Cadet Rand, along with Janice Lester, and a third cadet who Spock only vaguely recognizes – someone who lived in B-31 before, he concludes, now rooming with someone here – are the first to appear, and they are speaking, not very quietly. Or perhaps their voices are kept at a normal volume but he picks up the noise easier; his sense of sound sharpened, his body trying to compensate for the irritation to his eardrum.

“… and said that as if – morning! – as if that’s even valid information,” Cadet Lester is saying as
they cross the threshold. The human looks in his direction briefly. Spock only nods in return, and thankfully that is enough. The humans are immersed in their conversation.

Maybe Leonard’s advice about sleep … But he has things to do, duties. He is the TA and the Professor expects him to speak today about common Vulcan dialects. And then Astrophysics, and …

“That makes no sense! Facts are facts, you can’t just bend them as you like,” Rand is answering. She sounds upset or taken aback, possibly both.

He means to stand up and wash the dishes in the sink. But there is so much noise. He should have eaten faster, before the three other cadets arrived, he silently berates himself.

“Sometimes people are bonkers,” says the third cadet. The blonde woman has a clear accent which belongs to somewhere in the British Isles though it is very different from Scotty’s. At the moment, Spock has difficulty connecting the lilt to its geographical location. Another sign. He rises, slowly. Rand is ordering something from one of the two food processor slots, while Lester nearly collapses on a couch. He quickly rinses the glass, puts it on a shelf to dry, and turns to leave.

“So you heard about it too, Carol?”

“Hear ‘bout what?” someone piques in.

It is Jim. The human is clearly not rested enough. Something in Spock’s belly flames warmly at the sight of him. The human is smiling, an easy smile, and his eyes glimmer. He looks, despite the tiredness, truly happy, and relaxed. There are no signs of the tears of last night.

“Kirk? What are you doing here?” asks Lester, somewhat suspiciously.

“Well, my dorm room caught on fire.”

“Touché.”

The three humans have now grabbed their meals, and they seat themselves around the table, continuing their discussion. Spock was meaning to leave, but wonders if he should keep Jim company instead while he breaks fast. Though the noise …

The human’s gaze catches on Spock’s face. “Hey, Spock, you look kinda green.”

Odd, how both he and Bones used the same words. Perhaps the colour green has particular significance in human culture? He quells the echo of frustration of not being able to understand all these little details despite the several months he has now spent with humans.

As if realizing that the reference might beyond him, Jim hurriedly corrects himself. “Green – uh, sick, kinda under the weather.”

“It is only a mild sickness which will pass quickly,” Spock assures him. He is acutely aware that they are not the only people in the room though the three other cadets are talking about – something. From the words, it has to do with politics, and some recent decision announced, but Spock cannot focus though normally he would have no issue multitasking. Then a thought strikes him. “Perhaps you should let Leonard examine you. I may have infected you.”

“Ohay,” says Jim, and raises a hand, stopping himself abruptly before the touch actually occurs.

Realizing the human’s intent, Spock shies away. “If you are trying to check my temperature, McCoy has already determined that I have a light fever.”
Nothing will cause a human more concern than confirming their fears. Jim’s eyes widen a little. It is quite alarming.

“It is nothing harmful,” he assures him quickly. “I must fetch my books now and prepare for class.”

“Okay, well, maybe you should visit the medbay?”

“Only if my fever rises.”

The human isn’t entirely convinced, he can tell. Tendrils of worry and affection - deep, sharp affection.

It is almost too much.

“… different dialects, although currently only three are used by the majority of the population. This is reflected in the orthography.”

He switches to the next picture in the presentation sequence, where an example sentence is displayed in both Vulcan and Standard Federation English. He is pleased to see that a few of the cadets are actually taking notes, having realized that he is not a student who gets nervous or embarrassed by such actions. Nyota is sitting in the first row, and she looks very interested in the subject. If all cadets had the same attitude, the Academy would probably be quite different.

“This is an example of the oldest mode of writing which is also the most elaborate and has a widespread use, notably in ceremonial contexts, called gotavlu-zukitan. Nowadays more modern modes of writing are used. Unlike gotavlu-zukitan, which are more logographic in character, modern Vulcan script utilizes phonologically-based alphabetical systems. This old mode is centered around several deeply rooted intellectual ideals which are part of Vulcan society. The script has been likened to terrestrial musical notes in shape, albeit it is read primarily top-to-bottom and secondarily left-to-right. Each sentence is centered around a spine …”

His throat is sore. He had managed to squeeze in eighteen minutes of meditation before the class began, focusing his mind on other places than this mild discomfort, but the effects are wearing off quicker than anticipated. And he is tired, something set deeply in his bones. Vulcans do not usually grow ill - when they do, it strikes hard. The timing really could have been better.

Thankfully, he manages to trudge through the full twenty-two minutes of the presentation. There are a few questions. The cadets seem interested perhaps simply because he is a Vulcan talking about his own language; it is no facsimile, no poorly-researched project put together in a hurry. Cadet Giotto asks him to write a sentence or two on the board and go through the translation meanwhile, which is quite enjoyable. If he is not assigned aboard a starship right after graduation, Spock thinks, he could seek to teach at the Academy. The board would surely not protest at giving him that chance.

Finally, finally, there is a break in the seminar. The next half, the Professor will take over and talk about grammatical universals - or rather the problematic lack of proper grammatical universals - which is a subject Spock has read about and should be looking forward to debating. But now, his foremost thought is the longing for a warm blanket in a soft bed and possibly a cup of tea. The thought is decidedly non-Vulcan.

As cadets start to disperse, a majority of them going to the nearest replicator to grab a cup of coffee, Nyota approaches him. She’s frowning. That is not a good sign.

“Hey, Spock, how are you doing? You look kind of -”
“Green?” he fills in, predicting that the word is logically to be used.

She nods. “Yeah.”

“I have been approached by both Jim and Leonard about it already,” he says. He gathers his PADD and notebook, shutting off the holoviewer, before stepping off the podium. The world tilts, and he has to stabilize himself against the edge of the teacher’s desk.

One downside with not possessing sweat glands, Spock has concluded, is that a fever becomes intolerable quite quickly, as the body has to struggle more to work off the excess heat. Vulcans have a core temperature lower than a human’s, and, according to the last tricorder reading he made of himself, his own has risen by zero point four degrees. If it rises to point five he will go to the medical wing - Jim made him swear it. And he is quite certain that Jim will find out if he does not go if that is the case.

Nyota does not seem convinced.

“Do you have a question about the seminar?” he asks. He’d like to go and fetch a glass of water.

“It can wait,” she says, fiddling with her notebook. “Maybe you should take a break.”

“I am fine. What is your question?”

“Well, that thing you said about conjugating verbs, could you clarify what …”

He regrets the order of food at the cafeteria the moment he sits down. It was all movements of routine, and he stares at the overfull plate with rising disgust. Though he knows that, rationally, he must eat - his cells need the fuel in order to survive - he cannot make himself do more than pick at the food with a fork. It is wasteful. He eats one pea, and a second, and hesitantly a third. They do not taste like very much at all.

Leonard doesn’t even say hello. The human, when he appears, only attacks his neck with the hypospray without warning, and Spock is too tired to notice him until it’s too late. Most disconcerting.

Spock flinches back. But the effect is immediate and really quite soothing; a coolness spreading through his limbs. He looks at the human, who, only after he’s administered the hypospray, puts down his own tray on the same table.

“It’ll take a moment before it eases up the headache,” Leonard says.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah, well,” the human shrugs, “Jim’s been pestering me about it all morning, and I got a second free at the medlab to cook it up. I guess you never took my advise of rest.”

He should have. The Doctor isn’t incompetent, and Spock is certain that, without the hypospray, his fever would have continued to rise. He shakes his head without answering.

Leonard starts eating without another word, with gusto and great hunger, and he is eating with his hands. Spock drinks some water. He would really like to lie down.

He glances at the human, suddenly suspicious. “Was there a sedative in that hypospray?”

“Only a small dose to encourage you to see sense. Relatively small; a human wouldn’t be standing
up right now. Your daft green blood is too tough for that, though.”

“I see,” he states. If he does not leave the cafeteria soon, he will end up asleep here, which is the last thing he wants.

“It’ll take about half an hour before it really kicks in,” the human continues and grins - one might describe it as a cross between self-righteously pleased and somewhat evil.

“But I have a lecture this afternoon,” he protests. He has never missed a lecture apart from the time with the Andorians who … That time. He does not want to miss another lecture, even though the sound of a bed is becoming more tempting by the minute, almost too much to quell.

“Too bad. Well, go on, shoo. I’m not gonna scrape you off the floor, and you’ve got, oh, twenty-five minutes to comm the teacher if you’re so worried about skipping class, and to find a bed to sleep in.”

He does not have the energy to argue or be indignant with the human, though he would very much like to tell him his opinion on Leonard’s bedside manner, and that it is rude to hypospray a person without their knowledge. He holds back a sigh, instead, and does not yawn when the urge comes upon him, and he gathers his tray. The meal is mostly uneaten and going cold.

When Spock does take his leave and he is on the edge of earshot, he hears Leonard shake his head and grumble: “Of all stubborn people Jim had to pick the worst.”

And Spock has to bite back a sudden unexpected smile.

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To: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
From: Amanda Grayson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
Stardate 2257.42
Subject: re: re: re: Social relationships & companionship [Standard Federation English]

My dearest Spock,

I can’t dictate what you should do. My advice is simple: listen to your heart. I only want you to be happy.

I’d very much like to speak with Jim. Don’t worry, I don’t mean to cross-examine him. I just want to get to know him. If you both choose to go ahead then it’s a big undertaking. I remember myself the turmoil I experienced when I met your father. The truth that we came from two different cultures couldn’t be escaped, nor can it in your case.

The best thing for you to do is to communicate. Talk, a lot and at length, about what it’d mean for the both of you, personally and emotionally, to be together. Patience is key to comprehension.

If you mindmeld, please just be careful not to over-exert yourself. Is Jim psi null? Then it’ll be a lot for him to get used to. Let things take time. You both have it. Do only what you want to do, and don’t try to push yourself into something you’re not ready for in order to fit a mold – not just regarding melding, but touch and everything else that a relationship may entail. Please take care to not hurt yourself – or Jim – by rushing into things.
We can talk more about this if you’d like during our videocall on Thursday. Say hello to Jim for me, and tell him that he’s got your mother’s approval.

With much love,

Your mother

Two days later, the symptoms are completely gone, and Spock is relieved that it was not a serious illness after all, and his immune system could fight it off without issue.

He has also just found out that alternative housing for the cadets who had been affected by the fire will soon be solved. He is torn between relief, for Jim and Leonard’s sake, and also an unfamiliar feeling - part of him wants them to stay here. Even if they snore. He could do without the snoring, he decides. But it has not been unpleasant to share breakfast with them each morning, and to partake in - sometimes only witness - their close banter. Their … their friendship. To be part of something like that. Before the week is up that new routine may be broken and silence return. While it might help his studies, part of him will … he will miss it.

He wonders how he can ask Jim to meld again. He wants to share some brighter memories, not like last time when it caused tears. No, he wants to taste Jim’s happiness, and perhaps share his own version of it. There hasn’t been the right moment yet to bring up the subject.

His schedule is fuller than either human’s, but they tend to spend their free time with activities. Therefore he does not expect to return to his dormitory that evening to find someone already there.

Jim is sitting by the desk. He is not studying or reading or even playing a game on his PADD, though. He is dabbing at his own face with a brush, and there are things on the table - not pencils or books - which Spock has never seen before. He pauses, the door swishing closed behind him.

“Jim,” he asks, somewhat confounded, “what are you doing?”

“I got my stuff back!” the human sounds happy and relieved. “Most of it, anyway. My PADDs, my projects, my clothes, my makeup kit, the lot. Whatever wasn’t damaged by the fire, anyway. Wanna try?”

He is painting his face. Spock has observed other humans doing it, of course, in alternating ways and styles, but had not known that it was one of Jim’s interests. Or at least not taken note of it as it has never been spoken off. The human looks at him with sudden sharp interest. Surveying. Then Jim grins wide. “You know, you’d rock some eyeshadow. A pinch of purple -”

“Fascinating, but I am not interested in having any sort of shadow on my eyes.”

“You sure?” Jim selects another brush, and holds up the handheld mirror. “Maybe some other time, huh.”

For a moment, Spock studies all of the strange things laid out on the desk, the brushes of various shapes, the pots and bottles of unfamiliar contents. “What is the exact purpose of eyeshadow?”

They have not melded a second time.

He wants to. The intimacy of the moment had been striking and terrifying but also immensely calming. Jim’s mind is so bright and intense and warm. An embrace - yes, an embrace, and he wants to feel it again.
He isn’t sure when will be the right time to ask, though. They are both very busy, with differing schedules. To meld, they need time, a moment of quiet, undisturbed.

Later. He will consider it later, once the dorming issues have been resolved and his last assignments handed in. Later.

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It is a Thursday 07:45 post meridiem, and therefore it is time for their weekly videocall. It has never been a problem until now.

Spock does not want to take the call in the bathroom.

Jim is lying on the mattress on the floor, snoring. It seems that Jim does indeed sleep the hours he as a human needs, though at odd intervals and not at the standard hours. He tends to be awake some nights. Leonard is used to this and had advised the Vulcan to ‘just roll with it’. Until now, Spock has not complained. Said Doctor is now elsewhere, either studying or visiting a friend. Spock can tell that the human is not entirely comfortable with the sleeping arrangements. It will be some time though before repairs have been made to the damaged building and the dormitories restored. Over the last couple of days, security has retrieved and returned various items from the dorm rooms to the affected cadets: a communicator here, a piece of clothing there. Not all was destroyed or damaged by the fire.

He starts up the PADD. His mother and father returned to Vulcan four weeks ago. She had expressed regret that they hadn’t been able to stay longer, but they both have duties, and Spock understands. As he had not expected them to be here at all during this year, he is gratified. His mother’s presence after …

It has been welcome. They have met to dine or share a cup of tea several times. She has not asked him to show her around San Francisco, since she is aware he would not have explored much of the city beyond what is necessary to know for an efficient time of study here at the Academy. Still, now, he wonders if he should not have made sure to spend even more time with her. Enough time to … to reveal these facts in person.

He takes a breath, steels himself. Sends the request. His PADD is connected with the school’s subspace network. The Academy had arranged it; all cadets with family outside of Earth are given the opportunity. It will take thirty-five seconds for the signal to reach Vulcan. A small yet very noticeable timelag, and species with less patience than Vulcan would find it extremely frustrating to communicate this way.

The picture is grainy.

“Spock! It’s so good to see you.” She is sitting on the terrace of the house, and the Vulcan afternoon sun is drifting lazily behind her. He can glimpse the cityscape fading into the mountains.

“Hello, mother.”

Jim is still sleeping. Spock is using earplugs, which is unusual. His mother does not comment on it, however. Her expression is curious and somewhat grave.

“Did you get my reply to your last email?”

He has read it through three times. “Yes, mother.”

“Then you know I’m not in any way angry or disappointed. Oh, to be honest, I’m not even that surprised.”
“You are not?”

“I’m your mother, sweetheart,” she says and smiles gently. “When you messaged me about that date ... And I’ve met Jim. He seems like a charming young man. The conclusion was, well, logical to make. I’m not upset or angry, don’t worry. Does he make you happy?”

Such a human question. He is not certain how to reply. “I ...” Happiness. Immeasurable, inquantifiable, ungraspable. “Yes. I believe so.”

“Good. That’s all I was worried about. What about the meld? Have you spoken with him about that?”

“Yes, mother. There was an incident a few days ago, a fire. Because of that Jim and Leonard were forced out of their dorm and they are now rooming with me. Two days ago, Jim - he suffered from a nightmare, though I cannot disclose the details without his permission. But after that he asked me to perform a meld with him. I did. It was ... it was an emotional moment. But we both have realized that we are compatible. I have not changed my mind, and neither has Jim. He is very stubborn.”

“A fire? Oh, god, was anyone hurt?”

“No, mother. There were no casualties. A fourth year cadet, Scotty, managed to beam Jim and Leonard out of the burning building using a homemade device, and they were not harmed.”

She exhales. “Good. And, the mindmeld ... I’m glad. But this is a big step, Spock. I know that from personal experience. And you’re still young by Vulcan standards.”

“I am aware. Jim and I have spoken at length about this.”

“Okay. You know, I might not be able to keep this a secret from your father for very long. We do not easily conceal things from one another, though I’ve of course respected your wish until now. Sarek isn’t home right now. When he finds out, he might force you to make an ultimatum.”

“I understand.”

“Who’s that you’re talking with?”

Spock freezes. Jim is awake, and the human glances up from the pillow. His hair is tousled.

His mother, noticing the sudden break in his composure, frowns. “Sweetheart, is everything all right?”

The human is dragging himself up from the bedding. He is half-clothed, as if he had been too tired to fully change and flung himself in bed after kicking off his shoes. Now he approaches the desk, leaning over Spock’s chair casually, as if this is an everyday occurrence. He is so familiar, within this sphere. Like - like family. “Oh! Hi, Mrs Grayson. I mean, Amanda. How’re you doing?”

“Hello, Jim,” says his mother after the thirty-five second delay. Spock has unplugged the earphones, turning on the speakers of the PADD. “Spock didn’t mention you were there.”

“He was sleeping,” Spock says before Jim can answer. “He is more illogical with his sleeping patterns than the average human.”

“Oh, is everything all right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” says Jim with an easy, graceful smile. “Just kinda exhausted. Been working on this
project.”

“He is well,” Spock agrees. “Mother, perhaps we should terminate this conversation, or move it elsewhere.”

“Nonsense,” she says. “In fact, I’ve been wanting to talk with you, Jim. Spock’s said so much about you but we only met that one time. Don’t worry, it’s all good things. I can see why he’s so fond of you.”

“Okay,” says Jim, and abruptly, the human’s tone and posture indicate nervousness. The human reaches out, grabs a second chair, and sitting down next to Spock. His gaze flickers for a moment. “Uh, yeah, Spock said he’d mentioned … us. Were you guys talking about me just now?”

“Yes,” says Spock without inflection.

“My son said he’s explained to you, at least in part, about Vulcan relationships. And I know just how confusing and even terrifying that can be,” his mother says, and there is fondness in her eyes. “When I met Sarek - well, let’s just say it was one hell of a ride.”

“Mother,” Spock protests a little.

Thankfully, this use of tone has the opposite effect on Jim. The human chuckles, and the tension in his muscles loosens some. “Yeah, it’s kinda confusing. I mean, really getting it. We - we mindmelded. Well, Spock did, and I just kinda was there. I’m psi null. He didn’t hurt me,” Jim adds, hurriedly, as if predicting that Amanda might be concerned about this, "and I tried not to hurt him, but I couldn’t really control it. It was, it was very emotional.”

“I’m also psi null,” his mother reveals in an encouraging tone. “But there are things you can learn: control, awareness, that kind of thing. It gets easier with time. More to the point, Spock, I know you’re a strong telepath but to touch an untrained mind can be frightening, even dangerous. I’m glad it went all right.”

The implication: it could have gone very, very wrong. They were, in human vernacular, lucky.

“Mother, Jim and I are mentally compatible,” Spock announces. It is time.

“Yeah,” Jim agrees without being asked. He does not appear shaken or shocked at this revelation. At ease. Comfortable. “I dunno how to put words to it, though.”

“The fact that you managed to connect that easily is proof enough, I think,” Amanda says, nodding. “Spock, Jim, are you ready to continue your relationship? There’s a point when there’s no turning back. Jim, a Vulcan’s commitment is very deep.”

“I know, Mrs Gra-- Amanda. We’ve talked about that. We’re gonna take it slow.”

“We will not form a complete Bond at once,” Spock says. “It is better that we acclimate to this stage of our relationship first.”

“One step at a time. That’s a good way,” his mother agrees. “Spock, your father’s going to find out, though. I think it’s better you and Jim tell him, rather than he found out by accident. Sometime when you’re both prepared.”

“We shall take that under advisement.”

“Yeah,” says Jim. The human gnaws at his lower lip for a second. “Could Spock be in trouble?”
“No, I hardly think so. Sarek is married to me, after all,” his mother chuckles warmly. “Besides, I think you’ll have T’Sai T’Rama’s support too, Spock.”

“Who’s …?” whispers Jim, glancing at him.

“My paternal grandmother. She is an Elder, part of the High Council.” Strengthening his voice, Spock directs his attention back at the PADD. “I understand, mother.” Or at least he is trying to. He keeps trying. That is the best that he can do.

“Whatever you choose, though, I just want to know you’re happy with it,” Amanda says gently. “That includes both of you.”

“Thanks,” says Jim. “Could I just ask, uhm, do Vulcans - sorry if this is a rude question - do they do the …?”

Spock cannot quite comprehend the query, though it is syntactically correct. His mother, though, chuckles, obviously comprehending. Sometimes human language is so complex and illogical, and they have a tendency to use euphemisms and sometimes empty gaps to be filled in by the listener in a cultural context which takes years to master.

“Honestly, Jim, this is something the two of you must talk about on your own. But I can tell you that once we were committed, but before any ceremony as such, Sarek and I very much did.”

“Oh, okay. Sorry that was weird question. I don’t want to step on any toes. This is all kinda new to me.”

“It’s perfectly all right. And Vulcans are frank and straightforward.”

“Most of the time,” Spock corrects. There are instances when Vulcans are nothing at all as his mother describes them.

“Spock,” she abruptly addresses him in grave Vulcan - she speaks well from years of living there, but there is still a noticeable accent. That she chooses his native language instead of Standard means that she does not want Jim to hear all of it, and Spock has never properly assessed Jim’s skills in the tongue. If the human understands, he cannot properly tell. Jim’s frowns slightly but that might just be because of the language change. “He has not forced you to do anything you do not want, has he?”

And suddenly he understands her choice of tone as well as words. He shakes his head, and answers in Vulcan. “Rai. You need not be concerned, mother.”

“Good. Let me know if anything happens, will you?” She then switches back to Standard, and addresses Jim. “I’m sorry about that, but I needed to speak with my son privately.”

Her worry is sharp, emotions heightened, and she is more tired than she uses to be in their communications. And he senses that her question may stem from more than simply his being with Jim. “Mother, has something happened?”

“Oh, nothing more than usual. I’ve attended the Council for the last few days. It’s rather tiring.” The revelation is not soothing. Although he knows she is invited to the Council as Sarek’s wife, she does not always attend them, preferring to spend time in her laboratory. She is a scientist, not a politician, foremost.

Jim leans closer to the PADD, interested. “You’re in the Council? Wow, Spock never said.”

“You did not ask about my mother’s occupation,” Spock reminds him with a glance.
“It’s not as glamorous as it sounds, but I think it’s necessary, and a privilege for a human, to be part of the inner political circle. I can’t gossip, I’m afraid, until the Council has made its decision.”

“Then a major vote is imminent?” Spock asks.

“Yes. Have you read any Vulcan news lately?”

“Not for the past fifteen days. What has happened?”

And she sighs. For a moment she doesn’t answer at once, but fiddles with her shawl, and looks toward the horizon. “You know about Yeht Wul’q’n - a few days ago, one of them entered Earth’s Embassy here in Shi’kahr and left a phaser on overload. It was averted, no one was hurt. But still; it’s the tenth time something like that has happened since … since KEHL’s latest open move on Earth.”

“Sorry, dumb question,” Jim cuts in, “but who or what is this …? Hang on, is that like a Vulcan version of KEHL?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Their methods are similar and so are their goals, as their very name reveals,” Spock says. “I believed the group had been quelled. Nothing has been heard from them for years.”

“Yes, but there’s growing unrest on several Federation planets. I think it’s just … just the time,” his mother says sadly. “The Council is debating how to intervene, but they’re still an underground movement, and difficult to pin down.”

“And Vulcan does not have a strong security force,” Spock says. It has not been necessary since the Teachings of Surak truly were enforced and embraced by the majority of Vulcan society. When turning aside emotions for logic, so they also turned aside war and violence. The energy previously wasted on mindless passion was used to advance, to help each other, to build, to eliminate poverty and other causes of distress. The Federation, when it was established a century ago, should have made things even clearer that war is a thing of the past.

No society is perfect, though they often pretend to be.

“But don’t worry about it now,” Amanda says. “It’ll be resolved eventually. I was mostly curious to meet Jim again, not to talk politics. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Jim says, once more at ease. “Last time was kinda … yeah.”

“You can rest assured that you have my approval, Jim. But do expect a dinner invitation sometime in the future,” his mother smiles. “I’m not sure when, but we should be able to book a visit sometime during the year - at least before your graduation. Will you graduate at the same time?”

Spock would never have declined, and to hear of her plans is warming. “Yes, mother. Jim is completing the Command Track in only three years, which I do not think another human has done before.”

At his side, Jim awkwardly scratches at his neck as if embarrassed or uncomfortable, and Spock is ready to apologize. He has before noted that Jim tends to sometimes downplay his abilities. He does not boast his intelligence, nor does he easily let others point it out. “Yeah, well,” he mumbles, averting his gaze.

“Then I look forward to seeing you both at the graduation ceremony,” his mother says, a hint of pride there, one which she has learned not to show in front of other Vulcans but Spock cannot deny his mother this. Nor can he deny that part of him is pleased at this pride. “Now, I’m sure you both
“have things to do. I’ll call next week, all right?”

“Affirmative. Take care, mother. Live long and prosper.” He forms the ta’al.

“Bye! Thanks for the heads-up.” Jim waves his hand in a human gesture of farewell.

“No problem, Jim - take care, both of you. See you soon, ashal veh. Live long and prosper.”

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Upper atmosphere · Earth
Stardate 2257.45

The shuttle-ride to the Shipyards takes one hour and six minutes. They had not been allowed to choose their seats themselves, and Spock spends the journey in silence next to Cadet Rand who, thankfully, takes a nap through the whole ride. He wears a pair of headphones without actually listening to anything for most part, to drown out the smooth sound of the engines toiling. He looks out the rounded window at the landscape beneath. The Earth is so very blue and green and lively. It is nothing like Vulcan.

He would like to visit Vulcan again, and climb its hills, and taste its air. It is oppressive and heavy, but it is home.

Earth is slowly, slowly becoming a home, too.

Most of the time, though, he spends on his communicator, texting with Jim. The human is sitting in the same shuttlecraft but further in front of him, and sometimes the human glances over his shoulder, meeting his gaze. His eyes are as blue as Earth’s waters.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
if we got the time would u like to take a ride

Jim (0927-4339-11)
i’ll see if i can get hold of my bike ;)

He recalls the memory from the meld: the wind, the wind, freely, and the rush of the road underneath, all of the miles Jim has covered seeking to escape.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
It would be a fascinating experience. I would like to see more of the landscape around Riverside other than the Shipyards.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
theres not a lot to look at except corn :/

Jim (0927-4339-11)
believe me ive heard all of the corn jokes

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am interested what this part of Earth looks like, since I have never been there in person.

He thumbs the send-button, hesitating, before adding:

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Only what I received in our mind meld.

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
ur still thinking about it?

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
bc i kinda am too

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
it was cool. could we do it again?

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
thought what if we end up a pile of messy tears again

Spock (0934-5294-42)  
It was an emotional experience. I did not like seeing you in emotional distress.

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
don’t worry about that, its human to cry

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
everything is better after a good cry

Spock (0934-5294-42)  
It is?

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
yup :)

Spock (0934-5294-42)  
I would not be averse to melding again. I would like to share some of my better memories with you.

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
can u teach me control?

Spock (0934-5294-42)  
I could try, but I am not that well-trained in comparison with other Vulcans. I have always had to struggle with control.

It is somewhat of a relief to actually type it out, to admit it. Because it is the truth. He has always struggled and fought back, fought back.

It takes a while before there is a reply.

Jim (0927-4339-11)  
ill fix that bike ;)

The Shipyard is situated a couple of miles from the edge of the actual town of Riverside. Work is constantly ongoing, night and day, and there are a lot of people about: workers in yellow hard hats, Starfleet engineers in red, officers strictly overseeing construction and patrolling the area.

The hull of the Enterprise rises like a shadow. It is impressive and rather beautiful, this thing of steel
and glass and elegant curves. Spock can admit that, even though he is more interested in the technical specifics. He looks forward to meeting with the engineers to be able to ask them questions. Jim, on the other hand, while not wholly disinterested, is staring at the ship wide-eyed, and he seeks Spock out in the crowd of cadets, leans close, and whispers excitedly: “That’s gonna be mine one day.”

“You sound very certain,” Spock answers quietly, following the students who gather around the teacher who is calling names to make a final check of who is present.

“Just a hunch.”

Sometimes humans can be so extremely convicted in their beliefs. Spock does not want to take away the enraptured look on Jim’s face, though, and does not speak against this hunch. Maybe there is a logical cause to this optimism.

The teacher had not taken his Vulcan heritage or cultural differences into account when choosing a roommate. Rather, the choice must have been random. Perhaps the human had thought that way it would be most fair on everyone; so sign of favourisism. And Spock does not want to complain first thing he does. But when he goes to room 019 and finds Cadet Gary Mitchell there, he has no other urge than to turn around. He does not. He steels himself and enters the room.

“Great,” the cadet mutters when seeing him. The human has claimed the bed on the left and thrown a bag atop of it haphazardly. “It’s the Vulcan.”

“My name is Spock,” he clarifies, and wishes he had done so earlier. But when they had first met, he had not been allowed to give a full introduction, and his statement - logical and detached - that humans cannot properly pronounce his name had been, in part, a falsehood built on assumptions, and Cadet Mitchell had taken offence, and Spock hadn’t had a chance to explain himself - hadn’t wanted to, once he had overheard the whisper of pointy-eared freak.

“Yeah, well, whatever. Don’t touch my stuff.”

Why would he do that? He does not have the chance to answer. The human barrels past him, briskly knocking into his shoulder, and enters the bathroom. His steps are almost angry - humans do that; exhibit emotion through not just voice and words and facial expression, but the way they move.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

who did u get to room with?

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

im sharing with lawrence and mike :/

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

Gary Mitchell.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

ok u sound kinda unhappy about that? i mean u didnt even use full a sentence with a verb and stuff

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

I am not unhappy.

**Jim (0927-4339-11)**

ok :/
Jim (0927-4339-11)
for my part i could switch places, *we* shouldve had a room of our own

Jim (0927-4339-11)
lawrence nd mike are already arguing bout who gets top and bottom bunk

Jim (0927-4339-11)
but guess what, *I* get top bunk!

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Is that important?

Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah. like dunno why but yeah

Jim (0927-4339-11)
theres a bar nearby. wanna go? theres not much else to do here :/ tomorrow im gonna
get a hold of that bike tho ;)

He does not want to spent the rest of the night in this room with Gary Mitchell. He has brought his
PADD so that he can study, but he thinks he will not be able to concentrate on that. Setting down his
bag by the bottom of the right-hand bed, he replies to the message.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I will accompany you.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
:D

The chief engineers had answered to his questions sufficiently, albeit Spock had a sense they kept
simplifying things as if the cadets are unable to comprehend the mechanics of a warp engine. He had
had a mind to correct the human in the matter, but he has learned a great deal in the last few months
about stress and how it causes humans to behave, and had concluded, by observation, that the
engineers were stressed and not really wanting any visitors to the construction site.

Jim, too, had asked some intelligent questions. He had made sounds of ooh and aah and tried to pet
the ship’s walls as they were allowed a brief tour of the Enterprise’s interior - the parts that are
finished, at least. The Bridge was off-limits, but the Engineering section and many parts of the
Saucer had been available to take a closer look at.

The Shipyard had been a place of noise and constant movement.

Likewise, the bar on the same street as the hotel is also packed with people and sound. There is
music in the background which Jim calls ‘country’. Apart from the many cadets, there are some
locals (or so Spock assumes them to be). Most of the cadets have swapped out of their reds into
something more casual and comfortable. He has not, since he did not bring any other clothes than his
two uniforms.

Jim’s hand ghosts nears his wrist, not quite grasping it. Spock follows him to the bar counter.
Perhaps he could treat this as an opportunity to study another facet of human culture first-hand.

“Wow, I haven’t been here for ages,” Jim comments, looking around. He gestures at the posters and
other pictures on the walls, and a particular crack in the ceiling which apparently has been there for a
long time without ever being fixed. Little details. “Haven’t changed a bit. Y’know, this is where Pike convinced me to join Starfleet. This spot right there.” He points at a table in a corner. “My nose was broken.”

That, too, he recalls from the mindmeld. Pike had sat there and Jim in front of him, bruised from a fight with some cadets, his knuckles were sore and Captain Pike had challenged him with words about George Kirk, about the man’s heroism - *I bet you to do better* -

Spock is glad he’s wearing his gloves today, because people do not care that they are touching shoulders or bumping elbows into one another. He keeps close to Jim. He would have preferred to see the outside of the town more than the inside of this building, but understands that it is … nostalgic; yes, that is the correct word … for Jim to be here.

“D’you want anything?” Jim asks.

“You are aware I do not feel the effects of alcohol.”

“Maybe you’ll like the taste,” the human suggests. “Or there’s orange juice.”

“Then I will have the latter.”

Jim waves a hand, getting the attention of the bartender. Swiftly two glasses are procured. Spock sips the juice, and ponders these strange human things: the need to crowd in a busy, dim place, with background music forcing them to raise their voices to be heard. The need to drink alcoholic beverages. Perhaps it is because they aren’t telepathic by nature and thus require all of this close physical contact to constantly reinforce that they are not alone.

“Do you think we’ll get to serve on the same ship?” Jim asks suddenly, leaning against the counter casually. He is wearing his black leather jacket.

“I am not certain,” Spock says, looking at him. “It is possible, but there are many ships in the fleet so it is also possible that we will be separated.”

And the thought is sudden, uninvited, unwelcome. He does not want to be posted on another ship than Jim, lightyears and lightyears apart. Married couples tend to be posted together, but when they are … boyfriends? Starfleet will not care about such an unofficial bond.

“Grapevine has it Pike’s looking for recruits for the Enterprise when he gets it,” Jim says.

“Grapevine …?”

“Oh! it means rumour, gossip, that kind of thing.”

“I see. Yes, that is true. I spoke with Captain Pike before he left on his current mission,” Spock comments. “He insinuated that he would like me as one his science officers.”

“All good captains would,” Jim grins and, for some reason, winks at him. Just as he uses that emoticon. Spock finds heat rising to his cheeks. “They’re all probably fighting over who gets to keep you. I mean, Starfleet’s very own Vulcan, best cadet of all times.”

“That is an exaggeration,” Spock says, shaking his head. “And you are one of the best achieving cadets as well.”

“Shh, that’s a secret,” Jim lowers his voice, playfully, leaning closer and smirking. “Everyone knows I’m here because of my good looks.”
That is an illogical thing to say even as a jest. “That is a false statement. Beauty has no meaning when it comes to who will become a good Starfleet officer.”

Even if Jim is beautiful. Yes. Spock hasn’t truly thought of it before, actively, but - yes. He has thought about Jim’s eyes, but the rest of his body is also quite pleasing to the eye. It is not what has drawn him, though. His mind is beautiful, and if humans had a katra, Spock is certain Jim’s would be like an everlasting candle, constantly seeking to survive through storms, refusing to yield.

Jim is very still and silent, staring at him, mouth slightly open and eyes glimmering. Their hands are touching - just knuckle to knuckle - and Spock realizes, abruptly, that he must have broadcast that thought and the touch had been enough for Jim to hear -

The human slowly puts down his glass on the counter, without taking his eyes off him.

“You …? You think I’m beautiful,” the human echoes. Stutters. For a moment he sounds confused and dumbfounded and a little bit terrified.

“Yes,” Spock answers plainly.

The bar is forgotten, all of the noise and people around them. He feels the burn of Jim’s hand so close so close and he wants to press their fingertips together -

Jim nods, sensing the intent, and Spock moves his hand into how he has seen his mother and father do it, but apart from clumsy first touches not long ago he has never truly shared the experience himself, and he is … he is nervous. All is centered on Jim and their hands, carefully entwining as the human mirrors the gesture.

“I can feel you,” Jim whispers. “Is that normal?”

They already share a bond - not firm, not founded in ceremony or vows - but dedicated, something genuine and made by accident and Spock cannot put proper words to it. “I do not know,” he admits.

The human’s breaths are faster than the norm. So are his own. In the past two minutes they have steadily moved closer to one another, and they will not cease, and his heart is racing in anticipation. Suddenly, suddenly he wants to know what it is like; the human way. Jim’s eyelids flicker, and the human wets his lips. They are closer now. Much closer. Spock’s own breathing is quickening, unsteadily, and his heartbeat is thundering, and Jim meets his eyes unavertingly -

“Jim.” He isn’t even certain of what words he wants to say, simply that suddenly he needs to say them. “I -”

“Well, I’ll be damned. James T. Kirk!”

The human jerks back. A human male, about his own age, swaggers into view, taking up a lot of space. A hint of a frown mars Jim’s brow.

Spock does not finish the sentence he had begun. He feels off-balance.

Jim clears his throat, as if attempting to reset himself back to normal. To before. “Greg,” he says like a greeting.

“I thought you’d left us for good, Jim,” the other human comments. He barrels his way to the bar counter, loudly drawing attention to himself. He squeezes himself in on Jim’s left side, and grabs Jim’s hand to shake it, and illogical emotion spikes in Spock’s chest. Something dark and ill-tasting, almost like jealousy. The human doesn’t pay heed to the Vulcan at all, or to their still touching hands;
Jim has not let go of Spock, and the touch is like an anchor. “What the hell brings you back?”

“Just a visit to the Shipyard with the other cadets,” Jim answers. There is something odd to his voice, stoic cold struggling with welcome. This is an old friend, Spock concludes, with whom Jim no longer has any regular contact. Jim has never mentioned his name.

“Cadets.” The human whistles on his breath. “Very fancy. Oh, I see, not wanting to see how your old buddies are doing.” The human pauses and, as if noticing him for the first time, raises an eyebrow at Spock. “What’s this, a Vulcan? In Iowa? Fancy that.” His tone is quite rude. Spock has heard its kind before. He lets his face remain impassive.

“Spock, this is Greg Dawson - we went to middle school together. Greg, this is Spock,” says Jim, and adds, as if proudly proclaiming a great deed: “my boyfriend.”

Dawson bursts out laughing. When Jim’s serious expression doesn’t change, the laughter fades. “What? Really, I thought you’d never settle down. Of course it’d be with something, no offence, something not quite, y’know, human. Well, at least he isn’t green.”

Spock resists the urge to bristle at the ignorance behind the words. But he is Vulcan, and will not have an emotional outburst. However, Jim is still clutching his hand, and must have picked up on the echo of the reigned-in emotion.

Before Jim can say anything, though, Spock faces the human coldly, calmly, controlled. “I am afraid I am quite green,” he says, and watches the human’s face twist into an uncomfortable scowl. “Furthermore, you are trying to insult the both of us with what you are implying and possibly induce an emotional response. I think you could find that, if necessary, I can act quite human.”

“What the hell did you say to me? Think we humans are lesser, huh? You Vulcans think you’re so -”

Spock refuses to be moved.

By his side, Jim is very tense. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Greg.”

“What? Just saying the truth as it is. Is the Vulcan that good to fuck? I mean, I know you’re a slut, Kirk, but a Vulcan?” Dawson casts a disapproving, disgusted look at them both, up and down. “What kind of junk do they even -”

This time, Jim doesn’t cut him off with words. Spock, for his fast reflexes, cannot stop him. Jim’s fist hits the other human in the mouth, on the upper lip. Dawson stumbles back, catching himself against a stranger behind him.

Someone in the bar shouts, and noise is cut off. People are gathering around. Curious and gawking or wanting to join the fight or break it up. Spock grabs Jim’s shoulder, trying to send a calming thought. Jim’s jaw is tense and mouth shut and eyes narrow, and he is burning. The other human is straightening up, having recovered his bearings, and he spits red blood on the floor.

Spock can only see that this will end badly if it is allowed to continue.

“You fucking apologize!” Jim growls.

Dawson doesn’t. He throws himself at Jim using his whole body, and they tumble to the floor. In a matter of seconds Dawson has hit Jim twice in the face, and Spock is alarmed to see blood. Then Dawson rises to his knees while Jim is still dazed. He swipes a half-empty beer bottle from the bar counter, and the Vulcan can see it: the angle of his arm, the sheer rage in his face, and he can too clearly imagine what will happen when the glass shatters over Jim’s head and the human collapses.
He will not let that happen. He must intervene.

Fortunately, Spock has three times the strength of a human. To subdue the human with a nerve pinch is easy. Dawson collapses on the floor, and Spock helps Jim to his feet. Cannot be quite calm. There is red blood on Jim’s face and his shirt, and his nose appears to be broken. He does not seem to be able to let him go, to stop touching him to make certain that he is whole.

“Aw, thuck,” Jim gasps, pained, clutching at his nose. “D’you geth him?”

“Yes.” Spock pulls his communicator from a pocket - his hand is not as steady as it should be. He intends to call for a medic, but that turns out to be unnecessary.

The crowd of bystanders parts - giving way to a Starfleet officer in grey and white. There are three silver stars on each of the human’s shoulders, and three golden stripes on each sleeve: the designation of a Captain.

“What the hell is this about!!”

“Captain, I was not aware you had returned to Earth,” Spock remarks.

“Just stopping by,” Pike says, wryly, “and just in time, it seems. I didn’t think I’d find you in the middle of a brawl like this, Cadet.”

They are sitting in a corner of the nearly-abandoned bar. The evidence of the fight is being cleaned up, and both humans being tended. Neither have been badly injured, nothing that a dermal generator cannot take care of. Dawson should be waking up soon.

This was not how Spock had envisioned to spend his evening.

“It was not my intention to be part of it, but Mr Dawson was antagonizing Jim as well as myself. After the first punch was thrown I realized that the odds of Jim escaping unscathed was nil, so I subdued Dawson with a nerve pinch.”

“Jim, is it? So you two are friends?”

“Yes, sir.”

And Pike’s smile turns gentle. “Since you’re an exemplary student and nothing like this has involved you before, you’re going to be let off the hook this time. But a second time you won’t.”

“I assure you, Captain, that I will do my best to avoid a similar situation in the future.”

“Okay, good. Now, I’m curious what the hell started this.” The human gestures widely at the room and the upturned furniture and the smashes glass and the stains of blood from Jim’s broken nose. Spock doesn’t want to sit here, speaking; he wants to go, check on Jim. But he is nearby being looked after by Starfleet medical personnel; he is in good hands. Still. The abstract knowledge is not enough of a comfort.

“Jim and I were at the bar, speaking, when Greg Dawson approached and was introduced as an old friend of Jim’s. He - made a few derogatory comments toward the both of us, which led to Jim punching him in the face.”

Captain Pike frowns. “What kind of comments?”

He does not want to fiddle, uncomfortably, with his hands. He sits still, and does not let his
expression change. “He insinuated that Jim had a negative past of many romantic partners, as well as making derogatory references to my Vulcan heritage.”

“I see. I’m sorry, Spock. Some humans are frankly assholes, even in this time and age.” Spock nearly frowns. “Look, I can’t exactly discipline Mr Dawson since he’s not a cadet. And I don’t want to discipline Kirk more than necessary. I know that he is reckless but he does have a sense of self-preservation, and clearly he wasn’t starting the fight lightly.” Pike sighs idly. “Well, it could’ve been worse. This wasn’t the only reason I wanted to talk with you; I’ve been meaning to check up on you, son. I hear you’re becoming one of the Academy’s best cadets we’ve ever had, really impressing the teachers. And you’re friends with Kirk?”

“Yes, Captain. And others, too.”

“That’s good to hear. That’s really good to hear. Not all humans are like Greg Dawson,” Pike says.

“I know that you are not.”

“If anything like it happens again, though, let me know.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Kirk.”

“Sir, honestly, it was just - a mistake,” Jim says, cradling his newly-set nose. It is an angry red and sore, still healing though the dermal regenetator has sealed any broken skin, and the blood has been wiped away. His knuckles are irritated and swollen. His body is still soaring with adrenaline. “Look, he started it.”

“I’ve already heard the story from Spock. He told me that you threw the first punch, but Mr Dawson insulted you first. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir. You should’ve heard what he said. I only reacted to that!”

Pike regards him gravely. Finally, he breaks the silence. “No more bar brawls. It wasn’t the first time, but I want it to be the last. Understood?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll try.”

The Captain leans back in his chair, and the tension is swept away and replaced. ”You tried the Kobayashi Maru again.”

“You know me,” Jim shrugs. “Always beating the odds. One day I’m going to win that test; I’m gonna beat it.”

Pike shakes his head. It’s never been done. It’s impossible. But - well, Jim has always been good at beating the odds. Speaking of which … “I see you’ve made friends with Spock. More odds to beat?”

Jim’s posture turns serious and earnest and his face is open. “No, that’s not about beating odds at all. Spock’s not just a bet to win.”

“Are you -?” Suddenly, Pike stares at him, almost aghast, paling. “Don’t tell me. Jim. Don’t tell me I have to contact Ambassador Sarek because you’ve -”

“It’s not like that.” Jim protests. “It’s not a one-night thing. We’ve been working on this for months. You can’t contact the Ambassador! Not until Spock is ready to.”
“Kid, you’re in for a challenge.”

“Maybe, but I’m ready for it. Spock’s worth it.”

“You sound genuine.”

“I am. Why would I lie about that?”

“I don’t know. I know it’s none of my business, Jim, but, seriously, if the two of you are - whatever you are - don’t let it get in the way of your careers in Starfleet. And don’t make me have to contact the Ambassador.”

There is something beneath the window.

Spock has not slept. He has lain on the bed, looking at the ceiling, mentally reviewing the last book he read before the trip, and tries to block out the sound of Gary Mitchell’s heavy breathing and rattling snores. The human could have a lung issue. Or are all of them this loud? It is unnerving.

He had left the bar behind reluctantly, assured by Captain Pike that he is in no trouble and neither is Jim. He had seen Jim briefly. His nose had been treated and bruises rapidly healing, but the image remains burned to his retinas. The redness of the blood. Since Vulcan blood is green, green is also the colour of pain, indicating the need to stop, to cease. It had been strange coming to Earth and being confronted by the green-means-go of their traffic lights and other such details; never before has Spock truly associated the colour red with something negative. With pain. With danger.

He cannot recall his mother ever being physically injured to the point of spilling blood. Now he has seen Jim bleed, and he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t want to witness it again.

They had been forced to part ways, as Jim had gone to speak with Pike, and the Captain urged Spock to return to his room and get some rest. Tomorrow they will leave for the Academy quite early. Spock had not been able to argue. Once he was back at the hostel, he had texted Jim, and received a reply half an hour later that all was well.

Jim is meant to be asleep. It is nearly four in the morning, after all.

Spock sits up. There it is again: a flash of light, and it is not the natural softness of dawn. It could just be a car passing by on the street below. He rises, anyway, and goes over to check. Gary Mitchell turns over in his sleep but doesn’t wake, and Spock’s eyes are sharp enough not to need turning on any lights.

It is not a car. It is … a motorcycle? Yes; its silver trim gleams faintly, and its white spotlight is sharp and bright. As he parts the curtain slightly to peer down, he sees now that there is a person seated atop of the back of the bike. There is a helmet hanging off one of the handles, and another is tucked under the driver’s arm.

His communicator bleeps for attention.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

wanna go for a ride?

And Spock almost smiles.

In less than a minute, he is fully dressed, taking care to don his thermal underwear under the red (he
doesn’t want to taste the colour) uniform and his gloves. It is quiet; most residents are asleep. He walks hurriedly past the numbered doors, down the stairs, and outside. The air is chilly and a little frosty, and the bite of it stings his cheeks. Jim has swung around and parked by the entrance to the building under a yellow lamplight.

A few stars are visible, faintly, glimmering.

“Hope this fits,” Jim says, smiling brilliantly yet carefully as if he is nervous. His face is much more healed now, to his relief. There is no visible scar.

He helps with adjusting the black helmet and, thankfully, it does not trouble his ears by being too tight or itchy. Then Jim puts on his own and straddles the bike, gesturing the Vulcan to sit behind him. Few words are exchanged. They are unnecessary. When the human guides his hands to settle around his waist, Spock holds back a shiver of what could be delight mixed with something else, something that makes his insides tickle. It is not unpleasant, though. Touching Jim always makes him react physically; he can control it, but not stop it.

“May I ask where we are going?” he asks. The helmets are linked with a short-range communication device, Jim explains. He’s borrowing the bike from a friend, and bemoans that he couldn’t get his hands on his own, but the farm is a bit outside of the town itself and there was not enough time to fetch it.

“I don’t know,” Jim answers honestly, “I thought we could cruise around a bit. I know a couple of places.”

The rumble of the engine is a low growl when Jim kicks the machine online, albeit muted through the helmet. Spock fights the instinct to clutch Jim harder to keep his balance.

They leave the hostel’s parking lot behind, and take the left at the next crossing. The streets are nearly abandoned but for one or two early-risen commuters and a miserably empty bus. The streets open up, and faintly, behind them, the sky glows pink as the sun begins to rise.

The city is not like San Francisco nor like the other human cities Spock has seen. The town is much more quaint and smaller in size. There are fewer impressive towers rising toward the clouds. They head outside of it. The landscape is quite flat, and there is, as Jim promised, a lot of corn.

They do not speak much. They do not need to. After a while, he realizes Jim is humming something on his breath, a melody of some Terran music. They speed along. The twenty-first century combustion engine is nothing like that of a starship - louder, not as smooth. The wind is like ice, but Jim’s body is warm and in front of him like a shield, and that helps. Once or twice, Jim points out a detail - a tree by the roadside (I climbed that when I was seven and got too scared to climb down, and Sam had to get me out of it); an old house standing lonely on a field (we were told it was haunted and of course I had to check it out). Memories in the flesh.

The sun’s thin rays broaden, slowly, and the sky grows ever clearer and bluer as the photons scatter in the atmosphere. The colours of the world deepen as the grey darkness of night lifts. Earth, in its own way, is quite beautiful.

It is so very blue.

Eventually, they reach the end of a dirt road. It steeps abruptly down a ravine, as if a blade has cut into the rock itself and scooped it up, leaving behind a huge scar.

Spock knows this place, because he felt it in their mindmeld. This was the place Jim so recklessly - a
child of only twelve (before Tarsus IV; before; before) defiantly wanted to escape and he’d stolen his
dead father’s old antique car and driven it off the cliff, nearly killing himself in the process. Nearly.
The thought strikes him how close, just how close Jim had come to ceasing to exist, how close
they’d come to never meeting. Too close.

What if they had not?

He does not finish the thought.

Here, Jim slows down and stops the engine. Dust swirls around them.

Jim pulls off his helmet and draws a breath, and Spock follows suit. They step off the bike and onto
the gravel. The air tastes differently here. For miles around there is nothing to see: the town is behind
them, and there is only the ravine and the corn fields and the empty roads. A few scattered farms lie
still at a distance. The Shipyards, with the Enterprise as its crown, makes a blurry, jagged silhouette
jutting out from the plains.

“I’m sorry,” says Jim then.

This is unexpected. Spock turns to face him. “What for?”

“Greg. What he said. He -”

“- is not an exemplary human,” Spock says; he does not like seeing Jim like this, conflicted, even
pained. “I understand there are some who are far more superior. I did not take ill, Jim, other than
when he hurt you. He had no right to do that.”

Jim sighs. “I just don’t get it, Spock, why some people are such assholes.”

“Neither do I.” Oh, logically, coldly: yes. He does understand the mechanics, how history tends to
repeat itself and he has read so many books and he has seen how his mother was treated in the early
years, and he knows; differences cause people to react illogically. Even Vulcans. But he also
understands at this instance what Jim means. This reaction to injustice.

He wants to leave it behind.

The human holds out a hand, an offering. “I wanted to show you my hometown, the good sides of it.
What d’you think?”

“It is different,” Spock settles on, thinking for a moment. “From Vulcan.”

Jim’s expression smooths, becomes a smile. It is good to see him smile. “Not as hot.”

“No. I … I would like to show you Shi’kahr someday.”

“I want to see it. Bet you didn’t crash any cars there,” Jim says idly, voice fading, gaze training the
movement of Spock’s hand as he raises it to grip the human’s. It is nicely warm. On impulse, he
touches his fingertips to Jim’s, the Vulcan way. The human responds. When he continues to speak,
his voice is lower, closer. “At the bar … what was it you were going to say?”

Spock cannot, for his perfectly impeccable memory, remember. Or perhaps decide. His mind had
never finished that sentence. He had only know that he wanted to say close to Jim, and express
something - something emotional, something non-Vulcan.

“… I would like to kiss you.” His voice escapes as a murmur, certain, yet quiet, so close to the
human’s skin.

“We are kissing,” Jim whispers, moving closer, hands entwined.

“The human way,” Spock says, his voice too becoming something like a whisper. It is as if the galaxy has narrowed down to this one moment between the two of them, and everything else has stopped existing, as illogical and irrational as the thought may be. “How does it work?” What does it taste like? he almost asks, because mouths are involved in a human kiss, and therefore - logically - it must have a taste.

Jim moves slowly. He raises his free hand toward Spock’s shoulder where it meets the neck, and he allows the touch, assuring him that it’s all right, and the human tilts his head a little. His tongue darts out to moisten his lips. Spock can feel his pulse rising, same as at the bar. Nervousness. Human touch is different from Vulcan touch. Other things of significance.

“Sort of like this,” Jim murmurs. He leans in.

His lips are warm and soft, and Spock cannot help his eyes from wanting to fall shut. A reflex. Jim’s eyes are lidded. His thoughts are mulled and trembling; a great force, and he feels them too, and Jim is happy, oh, Jim is happy, he can feel it; he is nervous a little bit afraid (echoes of oh please don’t let me fuck this up and i care so much it frightens me) but also happy, his heart beating steady and fast, and his thumb rolls in gentle circles against the Vulcan’s nape, lulling, comfortable. So warm.

And Spock forgets the sensation of breath.
act i :: part nine

Chapter Summary

act i. part nine.
The limits of time.

ni’var
(noun)
[no Standard Federation English translation applicable]
two who are one

To: S’chn T’gai Sarek (ambassador.sarek@vn.a)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2257.54
Subject: Important development [Modern Golic Vulcan]

Father,

I recall you once urging me to choose my own destiny. When I began to exercise this right to choose by turning away Shi’Oren t’Ek’Tallar T’Khasi in favour of the Federation Starfleet, your reaction indicated to me that, whichever path I thereon would choose, it would not be one in your favour.

A human cadet, James Tiberius Kirk, or Jim as he prefers to be called, and I have begun a romantically inclined relationship. We have not formed a Bond, although we have mindmelded. The abruptness of this development is not illogical. Jim and I have shared experiences here on Earth which make us drawn to one another. We are mentally compatible. This is a logical choice.

My mother is human, as is Jim. Therefore I perceive that you may logically understand my reasoning for this choice, as you once yourself made a similar one. I feel there is no need to preach Jim’s qualities as my choice has already been made and they will not stir you. I am certain that Jim is my t’hy’la, and together we are ni’var.

If this choice displeases you, I cannot offer apologizes. I previously informed my mother of this relationship, and asked her not to reveal it to you. My mother only did what she thought was best, both logically and emotionally, by respecting this wish. I take all blame for that.

I have made my choices.

Dif-tor heh smusma,
“Bones, why did you get married?”

He lowers the PADD to stare at his roommate in astonishment, and he’s fucking glad he isn’t eating or drinking anything at this particular moment.

Jim meets his stare head-on with a roll of eyes. ”I’m not sick, Bones. Just answer the question please.”

“Why do you – ah. This is about Spock. Shit, you’re really in deep. I mean, Jim, how long have the two of you been dating? A couple of months, tops?”

“Something like that.” Jim shrugs. “Depends on how you count.”

“That ain’t a lot of time. Not a lot of time at all to start thinkin’ about marriage. Jeez, kid.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Seriously. When you decided, I mean, what’s – what made you decide?”

He thinks for a moment. Then exhales. Jim is stubborn, impossibly so; he’s not going to give in without a fight. Or, in this case, a thorough discussion. Bones has got to give him that. He’s one tenacious as well as frighteningly intelligent little shit, which does sort of help when one wants to become a starship Captain.

“I loved her,” he says at last, plainly. “Really. I was a young fool in love. Turns out that that’s not all there is to make a good relationship work, but, yeah. She was intelligent, witty, clever, beautiful … the perfect combination. Dated for about a year before we got hitched. She popped the question, I said yes, and then it was smooth sailing until – Hell, you know all about that. Nevermind. It worked out for a while, at least, enough for plenty of good memories and a daughter. Kid, are you thinking …? I mean, it’s a rough ride. I mean it. It’s not all fields of roses and the rest of those goddamn clichés. Sometimes it’s a real pain in the ass.”

“Maybe, but I’m not a pessimist, and I don’t believe in no-win scenarios.”

What a fucking bother. He didn’t go to medschool for this. He never should’ve gotten that degree in psychology – it had seemed a good idea at the time, but, really. Pain in the ass. He could’ve been a countryside surgeon. When did he become the emotional guidance counselor for this kid and his Vulcan boyfriend?

Right.

“It’s not a matter about belief. Either it works out or it doesn’t. Either way – two months. Ain’t that moving a bit fast?”

“So you don’t think I should,” Jim says flatly.

“Normally, I’d say you’re out of your corn-fed mind just thinkin’ about it,” he shakes his head. He’s
seen Jim with others: for a day, a week, a month. Worried about those STDs, alien or no, even though Jim’s a smart kid so at least protection was involved. He’s seen Jim waltz from person to person like a breeze, almost like someone sampling the table at a feast. Can’t say if he’s seen him fall in love, and frankly, Bones hasn’t wanted to know the details. Anyway, no one’s stuck around long enough so that he’s had to question them.

Nothing has been this slow or gentle. Jim truly has approached this differently. And Bones has never believed in love at first sight, or at least never believed in the notion of first crushes working out, becoming something more – but Jim has a track record of breaking a lot of expectations and setting new records. It’s in his blood.

“But I got to say the two of your kind of … click,” he admits warily. “There, I’ve said it. Now, go away, stop bothering me. I’m trying to read.”

“But,” Jim persists, “what if you’re really really certain and you’ve read each other’s minds –”

God. “Too much information.”

“You live in the gutter, Bones. I’ve never had a relationship this chaste. Seriously. We only kissed the human way one time! It was awesome, by the way. I mean, Spock is so –”

Okay, he does not need to know. “Too. much. information,” he repeats, taking care to punctuate each word clearly. “Look, want my advice? Just ask yourself: are you ready to throw yourself into the figurative curveball? Are you ready to make sacrifices, argue, fight, stick together –”

“— through the thick and thin? Yeah. Yeah, I am, Bones. We’ve mindmelded. I don’t think there’s much that can top that. We work. Spock is brilliant and beautiful and —”

“So you love him,” he cuts in before Jim can start a fucking sonnet. Jeez. He didn’t sign up to be some bloody love guru; he’s a doctor. His life would’ve been ten times easier if he hadn’t ended up next to cadet-to-be James T. Kirk on that shuttlecraft one and a half years ago. It might’ve been more boring now, but it would also have been much less complicated. And he would also be without a good friend.

Damn it.

It’s a bit like watching a child discover a new word, tasting it, trying it in a hundred different ways. Something dawns in Jim’s eyes.

“Love.”

Bones observes him carefully. “Have you told him? Has he told you?”

“… Not in those words, I guess. I mean … I’ve sensed his thoughts, and they can be pretty explicit. Not like that,” Jim adds, when Bones feels his eye twitch in growing horror. “He’s like a poet on the inside just struggling to get out. How – how long did you wait until you said the words?”

“Honestly, I don’t remember; it was years ago. She wasn’t my first crush. And it’s not some magic code that opens a magic door, Jim. It doesn’t automatically make everything better or more real. It’s not like you have to say it.”

Jim’s face falls slightly.

“Just, just … oh, just go for it, then!” Bones says, realizing that even if he told Jim no, even if he gave him a thousand logical – ugh, now he sounds like the hobgoblin – a thousand logical reasons
why it’s a bad idea to pursue the idea, he’s a hundred percent sure that Jim would go ahead anyway. He’s stubborn and in love and refusing to be disillusioned. “What’s the chance he’ll say no, huh?”

It was meant as a rhetorical question, but Jim’s too worked up to figure that out. “Pretty slim. He’s already sort of explained that Vulcans mate for life. That’s the thing, Bones, what if he realizes that I’m just a puny human and he could –”

“Then I’d say you’re out of your corn-fed mind,” Bones interrupts. “Even I can see some darn emotions in those hollow, soulless eyes when he looks your way. Honestly, kid. For a Vulcan, Spock is pretty expressive. He’s got like seventeen non-expressive expressions that even I am starting to notice.”

And he might not say it aloud, but if that Vulcan breaks Jim’s heart – well, let’s just say that Bones knows his way around bodies.

“Oh … right. Thanks, Bones.”

And he can’t help but heave a sigh, grin wryly, and shake his head again. Jim, for all his faults, is a good kid, and he’s gotten pretty attached to him. And (though he will never admit it aloud), through him, to the hobgoblin as well. *Friend of my friend* and all that.

“Anytime, kid. Anytime.”

---

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*ever been to a ball? the dance and food thing, not the round thing*

Spock (0934-5294-42)

*Are you asking me to accompany you to one?*

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*yeah if u want to? :)*

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*pike’s arranged a spring ball thingy for 3rd and 4th year cadets in a couple of weeks and basically since im on an accelerated course i apply. and i can bring a +1*

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*I think he’s looking for officers for the Enterprise, this is our chance!!*

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*so would u like to come? :D*

Spock (0934-5294-42)

*Is there a certain dress code to adhere to?*

Jim (0927-4339-11)

*i think most stuff is ok as long as u arent naked or smth*

Spock (0934-5294-42)

*I will not attend any such event undressed, Jim.*

Spock (0934-5294-42)

*Neither will you.*
Jim (0927-4339-11)

ok :P how about matching tuxes? i know a guy who can fix us up without charge :)

Spock (0934-5294-42)

I am willing to go as long as your choice of colours is not outrageous.

Jim (0927-4339-11)

it wont be, promise :*  

Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth
Stardate 2257.67

This study session is different from their usual ones in one notable aspect.

Nyota had asked that they go to her room instead of the library, which is fine; that has happened before, when her roommate Gaila is not there. The Orion is not there this time either. But something else is. It is lying atop of the desk, where the PADDs and books should be: neither are open or online. Nyota is uncharacteristically distracted. No pencils have been sharpened, and she is not asking questions about the latest assignment.

There is a purring noise. Strange.

“Nyota, why is there what appears to be a mammalian specimen lying atop your desk?” Spock asks, approaching.

“Oh,” she says. “Well, I found it this morning when I was out jogging. Just lying on the sidewalk, poor thing, it was hungry and shivering from the rain. And I couldn’t just let it lie there, could I?” She smiles at the creature. Her tone of voice is peculiar when she looks at it, as if addressing a small child. “It’s cute, isn’t it? Aren’t you a sweet thing?”

“You are aware that there is a no-pets rule on campus,” he is compelled to inform her. Surely she is aware of this? She is an exemplary cadet.

“Please don’t tell anyone! I’m just going to nurse it back to health and then release it. It’s just so pitiful.” Nyota strokes its … back? It is hard to tell, since Spock cannot identify where its head is, or indeed any other particular limb. The creature appears to be nearly round, almost like … Well, Jim would probably have described it as a ‘ball of fluff’. The human would also express quite a lot of sentiment and curiosity towards it, the Vulcan can predict. He would give it a name.

The purring intensifies. The creature does not appear harmful. Reluctantly, Spock sits on an empty chair, observing it further. He has not seen its like before. “Do you know what it is?”

“Well, I found it this morning when I was out jogging. Just lying on the sidewalk, poor thing, it was hungry and shivering from the rain. And I couldn’t just let it lie there, could I?” She smiles at the creature. Her tone of voice is peculiar when she looks at it, as if addressing a small child. “It’s cute, isn’t it? Aren’t you a sweet thing?”

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“Not yet. I’m searching the internet and stuff, but no luck. As far as I figure, it’s an omnivore, and it hasn’t reacted badly to anything I’ve given it. It eats a lot. Poor thing’s probably starved.” The human carefully lifts the creature, cradling it in her hands. With the other she offers it a flat biscuit, which the creature immediately begins to devour. “I should name it something.”

This is a sign of emotional attachment, meaning it will be harder for her to release it to the wild.

“Nyota, I am not certain that is a very good idea.”

“Here,” she offers. “Hold it.”

Vaguely alarmed, he raises a hand in the sign he recognizes as the human gesture meaning to stop or
hinder. “That … would not be a good idea, either.”

“It doesn’t bite,” Nyota assures him, visibly holding back mild laughter. She holds it out. “It’s really soft.”

She will be happier if he touches it. Carefully, he does so, though he does not hold it up. It is indeed very soft. Its fur is a dark brown. And the purring noise is quite … soothing. “Fascinating.”

Nyota smiles. “Told you it wasn’t dangerous.”

“I never believed such a thing,” Spock protests. “Nyota, perhaps we should begin our studies now?”

It has become strange to be alone at night.

The dorming issue has been resolved, days and days ago, and Jim and Leonard given their own rooms. It has left behind a silence which both wholesome and disconcerting.

There is no snoring, no noise of bodies turning, no light from an open communicator or PADD in the middle of dark night - both Leonard and Jim had tendencies to stay awake and look at the screens, checking social media or reading something or exchanging text messages with friends. He can return the room’s temperature to its normal range of forty-two degrees Celsius without them here. He no longer needs to sleep beneath a layer of three blankets.

Strange, yes, how fast he got used to sharing the space with the humans, even if it was also strange to share meal times with them, to suddenly have to make a queue system for the use of the shower, and to make up dormitory rules. The humans had littered their things all over the room. They were not tidy. And yet, a part of him, while he revels at the silence - this ability to breathe - is unsettled. It will pass, though.

He can meditate in utter quiet.

He still has trouble sleeping.

Morning nears. The first rays of sun begin to warm this side of the Earth. He’s sitting on the mat, palms upturned, and feels the flicker of the candles when the communicator pings, indicating a new message. At first he thinks it is Jim, though the human knows that he usually meditates as this hour and has now understood that he needs that time, undisturbed. As of late Jim hasn’t interrupted him at those times. He cannot sense any distress or pain. Perhaps he is bored.

It is not Jim.

**Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)**

*Hi Spock, sorry to bother you, but do you have time to pass by my dorm asap?*

**Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)**

*asap = as soon as possible*

This is unusual. Human nature, he decides; they are so impulsive. Nyota would not disturb him unless it’s important.

**Spock (0934-5294-42)**

*I will come to your room now. Is anything amiss?*

**Nyota Uhura (0914-9374-15)**
There are more of those creatures. In fact, there are eleven of them; one is the same as yesterday. Others have dark fur, or white, even black. The purring is tenfold stronger than it was.

Nyota is sitting on the bed, and Gaila with her, holding up one proudly. Both are smiling. It is somewhat disconcerting.

“Hi, Spock, thanks for coming,” the human says, looking up. Swiftly she closes the door behind Spock, after peering out as if to make certain that he wasn’t followed.

“Have you found more of the creatures in the street?”

“No,” laughs Gaila. “It gave birth in the middle of the night. Woke up to find them swarming!” The Orion is cradling several to her chest in avid fascination.

Oh. He had not attempted to prod into the creature’s mind as he touched it yesterday, but perhaps he should have done so. That way he could have found this out and warned Nyota beforehand, letting her prepare for the event. However, there appears to be no signs of distress or trauma to the newfound mother. The creature is as peaceful as always.

“I see.” Fascinating. Several of the creatures are near its mother in size, indicating their rate of growth. Very fast. “Have you found out its species yet?”

“Yeah,” says Nyota, handing him a PADD. “Here, it says it’s called a tribble.”

He takes the PADD and begins to read the article. Soon enough, he has a realization. This is a problem. Tribbles are not native to Earth, and cannot easily have gotten here unless smuggled by an unknown third party. They are described as peaceful, making a pleasant noise known for its tranquilizing effects, and extremely prolific. They eat, and give birth, all in an endless cycle. Fascinating, yet a huge trouble. If they multiply according to the cycle this graph indicates, if well-fed - which the human and Orion are making sure to keep them - then …

“Nyota,” he says, alarmed. “You must remove the tribbles immediately. It will be difficult to keep them hidden much longer, and then security will be aware you have violated the no-pets rule.”

“Oh,” she sighs. “They’re harmless!”

“In twenty-four hours your dormitory will be, in your words, ‘swarming’ with tribbles. One hundred and two, to be exact.”

“Calculator on legs,” mutters Gaila. Spock’s eyebrow nearly twitches.

However, Nyota is looking at him with serious attention. “You sure? I mean, they’re just …”

“Yes, unless you stop feeding them. The article describes them as being so prolific that they are more or less born pregnant, meaning they need no time for sexual recreation to reproduce.”

“Wow,” says Gaila, petting a tribble absentmindedly. “Taking all the fun out of it.”

Spock chooses not to comment that.

Nyota rolls her eyes at her roommate. “Okay. So what do we do? I can’t just dump them in the street!”
No, she cannot; that would be unnecessary cruel. But they cannot simply let this be, or soon they will be drowning in tribbles. "Perhaps we should alert the proper authorities. There must be an animal shelter in the city.”

“And let them take them away?”

Clearly, he had underestimated how illogically emotionally attached Nyota would be in this matter.

“Very well. I reserve my judgment.”

There are tribbles on campus. There are in nearly every dormitory on the second level of building B-30, and spreading steadily toward the third. Campus security and its janitors are at a loss. These are not cockroaches they can trample on to remove. Emergency calls are made. The cleaners are furious and frustrated. Not to mention the fact that cadets are happily taking a tribble here or there and carrying them to their own rooms in other buildings, thereby causing an even more widespread infestation. Whatever soothing effect the creatures’ purring has, it will soon reach a limit of tolerance.

It is in the middle of night when one falls into Spock’s quarters - via the ventilation system, no doubt.

He rises from the bed when he hears the noise, and does not bother to change out his pyjamas. Instead he gathers the tribble, and tries to ignore its warm purring noise and its effects on his cardiovascular system, and unlocks his door. It is not so late that no one is awake. Cadet Rand is standing in the middle of the corridor with an armful of tribbles.

She seems to be at a loss of what to do. At seeing the Vulcan, Rand grins wryly. “Got one too, huh?”

Wordlessly, Spock places the tribble on the floor, before returning to his room. He has a sense that the tribble will be picked up and cared for by someone else, and no doubt it will give birth to another litter before the night is up. He seals the vent, and opens a window to let in a fresh breeze.

He can still hear the intense purring through the door.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
ive got one!! :) want one? <3

Jim (0927-4339-11)
[1 image file attached]
isnt it cute?? :D

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I have no need for a furry pet. It is against the rules. I do not believe it is a good idea for you to keep it. You may end up in trouble.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
oh :/

Jim (0927-4339-11)
more for me i guess
In the morning, he reaches the lecture hall for the seminar in Tactics to find there are tribbles here too. Cadets are not paying attention to the teacher. Instead they are cuddling with the tribbles, stroking them, petting them, whispering nonsense as if the tribbles would somehow suddenly understand human language. The purring is overwhelming. A part of Spock’s mind, caught by it, urges him to relax and fall asleep. The teacher gives up halfway through and announces class to be over, giving them extra homework instead. For once the cadets do not protest to this. They are too absorbed with paying attention to their tribbles.

It seems Spock is the only cadet with all of his senses still intact.

As he meets him for lunch, Jim is absurdly pleased.

“Newton’s had another litter!”

“Jim, there are two hundred and seven tribbles in your room already,” Spock points out. “You really do not need any more of them.”

The human only shakes his head. He has brought one with him, and strokes its back idly with his free hand while he stabs at his food with the other. Every now and then he offers a bite to the creature. “Yeah, well. They’re nice and soft and furry, and make a pleasant sound - what’s not to like?”

Spock only shakes his head. “They must be removed. There are currently one million three hundred thousand eight hundred and two tribbles on campus, and their numbers growing are growing every minute. Nearly all food processors are malfunctioning because of the tribbles. There is something disquieting about them.”

“Oh?” Leonard, who is also sitting with them, raises an eyebrow in the Vulcan’s direction. “Don’t tell me you’ve got a feeling.”

“Do not be insulting, Doctor.”

Jim fails to hide a smile even as he takes another bite.

“I am merely pointing out the scientific facts. The tribbles are consuming whatever food they can access; they are clogging the ventilation systems: they fill nearly every hallway on campus, and are causing disruptions to class. It is, in other words, an infestation. I see no positive aspects to them.”

“Y’know what, Spock?” Leonard grumbles.

“I do not ‘know what’. Please specify.”

“I’ve discovered something - that I like ’em. More than I like you. You see, it’s the human way to like little furry things. Ever heard of a pet? Every kid has ’em at some point.”

Spock holds back a sigh. He does not tell them about I-Chaya. Well, Jim already knows, and it is not information he is ready to disclose to Leonard. “It is fortunate that I have spent enough time around humans now to learn to put up with practically all of your illogical ways. And the tribbles do have one redeeming characteristic.”
“What’s that?”

“They do not talk too much.”

Leonard crosses his arms, digging into his pasta. Jim, giving up on trying to quell his grin, starts laughing openly in irrational ways which causes heat to rise in Spock’s chest.

“Shaddup, Jim,” the Doctor mutters, pointing a fork at him. “Feed your damn tribbles.”

They need to be fitted for the tuxes. The friend of a friend of Jim’s owes him a favour, for something left unspecified, and Spock does not ask questions as he is not certain the answer would be all in a good light. The owner of the shop specializes in the craft and prefers to do a lot of the work by hand rather than by machine. It is a thing Spock can appreciate. Vulcans do, after all, have things of art still, despite the importance of logic.

But he isn’t sure it is entirely sure it is necessary for them to stand like this and be measured. Surely they could have transmitted their specifications along with scanned digital models? It would have been less time-consuming. And he would not be being poked with needles.

The tailor is quite enthusiastic. Jim compares fabrics. They are of high quality. Spock, frankly, cares mostly about the functionality of the garment, and would prefer if there were few embellishments. Fortunately, Jim understands this. He chooses a simple pattern. The human is excited. It is a tremor in his soul. He is looking forward to the ball.

Spock remembers attending such things with his father, both on Vulcan and on other worlds, including, when he was very little, Earth. That was the first time he had seen, in person, a Starfleet officer – an Admiral nowadays retired – and began to consider the prospect. His father wanted him to be a scientist or an ambassador or at least something Vulcan, and kept encouraging that; the thought of Starfleet never crossed his mind.

“Wonder who’ll be there,” Jim comments idly when the tailor momentarily disappears into a back room to fetch something. He is standing opposite to him, with two large mirrors on either side.

“All senior cadets have been invited,” Spock says, “meaning at least two hundred and seventy-five attendants, if we also include Captain Pike. Did he mention which admirals or commanders would be present?”

“No, it was vague like, but I hope Admiral Marcus is there. At least for a bit. If I’m gonna be Captain one day, I need a good rep with these people. I think not all of them like me.”

Spock doesn’t point out that he is probably right. Jim can be quite irrational and impulsive, and behave in ways which the rulebook doesn’t always agree with. No other student has attempted the *Kobayashi Maru* twice.

“I am sure you will have the opportunity to make contact with the officers,” he says instead.

The tailor returns. Finally, they can step down. They are informed that they can come fetch the tuxes on Friday; just in time for the ball the next night.

And finally, on a Thursday, there are no tribbles. The whole of campus is briefly evacuated that afternoon. It is a hardship, no doubt, for the staff. Each student is checked and double-checked with a scanner. Fifty-eight cadets are caught attempting to smuggle one or more tribbles through the door.
When they are allowed back, two hours later, there are no more tribbles in sight. The cadets are assured that no animal has been harmed and they have been taken aboard a ship which will take them back to their natural homeworld. Rumours begin to churn at once. Spock does not listen to them, as the cadets’ theories are ridiculous at best. Instead, he waits until there is an announcement made by the admiralty. A human named Cyrano Jones has been arrested for illegal smuggling and animal breeding. Apparently, in shipping a cargo of tribbles to a customer on Earth, one single tribble escaped its prison and found itself picked up from the street by an unknown cadet.

Spock does Nyota a favour by not mentioning to anyone that he knows who that unknown cadet was.

Instead, pleased that this is over, he returns to his book. The sudden silence now that the incessant purring is gone is both a relief and somewhat strange. No doubt Jim will be miserable for days for having to give up Newton to the proper authorities.

If given the chance, the human will probably attempt to get his hands on a new pet.

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**Jim** (0927-4339-11)

*r u a dog or cat person? :)*

**Jim** (0927-4339-11)

*could name it schrödinger*

**Jim** (0927-4339-11)

*or t’pan*

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**Spock** (0934-5294-42)

*Jim, I understand that you appreciate small furry animals, but we cannot get a feline or any other pet for that matter. They would not be comfortable on campus, and it is against regulations.*

**Jim** (0927-4339-11)

*:‘(*

**Jim** (0927-4339-11)

*how about a pet robot??*

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**Starfleet Academy Campus · San Francisco · Earth**

**Stardate 2257.79**

Across the room sitting on a well-lit podium, string quartet is playing a rendering of Haydn’s Opus 20 number four in D minor, and the pleasant sound cradles the room. Within there are many voices, chattering calmly. Cadets – all dressed appropriately in smart blacks or neat full-length dresses or other garments meant for the occasions. Officers – all in Starfleet dress uniform, with gleaming stars on their shoulders and stripes on their wrists indicating rank.

They are not the first to arrive, nor the last. They enter the large chamber side-by-side, not quite touching, a choice which Jim respects. The human had first wanted to hold his hand. Even though he is the only Vulcan here and few would have been able to recognize such a touch as what it would mean in Vulcan context, Spock thinks it would have been a bit too obscene, in front of so many strangers.
Not all strangers, though. They know or have met some of the cadets before, even though they are all seniors, due to their accelerated programs. At a distance Spock can also spot several well-known Commanders, Captains, and one or two Admirals.

A server droid moves through the crowd, and Jim snatches a glass from its tray. Spock refrains. Albeit the drinks are non-alcoholic, they are mostly meant to mimic alcoholic drinks, and he doubts they would be pleasant to the palate.

Someone suddenly claps Jim’s shoulder: a human gesture of greeting between friends.

“Jimmy!”

“Scotty! Hey, I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Taking my final finals this year, remember,” Scotty says with a laugh. “How’re you doing? Hullo, Spock!”

“Hello. We are both well.”

“I didn’t know you’re a senior,” the Scotsman says to Spock cheerily. It seems to be his default mode.

“I am not,” he clarifies, and shares a look with Jim. The young man is smiling. He seems … proud, and happy. “I accompanied Jim.”

“Oh, as his plus-one?”

“As his date,” Jim says, practically puffing his chest out.

“Splendid!” says Scotty with a grin. “Wondered when you two would get around with it.”

“Hang on, have you been talking with Bones?”

“Yup. Great guy, that doc. I’ve got a seat over there, but we’ll see each other later, yeah?”

There will be food in no doubt copious amounts. But first, there is a brief welcoming speech by Admiral Marcus. The Admiral spends most of his time on Earth nowadays, as the chief superior officer of Starfleet, but recounts with nostalgia his days as a Captain, the ability to command a starship and explore the universe. He also speaks with fond remembrance about his own days at the Academy, how he’d, too, been young and occasionally gotten in trouble with his peers. A human would.

Jim, Spock can sense, is only a little bored. He doesn’t like speeches in general, but he looks up to the Admiral. Personally, Spock wonders if Captain Pike will speak. He would like to talk with him about the Enterprise and possibilities of the future.

After perhaps forty minutes of walking around to mingle with the other cadets, they are allowed to take seat, and the food is served.

The food is very good. It has not been replicated, but cooked with care by real people. Everyone is enjoying themselves. Spock can sense an overlaying emotion in the room: it is warm, and crowded, but there is no sensation of tension or stress as there tends to be in the classrooms and lecture halls. It reminds him a little bit about the Theater, before …

He ceases the thought before it is fully formed.
He doesn’t want to think about the Theater.

Spock takes another bite.

Jim is avidly discussing possible assignments with the cadet next to him, a woman in their own age. She’s hoping to serve aboard the *Farragut* under Captain Pike’s former First Officer. Naturally, Jim disagrees; he truly feels that the *Enterprise* is the only ship for him. It is illogical, but Spock cannot fault him for it, since that is the ship Jim has seen take shape while he was growing up in Riverside.

There is a noise.

Yes, he notices it now.

A purring noise, rising in pitch, until it finally becomes a distressed squeak. It is not a human sound. Strange. Jim shifts, as if uncomfortable, and Spock realizes that he is the source – rather, the inside of his jacket, which he’s taken off and draped over the back of his chair. Now, one of the pockets is squirming, and Jim’s hand shoots into it as if on reflex.

There is only one conclusion he can make.

“Jim, is that a tribble?” he asks quietly. He cannot help but think that Jim could get in trouble for this. Tribbles are not allowed. They are sitting at a table surrounded by hundreds of cadets as well as senior Starfleet officers, as sooner or later one is bound to notice. More to the point, whatever could Jim be doing with one now? Why bring it here?

Jim grimaces. “Look, I didn’t mean to, but – yeah. Bones couldn’t keep an eye on Newton tonight, ‘cuz he’s somewhere around, so. I had to bring them.” His eyes flicker, and then he smiles conspiratorially, placing a finger across of his lips. The gesture is somewhat distracting. “Shh.”

If he were human, Spock would have raised a disapproving eyebrow in his direction.

The tribble does not silence, no matter how much Jim pets it or tries to smuggle food to his pocket. Others are starting to notice the noise.

The cadet sitting next to Spock, an older student who Spock doesn’t immediately recognize, glances at Jim for a second, and then down at his pocket. The cadet frowns quite angrily but does not speak.

The squeaking intensifies.

For some reason, it strikes Spock that the purring had only turned into that distressed noise when said cadet had sat down; previously, the seat had been empty. Now, that cadet is gripping a fork without eating the food, and keeps glancing at Jim. It is quite unsettling, that expression directed at Jim. Spock does not like it. And he cannot quantify this emotion; a human might call it intuition.

Eventually, the cadet mutters: “Can’t you get rid of that thing?”

“Sorry,” Jim murmurs without sounding like he means it. He has a hand now in the pocket, cradling the tribble. “I think something’s wrong with it, Spock,” he says quietly. “Newton and the others never got upset before.”

“Look, can’t you shut it up?” The question becomes almost a growl. It does not sound as if the cadet is afraid of the creature, but irritated, on the verge of angry.

“Hey, it’s just a tribble, it’s not harmful,” Jim says.
There is coldness in the air. Spock becomes aware of it. A sense of hostility. For a moment, he does not hear the rising and falling voices of the cadets and officers around them, or the clinkering silverware, or the faint dulled music from the string quartet. For a moment, all of his senses, like in warning, focus on the unknown cadet. He looks like a cadet, anyway. He is in his reds, which several cadets attending the event are. But the details are off. The cufflinks are upside down. The uniform does not appear to fit the cadet correctly, as if it belongs to someone else.

The cadet’s hand has released the fork. He is not touching any of the food on the table. He is reaching, slowly, silently, to his side.

The tribble is frantically shrieking. The female cadet next to Jim frowns.

“What’s that noise? Kirk, what’s that?”

It is attracting attention from the next table over, where a Captain, judging by her colours, is seated; she looks at them, at Jim.

“Is there a problem here?”

“Uh uh, No problem, ma’am.” Jim shakes his head, trying in vain to shush the tribble.

Spock still feels … cold. This sense of – *premonition* … he has not felt it many times in his life; but whenever he did, something always went poorly. It is what humans would call instinct, and right now it does not want to be ignored. He sees without seeing the Captain rise, approaching their table.

The unknown cadet is still moving his hand to the side. No. Down. Reaching for his boot. For a moment the human’s gaze flickers, between Jim and the Captain and, several tables across the room, to where Admiral Marcus is sitting along with some other senior officers. Spock follows the human’s line of sight. The view is direct and clear from here.

“Cadet,” the Captain – Ramstrom, commander of the USS *Regula I*, Spock registers, vaguely – says to Jim. “Remove that creature from your pocket immediately.”

“I think there’s a mistake … no creatures here …” Jim chuckles nervously, and might be smiling, charmingly, disarmingly. Spock is not looking at him.

The unknown cadet is reaching for something in his boot.

And Spock realizes – an insight: *instinct* – that he cannot let him do that.

“Cadet, what are you doing?” Spock asks.

The human doesn’t respond but continues the motion. It is not a phaser, but it looks like a detonator. It is small and smooth, a cylinder of some sort. He is about to press the button, and Spock moves, completely ignoring the trouble with the tribble now – he stands, meaning to nerve pinch the cadet. The human manages to avoid him just in time, sidestepping. The cylinder slides out of his grasp, rolling onto the floor, coming to a stop by the edge of another table, stopped by the overhanging cloth. Spock’s hand comes in contact with the man’s wrist.

It is not a mindmeld, not even an intentional reading. But his body is concentrated on this possible threat, and he cannot help but overhear: this man is not frightened. He is deeply cold, enraged, and concentrated, and he has a mission, he will fulfil it. He is not a cadet. He is an impostor.

Jim and the others are noticing that something’s wrong. Turning. The impostor is faster. He pulls out the phaser which was hidden in his trouser belt – the belt must have been magnetically shielded to
make sure any weapon could avoid detection by the guards at the door, Spock rationalizes idly, not truly thinking it. Reacting. He tries to nerve pinch him again.

The impostor has some kind of training in fighting. He is strong for a human, and fast, and he dodges again and seems to realize that whatever the plan was – to stay unseen and hidden – has been ruined. He dodges, and grabs Spock’s shoulder harshly, nearly wrenching it out of its socket, and spins him around like a flesh-and-blood shield, pressing the phaser to his neck.

Perhaps that was why the tribble was shrieking, Spock thinks. Maybe it could sense the impostor’s malicious intent. Perhaps such a pet would not be amiss after all.

Jim stands up, paling and furious. Captain Ramstrom is unarmed; they all are. But this room is full of cadets and officers, and security will soon be alerted.

The quartet silences. People are noticing the commotion.

“Don’t move,” the impostor hisses, pressing the phaser harder against Spock’s throat. He then looks at Captain Ramstrom, raising his voice. “Hello, Starfleet. Apologizes about this.”

“Let the cadet go,” the Captain orders, keeping her voice calm.

It is more than Jim is capable of at the moment. It appears the female cadet is holding him back from launching himself at the impostor.

Spock locks eyes with him. They do not have a fully developed Bond yet, and cannot transmit much at this distance, other than brief impressions. Jim, he thinks, willing him to listen. It will be all right.

The impostor is steady. No fear. And perhaps the impostor has not realized, does not know, what it means that his hostage is a Vulcan and that Spock’s hands are still free, albeit the phaser limits his options. The human is not wearing any gloves or anything else to cover his hands.

Like on Luna, he thinks, like with the Andorians. He can …

“What is it you want?”

Other cadets are being ordered to back away, forming a circle around them. Security is being called for. Admiral Marcus hurries across the room.

“Who do you represent? Are you part of a plot?”

“What do you think, Starfleet?” the impostor retorts.

And Spock knows, with certainty, without words. Feigning a weak struggle, he has grasped at the human’s arm, which is slung over his upper torso to keep him from moving. His fingers touch skin, and he is revolted; the human’s mind is not trying to protect itself. And finally Jim seems to understand.

Jim nods at him shakily. It’ll be all right.

There are others, Spock can pick up. Numbers are uncertain but there are others waiting and this is the signal they are waiting for. KEHL does not want aliens on Earth and do not want Starfleet to keep looking for them. They want to wage war, and what better way to start it than to blow up the senior admiralty and half of the Academy? They are waiting to move in, to plant evidence. They are on the premises. The impostor is not the only one in the building. In the room.
Show me, he thinks at the human, like an order. It isn’t like the Andorian incident at all. He was weak then, in pain, alone, and he had never touched another mind before to plant suggestions.

Meanwhile, the doors are opening, and several security officers in red are streaming inside. Their phasers are set to stun. They cannot fire; Spock is in the way.

Show me, and there’s an imprint of a memory, and the human fights against it, wants to keep it hidden. But Spock has seen. It is enough.

You want to drop the phaser.

You want to drop the phaser – and the human hesitates briefly, considering the words, frowning, muscles losing some of their grip. Spock reacts, driving his elbow into the human’s solar plexus. The man stumbles with a grunt. Spock wrestles with him for a moment for control of the phaser. A shot goes off, upward, tearing a searing burn through the ceiling.

Another shot, from behind. The impostor collapses.

“Cadet! Cadet, are you all right?” Admiral Marcus asks, emerging, holding a phaser set to stun.

“Yes, sir. Admiral, I believe this man is not acting alone –”

“Don’t worry about it, Cadet,” the Admiral says. “We’ll take care of it.” Security moves in, and the impostor is taken out of sight.

“Admiral –” Spock tries again, but the Admiral is already moving away, uncaring.

“Spock,” Jim gasps, coming to his side. “Oh my god. What the hell just happened? Who was that guy? Are you okay?!”

There is no time to explain. There is an explosive device somewhere in his room, and the detonator – KEHL are waiting for the signal; this is timed; they’re waiting; they have someone on the inside; Spock cannot see the detonator.

Someone has taken it.

But he remembers the face; the face of the second impostor, the one who is here … no, was here. “There is an explosive device in this room about to go off,” he says.

Jim stares. “What.”

No time to explain. Spock is already rushing toward the other side of the room, moving through the throng of people. People who churn and murmur and shout and they are in the way.

“Spock! Wait! Did you say–?!” Jim sprints after him, cursing. Elbows someone by accident. “Spock, wait!”

“Hey! Watch out where you’re going!”

“Sorry!”

Spock reaches the podium where the string quartet was playing; the four of them are now standing, staring at the scene in bewilderment. The podium is made of plywood and steel, constructed earlier,
yesterday, but some construction workers and one of them, one of them was an impostor.

A human would not have been able to tear the structure open, but Spock is not human. With raw Vulcan strength he manages to create a crack in the wood and lift a piece of it away, bringing light onto what is hidden underneath.

“What are you doing!?”

“Is that – what’s that?” one of the violinists startles.

“Spock!”

Jim, breathing rapidly, has caught up. And stops short.

There, hidden so inconspicuously in the floor, is a bomb.

And the timer is ticking down.

Jim is sweating.

This started as a good day. He’s been looking forward to it for weeks. He’d get an evening to have fun, and he’d have Spock there, and they’d eat luxurious food and discuss quantum mechanics and get a chance to meet with the admiralty of Starfleet. There’d be food and music and maybe some dancing – he’d wanted to dance with Spock. They could round it off, just the two of them, in his or Spock’s room, with a movie or something. Just the two of them. It’d be great and he’d planned to involve at least one kiss, and –

And Spock’s been threatened by a madman with a phaser and now there’s a fucking bomb.

Spock looks so … calm. And he probably is pretty calm. He knows how to control himself. The Vulcan, so handsome in his tux and with his ears and his glossy hair which should look ridiculous but isn’t, kneels in front of the device, considering it. There’s a mess of wires and crucial components and, for all that he’s read and learned in his life, Jim isn’t sure how to solve this one.

The Academy has taught him how to make starships, not how to unmake fucking bombs.

“How much time do we have?”

The timer is moving.

“One minute and forty-seven seconds,” says Spock calmly.

It might be enough time to evacuate, but it’s probably not, and – fuck, fuck, fuck. Jim fumbles for his pocket where he keeps his comm, but realizes he’s left it by his table, with his jacket, with Netwon the Tribble. He looks at one of the quartet members, who is clutching their viola in horror. “Got a comm? Anybody got a comm?!”

Without averting his gaze from the device, Spock silently hands over his.

Jim dials Pike.

“C’mon, pick up, pick up … Chris! Chris, it’s Jim! There’s a bomb!”

One minute and nineteen seconds.
“I need a knife,” Spock says, “or something else of equal sharpness, in order to cut these wires.”

“You’re gonna … Are you out of your mind?! Have you ever even done anything like this?” Jim splutters. “No, not you, sir – Spock wants to defuse the bomb! On his own! – One minute and … fifteen seconds. – Yes, okay. We’re waiting. But we don’t have that time! – They’re sending a squad,” he relays to the Vulcan, “but they won’t get here in time, no way. We’ve got to go!”

Spock holds out a hand. “Give me the communicator.”

Jim obeys. No time for questions.

“Sir, this is Spock. I have reviewed the design of the explosive device, and I believe I will be able to deactivate it before an explosion occurs. If I am right, if this fails, it will level this building and possibly damage other structures nearby.” He sounds so calm, even with so many lives at stake. He sounds like a young cadet but like a seasoned officer, an adult. Vulcan. Jim wishes that he had that confidence in this moment; this is not a simulation; this isn’t the Kobayashi Maru. “You must evacuate all cadets and personnel from the premises immediately.”

Jim can’t hear whatever Captain Pike responds with, and Spock’s face is impossible to read. It is sternly set.

Spock is too stubborn.

Someone has activated the Academy’s internal comm system. A voice rings out, raspy through the speakers, but Jim recognizes it to belong to Admiral Barnett.

“Attention! Evacuate this building immediately. This is not a drill. Everyone go to your designated safe areas and await further instructions. Attention, this is not a drill. Everyone evacuate this building immediately. Go to your designated safe areas –”

One minute.

Well, Spock doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere. And Jim isn’t going anywhere without him.

“This appears to be an old-fashioned device without a digital mechanism, and therefore it can be defused in a traditional manner. It is tied to what appears to be the core of a proton torpedo of some kind. These four wires must be cut in the correct order, but there is a fifteen chance probability that this wire is not the correct one to begin with. The chances that I will succeed are not a hundred percent. Jim, you should evacuate.”

His palms are clammy. The room is being emptied. The musicians have left the scene. It’s just the two of them now, and not at all in the way he’d hoped. Vulcans cannot sweat, and Spock’s hands are very frighteningly steady, but Jim can hear him breathe. His breaths are slightly rough.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Briefly, Spock looks up from the device.

Jim meets his gaze, and kneels next to him, seeking out his wrist, wishing he could kiss him, reassure him in some way.

Then Spock returns his focus to the device and lifts the knife, taken from one of the nearby tables.

*Here goes nothing*, Jim thinks, staring, and wanting to hold Spock’s hand in case this doesn’t work,
in case it doesn’t work, but he doesn’t want to ruin their chances by risking Spock’s concentration. Instead he thinks fervently I believe in you, and doesn’t close his eyes, staring at Spock’s untrembling hands.

The knife slices through the wire.

To: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
From: S’chn T’gai Sarek (ambassador.sarek@vn.a)
Stardate 2257.79
Subject: re: Important development [Modern Golic Vulcan]

Spock,

The memory of that particular conversation is not lost to me. I can very clearly recall having to retrieve you from the educational institution of Shi’kahr and bring you home for punishment after engaging in a physical fight with three of your age-group after they insulted both myself and your mother. And I can indeed recall giving you that very advice.

Perhaps such advice was not even necessary. You are a very proud being. Ever since you were born, you have fought for your right to be. Logic dictated that your mother and I should not have attempted to have a child. Yet, you exist, and you continue to. When you kept leaving home to explore the wilderness and the mountains, before you passed the Ordeal of Maturity, it did bother me. And afterward even more so. There is a core within you which will not yield to whatever test is forced your way, and you endure. It is so the same with the ways of your heart, and these are matters which I, as any parent would, may disagree or agree with, but in the end I cannot interfere.

I cannot say that I am wholly surprised, as you have a human mother. Therefore, there is a part of you which is inescapably human. This is not necessary a thing of evil. Spock, this is not an expression of displeasure or anger, or any other negatively fueled emotion. You are well-aware that no Vulcan is unfeeling. If we were, I would not have been able to marry your mother.

Spock, your mother has taught me many things. With those things in mind, I must let you go. You are to do what your own logic dictates, and what your heart desires. In this instance, the two may be the same.

My own meeting with the human you have chosen was brief. But I heard from the Starfleet Captain Pike that James Kirk attempted to find you during the incident with the Andorians, and his concern was both genuine and strong but did not blind him. if James Kirk’s other facets, emotional and logical, are as genuine, then I shall not worry. For I am your father, Spock, and it is every father’s duty to be concerned with their offspring’s welfare.

Your mother is correct in her assumptions that your grandmother also gives her support. It is now her wish that, should you and James Kirk proceed in this matter, you will come to Vulcan for the proper ceremonies. I agree. As soon as you have graduated, before your first assignment, I believe it would be a good time for you to return to Vulcan.

Dif-tor heh smusma,
Your father
Chapter Summary

act i. part ten.
Some vendettas never truly die.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

act i.
part ten

khaf-spol
(noun)
heart
the muscle which pumps blood
from the veins into the arteries, keeping a person alive;
in many mythologies and cultures considered to be the centre of emotions

Shi’Oren t’Ek’Tallar T’Khasi · Shi’khar · Vulcan
Stardate 2256.90

“You are part human and therefore inherently emotional and illogical; these flaws have put you in an inferior position compared to your peers. It is thus to be concluded that these results cannot plausibly be true. The intellectual capacity of a hybrid could not be on par with that of a true Vulcan.”

The statement is matter-of-fact.

“It is illogical to fake results one would be unable to uphold,” Spock replies, without any outward display of emotion. He has spent the morning meditating and strengthening his mental shields, and he stands straight before the board, unwavering, and he will not let them see any weakness. He is Vulcan. He is Vulcan.

They are sitting on raised on a dais and the speaker, an elderly Vulcan with greying skin, looks down gravely. Natural, bright light falls through the windows and scatters on the well-polished black marble floor. It is quiet. Spock’s pulse is currently two hundred and fifty-one beats per Standard minute, well within normative parameters.

The entrance exams, which took two point seven days to complete in full, along with the results of every test he has ever taken in an academic context, every project, every essay, every written or spoken word – as with any other student seeking entrance to the Vulcan Science Academy the board has spent a considerable time examining these results. And now they have reached their conclusion. They find him flawed and none of them expected him to show such aptitude in any subject. The fact that Spock’s results have risen above that of almost all of his peers irks them, albeit of course they do not such expressive language to the describe the situation. They do not use the
word surprised. They assume that he has cheated. Humans are known to be deceptive and a hybrid could be a liar. This is a grave transgression, and Ambassador Sarek has been asked to join the board as the Council gives their verdict.

Minister Telak then says: “It is illogical, and yet there is no authentic proof that these results have been, in any manner or form, manipulated in favour of admittance. Consequently, the Council has decided to drop these accusations.”

Spock cannot relax.

“You have surpassed the expectations of your instructors. Your final record is flawless, with one exception: I see that you have applied to Starfleet as well.”

They ask for truth. He will give it. “It was logical to cultivate multiple options.”

“Logical but unnecessary. You are hereby accepted to the Vulcan Science Academy. It is truly remarkable, Spock, that you have achieved so much, despite your disadvantage.”

“If you would clarify, Minister, to what disadvantage are you referring?”

“Your human mother.”

Each scenario plays out the same way: in his (human human human) dreams, the nightmares, the good ones. It plays out the same because he knows the logical outcomes, he can calculate them. He knows the Vulcan nature and the Vulcan way. No scenario ever played out without a mention of his humanity. His mother.

Sarek is watching carefully. Momentarily Spock meets his gaze. His father would be proud of him. He is Vulcan.

He did not apply to Starfleet without a single (illogical) desire to go there. He may not have met many humans, but his mother is a remarkable specimen, and accounting for the pure number of humans in the galaxy she cannot be an outlier.

“Council, Ministers – I must decline.”

They are not visibly or audibly outraged, or taken aback, or offended. They are not anything. They are Vulcan. “No Vulcan has ever declined admission to this Academy,” says Minister Telak.

“Then, as I am half-human, your record remains untarnished.”

“Spock, you have made a commitment to honour the Vulcan way,” his father says, and there is disappointment there which Spock recognizes because Sarek married a human; he adapted; and he has been disappointed before.

“Why did you come before this council today?” Minister Telak says. “Was it to satisfy your emotional need to rebel?”

One day he might rebel, the idle thought strikes him: there might be an uprising. This, to Vulcan senses, already is. To fight like this. Struggle with prejudices the others do not care about because they are Vulcan and they are whole and they will not see. To be treated as inferior – it is logical. It is logical. – and it does not stop, it will not stop. The only way for it to stop is if he chooses to walk the other way and make a new path for himself, one which is not hedged by Vulcans and Vulcan customs and Vulcan ways. Their oppressive presence. If he is to be a rebel then he shall wear that label as his own.
His heart rate is two hundred and sixty-two beats per minute. His breathing is regular. He raises his hand in the ta’al, and knows now that his father’s disappointment will most plausibly last for the rest of his life, with a high chance they will not speak again.

But his mother might understand. She is human.

“The only emotion I wish to convey is gratitude,” he says, calmly. “Thank you, Ministers, for your consideration. Live long and prosper.”

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**Starfleet Academy Campus • San Francisco • Earth**

**Stardate 2257.79**

The knife slices through the wire.

Jim holds his breath.

For the first time since this whole ordeal started, Spock breaks his composure, if only a minimal amount. His shoulders relax a little, and he exhales, briefly closing his eyes.

The timer flickers and shuts off. Stillness settles over them both. The danger is over.

Jim starts to breathe again, holding back a shudder of relief. He’s clutching the comm, which Spock handed back over. Now he raises it again, to call Pike and signal that it’s all clear.

Not the way he’d thought the night would end. At all. He almost, almost laughs, with a note of frenzied shock: his heart is beating hard, thrumming with adrenaline. “Whew. That was close –”

Only to be thrown to the ground. Or tugged, rather. Something hot and bright flashes past the spot where he’d just been standing. It scorches the floor. Phaser blast. Spock’s hand is fisted in his white shirt, near the elbow, and the Vulcan peers, for a split second, upward. The room is large and the ceiling several meters high, and there’s an upper gallery, overlooking the main area.

They’re not alone.

Well, Jim thinks, rolling back: he and Spock react together, moving away from the podium and toward one of the ridiculously potted plants adorning its sides. Another blast sears through the air. **This is fun.**

“Alert Captain Pike!” Spock cries. His voice does not sound quite as calm now, though his eyes are clear and his mouth stern, and there’s a hint of a frown between his beautifully arched eyebrows.

Right. Right. The comm. His thumb fumbles with the buttons. Pike picks up after barely a single dial tone’s gone through.

“Son, give me good news,” Pike barks. His tone gives away that he thinks this whole thing is a really really really bad idea.

“Kinda! Bomb’s disarmed but there’s a shooter, we’re t– Spock, what the hell? Get back!”

The Vulcan, crouching, peeks around the edge of the large dark pot with intricate markings on it. He is no doubt trying to pinpoint the shooter and then come up with some stupidly daredevil logical plan to best this new adversary.

And all Jim had wanted was a date.
“Security’s inbound! Don’t try anything foolish! And that’s an order, Kirk,” Pike says sharply and then he’s issuing commands that Jim can’t properly make out but they sound rushed and avid, and Pike never hangs up.

Spock turns back around. “The shooter is near the emergency exit of the gallery. They must have returned when the explosive did not go off as planned. We serve as a distraction for now, but they may try to set off the photon warhead with a shot from their phaser if it’s powerful enough to penetrate the shell. I believe it is some sort of sniper rifle.”

“And definitely not set on stun,” Jim grumbles. Okay. Okay. They can … fix this. Yeah? Yeah. He nods to himself. “So we gotta distract them from setting off the bomb. Okay. Great.”

“We could,” Spock starts, and Jim meets his gaze in disbelief, sensing how that sentence is going to end.

“We could get shot dead!”

“Or they will destroy the building.”

Jim holds back a groan and steels himself. “Got a point there. Hey, sorry about the date getting ruined. Again,” he says, sighing. This track record sucks. Kidnappings, bombings, shootings. “Next time, let’s make it simple stay-at-home.”

Spock nods grimly. “Agreed.”

They don’t exactly articulate a plan between them. It simply unfolds, and Jim is aware of Spock beside him, the heat of his body – not that of a human’s, much cooler, but nonetheless present. The whisper of movements. Vulcans are agile and swift and strong, and he guesses that once upon a time they were pretty deadly guys, before they took Surak’s Teachings to heart and became self-proclaimed pacifists.

It was a nice move Spock did before, socking that impostor even if the human had appeared physically bigger. Vulcan: 1, Human: 0. Only now the human has got a gun.

Three times stronger than a human. If they could get up to that gallery and disarm the shooter … but how? Can’t take the elevator, it’s probably shut off. And the stairwell is across the room. The exit is much closer, but without a distraction, the shooter can made the whole place go boom.

They dash from the first potted plant to hide behind the next, three meters away. It’s some kind of giant alien cacti with purple flowers and it has a soft pleasant scent. Kind of like vanilla. Odd decoration, but right now Jim’s really glad that they’ve got it to hide behind. It won’t do for long though. They’ve got to keep moving.

Tables. Lots of tables. Could use the tables as shields. Somehow. Yeah? He exchanges a look with Spock, who nods, picking up on the idea – it could almost certify as a plan. Improvised plan.

“There’s this nice retro coffeehouse,” Jim blurts.

The Vulcan’s eyebrows rise a little at the statement. Probably thinking what an illogical, irrational human being he’s being right now to talk about coffeehouses in the middle of being shot at.

“This is not quite the time to discuss future dates, Jim.”

“They have this awesome latte. Not really latte but kinda – there’s Antarean brandy involved.”
“I would rather prefer spice tea. And this is not the time.”

“Yeah. I’m stressed. Okay, on three? – One, two …!”

They reach the first of the tables, which is round and covered with a fine detailed white cloth which, at a distance, appears plain but this close evidently is embroidered with small pale Starfleet insignias as well as food stains. Chairs have been half-way pulled out and some of them fallen over in the chaos of everyone else evacuating, food left abandoned half-eaten on the plates. Hmm, maybe that potato would make a good projectile? He doesn’t need to word the thought; Spock picks it up, and probably considers Jim to be thinking too loud.

“That is a terrible idea,” Spock grunts, as they kneel some way beneath the table.

“I’m a good thrower.”

If he were human, Spock would have rolled his eyes at him. The Vulcan doesn’t even sigh, though Jim knows that through the vibration between them the Vulcan has to be a little annoyed as well as endeared to his behaviour. Jim can’t really help it. His mouth sometimes acts up. And though his heart’s beating harshly, adrenaline rushing through his body too fast to be good, Jim can’t hold back a grin.

“We can order in next time. Whichever tea you want, and pizza, lots of pizza and we’ll watch an old movie,” he says.

“Again, Jim, this is not the time.”

A couple of more shots go off. A glass is shattered, tiny shards raining over the edge of the table, and liquid being spilled everywhere.

Yeah, this date sucks.

On one-two-three, they run for it again. Slowly, they make their way through the labyrinth of tables and chairs. Stuff has been left behind by the various guests: a jacket here, a handbag there, a communicator dropped on the floor, an earring, a purple scarf.

There’s a roar of ceramic shattering sharply as the shooter releases a new burst of fire.

“Gotta give the guy – they’re persistent. Lucky they can’t aim.”

Of course, he shouldn’t have said that. He shouldn’t fucking have.

As they’re nearly at the empty Admirals’ table, Jim stumbles on a half-fallen chair and is slowed down a moment. And in a fraction of a second, Spock’s turned around and is in front of him, a shield, and the phaser blast tears through the air. Spock doesn’t cry out, but flinches violently, blinking as if in shock.

“Spock! Spock!”

“It’s all right,” the Vulcan insists, tugging at his arm to move him. A contraction: not a good sign of Spock’s health right now. Together they more or less fall in a heap, rolling underneath the Admirals’ table. Won’t hold long. “It is only a flesh wound.”

It hit his leg. It’s too dark under here to see, but Jim can smell the crispness of burnt cloth and flesh, and his stomach rolls unpleasantly.
“Why’d you do that?!?”

“Had I not intervened, the shot would have wounded you much more severely.” The only sign of pain is the Vulcan’s increased breathing, quicker, louder, and a slight pause between words. Jim fumbles with a hand, skimming around the wound. Part of him realizes that they don’t often get this physically close. Spock is so steady. Jim wishes he could be, too.

“Now what?” he whispers.

“I believe this table will be destroyed within two minutes, and the shooter may get what you call a ‘lucky shot’ at either of us, since the phaser’s high setting allows it to burn through wood.”

“Full of good news.”

Spock is probably glaring at him. “There is no point in making a false assessment.”

“Point. Can you run?”

“For a short while, I believe so, yes.”

“Security should be here,” Jim grumbles. “What the hell’s keeping them?”

Then, he notices, it’s gone suspiciously … quiet. There’s no more glass breaking or wood creaking, and no more of the acid noise of a phaser firing. The noise is being replaced by something else. Voices and many, many feet, and someone shouting orders.

Carefully, he lifts the edge of the tablecloth on his left and glances out.

From the other side of the room, the sees a mass of black boots pouring into the room. Looking up, he sees those boots are attached to people in red.

Jim exhales shakily. “Cavalry’s arrived. Thank fuck.”

“You should be grateful, you irresponsible bonehead!” yells an angry voice.

“Bones!”

And it is. Rolling out from their meagre cover and, helping Spock do the same by insisting the Vulcan throw an arm over his shoulder for support, Jim stands up slowly. Up above, on the gallery where the shooter was hiding, there are a couple of security guards, and Bones and Uhura. He’s more cleaned up than usual, hair combed back neatly, and she’s gorgeous in a yellow silk dress. In one hand Uhura’s holding a phaser; in the other a sharp stiletto shoe. She hands the weapon over to one of the security guys with a wry frown on her face, before leaning on Bones to keep her balance while putting her shoe back on. The look on her face is intense.

_Huh?

“Hang on! Did you just call me bonehead?” Jim shouts at him, too taken aback to come up with anything else.

“Yeah, it was the nicest thing I could come up with,” Bones sighs. “Hang on, we’re coming down.”

Jim had figured Bones would be here tonight; that’s why he couldn’t look after Newton. But he had a date? With _Uhura_? And Uhura took the gunner down with _her_ shoe?

Wow. No wonder she’s friends with Spock. They’re both really not-logical-but-insisting-they-are
sometimes. And awesome. And terrifying.

Bones wasn’t here with Uhura as a date-date. He’s not interested, and she’s spoken for, apparently, and Jim’s been too busy mooning over a certain Vulcan to take note. Just as well, he supposes. That way, she’s got some peace and quiet away from his tenacious questions.

“When I heard the two of you were in there, I couldn’t just wait. Then we heard the shots,” Uhura explains, half an hour later. So she and Bones had gone in and she’d, without really thinking, pulled off her shoe and crept up behind the shooter who was focused on Jim and Spock, and she’d hit the guy over the head. Pretty hard. Jim’s crush on her has faded now (he’s got a Vulcan, after all) but, wow. Also, she and Bones are not on a date. Apparently, he hadn’t gone with anyone to start with and Nyota’s got a girlfriend with whom she’d spent the majority of the night. She won’t tell Jim who, which is probably because she doesn’t trust him not to spread rumours or ask annoying questions. Which is fair. During the evacuation, Nyota and her girlfriend got separated when helping getting people through the doors, and she ran into Bones, and the two then heard the shots and ran back inside. This story is repeated several times: to Jim, to the officers asking, to Captain Pike who worriedly lingers with the cadets for a few minutes before the bomb squad has declared the atrium clear.

They’re sitting in the back of an open hovercar, one of the several which security had used to get to this part of campus. Now they’re sweeping the perimeter, looking for any more culprits. Cadets are being questioned, their health assessed, and then they’re told to get to their dorms: no one puts up a struggle. Communicators are talked into constantly, people assuring friends and family that they’re okay, and Jim thinks he hears the whisper of a news heliship circling above them. Someone must have tipped them off that something’s happened on the campus. If Starfleet hopes to keep quiet about this, they’re far too late. Jim’s seen dozens of posts on social media already. Plenty of cadets are standing around, photographing or filming with PADDs, or huddling in tight groups, hugging themselves as they wait to be released. It’s kind of cold out and no one is properly dressed for the weather.

The sky is clear and dark. The sun has set. Night would be perfect for stargazing; a bit chilly.

He’d managed to grab his jacket before being whisked out of the atrium. No one’s taken Netwon the Tribble away yet, but Jim supposes, with a sigh, that that’s coming. He strokes the now calmly purring tribble absently over its soft back while looking over at Spock. The Vulcan is being treated by some medics at the scene, an outrageously orange shock blanket draped over his shoulders. The stubborn Vulcan was right that the injury is not severe, and they can knit it together with a dermal tissue regenerator. He had tried to walk out of the building on his own, only allowing Jim to support him once he’d stumbled half a dozen times, grudgingly admitting that he’s in pain. Jim wants to be next to him, but the medics – or security – won’t let him. Think he’s in the way or something. Another medic has already looked the three of them over, declaring them fit as fiddles, minus a couple of bruises. Bones had more or less chased that medic away; he’s a doctor so he can look after them, etc. etc. - Jim hadn’t really been listening. He looks as the medics tend to Spock’s leg and winces in sympathy. He can almost feel the burn. Maybe it’s an echo that is really there. He wants to hold his hand, and have Spock do that thing with his eyebrows indicating that he’s annoyed and fond all at the same time. Make sure he’s truly okay.

“Bad luck really follows you around, kid.” Bones grumbles. The old doc’s arms are crossed over his chest defensively and perhaps a little bit from the cold. “Can’t believe the two of you went in there alone and were … Jim? You listenin’?”

“Uhuh.” He doesn’t look at his friend, only at Spock. After a moment, sensing his gaze, the Vulcan returns his gaze. They’re only a few meters apart, but it feels like the distance is the width of a
galaxy. “Yeah. Yeah.”

Bones shakes his head. “He’s not listening.”

“Give him a break,” Uhura says. “Though Bones is right that what you did was irresponsible and very … very Kirk.” The linguist is at loss of words to describe it.

“From what I hear,” Bones comments, “it was Spock who did most of the work.”

“There was really a bomb?” Uhura swears on her breath, something in Swahili. She rarely loses her cool like that. She shivers. “I can’t believe it. On campus. We’re meant to be safe here.”

“Wonder who’s behind it.”

“I think Spock knows,” Jim says suddenly, rejoining their conversation. His mind is no longer anywhere near questions about why Bones and Uhura were there together, or who Uhura’s mystery girlfriend is, or any of that. He can only see, for his mind’s eye, that strange cadet-who-wasn’t-a-cadet grabbing Spock, pressing a phaser to his neck. So close. He was so close to –

Too close to –

But Spock had gotten free and even skimmed over the guy’s mind, gaining the knowledge that saved their lives.

Starfleet is going to love that. Hate it. Both. There’ll be an investigation and probably hearings and suddenly Jim feels so so tired, his bones aching, muscles strained. He remembers the echo of Spock’s touch as he’d pulled him out of the fire, shielding him. He shouldn’t have done that. Shouldn’t have risked it. He got shot. Spock got shot because of him.

Way to go, Kirk. You almost got your boyfriend killed when taking him out on a dance.

“Yeah?”

“It …” Jim pauses, and he can still taste the explosion, and the gunfire, and the rumbling air the smoke and the cries. “KEHL.”

“Fuck. Then this ain’t over.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Spock is arguing with the medics. If glaring at them with an unmoving expression and silent, cold eyes counts as arguing. His left pant leg is rolled up, the tux ruined, burnt through. A clean white bandage has been applied there. There is no blood. Phaser wounds don’t tend to bleed – everything cauterizes at once due to the heat of the enemy weapon.

Jim never wants to see Spock bleed.

Now the Vulcan is standing up, rolling the tattered trouser back down again, and putting his shoe back on. He walks over to Jim, Bones, and Uhura determinedly. His steps are somewhat slow, but steady, not wobbling. He isn’t grimacing or frowning. An outside would think him to be entirely calm, unmoved, and not in pain at all. He’ll probably try to meditate it away.

Jim stands up, offering his seat. Spock refuses it.

“We are allowed to go now,” he only says. “Has anyone taken your statements?”
“Yeah,” Jim says, and Bones and Uhura nod. They too look tired. Their evening was ruined too.

“You?”

“I have been exempted, it seems. I will be contacted in the morning.” Jim can tell that the Vulcan is relieved about that. “I will return to my dormitory now. I need to meditate.”

While Uhura gathers her purse and speaks quietly with Bones, making similar plans to retire, Jim asks carefully: “Can I come with you?”

He doesn’t want to be alone tonight. And Spock may be Vulcan and Vulcans claim they do not smile, and Spock’s lips never move, but there’s something turning warmer in his dark brown eyes. It makes Jim’s heart flutter and soar.

They’re going to be okay.

“As long as you do not snore too loudly.”

Spock’s room carries the scent of incense, some ancient Vulcan kind which they use when they meditate. It has seeped into Spock’s skin, always carrying it with him. That, and the smell of candles and of strong black tea and of worn yellowed paper and something that is simply tenderly Spock. It’s calming. A draught.

Spock lets their fingers touch, brushing against one another. It’s not proper Vulcan kisses, merely reassurances: I’m here, we’re here, we didn’t die. Which is nice.

They passed by Jim and Bones’ room just to get a pair of sweats and a toothbrush. Neither is in the mood to eat. They head to bed, or, in Spock’s case, the meditation mat. Jim’s mouth is dry, and he drinks some water from the room’s replicator while Spock quietly brushes his teeth and changes in PJs.

Jim got used to that while they temporarily roomed together, after the fire. Spock, for either Vulcan reasons or personal reasons, was shy about undressing around him and Bones, always using the bathroom if they were present. Jim on the other hand has never really had a problem with being half-naked around people. Or naked. Bones had tolerated that; probably because he’s a doctor, and he’s seen far worse things.

Not that Spock’s even as much as blushed in his presence any of the times Jim’s walked around half-naked. Kind of a pity. Jim’s sure Spock would look very nice blushing green. He glances at the closed door of the bathroom for a moment, listening to the running water. Both of them are too tired to shower.

There’s a certain rhythm in it – frighteningly domestic and easy, which they slide back into without a thought. Jim’s never really had that with anyone, except Bones of course, and Bones is always kind of grumbling at him and throwing Jim’s dirty laundry back at him whenever too much gets on the floor. When they’d roomed with Spock, the Vulcan never let any of them leave laundry on the floor. Or empty pizza boxes. Or anything. The Vulcan is very tidy. Though he let them keep their sides of the room kind of messy, meaning that, yes, they could leave half-read books open on the table.

Now, Spock’s probably too weary to argue if Jim were to make a mess. He doesn’t. He folds up his tux, ruefully wishing for a moment that the night had had a much happier ending where he wouldn’t have had to undo his tie on his own, and places it on an empty chair. Then he changes into the sweatpants, takes off his socks. The room’s hot. Normal temperature for a Vulcan, of course. He might wake up sweating tomorrow. But Jim’s slept in far worse places.
The bed is very soft. It smells like Spock, despite how rarely he’s got to be sleeping in it. He knows Spock sleeps little, even for a Vulcan. He curls up atop of the covers, sighing. He wants to curl up around Spock and never let go to reassure himself that they’re both breathing. As he relaxes, all the aches of his body become far too apparent. He’s bruised and sore from all that dodging and running into furniture. But he’s had worse. Far worse.

His eyes are half-closed but he notices the door sliding open, Spock reemerging from the bathroom. The Vulcan doesn’t say anything, only dims the lights, and crosses the room on bare feet. Jim watches through lidded eyes as the Vulcan lights one candle calmly, just a single one tonight, and settles on the meditation mat, palms open and relaxed. His back is a bit turned from the bed, and Jim can see the beautiful curve of his neck where it meets the shoulders. Not a hair is out of place. He is the epitome of calm control, like a rock in the darkness. He sits there, so quiet, merely breathing. Breathing. Breathing.

Jim falls asleep.

A note is scribbled into a PADD, waiting on the bedside table.

Jim, it reads, so familiarly. I hope you have slept well. I have been called to Admiral Marcus’ office to give my statement. I will be available on comm should you like to call me. May we share lunch together once my interview is over? /Spock

He quickly sends a message on the communicator:

Jim (0927-4339-11)
of course we can lunch together babe, call me when ur done, c u <3 btw r u in pain?

Only once he’s sent it, Jim realizes that he used the epithet, it’d just slipped out of him.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I will call you. However I need to point out that I am not a newborn child and you do not need to address me thus. I have received painkillers. I am in good health.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
sorry I didn’t mean to call u babe

Jim (0927-4339-11)
I mean I could if u like it

Jim (0927-4339-11)
it’s a human thing, sign of affection u know

Spock (0934-5294-42)
Oh. I think I understand. It is similar to the Vulcan use of the word ‘ashalik’. I appreciate the endearment, but I am not comfortable with being compared to a newborn.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
I’m sorry. if i make u uncomfortable like that again tell me so i don’t make the same mistake twice. are love or sweetheart ok?
Jim (0927-4339-11)
yeah I slept ok, gonna get breakfast now. Since there are no classes today I dunno what to do.
Don’t worry about me im fine, its u we should worry bout bc u really need to be more careful :*

He’s pretty sure the Vulcan’s got to be smiling, in his not-obviously-smiling-because-Vulcans-don’t-smile sort of way. Jim doesn’t mind. He won’t ever mind.

Spock (0934-5294-42)
I am careful. I did not ask to be shot at last night.
Please make certain to eat well.

Jim (0927-4339-11)
I will
xxx
<3
:*
Sarek’s question is … somewhat unexpected, but not unwelcome. His father … cares.

“I am adequate,” Spock answers: a truth. There are variations of fine. His injury is steadily healing. The scar is not deep and will not bother him, as he was treated in time with a dermal regenerator, and he has been checked up on by both Starfleet medical personnel and by Leonard McCoy, who pretends not to care, claiming he is only doing it for Jim’s sake. Spock had not argued with him; he did not see the point.

His mother exhales deeply. “I’m relieved to see you again,” she says. “I was so worried.” Normally, in front of his father, she would reign back the use of emotional expressions, but now it seems she has trouble controlling herself. And Spock cannot blame her. Since he came to Earth for his studies at the Academy, his well-being, his life, has been in danger three explicit times, and it was never in the equation when he planned his two-year stay on the watery world. “And Jim?”

It is logical that she will ask of him too, and that this conversation will deal more with him. Spock understands that. He has made sure to take this call in privacy; it is early morning, and he has already breakfasted. Classes do not begin for another forty minutes.

After the ball, he hadn’t attempted to call Vulcan, but he had written an email the next day detailing what had occurred. He had not mentioned the exact nature of his injury, only that it was not severe. His mother’s reply had arrived within five hours, asking that they forgo their videocall their usual time and instead she would like to contact him as early as possible, when both their schedules would allow it.

“He is unhurt.”

“Spock,” his father says, and he is serious: he is always serious, but the depth of his voice is more prominent than usual, though he does not indicate any particular emotion using his face, other than calm, a deep serenity. “I will visit Earth in thirty-one Standard days to work at the Embassy. I expect to meet the human James T. Kirk at this time.”

It shall be the test which Jim must pass in order for his father to truly accept their Bonding, when it is finalized. If it is finalized. If. When. Spock cannot think that far ahead, not now; his mind is not as orderly as it should be, the turmoil lingering after the near-miss at the ball.

When Spock read his father’s reply to his latest email, he was … He was not certain how to respond. He has not written anything back yet and, after this conversation, it might be illogical to answer in text as well. In truth, he had not expected Sarek to express any kind of acceptance toward Jim, toward this choice. Toward Spock’s desire for freedom to choose. He believed his father would request him to immediately cease socializing with Jim, with the humans - to cease: to cease rebelling. To conform to Vulcan standards. He had made calculations, and even, in a flash so humanly emotional it perhaps was not fully sane, he imagined, briefly, taking Jim’s hand and walking away and never returning to Vulcan.

“Yes, father. I shall speak with him.”

“… requires an additional five mols of strontium to equal the chemical equation, like so. You can read more about that in chapter 16. Okay, that is it for today. For the next lab session, please calculate the rest of the equations in the handouts, and we’ll go through them next Tuesday. Return the safety gear to its place and make sure the workspace is clear before you leave the laboratory. Thank you,” the professor says, and there is clamour as students begin to scatter.
Cleaned glass beakers and tubes are placed in cupboards, safety glasses hung up, burners put away, gas cut off. The cadets begin to filter toward the open doors, chattering all the while. Spock is neatly methodical and does not rush. He does not wish to cause an accident. The cadet on his left flips open their communicator as if to check for messages only to heave a disappointed sigh. The one to their left, in turn, is also slow to clear their desk but not because of great care; they are too busy talking with their friend in low, excited tones. They, along with one very eager student near the front who hurriedly copies what’s written on the electronic board, are soon the only ones remaining in the room, apart from the teacher who is sorting through some papers.

“You heard what happened, didn’t you?” one cadet whispers to the other.

Spock lays his pencils and pens in their case and does not look at them, but cannot help but overhear. He checks that the desk is spotless and nothing has been left behind. The student who’d sat to his right had rushed out in a hurry, dropping their notebook underneath the chair - very negligent. A Vulcan would not do so. Without outward expression, Spock retrieves the notebook and checks if a name has been written on its front or in the margins. He cannot find one at once.

“We all heard; we had to evac the dorm ’cause it’s next-door to the atrium,” says the friend, placing their PADD in a protective bag and slinging it over their shoulder. “I’m just glad no one got hurt.”

“I think it’s exciting! There was, like, a couple of cadets who saved the day or something, I heard about it from Beth who’s talked with Jen, and he said, yeah, he saw Uhura? like, in a great yellow dress, and she’d beat up someone?”

The friend frowns. “That’s … No. People could’ve been injured or worse, and if I ever see one of those KEHL bastards I’m going to punch them in the face. It’s not exciting. It pisses me off.”

Spock finds that his focus has drifted, unwillingly, and he forces himself to move. This was not a conversation he was meant to be privy to. Yet, it was somehow - somehow comforting to hear one of the cadets to explicitly state such an anti-KEHL opinion, and the human part of him wishes he knew the cadet’s name. To know, to know that this is an ally: this is someone who does not believe in the inferiority of non-humans, or the danger they could pose to humanity or Earth; someone who believes that he has as much a right to be here as them.

He moves these thoughts away, rises, and approaches the teacher to hand over the notebook so that it may be returned to its owner next class. The professor looks at it tiredly but thanks him, and Spock exits the laboratory, glancing at the digital clock on the wall on the way out. 11:07. Lunch is now available at the cafeteria, though he is not sure if he would like to go there today. He is not feeling particularly hungry. He had a steady breakfast, and today, according to the online menu he accessed, today they are serving curry and it never properly agrees with him.

At this hour several other classes are ending, as well, or some beginning shortly, so the corridors are full of life. Movement. People. It is easier now than it was three or six months ago to handle the press of so many minds distantly around him and create shields, but Spock still moves more hurriedly than he would like in order to get away from it. Navigating through the crowd, the tries to shut out their words. Discussions are being made in many languages and the most popular topic is the weekend ball - what happened. The truth is not wholly out: a statement has been released wherein no names had been mentioned, much to Spock’s relief, but rumours run rampant. Such is the curiosity of humans: they will not let this event go for many weeks to come.

The morning after it all, Spock had been questioned, and his story confirmed along with those of Jim, Nyota, and Leonard. Captain Pike had been there as well as Admiral Marcus, and many security officers had spent the rest of that night securing the whole of campus. The atrium and many other buildings had been searched thoroughly for any signs of impostors, intruders, or hidden weapons. No
such things had been found apart from a communicator dropped in the stairwell leading to the emergency roof hatch of the atrium, where the ball was held. It is believed that the impostors were going to escape that way; at least one of them. The first one, who had been stunned by Admiral Marcus and with whom Spock had struggled for the detonator, was ready to lay down his life for the extremist group’s cause, taking himself with the cadets and officers as the building would have been leveled. He is now being held at a secure location; Spock knows no more of the matter, and wishes the answers were more definite. People are still being questioned. The heightened security at Campus is immediate: there are many more officers about, and security personnel openly bearing phasers, and it does not sit well with Spock. This is meant to be an institution of learning and exploration, not a military installation. The presence of arms should not be necessary. It should never be necessary.

Cadets are scanned before they are allowed to enter public buildings. Bags are searched. Many are put-off and outraged, and some protest. Spock does not. He understands Starfleet’s concerns. Someone, several someones, sneaked onto campus, more than once, in disguise as personnel and cadets. Managed to get inside armed. Hide a bomb. What else could they have done or are planning to do? They have two men in custody now and are working joint with the city’s police force, and answers hopefully will be found. And Spock hopes that this perhaps, perhaps, could be a key leading to the complete dismantling of the Keep Earth Human League.

It is a faint hope. Governments are overthrown; protests are made; people are killed; history repeats itself. Books are burned, many of them because the leaders of the past were afraid of the written word and what they could convey: creativity: individual thought: freedom. Oppressive ideas are rarely fully killed. They keep being resurrected, and for KEHL to truly be gone those ideas need to disappear: become a warning of past foolishness and needless death, a historic monument and nothing more: nothing to be celebrated. Such a revolution could still be centuries away, and the thought is more saddening than it should be. A bleak outlook. Logical: cold. Spock has learned human history as well as the history of Vulcan since he was only a few months old, and he has been taught to not only repeat sentences but analyze them from many angles. He understands that ignorance begets fear begets violence, and to be free of the problem means going to the root of the issue. Today’s Earth is a better place than it was a century ago: he knows, yet it is sometimes difficult to grasp, to accept that it isn’t better.

Evolution is a slow process.

No one has announced how long the situation will remain thus. Spock waits patiently as the security officer in red scans his body and his bag before he is allowed out of the building; the woman doing it looks weary and pinched, yet alert, and for some reason offers a smile that maybe is meant to be encouraging when she opens the doors. The air is heavy with rain threatening to fall and Spock heads for his dormitory. He has a three-hour gap in his schedule: a rare luxury, and recently a package arrived from his mother including many Vulcan spices and ingredients. He has more than ample time to cook a proper meal as well as study. From the inventory, there should be enough to make some barkaya marak and a side of balk’ra …

“Hi,” says a voice from the door, and he doesn’t need to turn around to identify the speaker.

“Hello, Gaila.”

“Watcha making?” the Orion asks, walking into the spacious common room and plunking down onto the sofa, clutching a PADD. Spock detects the movement out of the corner of his eye; he does not take his concentration off the stove, where the soup is slowly simmering. She is not wearing a cadet’s uniform and there is something somewhat off about her voice and skin, the hue darker than usual.
"Barkaya marak. It is an old Vulcan dish," he says.

Over the time of their acquaintance, he has lately found Gaila to be more pleasant. She has a flirtatious and slightly harsh exterior; she thrives to be among people, to socialize; they are of completely different species and cultures and personalities, yet because of that they are also somewhat of the same, sharing their outsidership as common ground. In the beginning, she had attempted to make contact with him as she would a human, and called him frosty and far too Vulcan. Now, this is accepted fact, and she does not try to make romantic advances. They do not interact that very often, but she is a friend of Nyota’s, and if Nyota can find her pleasant to be with then Spock shall try as well. To broaden his social circles while on Earth is only logical, as they are both Starfleet cadets and may end up serving on the same ship one day in the future.

The Orion is curled on her side and he hears her PADD beep quietly. For a moment, neither of them speaks. She has the right to be here; this is the floor’s common room, and sometimes it truly irks Spock not to have a private kitchen. He has always had an aptitude for cooking, an interest his mother encouraged him to cultivate. He stirs the soup three times clockwise before turning down the heat eighteen degrees, and checks the oven. The balk’ra is nearly done.

Gaila makes a low, pained noise with her mouth closed, and her scent flares; as he is half-human, he can perceive the Orion pheromones, but as half-Vulcan he refuses to let it affect him in any way or form. He looks at her, not frowning or narrowing his eyes or shifting his expression. “You do not appear to be at good health,” he points out. The change in skin colour looks to be due to a fever, and her natural pheromones - which would not work on a Vulcan: his self-restraint is more than adequate to resist it - are a dampening field surrounding her, this time not in order to seek a mate but signal discomfort. “You should seek out medical assistance.”

“Nah,” she says and sniffs in displeasure and distaste. “Just the flu. Can’t go to class because the boys lose control of their poor little bodies, one whiff of this,” she makes a vague gesture with a hand, indicating the air, “but I figured you wouldn’t be that bothered.”

"A correct assumption.” He calculates that the balk’ra will be finished in six point five minutes, and he adds the last crushed herb to the barkaya marak before covering it with a lid and turning off the stove completely. He senses the Orion looking at him, an idle yet intent kind of gaze, as if she is very bored and he is the nearest entertainment; a human would have been deeply concerned, but he mostly ignores her. He is used to being stared at.

“So, you and Kirk are going steady now, yeah?”

She must have heard this from Nyota, or overheard it, or perhaps taken a look at text messages she weren’t meant to see. Orions are clever and devious. “I will not elaborate on our relationship to you,” Spock says steadily, reaching into a cupboard to extract bowls and plates.

“Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me,” Gaila says with a grin.

“I have little trust in your words.”

“Seriously. I’m not all that archetypal Orion, you know, like I’m sure you’re not the typical Vulcan. I mean, hooking up with a human? Can’t have been popular with your sort.”

Many would have fallen into that trap; after all, she is, seemingly, genuine with her empathy, and he can appreciate that. Nonetheless, he will not divulge any information to her about Jim and himself; she would only find ways to use that to her own advantage. He is not unaware that she is frequently visited by cadets from all-over campus as well as the source of many rumours. The art of affairs and extortion is something she must have grown up surrounded by on Orion, just as he was a child
surrounded by dictations of logic and the expulsion of emotion. Without replying, he begins to set up the cutlery on the table.

“Waiting for someone?” she asks playfully, noting the doublation of plates and spoons. “I hear humans are big on the candles thing.”

“Negative. You are obviously unhealthy and have not gone to the cafeteria to eat. I have cooked to make lunch boxes for five days ahead - there is enough, should you care to try some.” He keeps his voice free from emotional attachments, anything like sympathy; there is only logic. That is the face he must show. “Your body requires nutrients for your immune system to recover.”

The Orion blinks, obviously never having expected such an offer, and she is too prideful to ask for aid or if she could partake in the meal. By extending this branch to her, Spock makes the logical assumption she will be amendable to something that could be friendship rather than acquaintance, and his mother would be proud of him for this. Also, this favour could one day be returned. “Oh. Uhm. Thanks. Nice, never tried Vulcan food.” She slowly, carefully gets out of the sofa as if each breath is slightly sore and settles on the others side of the table, not too close. It is possible that, due to their different physiology, the virus plaguing her would not affect him, but neither would like to completely take that chance. As she seats herself, Spock gets the food out of the oven and lays it out to cool for a moment, and sprinkles a handful of crushed herbal leaves atop of the balk’ra.

They share the meal in a beginning of tentative silence. Then, eventually, as Gaila has eaten for awhile and finding it tasteful, she gains momentum and she asks questions and makes comments. Humans might talk about the weather; with Jim, he would discuss, perhaps, temporal mechanics, or something else striking their fancy at that particular moment. Gaila is interested in people and their relationships and she knows the names of practically every cadet on campus. She can reveal little details about many of them which surely, Spock quietly reflects, they wouldn’t wish to be out in the open about. There is something confidential in the way she speak to him about these matters. Both an invitation and a test: of his person, of his loyalties. Every time she tries to meddle out information about his and Jim’s relationship, he briskly evades her. He is very good at chess and this is another game.

After some time, unavoidably, the topic turns to the ball and the attack. Gaila’s eyes no longer gleam when it is mentioned. She keeps up a stoic, untouched appearance, as if she steps out of a dream to please the humans around her with sensuality and a love of the flesh, but Spock realizes, in this moment, that she has been struck hard by this attack. She is not human. Not a sliver of human, and she is surrounded by them: here, at Starfleet, she had thought herself to be more safe, to be among people who would not wish her or her kind immediate harm. He cannot quite name this emotion. Perhaps it is pity. No, it is not: he feels it for himself, too. He wants it to be unreal and over, imagined, a mirage. But then he recalls the wires beneath his hands and the knife, and Jim’s heartbeats next to his worriedly worriedly and the fear, and the tear of the phaser blast through muscle -

He has not touched much of the food in the past five point six minutes. The memory (sudden: clear: a flash of light from the muzzle and Jim was in the way and he had to act, he had to act, he could in an eternally slow millisecond perceive how the phaser blast would angle through Jim’s torso and silence his heartbeats forever for ever ever ever) strikes him, unwilling, and he must have silenced, lost track of a second as Gaila was speaking, a question perhaps. She is looking at him with an unusually solemn expression. It is not like him to be a poor listener during a conversation, but for a moment it is as if he is not here in the common room at all, but in the grand hall, the music from the string quartet embalming them and the timer ticking down. He forces himself to focus. Here. This is here; this is now; they averted the explosion; it was all right.
“Nyota told me what happened,” Gaila says after a while, quietly. They are alone but the doors are open and anyone could walk in and overhear. “Thank you.”

“Thanks are unnecessary,” Spock says, a reflex.

“I was in that building. If you hadn’t …” She silences, looks out the window. It is raining, a heavy burst. “Shit like that shouldn’t happen anymore,” she says. She has stopped touching the food.

No. They should not, but they do. Perhaps it is the inevitability, the constant luring fallibility of the human race: they are not perfect, unflawed, logical. But similar things happen on Vulcan, too. They are not always the peaceful pacifists they claim to be - Vulcans lie. They lie. As some Vulcans wish for the humans to cease to be, so do some humans wish for the Vulcans, for every other non-human race. Suddenly, a shiver wants to travel down his spine, and he has control himself so that his heartbeat will remain steady.

Is any place truly as safe and inclusive as it proudly proclaims to be?

“I came to Earth when I was nine or eight years old. Don’t really know, in Standard,” Gaila says, breaking the silence which had fallen between them. “My mother took me here and made us citizens of Earth, started working. Said it was for a better life. Safer. She never stepped on a starship again and did her best to act human. Did a few surgeries … I - I don’t really remember Orion. Just these bits and pieces … I, I guess. I’m kind of jealous of you. You’ve got both Earth and Vulcan, you’ve got both.”

Jealousy is such an illogical emotion. Spock cannot tell her that he has tasted it: tasted it so deeply and it’s nearly torn through him, along with raging guilt and anger and despair, and this undercurrent of love unheeded, and the constant feeling of never being enough. Would she comprehend that? She is fully Orion; her blood is not tainted by human DNA. Despite her upbringing here on this planet, she is well-versed in the ways of her people, their customs, and she does not try to hide who she is.

She never tried to bury the human. She has no human to bury.

Perhaps he has misjudged her: he has made assumptions based on her Orion heritage, without considering the whole of her past and how it could have shaped her. Because he has never encountered an Orion before who would share information about themselves with tears gleaming, humanly, in their eyes.

“Sometimes one would be enough,” he finds himself saying. Gaila may interpret that as she likes. He has finished his plate now and stands, starting to put things into the dishwasher. He puts the remainder of the food into boxes and stores it in the fridge, and as he works he does not speak or look at her. The words were not meant to be said. He is losing control … He must meditate.

Vulcan is arid and beautiful.

At the bottom of the package, this time, his mother had sent more than food and sweaters - so many gifts, unasked for yet Spock cannot bring himself to turn them away. She had included a pair of holographic virtual reality glasses, technology which has many applications: some would deem it a toy for children, a silly pastime. A postcard one can step into, and she had made a recording of their house and the nearby lands, the view stretching onward into the mountains and the sky is pale. It is not the most advanced virtual reality technology available: this one is a cycle, repeats a single recording, and he is not free to move around in it; he does not need it. A bird circles high above, searching for food or shelter, and a sehlat cries at a distance, an echo, but otherwise it is quiet. He has waited for a few days before trying them on. It requires time undisturbed. After - He needs it, and
one Thursday night, after exchanging goodnight texts with Jim, he closes the blinds and plugs in the headphones and puts the glasses on.

For a moment, he can forget that he is on Earth. Of course, it is only an illogical illusion. He is very far too well aware that that is unreal: the image is of high-definition, yes, and has all the depth and colour of a dream; but the pull of gravity remains the same steady one G, the oxygen levels do not change; he can still smell the salt of sea from the San Francisco bay. It is not home, but almost.

His mother has made it into a walk, starting on the threshold of the house. She does not speak: there is no recorded message, nor background music. Simply walking, slowly. Footsteps. His memory is perfect and without flaw, and he thinks of the stark hot wind on the outside giving way to cool, recycled air on the inside, the hall lit by a row of yellow lights and to the left there is a chair, an environmental computer control attached to the wall above it. The space looks almost the same as when he left it - little details: someone, his mother probably, has left an ear commlink lying on the living room table; the row of potted plants underneath a window have been slightly rearranged and a pink flower is blooming; something is steaming on the stove. A window is open, a curtain curling in the wind, and his mother's hand comes into view to shut it. A click from the latch.

Over a threshold, down three brief steps and a glance into the library. Spock has made many memories there: during his first two years, before joining an educational institution, he would spend much time there with both his parents, learning his letters and numbers and the beginnings of logic and science and the Teachings of Surak. There is no longer a blanket on the floor where he had curled up with I-Chaya while studying - there has not been a blanket there for years and years; Spock recalls the shades of its colour and the flaws in the stitches. It was an old thing, and his father disliked it; it was not beautifully perfect, and I-Chaya chewed on in when bored or hungry, and when Spock was five Standard years old his father attempted to throw it away. Next morning, it was back in its place of honour: Spock had stubbornly crept out of bed in the middle of night and plucked it out of the recycling bin before the machine had destroyed and remade it into something new. He had received a scolding about illogical emotional attachments to material objects. When his father put the blanket in the recycler and pressed the button, Spock remained in his place and did not stop him, and he belatedly had tried to apologize to I-Chaya even if the sehlat could not have understood the spoken words. It was just a beast. Faithful, yes, but a beast. Shortly thereafter, following a series of times when Spock would try to escape the house on his own to explore, after disobedient his father's command, after showing vivid emotion - acting out; rebelling; as a child would, and had he been human no one would have scolded him for wanting to weep or smile or get attached to things. But his father called it rebellion. A Vulcan does not do those things and, in order to make him more Vulcan, his father sent him to the Mind Healers.

Right now, Spock does not think about the Mind Healers.

The house is peaceful and quiet. At the back of the house, stretching toward a towering horizon of mountain ranges, is a balcony carved into the very rock, with steep edges measuring hundreds of feet, and his mother has ensured to make it homely - all of it was to be homely. Vulcan living is functional, and aesthetic elements draw mainly on historical remnants, old pieces of art, traditional architecture; there are musicians and artists on Vulcan, but they are quite rare, and they do not have the same function as composers and painters on Earth seem to do. It is not as free. Spock was not encouraged by his father to express artistic talent; albeit his mother did; his mother encouraged nearly all that he attempted. All branches of science. To create music. She brought him a ka’athyra from the Shi’khar markets when he was nine and he perfected the eighteen traditional cantatas to play for her, including the lay of Falor’s Journey with all of its three hundred and forty-eight verses. It seemed to please her. And he wanted to make her happy, even if he would no longer accept embraces from her - Vulcans do not hug. He had earned his place as a full Vulcan after kahs’wan and could no longer accept her human notions of affections, and he tried tried tried ever since then to be unmoved and
unmoving by emotion.

The doors are open to allow light and air through. They step outside. He sees the result of wind, a distant whine, but cannot feel anything upon his skin, a reminder that this is merely a holographic display before his eyelids and little more. The recording lingers for some time on the balcony before it turns again, inside, and his mother walks into the kitchen and he sees her hands reaching for the stove and stirring the pot. Adjusting the settings. Reaching into a cupboard for a pinch of salt, some herbs. She does not use measuring cups - she is not that exact. She has always been a good cook. Spock watches, and illogically feels a pang of longing to be there, and join the table with her and Sarek and taste the food prepared by her. Speak. Voices in real-time, not lagging videocalls or emails without immediate response.

It takes a moment to identify the sound of knocking as coming from outside the recording, as his mother does not stir or react to the noise, intruding upon the image. Spock lowers the glasses, waiting so that his eyes can adjust to the lack of light, removes the headphones, and the knock comes again. It is nearing 03:00. A human should be asleep at this hour. There is a fifty-nine percent chance that it is Jim, unable to sleep, wishing to socialize or seeking comfort, assurances; an eight percent chance that it is another cadet from this floor, though their reasons could be vague; he cannot smell smoke or the like, nor sense any danger. The chance that it is someone from another building entirely is remote and slim.

He opens the door.

“Leonard? Are you in need of aid?”

The human looks very tired, his hair mussed and eyes heavy, half-lidded, and for a moment Spock wonders if the man is sleep-walking. He did not think McCoy would do that, but he could have a condition of some kind.

“It’s Jim,” the man says, and a thousand horrible thoughts are birthed processed disregarded in the time it takes to hear the words, and Spock is already reaching for his shoes. Leonard scratches the back of his neck awkwardly, bites back a heavy yawn. He does not apologize for appearing at such a late hour; he must have begun realizing that excuses are unnecessary for Vulcans. “He’s - I can’t calm him down. Nightmare. Thought maybe you’d, dunno, help.”


Leonard, a mixture of annoyed and embarrassed, says: “Yeah. I tried your comm but you weren’t answering.”

He had turned it off for meditation. A mistake. Spock vows to never turn it off again and together they hurry down the hallway, to the stairs, outside. The night is chilly and damp, and the stars are veiled by low-hanging clouds. A minimum of four point three minutes which Jim has spent alone. It is not good. Something within him thunders, and it could be his heart, or it could be Jim’s heart, a twist of adrenaline and fears and horror, reaching across their tentative link for something to hold onto, a comfort. Leonard is one step ahead and their room is on the first floor, crammed next to a janitor’s closet and the door is unlocked.

A nightlamp is shining like a hollow moon. On the farthest bed, Jim is lying on his side in a fetal position, tangled in the sheets, whimpering and whispering. His back is to the door. Spock is at his side without speaking and sees a pale face and he has never seen him like this. His expression is distant. There is an undercurrent of violence within it, and as Spock tries to reach out for him, Jim lashes out. A foot is still trapped by the sheet and he falls over the edge of the bed onto the floor with
a thump. As if he were a frightened animal trapped by a snare, the human blindly claws at his foot without success and Spock sees now that he is still asleep: his eyes are wide open, but blank, and do not process the light as they would were he conscious.

“Jim,” Spock implores, steadily. He does not know what to do, and it - it frightens him. The only other person on Vulcan who has the ability to dream, apart from himself, is his mother, and she has never had nightmares for him to soothe. “You are dreaming. You are only dreaming.” He approaches carefully, and Jim scuttles away until his back is pressed to the wall in the corner and when the blanket causes the nightlamp to fall down and splinter, he does not react. Spock does not take his eyes off him nor does he flinch when the lightbulb flashes and dies. “Jim,” he says, and kneels in front of him to be on his level. Surely that will help? To be able to meet eyes; to not tower above as a beast, a predator. Logically.

Leonard is still in the room but keeping his distance. “I tried talkin’ to him; it didn’t work.”

A slow movement, he attempts to reach for Jim’s face - not his meldpoints, at once. Jim is in no state to give consent to a meld, but perhaps a touch would soothe him. Perhaps he could recognize it, subconsciously, as something good, something safe.

Why is Jim …?

_Fire. Explosions. Phasers. Fire._

He must be dreaming of Tarsus IV.

Spock lowers his voice, and the word lingers on his tongue waiting to be formed. He has never said it out loud before. “_Ashalik,_” almost a tremble which a human would hardly notice. “It is all right. You are only dreaming. You are not in danger here.” His hand hovers so close so close to human skin - he can sense faint body heat, lower than his own, and Jim’s breaths are harsh fast stark and his beautiful eyes should never have to hold such deep-rooted fear. Such horror. “I will not hurt you.”

Humans speak to their young in bright, babbling voices when they are in distress; and his mother would speak softly when Spock displayed negative emotions as a child. When in need of comfort. He must comfort Jim, and if he cannot do that with a touch, words must be used. He does not know what to say. “Jim,” he repeats, and his hand gently reaches Jim’s foot and the human tries to kick him. He catches the action deftly. He is much stronger than him, especially as Jim is not aware of what he is doing and the movement is uncoordinated, sluggish. “I will not harm you.” He begins unwrapping the blanket from the trapped limb and feels a thrum of anxiety and a tremble of muscle, straining beneath his grip. As he works, he repeats the phrases: he repeats Jim’s name, and slowly a change comes upon Jim’s frame, albeit it is still tense, wary, and unconscious of its own actions. The foot is freed and Jim draws in on himself, wrapping his arms around his torso and he rocks back and forth. Something inside of Spock _aches_, physically, at the sight. Jim exudes pain and vulnerability and confusion. This should not be. This should not be.

He has to fight to not be angry. The people responsible - the horrible man causing Tarsus IV - is gone. is dead. is gone. He will not touch Jim or the other survivor any more, will not, will not ever. Spock will make sure. “Jim,” he murmurs. “Wake up. It is a dream and it is not real.”

A low, quiet wail. Jim hunches over, hides his face. He is weeping.

Spock wants to wipe away the tears for ever.

“Jim.” He is in front of him now, only a small distance, and Jim has not attempted to hit or kick him again. Slowly slowly slowly he reaches out. A hand. Jim’s shoulder is naked - he is not wearing a
shirt - and cool to the touch, and a rush of emotion falls over him and if not for his meditation earlier his shields might not have been strong enough to handle it. There is pain, anger, confusion. There is a burning burning burning and Spock cannot be sure if it is the memory of hunger or the memory of fire -

Jim, he whispers, even if the human surely cannot properly perceive it. Jim. Ashalik. It is all right. It is a dream. It is unreal. A mantra, repeating, and he keeps his hand there, on the shoulder, and copies a movement his mother had done, when he was young, a thumb in small circles which are meant to be calming. He must be calm; he cannot be angry, not when Jim is close enough to hear. He will not fell tears, but for a moment he wants to, wants to be furious at this injustice - Jim was only a child, only a child, when he was trapped on Tarsus IV and Spock has only read reports, seen sparse holovids, but … for a human child to go through …

Jim.


The human shudders, and falls forward, and suddenly he is burrowing himself in Spock’s chest, seeking an embrace, an anchor, and, bewildered, Spock is frozen, having lost the grip of his shoulder. Jim is no longer wailing, but still crying in a quietness, and hands fist in Spock’s shirt harshly. They have never had this much bodily contact all at once before, and he feels now that Jim is colder than he should be - from shock? The softness of his hair against Spock’s cheek is - new, and a little strange, but not bad; and a nose presses into the nape of his neck. For some time, Jim lingers there, until the sobs taper off and then he gives a soft sigh and he is no longer burning. Spock’s hand hesitantly touches his back. The shock of the touch is reeling: he can feel his mind: and it is the beautiful mind he melded with, more disorderly than last time because of the dream, and no longer asleep.

“… Spock?” there is a whisper into his shoulder, but Jim does not move away. A wet snifflle.

"Yes. I am here."

Confusion; shame, coiling through his blood; Jim shudders again.

You were dreaming.

it, it’s, a stammer, Jim tasting this way of speaking to each other without sharing their thoughts with anyone else: so intimately. it’s usually not this bad, I don’t, I don’t know why - it. the ball. the phaser, it. it must’ve set it off. i’m sorry. i’m sorry i’m sorry i’m sorry

There is no need to apologize, Ashalik.

you said it again. ashalik. Spock realizes that the curl of warmth, and the movement of the face still buried against him, indicates a smile; fondness. this. i can’t - you hear me? it’s difficult, but. did i wake you?

No, I was not asleep. You will learn control in time.

Someone clears their throat. “Uh, not that I want to break up this lovely moment, but if he’s awake we really should get him back in bed. It’s cold and I won’t take care of him if he comes down with the flu again,” mutters Leonard, even if the last statement is a lie. Leonard will always care for his friend. “And I really need to sleep for at least two hours without bein’ interrupted.”

“Are you capable of standing?” Spock asks aloud.
“Uh-uh,” Jim murmurs softly, no longer tense: he relaxes against him, and slowly they untangle. Jim’s face is red and his eyes puffy, but no longer wide and horrified and Spock has a strange urge to brush a thumb across his cheek to wipe away the tear tracks, which he holds back. He helps Jim back into bed. The human moves tiredly, heavily. Leonard goes to fetch something from the replicator in the hallway.

“I miss Newton,” Jim says, huddling under the covers; Spock lingers. He cannot leave, not after seeing Jim in such distress.

The tribble had been taken in the care of authorities shortly after the ball, to be returned to its natural habitat. Jim had, while caring for it in the last few days, not fed it so much that it had spawned, so there were no litters too to take care of. Spock can vaguely understand. The tribbles had through their presence and purring noise given many cadets comfort and made them calm, and perhaps they had made Jim sleep well. But no pets are allowed on campus, especially such of alien nature. They would not be comfortable on Earth in the long run.

“Are you all right?” Spock asks.

The human shrugs, silently, averting his eyes.

“If,” he says, and pauses for one point three seconds. Much longer than he usually would in order to think. “If you would like, I could stay. Here. With you,” Spock offers, hesitantly. He is not sure if Jim will accept - oh, but he will. He is human and emotional and - But would Leonard mind his presence? Perhaps it is not a a good idea - but he offers anyway. He must. For Jim. To make sure. “If it would bring you comfort.”

In reply, Jim lifts the covers.

It is much warmer under here. The mattress is softer than his own and smells of Jim, so familiarly, and Jim shifts the two pillows so that they have access to one each. Spock has shed his outer shirt, realizing it will not be very comfortable to sleep in, as well as his shoes; he had considered it briefly before shedding his trousers as well. His thermal underwear will be enough to keep him both warm and modest. They have settled down and Jim’s side is pressed against his, a source of heat so steady, and Jim looks at him, whispering: *is this okay?*, asking permission before snuggling up to him on his side. It … it is not unpleasant.

It is good.

Leonard returns with a glass of water in hand, and abruptly freezes on the doorstep.

“Okay. Right. I guess it’s the couch for me, then,” the human says, but before he can truly begin a irritated rant, Jim cuts in:

“It’s okay, Bones, we’re not going to do anything. Just sleep.”

“Fine, but if you do anythin’, and I mean *anythin’, with me ten feet away, we’re gonna make some ground rules and I’ll -”

“You the chaperone now?” Jim asks playfully, and it is almost as if the night terror has been washed away, forgotten. As if he is trying to actively forget. Spock struggles to keep his heartrate and breathing level. Jim is so close - so close. They have never been this close. He is warm, and his skin soft, and the hair on his chest a little rough and Spock has never seen him this unclothed before, nevertheless been lying in the same bed. Having these emotional impulses is illogical and - yet not illogical. They are in a relationship. They are *t’hy’la*. Part of him wants to begin exploring. To touch.
He does not: he lies still, with his hands clasped on his breast, and tries to lull himself into rest.

“Might as well be, the way things are turnin’ out,” Leonard grumbles, shutting the door and placing the glass on the small table next to his own bed. “But tomorrow night-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jim sighs and yawns, smiling.

Another kind of warmth settles in Spock’s chest when Jim smiles. It makes him …

happy.

It is a realization, simple, oh so simple and huge: *Jim makes him happy.*

His mother once said that that is what a friend is. Someone who makes you happy. And love … He has not fully, truly grasped it. The abstract. Even as they kissed. That this - this is love. To join, in mind, in heart. To be there. To make each other feel safe. To make each other happy.

Neither human notices any of these thoughts. Leonard waves a hand and orders the computer to shut down all lights in the room. A shift of fabric as he gets into his own bed. Jim’s breaths are warm against Spock’s cheek, and he frights to not turn his head to merely look at him. That way he will never fall asleep.

“G’night,” Jim whispers, eyes sliding shut.

Jim makes him **happy.**

“Any pain?”

“None in the past twenty-four hours,” Spock reports. He has not taken any pain medication for two days. The injury was to muscle and skin, but not to bone, nor to any major blood vessels or nerve bundles. He was treated on-site fast enough with a tissue regenerator that it is not an issue.

It will still leave a scar.

They are, at this moment, not speaking as two cadets to one another. Leonard has several years of medical experience before joining Starfleet, and he is already an accomplished surgeon; as Dr McCoy, he slips into a comfortable, familiar role. He remains as gruff and honest as ever, though. Human and emotional. They are in the medbay at campus, McCoy having persuaded the staff to let them use a room. He inspects the injury to Spock’s leg with a critical eye as well as with machinery. The tricorder does not beep in warning that there is a crisis.

The readings indicate that there is no nerve damage, and Spock can feel everything, but Dr McCoy still checks manually. “Wriggle your toes.” He does. It is no problem. Eventually, Dr McCoy is pleased with the results, and he is allowed to put on his shoes and roll down the trouser leg. “It’s healing nicely. I’ll check up on it tomorrow too, but I don’t see that you’ll have any issues. If there is, though, I want to know.”

“Of course, Doctor. Withholding information about my health would be illogical.”

McCoy gives him a wry look. “Yes, it would.” The human puts down the PADD and tricorder on the examination table, and Spock stands, gathering his bag with supplies. He has a lecture to attend to. “Okay, exam’s over.” Leonard is back; Dr McCoy is now off-duty, and Leonard is a cadet. Before Spock can leave the room, standing on the threshold, the doors sliding open, the human says something to halt him.
“About last night - it did Jim good, having you there. So, thanks for that. Also, if the two ever touch inappropriately in my presence, I’ll -”

“There is no need for you to finish such a threat,” Spock assures him.

“Nonetheless.” The look in the human’s eyes is difficult to read, but somehow important, so Spock focuses on him and his words. “Listen, Spock, Jim is my friend. He’s done some mistakes, yeah, but haven’t we all. And if you hurt him, in any way, physically or mentally - let’s just say as a doctor I know a lot about bodies, including Vulcan bodies. What makes them tick.”

There is no question about that. As Jim’s closest friend at the Academy, and perhaps ever, it is highly logical that Leonard is protective of him, and wants him to be safe and unhurt and unabused. Considering Jim’s past … Of course. It is logical. It is nothing personal; these are words which Leonard would have used regardless with whom Jim forms a relationship with. Spock inclines his head in acknowledgement. “Duly noted, Doctor. I have no desire to cause Jim any harm.”


Understanding a lot of the things humans do and say is something which Spock has only just begun to grasp. But this thing he understands beyond a doubt.

“There is a human expression: we are on the same page, Doctor.”

This the human approves of. “Good. Now, shoo. I’ve got to get to calculus.”

Three red tomatoes are carefully selected and neatly placed in the basket next to the packet of soy cream. He chooses a handful of shallots next; they are similar enough to Vulcan onion roots to function passingly in several Vulcan recipes.

Spock is not very fond of stores. This is not a grand supermarket - there would simply be too much noise, too many people, for him to handle right now without first preparing himself for the onslaught. He prefers this small grocer’s, situated in a quaint corner of a smaller street, and they tend to have a varied selection of not only Earth foodstuffs but also products imported from other Federation worlds: Tellar, Andoria, Vulcan, Rigellia. Therefore, many of their customers are also non-Terran. A Denobulan is also in the fruit and vegetable aisle, weighing potatoes. On an almost human whim, seeing that the price has been reduced by fifty-nine point three percent, Spock selects some Andorian tuber roots before moving on to the next aisle.

It has been a long week. He has struggled more than usual with his studies - not because the subject matter was harder than normal, but his focus keeps …slipping. On the edge. He does not sleep, and meditation gives not as much comfort and rest as it should. It is an evil circle, each hour of poor meditation fuelling a day wherein his concentration is lower than it should be and thus his self-control is tested, his mood, his body - stress. Is this stress? it could be. he has not experienced it like this before. Not even on Vulcan, during the trying days when performing tests and experiments in order to prove himself worthy of attending the Vulcan Science Academy. It is illogical. He has not had a major exam for the past fourteen days. It has been over a week since the ball - he must begin to put it behind him, now, now, now. To hang onto what happened is … illogical.

Jim has had more nightmares. Spock is aware, because Jim looks physically drained each morning when they meet, either for classes, or a study session together, or to share a meal. Perhaps they ought to spend more time together doing other things, unrelated to the Academy. They are, after all, boyfriends. This still strange, new, wondrous word. Humans celebrate twosomeness and cherish it, and go on dates and they wed not out of logic but from emotional reasons. Would Jim like to spend
time off-campus with him? Spock silently ponders this while weighing bread options, reading ingredient labels. Jim mentioned that coffeehouse without naming it or its location, but if they serve specific items - latte with Anteran brandy? yes, that was it - then it should not be too difficult to find using an online search.

There is more than one reason they should spend more time with each other, without the presence of peers and teachers. He must talk with Jim about his father’s request - a request which is, in reality, an order - to meet, and prepare him for this. Yes, the two have briefly met, but Sarek barely glanced Jim over at the time; Spock had been taken by the Andorians, and a political disaster had to be averted, and at the time Sarek had not known that Jim was anything more than a friend. That anyone could ever be more than Spock’s friend. That Spock had friends. Only recently has his father become invested in his son’s well-being and daily life. They communicate via email from item to time, but mostly about logical things. Necessary things. What will Sarek think of Jim, this young, emotional human? And what will they do if Sarek does not approve?

Spock cannot think of these things right now, standing in a grocery store. Later. Later. He shoves the thought aside.

Decision made, Spock places seven-hundred grams of dark graham bread in the basket, ticking the item off his mental list. He usually does not shop much, as the cafeteria and the replicators can provide most of the food he needs daily, but he would like to cook more. The package his mother sent has given him - inspiration, to do more of it. He needs more flour to make a fresh batch of kreyla.

As he is deliberating between standard white and whole-wheat flour, a human comes to stand quite close next to him - too close for Spock’s comfort - apparently in search for something on the same shelf full of ingredients for baking. The human doesn’t pick something right away, however. They smile at him, and it is nothing like Jim’s smile: it does not make Spock feel anything, and he would like to get away but the human is blocking the way, pushing a half-filled cart in front of them.

“Hey, pretty,” they say. Spock does not reply. He is not interested in socializing with this human. At all. He estimates them to be somewhere in their mid-twenties or early thirties, and they speak with a general Standard accent, indiscernible. The human goes on speaking, and does not sound at all embarrassed. “Just got to say, I haven’t met a Vulcan before - you’re Vulcan, right? - and those ears are really, really hot. I mean, it’s so exotic, and, what I’m saying is I don’t mind them - What’s your name? I’m Tim. Wanna swap comm numbers? I’ll buy you a drink.”

Seemingly, the human is very interested of the sound of his own voice. He is also, quite possibly, delusional, and for once Spock wishes he had more pronounced skills in human social cues so that he could signal to this human, without using his voice, that he wants him to leave him alone. He cannot do that, so he says: “I am not interested.” He takes a packet of white flour off the shelf.

“Look, I was a bit too forward, I guess,” the man says, not sounding genuinely apologetic whatsoever, and there is no charm to his presence. “You’re kind of cute. We could catch a cup of coffee. Vulcans drink that, don’t you? Everyone likes coffee. What do you say, sweetie?”

Is is considered rude to nerve-pincher a human in public? It is. His mother would be ashamed; it would be considered an action of unnecessary violence. “I am not interested,” Spock repeats. The human’s manner of assigning him such names - pet names, without him asking for them, without him wanting them - for some reason, the human within him wants to shiver in disgust. It is not at all like when Jim writes to him: it gives him no warmth, and he is not fond of this stranger. Why would he be? Deciding it is better if he left the store now, Spock attempts to move past the human without knocking down any bottles of marmalade from the opposite side of the aisle with his basket.
The human shoots out a hand and lays it on his shoulder.

Spock tenses sharply. “Do not touch me.” He must breathe calmly, and not lash out. A Vulcan would not lash out. A Vulcan is orderly, their emotions reigned in, and to nerve-pinch the man would be considered assault; he will not commit an offence. The human’s hand lingers, uncaring, for three point six seconds, the grip not that gentle and Spock forcibly shrugs him off.

“Hey, no need to be frosty,” the human says, smile now turning into an angry frown, with a promise of violence to come if the ire grows, and the human instincts which Spock has inherited, spent so many years of his life training to suppress, flare to life: warnings to flee. This situation could very easily escalate. “Just trying to be nice. C’mon, babe.”

“I advise you not to attempt making physical contact with any Vulcan you ever cross paths with,” Spock says sternly. “Nor call us by human pet names.”

“What’s with the attitude? Come on, I’ll make it up to you. I’m a nice guy.”

“I believe they very clearly said no,” a new voice intones, and Spock sees that it is the Denobulan from earlier, an elderly adult with ridges across their face and it is a much more kindly, pleasant face than that of the human. Their voice is firm but courteous. When they look at the human they appear stern and disapproving, but then they smile at Spock, and the human has with great reluctance loosened their grip of his arm. Glowering, obviously annoyed and possibly angry, so clearly that one does not need to be a telepath to know it, the human lets the Vulcan pass him. Spock exhales through his nose, refusing to let any emotion be betrayed.

“Just wanted to be nice,” mutters the human, as if to himself, yet loudly enough for anyone nearby to hear: the obvious intention is to show his displeasure and anger, immaturely, and also verbally insult the Vulcan. “Freakin’ Vulcan. You need to loosen up. No one wants to fuck a frigid -”

“I beg your pardon,” says the Denobulan, clearly and slowly, almost a growl, and a lesser being might be terrified by the intensity of their glare. For a species known for their kindness and gentleness, it is an odd thing to witness; Denobulans are a close-knitted race, individuals used to living in tight communities and everyone taking care of each other in sizable, complex families, partly as a result of the large population all living on a their homeworld’s single continent. That is what Spock knows from textbooks, at least; he has never been more than brief acquaintances with any Denobulan. Their science is well-known, particularly in medicine, where leaps have been made in new technology, in particular nanotechnology and genetic engineering; Spock has read much about that, though medicine lies only in the periphery of his interests. “I expect you to apologize for your behaviour this instant. And if I see you harassing someone again I won’t hesitate to call police.”

The human simply shrugs and starts to walk away, toward the check-outs, thundering past them. Spock does not interfere. The incident was uncomfortable, yes, but he has endured far worse. He will need to meditate later today and place the memory of it far away, at the back of consciousness where it cannot be reached.

The Denobulan turns to him. The ire is gone and has given way to warm concern, and Spock finds it … touching, as well as confusing. They are strangers. He is not used to strangers caring for his well-being; mostly, people stare, at his alien face and his alien ears, whisper behind their hands as if he could not perceive it. “Is everything all right?”

“Affirmative,” Spock says, nodding once to reinforce this.

“Good. Humans,” the Denobulan sighs, shaking their head. “Sometimes I wonder why some of their kind can be exemplary and kind, and others so unpleasant.”
This conversation, although unasked for, is not on in which he desires to be only silent, though he does not want to linger either. “All species are diverse.”

“Wise words,” the Denobulan agrees. He looks at Spock as if properly for the first time, and the Vulcan can now take a moment to do likewise. The Denobulan must be quite old; their yellow eyes are aged and the left one slightly dull, so they must have some issues with their vision. Today, most such things can be fixed with surgery, but perhaps this one has not elected to have one. Their hair is thin and grey, an indicator that the Denobulan must be old indeed; the signs of age one would expect in, say, a Vulcan or human, are otherwise largely absent in their race. “Oh! Cadet reds!” they exclaim, and now the interest is deep, vivid: “I didn’t know we’d have a Vulcan in Starfleet! Congratulations.” They smile widely.

Spock, uncertain as to how to react, says: “Thank you.” The Denobulan had used the inclusive pronoun of we - it could be merely an error when speaking a second or third language, or it could indicate that they are or have been part of Starfleet.

Before he can ask, however, the Denobulan goes on: “I was there in the early days when Starfleet sent its first ship into the unknown. Ah! those were the days. I’m far too old for that now, of course. Dr Phlox, retired.”

“The very same Dr Phlox who served under Admiral Archer of the USS Enterprise NX-01 while he was still a Captain?” Spock asks, taken aback. A human might have been full of glee. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Doctor. Your reputation as an excellent surgeon is widespread on Vulcan.”

“The very same,” the Denobulan confirms with a wistful smile. “I see you know your history - wouldn’t expect anything less from a cadet. Which year are you graduating?”

“If all goes according to plan, in 2258.”

“Wonderful! Maybe I’ll live to see it. I’m always happy to see some diversity in Starfleet. So many humans dominate it all, and we need other voices to be heard.”

“Yes, but some of the humans are agreeable,” Spock finds himself saying, suddenly thinking of Jim’s smile and Nyota’s calming presence and even of Leonard’s gruffness.

Dr Phlox chuckles, a sound full of memory and time compressed and so many names unspoken. “Indeed. I remember Archer in his youth, and Trip - Commander Tucker, you know him as. It’s a pity … such a pity …” He trails off, a tired sigh, and he stares vacantly at the rows of marmalade for a moment. Then he clears his throat and brightens again, and in that long second Spock got a glimpse of old faces long since gone, of fates having laid to rest, of empty graves. “But! I don’t have time to give lectures now, got to rush back to the family.” He holds up his own shopping basket, which is overflowing, and shakes his a little. “Fifty-two mouths to feed, and I got tasked with finding some potatoes. You know, if you ever need help with your studies - I have a few tales to tell - give me a ring.” Dr Phlox digs something out of a pocket: a small card with his name and communicator number printed on it, laminated, and he hands it over carefully making sure they do not physically touch; the doctor knows of Vulcan physiology and customs. “Or if some pesky human bothers you, and I’ll have words with them, cadet …?”

“I am Spock, of the House of Surak. Thank you, Doctor. The latter shall hopefully remain unnecessary,” Spock says, and holds the card tightly so that he will not lose or drop it. Maybe he will never call the number, but he doubts Dr Phlox would appreciate it if it was accidentally distributed. His name is well-known also outside of Starfleet circles, a minor celebrity for his contributions to human exploration and history. If not for Captain Archer and his crew, if not for the very first
“Enterprise,” there would be no United Federation of Planets. Spock would not be, either; his parents would probably never have met. Logically, he owes Dr Phlox a debt of gratitude for merely allowing him to exist. He does not say this. It is not his place to burden the Denobulan with such information.

“Surak? Oh, the Ambassador’s son! Well, well, I think I’ve met Ambassador Sarek once - long ago. Now, got to dash! I wish you the very best with your studies, young one,” Dr Phlox smiles and forms a ta’al with ease, well-practiced. “Live long and prosper.”

Cradling his basket in his elbow, Spock frees a hand and holds it up to form a ta’al in return. “Live long and prosper.”

Then the Denobulan disappears, hurrying for the check-outs, and Spock pauses to rearrange his thoughts after this unexpected meeting. He pockets the card, and considers his basket. There was something else he meant to buy. What was it?

Ah. Sweet peppers.

“You met who?!”

“There is no need to shout,” Spock reminds him as Jim gapes. He has dropped his fork and bits of sauce have splattered onto his shirt; the human does not seem to notice, or care. “Yes, I met Dr Phlox this morning while buying groceries. Jim, you must remember to breathe.”

“Oh my god, wow, wow, wow,” Jim says, swiftly, as if he has forgotten how to breathe altogether. “One of Admiral Archer’s crew! For real! In person! Did you get his autograph?” Picking up his fork again, he adds: “You have got to tell Bones. He’s going to be so jealous!”

“No, I did not. I do not see the value in owning a piece of paper with someone’s signature on it. The memory of the meeting itself is much more valuable, if one measures by sentimentality and emotions, is it not?”

“True, but it’s a human thing, and you can show it off to friends and stuff. Wow, I had no idea he lived in San Francisco, or on Earth. He’s got to be old. Really old.”

Spock had not mentioned how exactly the meeting had come to be, not yet. The human and his unwanted hand. He can predict that Jim with react negatively and not very calmly, and possibly propose to find this human with the intent to threaten him or cause physical harm - illogical, and not wholly legal, but a human reaction. Emotional. Vaguely, Spock can understand that it would be a human way of showing care and support: by promising to be there, even in hindsight, and attempt to ensure his physical and emotional safety and integrity.

They are sitting in the common room in building B-30, eating lunch. Spock has tried out a new recipe using some of the ingredients he bought earlier, and plans on revising notes from lectures in mathematics in preparation of a minor test next Thursday. He expects to excel with full marks. Jim, slowly, starts eating again, murmuring: “Dr Phlox. Oh. My. God.” to himself as if disbelieving.

“I was given his communication number should the need arise for me to call him for advice on Academy studies,” Spock says.

“You got his number?! Oh my god.”

“Jim, I do not comprehend the need to make illogical exclamations referring to a god from Terran religions.”
“It’s just, it’s a shock. Wow.” Jim stares at him with wide-eyed excitement. “What was he like?”

Spock takes a bite of the food and formulates an answer, recalling the encounter. “I had an impression of wisdom from him. He seemed very kind, and of course he is an accomplished medical doctor and surgeon with over a hundred years’ experience.”

Jim has now finished the last part of his meal, and after the human has drunk some water, Spock says: “The reason we spoke was because he intervened as a human attempted to make unwanted advances on my person.”

He watches him carefully, gauging his reaction; it is immediate. Jim stiffens, and his excited grin fades into a frown. It is not only angry, though. It is worried. “What happened?” And, as predicted, he also asks: “Have I got to pummel someone?”

“Negative. The human - a male in his twenties, I believe - asked for my communicator number; he also made xenophobic remarks about Vulcans when I rejected his offer for coffee. He grabbed my arm -” Now, Jim is altogether pale, his mouth a thin down-turned line, his hands tight fists. Humans can be violent, humans can be very violent and suddenly Spock thinks of Iowa, and the bar, and blood over Jim’s face and he struggles to blink the image away from his retinas. “- but it was then Dr Phlox intervened. I did not see the human on the bus ride back to campus, so I do not believe we shall come across one another again.” He does not mention a name: it would only spur Jim onward, and he does not want to see him hurt in a fight or argument. “I am all right, Jim. I am unhurt. Violence is unnecessary.”

He had checked his arm once he returned to his room. There is no bruise. The grip was not that strong.

“Okay. I don’t like that someone harassed you like that, and if I ever meet them I can’t promise I won’t punch them,” Jim says. Still frowning, but not as severely as before. “Have they no sense? Touching without asking is not okay.”

“Apparently they were not aware or did not care. But it does not matter, Jim. The incident was halted by Dr Phlox and I doubt either of us will come across this human again, given the size of the city.”

The meal now finished, they clear the table together and place the dirty plates and cutlery in the dishwasher. Approximately one portion of food is left over and this is put in a box in the fridge. Then Jim hefts his bag where he has his PADD and notebook, and Spock fetches some of his books from his room. They debate whether to stay here or go elsewhere to study. It’s raining today, whyfor Spock had opted to take the bus and not walked. Otherwise it might have been warm enough to sit outside in the wide expanses of the green lawns. Not that ergonomic or practical, but humans like go gather out there, in groups or alone, sitting on blankets. That is also an idea for a date.

One day soon Spock will put the plan into action. Jim had invited him to the Theatre; he had asked him to the ball. He should be the one to ask, next time.

They head to the library. Given the weather and the upcoming exams, many cadets have chosen to do the same. Finding an empty table takes upward the quarter of an hour. Eventually, they find a small one crammed into a corner of the third floor, in-between bookshelves full of literature on cardiology, divided into subsections grouped according to species.

Studying is calming, relaxing. It is another form of meditation. To go over a problem, one at a time, logically and critically, and to absorb information swiftly and precisely, is something every Vulcan learns as soon as they begin to speak. He places a book in the middle of the table so that they both
can see it, flips it open to page two-hundred and five, and picks up a pencil. When it comes to mathematics, he finds it useful to write on paper as well as on the PADD. It is easier to clearly trace thoughts.

“Psst,” Jim whispers after half an hour. The human has a page full of numbers and symbols in front of him, and Spock can spot no glaring error at first glance. “The third question, it’s a fourth degree equation and I forgot my formulas in my dorm. D’you use the root for this part first, or …?”

“Negative. It is easiest to find the value of \(x\) by first finding two second degree equations this equation equals,” Spock murmurs. They must not disturb the others are work or draw the attention and wrath of the librarians onto themselves. “Observe that \(f(-1)\), \(f(-2)\), and \(f(-3)\) all equal -3, like so …” He moves closer so that Jim can read his notes, and the human concentrates, and Spock makes sure Jim can follow every step of the way as he explains, patiently. Jim is clever but he has not had the rigorous training a Vulcan has, and sometimes he becomes too eager, works too fast, and therefore makes errors which irritate him, a gnawing sense of disappointment. For Jim to understand that he is highly intelligent for a human will take time. Perhaps he will never fully learn it, and never truly be comfortable and at ease with himself. Spock, too, must learn. “… and finally we have two second degree equations which are to be solved in the usual manner.”

“Right, so, so then the fourth power’s removed, you just got to … Okay, I think I get it. I think.” Jim nods to himself a couple of times, then looks at him, eyes bright and hopeful. He smiles, a beautiful smile. Something in Spock’s side aches warmly. It could be longing, and he wants to hold out a hand and kiss him, suddenly, an impulse. “Thanks, Spock.”

“Thanks are unnecessary.”

The human meets his gaze steadily and there is a question there, and Spock nods slowly, understanding. Jim’s fingertips brushes against his forefinger, and Spock’s breath stutters, a sharp inhale; the contact so simple and yet so immense. “I, I want to kiss you. The human way. Is that okay?”

No one is directly nearby. This table is partly protected by tall towering bookshelves, and there are no security cameras. No eyes watching. But for a quiet lull in the background of pages turning, muted conversation, and pencils scratching against paper, they are alone in the quiet, surrounded by the homely scent of books which always make Spock make associations to home. to his mother. to safety, comfort. and now, too, to Jim. Gently returning the gesture, fingertips to fingertips, a Vulcan kiss of greeting, he gives permission. They are sitting side-by-side, having moved closer together when Spock was describing the formula, and now they slowly lean in, and it is difficult to tell who begins the motion and who ends it.

It is not like the kiss in Iowa. It is just as warm, but very brief. Zero point three-two-one seconds of contact of lips against lips.

“It’s called a ‘peck’,” Jim whispers after they part, faces still quite close. Close enough to try again, should they desire it. “What do you think?” He sounds slightly nervous, seeking approval.

“It is not unpleasant.” He had not been aware that there were different kinds of human kisses or that those kinds had differing names. “Though it lacks certain finesse.”

“We just got to practice more,” Jim says with a wink. “A work in progress.”

And Spock does not think he will mind that.
Finally, the cliffhanger is resolved! You've waited patiently since February, and, after half an eternity, I've managed to complete this chapter. Thank you everyone who has hung onto this fic and left comments and/or kudos! I apologize it's been so long since I updated. A lot of things have come in-between - other stories in other fandoms, university studies, and lately work and moving to a new place - but I am finally back on track (sort of, anyway!). I began writing this chapter sometime in June this year, so it's been quite a long, uneven journey, and it's taken me awhile to get back onto track with this story and recall all the details of the plot. I've gone through the past chapters and revised the format a bit, plus fixed grammatical errors where I've found them (and probably missed a few things - please tell me in the comments if you find an error so I can fix it!), but plotwise nothing has changed. Please enjoy!
Chapter Summary

act ii, part one.
To be human, Vulcan is not allowed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

t’hy’la

act ii.
part one

aitlu
(verb)
desire

to feel or have a desire for something or someone; to want something strongly;
to expect and wish

Shi’kahr · Vulcan
Stardate 2242.184

No.

It is a word which means nothing. Because he is half-human (less: weaker: not enough) and he has displayed emotion and he is not Vulcan and is it not enough, and he has wept openly and he has laughed and he cannot control himself. He cannot control himself, his mind, his body, this fallible weak flesh, this human mind. This brain that is not enough and his mother’s concern, her fear, her worries flood through him, a dam cracked around the edges. His father is cold. He is always, ever, cold. He is in control. He is Vulcan.

Spock should want to be like his father. Vulcan. He performs well at school, with one exception: he does not show control. He does not. The test results are promising; he can recite the formulas; he can explain the concepts of time, and gravity, and the first law of thermodynamics; he has always learned easily. But he displays emotion. When Stonn, of the same age-group, called him a weak human and his mother inferior, Spock struck him down. A simple action. Something without words burned and raged in his mind his heart his blood, and his eyes filled with tears, and Stonn had said Vulcans do not cry; you are not Vulcan, and Spock had struck him down.

No.

NO.

The useless, meaningless word is repeated over and over, a mantra in his mind, but outwardly Spock is silent and he strains his shields but his shields have always been weak. His father has tried to tame them, and Spock is sore since he failed and the warnings were given. After the altercation with Stonn, resulting in the other’s face being littered with bruises and a tooth knocked out, Spock’s fists green with blood, he was taken aside and sat still in front of the Headmaster, and he took the scoldings and the words and tried to be calm be calm be calm and recall the Teachings of Surak. The Teachings. The Teachings. But he cannot forget, cannot forget and the heat coiling through him and he is not Vulcan enough; he wants to be, needs to be Vulcan. But he will not ever be. He will not ever be enough, and he was given warnings, and he bore the beatings on his back silently, and his shields cracked, and his father, coldly, took him here. To the Mind Healers.

He did not want to go. He fought against it when the doors opened and he was led into the examination room.

It was a mistake. He should not have fought. A Vulcan does not fight.

He asked forgiveness.

It was a mistake. He should not have pleaded to be forgiven for his faults. A Vulcan is cold; in control; a Vulcan does not ask forgiveness, because forgiveness is illogical. Thanks are illogical.
Words derived from emotion are illogical. There is only logic, and in logic there is no violence: in logic there is peace: so proclaimed Surak and his Teachings are to be followed, revered. What Spock did was violent and emotional and not what a Vulcan would have done, should have done. Not. not. not.

(It was the first time he physically fought another Vulcan. It will not be the last.)

Stonn receives no punishment. He is Vulcan. He did not insult: he only stated facts; when Spock tries to dispute this, tries to prove to the Headmaster that the first statement, yes, I am half-human: that is correct - but the second. No. It was faulty, it was wrong, it was a lie: his mother is not inferior, and Stonn insulted her and her House and himself and his father with that single word. The Headmaster would not listen. Stonn had done nothing wrong. He is Vulcan and of a prestigious house and this is the best educational center in Shi’kahr, known for preparing its students for the Science Academy. Stonn had done thing wrong. Spock was the cause and the reason, and he shall be punished. It is logical.

The Healer’s hand is ice and Healer Senwa unmovable: a force, and it does not ask permission for entry. Spock is not Vulcan enough and he must be brought to order. His shields need to be strengthened and his mind be rearranged to fit the norms and it is logical and Spock knows that. He has been told. He has been told. He has been told. He struggles. He does not was Senwa to be in his mind - the only other minds he has touched, before, is that of his mother and his father and they are different. His mother is comfort and warmth and home. She smiles. His father is cold, distant, predictable, logical. Senwa’s fingers press against his meldpoints and Spock cannot move, the weight from the other Mind Healer’s hands, Healer Oratt, immobilizing his shoulders and he is not allowed to fight but he needs to - instinct - instinct - human instinct: to preserve oneself: to protect oneself: to flee. to fight.

No. NO. NO.

(i don’t understand. i don’t understand. i don’t)

He has been trained, since he was less than three years old, in the art of logic and science and his father showed him, had tried to show him, how to make shields. He has trained every day to remake those shields, to wrap them around himself, an embrace, and some Vulcans use a physical sensation, or an image of dark green, or a memory of particular importance on perpetual repeat. Spock cannot do this. Not now. The Healer’s presence is unforgiving and he cannot keep him out, and he thinks of (unasked for, unwilling) Stonn’s blood on his knuckles and the grim satisfaction of it his mother’s smile the story the book he held last night before curling up to sleep a flash of sunrise I-Chaya’s soft fur a low rumble of lightning storms at a distance he watched them from the balcony last summer and swirling winds took over the valley it was wild and free and he’d wanted to throw himself into it and escape -

he is pulled at. from all directions. a probe. it is not a meld wherein two minds in harmony read each other and rejoice. there is no emotion from the Healer. he is there to bring order to this emotional human chaos because Spock is too strong a natural telepath to be allowed to run free with this gift. he must not rebel. he must conform. he must. the strings of his thoughts are tugged at forcibly and they are braided and the Healer reaches for the memory of his mother’s laughter and her praise after he recited the one hundred first decimals of pi for the first time without flaw she was proud of him, she was proud, and the Healer is tugging at the memory to place is far away and out of reach;

NO NO NO

stop
The Healer does not stop.

Spock is at fault and must be corrected. He must be corrected. He must be corrected. He must be controlled. He must be controlled. He must be

His heartrate is higher than it should be; he cannot sense it; he cannot make sense of anything but the Healer’s presence and it hurts it physically hurts the rearranging of memory and removal NO! NO! his mother’s smile is being taken: well done spock i am proud of you well done

(please)

Illogical. It is illogical to plead. Humans do so but Vulcans do not. Illogical. He is an illogical creature, governed by human human human emotional impulses:

(to be human is not allowed)

No, not anymore: the Healer commands: he is Vulcan, and Vulcans are in control; Vulcans are not emotional. Spock has been taught, is being taught, is controlled into a state of thought, absolute in its description of what Vulcans are and his duty, and his mother’s smile disappears, a whisper of wind, the coldness spreads further and he cannot move, and the Healer withdraws after forty-one point seven-two-six Standard minutes. Healer Oratt’s grip is released. He is, once again, alone, and he cannot speak. His tongue is heavy and body illogically numb and his heartrate three hundred and seven beats per minute and an invisible weight is pressing down his chest, compressing it, making it difficult to breathe.

Spock leaves the Mind Healers. He is five years old. The touch of the Healer’s mind oppressing his own will remain as a shadow forever, and his father reminds him, on the way home, that he is Vulcan and must always be Vulcan. And Vulcans do not lash out in anger to assault others. Vulcans are in control. Vulcans are cold, and Vulcans do not lie.

He cannot remember reciting pi to one hundred decimals and his mother embracing him and smiling and saying: I am so proud of you, my son.

He cannot remember.

Afterward, taken home, Spock falls away from his mother’s arms and wants deeply deeply deeply wishes to cry, but cannot logically fathom why. She cradles him close, anyway, and whispers: It’s going to be okay and there is a thrum of anger and she and Sarek discuss things loudly behind locked doors, and his mother emerges one point seven hours later and says: No one will touch your mind like that again, I promise. I promise, I promise.

He cannot remember.

The hearings conclude on a Thursday at seventeen hundred hours. Throughout, Spock has been asked to the stand twice in order to testify. He lays out the facts as he knows them, his observations and his actions as objective as subjective motions could possibly be. Without emotion. He does not allow the judges and the audience, waiting patiently sternly anxiously, to notice at all that he could be nervous or afraid. To be fearful is illogical. He will not let them see any hesitation or doubts, albeit
he, deep down, is unsure whether these spoken words and brief actions will amount to anything but a short, short rest wherein the Keep Earth Human League cannot take immediate action but must wait, lay low, persist; they may persist, and that is what is frightening. All it takes is for one person agreeing with their twisted beliefs shouting loudly enough, and the circle can start anew.

The verdict is a relief. Starfleet security, in liaison with local police authorities, are attempting to finally dismantle KEHL. It cannot, of course, be done smoothly and all at once. But some humans can be found. Some can be proclaimed guilty. The charges are laid out clear: attempted murder, sabotage, hate-crimes, a long list of previous violence and this time, Starfleet promises, the humans will not be able to buy their way out of punishment. It is likely they will be transported to a penal rehabilitation colony offworld: it is not a cruel or harsh punishment, compared to what has been done in Earth’s past, or is done today on many other planets. Klingons would have had them all executed.

(Vulcans would have had them taken to the Mind Healers for correction.)

Jim, too, has spoken when asked and lingered, watchfully, while Spock gave his testimony. He was required to describe in full detail how the events at the ball transpired, words spoken, movements made: thanks to his perfect eidetic memory, that was no issue. He is not questioned. The judge seems to trust in his tale based on the fact that he is Vulcan and she, like most humans, live with the strong belief that Vulcans are incapable of lying. He doesn’t correct her. He includes everything: the attention Jim received because of the tribble he was hiding: the impostor posing as a cadet, his uniform mismatched and cufflinks upside-down: the detonator: the noise of his mind when Spock came in contact with it. That which is not allowed according to Vulcan law, to peer into someone’s mind without consent or cause. But, the judge proclaims, it is not to be seen as a crime in this instant, as his telepathy was key to finding the bomb and disabling it in time; there was justifiable cause.

No one wishes to imagine the possibilities if he hadn’t.

Eventually, they are released from the grand halls and its gleaming white ceilings, the computer turning off and the lights brightening. As people - witnesses: Starfleet officers: cadets: lawyers - begin to file out, Jim’s fingertips brush quietly against his own. Spock welcomes the touch. It is … warm, and soothing.

“Wanna catch a bite?” Jim murmurs, barely hiding a yawn. It is tired work.

“Negative. I must study for my upcoming test.”

Jim nods. “All right. I’ll go with Bones, then. Mind if I stopped by your dorm later tonight? Around ten-ish?”

Despite the usage of a suffix which Spock has not heard before, he comprehends the meaning. The sound of company is not wholly unwanted. He can deduce that Jim will bring his PADD, onto which he has downloaded a number of movies - he keeps doing that, even though the PADDs are meant to be educational work tools, not meant for entertainment. “That will be fine.”

“Great! Ever heard of The Princess Bride?”

« … and court has ruled the four men, arrested at the scene of the crime, guilty. They have all been sentenced for twenty-four years at the penal colony on Tantalus V. During the investigation, other names have come to light, and a number of people are currently wanted. If you see any of these humans, contact the local authorities immediately. Beware that they could be dangerous and violent.

According to Professor Hillary O’Brien, teacher of Anthropology and Sociology at the Lunar
University Institute, the rise in xenophobic hate-crimes has escalated to its peak. “We haven’t seen this kind of activity, this frequently, since the mid-twenty-first century. At that time, humans made violence on each other. Today, some yet retain a vivid and dangerous us versus them mentality. This can only be destructive in the long run. If we can’t get past that, I don’t imagine the human race surviving with the Federation as it is,” she says. “The Federation was founded on thoughts of equality and liberty for all, much like the revolutions of old. But can we do that with KEHL remaining, spreading hatred and fear? No. No, we can’t, and we’ve got to fix that.”

A study made last year suggests that KEHL has now grown to over four thousand active members on Earth, but the number is uncertain at best, as many of these members conduct their illegal activities under assumed identities, at the same time living normal lives. “That’s what so unsettling,” O’Brien says. “They’re not just strangers in white. These are neighbours, friends, family. To get to the root of the issue we must ensure that they cannot remain hidden. We have to expose them and punishment must be dealt out. Xenophobia cannot be tolerated - this is the twenty-third century! If left unchecked …”

Jim knocks on the door at 22:32, and Spock is sitting by the desk revising notes. Under one arm the human carries his PADD, and in his other a small bag which is opened to reveal soft drinks and popcorn. Spock has tried the former once and found the presence of carbon dioxide in the liquid to be both disturbing and unpleasant to the tongue, so he prepares a cup of tea instead. The popcorn, though, is all right. It is fascinating. Human foods are quite strange sometimes.

It is an old Earth movie, its graphics severely outdated and the colours quite stark as if attempting to compensate. Yet there is something timeless about the story. Jim enjoys it, and that is even more important. Something feels aflame at the base of his body every time Jim smiles or laughs: a deep, open-mouthed laughter which Jim doesn’t try to hide or stop. Evidently, he has seen this movie several times. He quotes nearly every line without hesitation.

Spock spends most of the time not actively watching the screen, the PADD nestled between them against Jim’s up-tilted knees; they are reclined on the bed, sitting very close, and he feels each of Jim’s breaths, each laugh, each tremble, and sometimes their hands lightly touch. Not proper kisses but almost. At times, when there is a reference which Spock does not understand, Jim gladly pauses the movie in order to explain it. Eventually he can comprehend the plot, albeit it is, in part, wholly ridiculous. No Vulcan would produce such material. Vulcans do not make up silly stories to tell around fires or display in moving colour, each line said with full conviction even if they are illogical; not for many hundreds of years, before Surak. Perhaps, perhaps then, before emotion was to be reigned in and a façade of peace instilled, art was something more widespread and revered, something more than tradition. Perhaps. Nowadays, all art of Vulcan are products of traditions and the emphasis is on repetition of form that were, how they have always been. To preserve. To learn, and to recreate pieces of old rather than create something anew. Not for mindless entertainment but for knowledge. When Spock learned to play the ka’athyra it was not for entertainment’s sake.

Had his father allowed it, his mother would have watched movies with him when he was a child, Spock suddenly has the realization. But he feared a rebellion, and the books his mother read, old Earth children’s stories, were enough of an influence. It could not be risked. He would not have been Vulcan enough had he had such freedoms as to chose how to entertain himself - he tried, he tried, he tried, and he fled into the hills and climbed trees. His mother read him stories. Sarek never did. It did not cross his mind as an option: all Spock recalls is his father’s coldness, this distant shadow constantly watching his every move, expecting results. Spock would recite the formulas correctly, number memorized, he explained the constrains of DNA and the basics of molecular biology and the process of stars being born and dying, so many facts, and his father never smiled, never said that he was proud of him for these achievements. All Spock sought was this approval. This firm knowledge
that he was enough. Is enough. Vulcan.

Jim is so warm and his smile is wondrously beautiful, and Spock is not looking at the PADD anymore; he cannot concentrate on it. He thinks about the kiss in Iowa and the one in the library and the small ones they had attempted in-between. Recalls the press of lips. Human kisses are strange, but … he would like to try again.

He would like to try again.

He would like to.

They are sitting closer together now and are leaning forward. Into one another. Jim’s attention has shifted from the screen and the human wets his lips; a common precursor to a kiss, Spock has learned. The human’s gaze flickers across Spock’s face. The kiss is soft, not as brief as it was in the library. Longer. Deeper. Jim’s tongue touches his own. Like in Iowa, before the brilliant sunset. Jim’s nose bumps against his own as the human shifts his whole body toward him, attempting to find a more comfortable position, and a hand curls around the nape of his neck, settling there. It is warm and a bit wet, but Spock is getting used to it.

this okay? a fleeting thought; the hand moves, the thumb moving in circles.

Yes. The tongue presses further into his mouth. The taste is slowly becoming familiar, more than singular memory. The movie is forgotten. Jim cradles his head with both hands now and Spock instinctively raises one to meet them, fingers against fingers, the touch sending a small shock through his body and mind. It is good.

When they part, they are both out of breath and Jim breathes heavily and smiles broadly. His eyes are so bright and full of joy, and their Bond trembles with happiness and something else Spock cannot properly pinpoint.

It could be love.

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To: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
From: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
Stardate 2257.104
Subject: re: re: Universal translator programming glitches [Standard Federation English]

My dearest Spock,

I hope that you are well. Given what’s recently happened on Earth and on Starfleet Academy I’m concerned for your safety - Admiral Marcus’ reassurances that the situation is in hand gives little comfort to a worried mother. Please tell me everything that’s happened since last we talked. Did you receive my last package?

I’m including the latest update of the universal translator program I’m working on, since you asked to have a look - we’re still having some issues when it comes to the division of word classes as they aren’t always universal. Please do so if you feel like it, but don’t wear yourself too thin. Remember to eat and rest and have fun once in awhile. Have you gone on any more dates with Jim?

Your father and I will be on Earth on Stardate 2257.113 and the shuttle should land at San Francisco Spaceport around 18:00. I think it’s best we meet there, since it’s a
more neutral location than the Embassy. I was thinking we could go out for dinner together. Maybe you know of a few good places in the city? It’s been years since I last ate out in San Francisco and I’ve forgotten what’s to be found.

This is a short message; I have a Council session to attend to, but I’ll write more later. The most important topic we’re discussing today is the matter of YehiWul’q’n. I believe after seeing the developments on Earth, KEHL finally starting to be dismantled - which is about time! - the Council has decided it’s time to go to the root of the problem and finally deal with it. It’s a relief. I’ll let you know how the meeting goes and if any proper decisions are made.

Good luck with your maths test today! I’m keeping my fingers crossed.

Live long and prosper, and loving you always,

Your mother

« … Time remaining of test: eight minutes, fifteen seconds, » the computer says without infliction. « Algebra problem twenty-six. Difficulty level: medium. Question: the equation of f(x) is given the square root of twenty-four x plus thirty-two x plus four equals zero. Query: find the two values of x when f(x) equals zero, to three decimals. Solve. »

Spock has learned to solve simple second degree equations such as this one since he was less than five years old; it does not take long to calculate the answer. He visualizes the quadratic formula. It takes only a few moments.

“Answer to query: x equals minus one point one-nine-four and minus zero point one-four-zero respectively.”


Like he prefers and has requested, he is allowed to take part of the test verbally, the computer recording. The written part, wherein arguments were to be properly put forth and backed up by evidence, was enjoyable, a good challenge. This part of the test is about facts and calculation, nothing more. He has stood in a similar environment in Shi’kahr’s educational installations hundreds of hours in the past. Whereas the computers are similar to those on Vulcan, the instructor, sitting on a chair next to the computer, taking notes, is not. A Vulcan would be unmoving and uncaring, never giving praise and never showing disapproval.

Professor Jenkins has not made any notes for the past twelve point seven minutes; the test began thirteen minutes ago. The digital pencil rests loosely in their hand, leaning against the PADD in their lap, and their mouth is partly agape, expression a bit slack as they stare at the Vulcan, occasionally blinking. Shock, Spock idly concludes. It does not appear to be a medical situation, however, as the human is breathing properly and their eyes are focused.

« Algebra problem twenty-nine. Difficulty level: high. Question: the equation is given as f(x) equals the cube root of x squared plus four x. The antiderivate of f(x) is g(x), where g(5) equals seven. Query: find value of g(1) to three decimals, with argument. Solve. » the computer prompts. « Time remaining of test: five minutes, twelve seconds. »

He is not allowed to be helped by tools or instruments or others during this test. This question requires some thought, and Spock attempts to visualize the equation - walks through the steps of
solving it. It is a tricky question, but not impossible to solve. After one minute and twenty-seven point three-seven-nine seconds of thought, his longest pause thus far, he speaks.

“The solution is as follows: $g(x)$ equals the integral of the function $f(x)$ over $x$ from $a$ to $x$, wherein $f(x)$ equals the cube root of $t$ squared plus four $t$. This integral cannot be solved by the common method, therefore the integration is useless. Instead, one must make a new equation where $h(x)$ equals $g(x)$ minus seven, recalling that $g(5)$ equals seven. This makes it so that $h(x)$ is also an antiderivative of $f(x)$, where $h(5)$ equals zero. This can be solved using the integral of the function $h(x)$ over $x$ from five to $x$, where, again, we have the cube root of $t$ squared plus four $t$. As $x$ is equal to five, we get the value of zero as required to solve the equation, given the upper and lower limits are equal. The function of $h(x)$ over $x$ from five to one, using the same integral as earlier, gives the answer as minus ten point eight-eight-two. Finally, since $h(x)$ equals $g(x)$ minus seven, and that $g(1)$, as was the query, equals $h(1)$ plus seven. Therefore, the answer to the query is: the value of $g(1)$ is minus three point eight-eight-two.”

The computer whirs as the answer is acknowledged and processed. Throughout all of this, the supervisor has not said a word. Professor Jenkins is here to observe, to record data if necessary about his performance, and not interfere.

« Correct, » the computer says.

“Computer, pause,” Professor Jenkins cuts in suddenly, a command, and the computer silences, its screen on stand-by. Spock hides a frown. Is something amiss? He answered correctly, as did he the other questions. But the human clears their throat and there is no trace of aggression or disappointment in their facial expression or tone of voice. “Cadet Spock, I don’t think we need to continue with the test. It’s clear to me that you’ll pass with full marks on this course.”

Were he human, he would have shook his head. “If I may, Professor, I would prefer to proceed with the test. One must always be made aware of one’s full capacity and limits.” He has studied intensively for this test; it is the final one for this course, and instrumental to his final degree at Starfleet. To not complete the test, then, would be wasteful and illogical. “It is only logical,” he says, and the human slowly nods.

“Right. Okay, if you want to.” They say it like they clearly weren’t expecting such a response. The human scribbles something onto their PADD, then slowly sets it down onto a table, and Spock notices how their eyes are still wide as if in disbelief. They clear their throat again. Maybe they require water? “Computer, continue test.”

The computer goes on:


It takes three point six more minutes to complete the test.

He has not made an error. If his mother were here, she would have attempted to embrace him, and she would have said words, nonsense but meant genuinely, warmly, and, like a twinge of physical pain, he thinks of her and imagines that she was here. In this room. Present. But she is not. It is just him and the computer and the Professor. Jim is on the other side of campus, listening to a lecture on astrophysics, the mechanics of spacetime.

As he walks out the door, Spock gets a glimpse of the Professor’s PADD. There is no long harangue of negative notes, nothing in warnings of red - humans’ favourite colour to mark things when they are bad or sub-par or dangerous. It says, simply, in a fine cursive script, underlined: wow excellent!!
The bowling alley is unpleasantly noisy. The music is strange, and reminds him of what had been played at Gaila’s party albeit at a lower volume: he does not feel its vibrations in his bones. Lights have been arranged in flash in different colours in a somewhat playful manner, no doubt in order to incur feelings of relaxation and fun within humanoids who enjoy such things. Jim, Nyota, and Cadet Chapel do. Spock remains hesitant. The game, which he had researched beforehand, seems … oddly frivolous and with little point to it. Chess he understands. Through that game, one trains the thought of strategy and long-term planning and memory. To strike down a number pins using a specially designed ball of marble is simply excessive and he cannot, frankly, see the point. But Jim is thrilled, and explains he has not bowled ‘in ages’, only through videogame simulations and the like, and that
he has missed ‘the real thing’.

Spock is slowly learning modern human vernacular. His mother usually employs a moderate, contained version of Standard, usually avoiding confusing idioms and slang.

The research had explained the difference between the balls of different size and weight, adjusted for people of different strength, and the materials of the slick floor, and the formation of the pins. It also revealed that one must wear certain shoes. It is all quite ridiculous, but Spock is willing to humour the three humans, because Jim smiles and laughs and there is no sign of stress or nightmares. On the way here, in the hovercab, they had discussed temporal mechanics and a newly published article Spock had found online, and they hadn’t mentioned studies or the ball or violence. Jim has switched out of his uniform into casual jeans and his fake leather jacket, and his hair is messier than usual though in some arranged manner which could be deliberate. Nyota’s hair is braided and elaborately pinned up, and Cadet Chapel holds her arm. Before leaving the dorm building, Nyota had approached Spock and asked, in a manner that could be nervous, if he agreed or disagreed that she looked well in her newly acquired dress. Spock had no true opinion in the matter, but it seemed important to her, so he said her looks are secondary to her intellect, which is higher than the average human’s, and that Cadet Chapel ought to appreciate that more than any dress. Seemingly she does, and Spock is … glad, yes, that Nyota also is smiling.

Humans need to be content and happy; otherwise their health could decline. Nyota is happy with Cadet Chapel. And Jim is happy with him.

With a loud clatter, the ten pins tumble to the ground and the ball rolls out of sight.

“Strike!”

Currently, Nyota and Cadet Chapel - Simply call me Christine, she insists - are leading the game by twenty-nine points. Spock has yet to master the proper flick of wrist to spin the ball onto the correct path to level all ten pins at once. The game is meant to be friendly, but humans easily become competitive. With a smug grin, Jim returns to his seat by the plastic table - the design is retro mid-nineteenth century Earth, Spock thinks, with bright reds, dark black, and brilliant white mainly in checkered patterns. There is a small food bar with a replicator in the facility and they have all ordered soft drinks.

“You know we’re still going to win, Kirk,” Nyota says as Christine picks up a green bowling ball from the dispenser.

“We’re catching up,” Jim says, taking a sip of his drink through the straw. The sight is illogically distracting and Spock has to avert his gaze. He looks at Christine as she releases the ball at high, secure speed toward the pins. Eight of them go down.

“So close!”

“You’re just jealous my girlfriend is awesome,” Nyota smirks.

“Nope. Not one bit,” Jim stubbornly shakes his head. Spock could, in fact, inform Nyota that Jim is, with high probability, jealous of Chapel’s bowling capabilities. Christine has managed to fell the remaining two pins, and her and Nyota’s scores climb steadily upward. “Anyway, Spock’s awesomer.”

“That is not a word in Federation Standard English,” Spock informs him; Jim is already well-aware of this fact, but it seems he forgets the grammar of his own first language from item to time, perhaps deliberately.
“Is that a word in some other language that means the same as awesomer?” Jim asks as Spock stands to exchange places with Christine.

“Many languages allows for the comparison of adjective into comparative and superlative by adding a prefix, suffix, or infix directly to the lemma in question instead of using adverbs to compare words,” Spock says, collecting a ball from the dispenser and taking up the stance, which his body is still trying to get used to. Mentally, he can predict and project how to stand and when to drop the ball, the angles and the forces. To translate theory to practice, however, proves to be a more difficult challenge.

Chapel raises an eyebrow. “Kirk, are you seriously trying to argue grammar with your Vulcan boyfriend?”

“Should see some of our discussions on morphology,” Jim says. Spock cannot see him, his back turned, but senses the intensity of his gaze on him, so focused and intent but it is not off-putting or as distracting as it could be. “Can get pretty heated.”

Spock released the ball at a thirty-nine point two degree angle relative to the floor, but he still tends to veer the ball off-course to the left. Five pins go down and the computer whirs, relaying the score. As he waits for the ball to return to the dispenser, he turns toward Jim and if he were human he would have frowned. “I hold fast to my argument regarding whether Orion is to be classified as a fusional or an agglutinative language which we discussed yesterday.”

“Yeah, but the main Orion dialect clearly’s more agglutinative from the male perspective,” Jim argues. “I mean, since there’s a difference in the way the language is used depending on the speaker’s gender.”

“Agreed, but, keeping to the sociolectal standpoint, given females’ higher position in Orion society, to classify the main dialect as fusional is correct. In part, your argument has great value, but if one single classification must be given, as is often the case when it comes to Federation records, it would be more proper to classify it according to the majority of its speakers. Among Orion, females and thus their dialect outnumber the males’ three-to-one.”

Chapel leans closer to Nyota, glancing between human male and Vulcan confusedly. “Are they always like this?” she half-whispers. Spock has no trouble hearing every word.

“Apparently. Guys, could you keep it in the bedroom next time? I mean, it’s cute for about five minutes but we’ve been here nearly an hour and, Kirk, you don’t stop flirting to even breathe. Is this your kind of foreplay?”

For some reason Jim’s skin turns a redder hue than normal, almost like a rapid fever. However he displays no other symptoms and Spock cannot detect any distress or pain from him. He is not familiar with the term Nyota used, but, gauging from her tone of voice and from Jim’s reaction, is must be tied to human rituals of courting or intercourse. Spock will not blush, however much Nyota tries to rile them up. It has come to his attention that humans both like and dislike to discuss their relationship habits aloud: they exchange rumours with others, yet tend to deny involvement when directly asked. It is a paradox. “We’re, that’s not, I mean, we’re just talking,” Jim says, shooting Nyota a heated look. Usually he does not stammer in such a manner. Fascinating. “Shut up.”


Human interaction can be so strange. Evidently, this was not meant as an insult; there is no anger or resentment or hurt emotion anywhere in the air.
“And I guess you swept Christine off her feet with no problem?” Jim counters.

“Actually,” Christine says, “it’s more like the other way around.”

“So there was never a chance when we met in that bar two years ago,” Jim muses, and Nyota laughs, standing up because it is her turn now to play. The current score is ninety versus a hundred and twenty-two points. If this round goes similarly to the last one, Nyota and Christine will definitely win. Spock does not mind. The bowling experience is not as overwhelming and negative as he had feared, but he looks forward to its ending. They had discussed going out eating afterward; Spock would like to visit the café Jim had earlier mentioned.

“Nope. I don’t swing that way.”

Christine smiles at Spock, an intrigued expression on her face. “Seriously, the two of you discuss morphology that easily?”

The query is odd when one has already seen the evidence. “Of course,” Spock answers blankly. Why would they not? Jim has a high I.Q. and possesses a good memory, and they share an interest in linguistics.

“What can I say?” Jim says, and his fingertips brush against Spock’s. The Vulcan suppresses a shiver. They do not often display affection so publicly, but Chapel doesn’t blink. Maybe she doesn’t know of Vulcan physiology so well, despite her studies in medicine; maybe she doesn’t understand the simple gesture. “We’re huge nerds.”

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To: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2257.107
Subject: re: re: Universal translator programming glitches [Standard Federation English]

Mother,

I am well. I received a full score on the algebra test, and Professor Jenkins, the supervisor of that mathematics course, has advised me to speak with the guidance counselor, Mrs Coleridge, about attending a specially tailored algebra course for the remainder of the year. It should better suit my educational needs. I received your package and am grateful. If there is something Earth lacks it is many proper Vulcan ingredients.

Last night I went on a so-called ‘double-date’ with Jim, Nyota, and her girlfriend, Cadet Christine Chapel, who studies to become a nurse. We visited a bowling alley, an old human entertainment, and then went to eat and drink at a coffeehouse which Jim had recommended. The soy latte was particularly good. Nyota and Cadet Chapel won the first round of the game, and Jim and I the second, which I think to be a fair outcome since I had not intended to take the game so very seriously. However, Jim claimed it was very important to win and a matter of honour. It is somewhat confusing, but sometimes humans are highly competitive when it is unnecessary to be so. A remnant of evolution, no doubt. A few days ago, Jim and I also watched an old Earth movie, The Princess Bride, which also was a fascinating experience. Could you recommend any more such entertainment, mother? I could not reply to Jim’s questions regarding watching another movie, as I have little knowledge in the matter and could not express an opinion.
I have looked at the version of the universal translator which you sent. It appears to me there is a glitch in the third matrix concerning root words, causing the program to confuse verb and noun conjugations with each other, thus rendering communication difficult. I am attaching a file with a suggestion to fix this problem.

There is no need for concern. I eat regularly, albeit I find sleep difficult and tend to meditate more. I must alter my pattern. I have an appointment in two days with one of the Academy’s psychologists, who have asked to see me once more. I doubt such a meeting would yield results, but we shall see. I have spoken with Captain Pike, and he urges me to go, referring to the several incidents I have been unwillingly involved in since I came to Earth; he argued that not even a Vulcan can remain wholly untouched by such events, and I must agree with that assessment. It is logical. And I do not have a wish to see a Mind Healer. The human equivalent is less pervasive in their approach.

Live long and prosper,

Spock

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Dr Ogawa’s office has changed very little since last they met one hundred and twenty-three days ago. She has trimmed her hair recently into a fringe and the desk is just as neat, but the small square photograph - old-fashioned two-dimensional, simple colours, nothing extravagant - has been replaced, picturing what must be a relative, a child perhaps of fourteen Standard years old. Too young to attend the Academy. Humans, Spock has previously observed, have a fondness of saving photographs of loved ones and displaying them, perhaps as a reminder. After all, most humans have a fallible memory. His own mother has confessed that after too long she can forget the details. It is a strangely discontenting thought. The fleeting moments.

The chair is soft, made to be comfortable, but Spock does not sink into it. He sits straightly. Through the window he can see the green lawns, so many people milling around, flashes of cadet reds and the faint hint of many voices, and the sky is cloudy. After a few minutes, raindrops begin to fall, and soon it is a minor torrent, and the cadets scattered below hurry into buildings to take cover from it. It is 12:30 and Spock has gotten leave from the chemistry teacher to be here - he has already read the required chapters, worked out the problems, handed in the homework. He had no excuses not to go.

And to not go, to defy the almost-orders of Captain Pike and the others - it would be ... illogical.

“Hello,” Dr Ogawa smiles in greeting, taking seat herself after the door slides shut, the lamp above it changing from green to red to indicate that she is busy and ought not to be interrupted. “How have you been, Spock?”

It is a very vague and general question. “I am well,” he answers, in honesty. There is no reason, no logical reason, to lie.

“That’s good. You remember what we talked about last time?” She had not taken any notes, so she does not start browsing through her notebooks for answers.

“It is a very vague and general question. “I am well,” he answers, in honesty. There is no reason, no logical reason, to lie.

“That’s good. You remember what we talked about last time?” She had not taken any notes, so she does not start browsing through her notebooks for answers.

“Affirmative. My memory is eidetic.”

But, but, is a lingering thought, sometimes it is not. Because there are gaps where there should not be, and his mother could not explain it properly, and his father would not, and Spock had deemed it unimportant in the end because the knowledge taken had not been of vital facts - and even if they
had, facts can be relearned. Books reread. Tests retaken.

When he does not say anything more, doesn’t prompt her with inquiries or observations, Dr Ogawa says: “Last time, you told me you had some trouble sleeping. For a Vulcan, that’s rarely an issue, since you don’t require as much sleep as a human. Is this still a problem?”

He hesitates. A few milliseconds. His facial expression does not change, but the pause might be enough to cause her to think otherwise. “At times. Yes. I find rest - difficult,” he admits, slowly. He is not used to it: not used to telling someone, a virtual stranger, of his thoughts and doubts and needs. It is difficult enough to open up to his mother and to Jim. To … friends.

“I see. How much do you sleep?”

“An average of four hours each week.”

Dr Ogawa’s body language indicates that she is relaxed yet not wholly; there is some tenseness about her shoulders and her eyes, and it is not unlike how his mother reacts when receiving bad news. “The recommendation is ten to fifteen hours per week. And your studies? Are they going well?”

“Affirmative.”

“Okay. How about food?”

“I eat regularly twice a day. Thrice, on occasion, when my schedule allows it.”

“That’s good. Apart from sleep, do you feel like you have any other troubles in your daily life? Without proper sleep, it can be difficult to cope in the long run.”

“Negative,” he says. “I tend to meditate during hours when it could, at times, be more beneficial to sleep. But …” He trails off, not really intending to but the words fade on his tongue, in his throat. What was he meant to say? He does not know. He does not know, and Spock looks away from the Doctor momentarily to glance at something else, anything else. Rain smattering quietly against the window. A soothing rhythm. “I have always slept little, for a Vulcan,” he finds himself admitting. “I dream. But Vulcans do not dream.”

He sees the realization as it hits her: a light coming to her eyes, and she nods again and writes, for the first time, something in the notebook. He does not look to see what. Part of him does not want to know. It is shame, and it is shameful to feel shame: the constant paradox. A human would not properly understand even if they tried.

“Nightmares?”

As of late, it has not always been of coldness, or of the Forge, or of green blood staining marble. It has been of red blood, and of fire, and of a deep deep hunger not his own and terrified eyes still green like Jim’s father’s and a curling echoing laughter of a madman and the yells of adults tearing each other apart as the children hid and covered and sometimes were forced to do horrible, horrible things in order to survive. Jim with a knife in his hand, only a child, only a child. Only a child. He dreams of the Vulcan sun, and I-Chaya shuddering, drawing their last breath, and the touch of their mind suddenly gone gone gone. And the Mind Healers. The fingertips pressing against his meldpoints. The cold cold cold -

“… Yes.”
Dr Ogawa looks at him for a moment. There is no outright pity, but there is empathy. There is some kind of comprehension beyond what Spock had expected, and perhaps she is a low-level telepath or empath. There is no pressure; if she has the ability, she does not attempt to use it to gain direct access to his mind. He is grateful. If she did, if she ever did - he would have no choice but to leave.

“I took some time, after last time we met, to seek out Dr Senva,” Dr Ogawa says, and her tone is as always serious but now also careful, as if threading new uncertain ground. “I understand that the medical institutions on Vulcan work slightly differently from here on Earth, with little to none doctor-patient confidentiality. What is said between us, however, remains here unless you want it to be otherwise. I found out that you had an appointment with Dr Senva when you were five years old.”

He fights the irrational, illogical urge to shiver and swallows any emotion wanting to suddenly rise. “Correct.”

“When we spoke last time, you didn’t want to talk about that. I think we should, if you would agree to it. Yes, things are done differently on Vulcan and Earth - different planets, different cultures. But you belong to both, being both human and Vulcan, and in my opinion Dr Senva, as well as other Mild Healers assisting him at the time, didn’t take that at all into account. They didn’t help you; they tried to change you at your core.”

They almost succeeded.

“Doctor,” Spock says, a faint emotion which could be alarm as well as - surprise? - growing in his chest, pressing onto his lungs. But emotion cannot do that. Emotion is abstract. Is it not? The chemoelectrical signals in the brain can be fought against. Won over. Reactions reigned in and controlled. Controlled. No emotion should make him feel physically weaker. No. “Speak plainly.” Please, he almost says.

“Dr Senva, quite clearly, explained to me that he performed a mindmeld on you, at a point in time when you weren’t prepared or willing, to bring … order. That’s how he put it. In doing so, he implied to have rearranged and even removed some or your memories. Spock,” Ogawa looks at him, and there is concern and something burning, but it could not possibly be anger; “Do you remember when that happened?”

The words want to be stuck in his throat. “Yes. I … Yes. I recall.”

“You said your memory is eidetic.”

“Affirmative.”

“Are there any gaps?” she asks. “Anywhere?”

The average Vulcans begins remembering from the age of two or three; it was the same with him. After that, everything should be, after proper meditation, when relaxed, perfectly clear. Well-ordered. He should be able to remember. He should. He knew that it was not so; that there are blanks, but they were not important. His father said it was not important and what the Mind Healers did was necessary in order to bring structure to his mind and behaviour, so that he would not be a danger to others or himself. So that he could be Vulcan. Vulcan.

Why is there a sensation of a lump in his throat? Illogical. It must be removed.

Vulcans do not lie.
"There are. Mainly from my fourth and fifth year."

"Then we have evidence," Dr Ogawa says, but Spock interrupts her:

"Doctor, I - I can draw logical conclusions as of what you might be feeling in this matter and which action you would like to take. But it is unnecessary." The past is the past. It is done. Memories removed cannot be returned. "I desire no action to be taken on the matter. It was logical, in order for me to become Vulcan, to be sent to the Mind Healers for correction."

Dr Ogawa is openly frowning. "Logical, maybe, according to some Vulcan tradition. I’m sorry, Spock, but as a human and as a Doctor I swore oaths, and I can’t agree with that assessment. Whether you’re fully Vulcan or not is beside the point. There must have been other, better ways to deal with emotional outbursts, which I know is not allowed among Vulcans. But you were a child. You did not give consent to the mindmeld."

It is clear what she wants to do. "You want to bring this matter to a civilian Federation court?"

"It’s over a decade too late, but yes, I do. But only if you agree, Spock."

"I acknowledge your arguments, Doctor. But I decline. To be frank, I do not see the point."

Memories taken cannot be recovered. Memories stolen cannot be given back. They have been destroyed.

Dr Ogawa sighs. She looks older, of a sudden, much more tired and drained, but she nods. "All right. But if you ever change your mind -"

"I will not." Vulcans do not lie; Vulcans are absolute; and he is Vulcan. he is vulcan. (even if, sometimes, he doesn’t fully want to be)

"Thank you, Doctor, for your time." He rises from the soft chair and forms the ta’al. The surge of emotions is illogical, and he will resist this human human human urge to fell bitter tears. He has not wept since I-Chaya died. He will not. “Live long and prosper.”

The food is underseasoned. For a Vulcan to detect this, it means that a human with barely any tastebuds at all would notice that the flavour is highly lacking; traditional Vulcan food is, by most, considered to be soft in taste, due to Vulcan physiology being much more sensitive to taste than a human’s. But underseasoned is fine. It does not burn his tongue, and the consumption of food is a logical choice: one must consume the nutrients in order to survive. The pleasure of taste is secondary.

Evidently, the human cadets do not agree. Most of them aren’t eating at the campus cafeteria today. Those who are grimace in regret once they’ve sat down. They’re grouped in threes, fours, fives, some with PADDs or notebooks set up next to the half-empty trays.

To Spock’s right, Jim and Cadet Chekov are playing chess. For the past eight days, the Russian has brought with him an old-fashioned two-dimensional board and challenged, to Spock’s knowledge, twenty-one cadets. Thus far he has not lost a single match.

Jim is not eating. The human does not look particularly concentrated; he is slouched in the chair, leaning back, an arm slung over the back of Spock’s chair generating a steady stream of bodyheat which could have been distracting, but Spock finds it … comforting. He does not stare intently at the board, chattering easily with the others around the table as they play, most of which have abandoned their food in favour for watching the game unfold. Anyone could think he is careless and isn’t that
interested in playing, but Spock knows him better than that now. Their Bond, as weak as it is, is full of thought, relentless planning and discarding and renewing of strategy. Jim is good at chess. Chekov is, too. They are quite evenly matched.

After thirteen seconds of deliberation, Chekov moves a knight to B7, claiming one of Jim’s bishops. It is a clever move, Spock silently notes: Chekov has now freed his tower from where it previously blocked, and he can predict several outcomes where Chekov will win within seven moves. Jim has only once chance now to retake the game in his favour.

“Nice move,” Jim says airily, smiling, leaning forward to make his own. “Maybe not nice enough, though.”

“What!” murmurs Chekov to himself, a tone which humans employ to show mild shock or disbelief. None of his pieces have been felled. But an unintended opening has been exploited and suddenly, Chekov must have realized, his king is in danger. “Это невозможно!”

“I told you,” says Cadet Sulu with a smirk. “It’s never a good idea to challenge Kirk at chess.”

“Yeah,” says Leonard dryly from where he’s sitting on Jim’s left, chewing on a sandwich. “Only know one person who’s beat him at the game more than once in a row.”

“Well, but Spock’s Vulcan,” argues a cadet sitting near the edge of the rectangular table. Gary Mitchell. His tone is not pleasant, but Spock ignores it and does not acknowledge the fact that the cadet might have meant to insult him and edge an injured response from him.

“So?” Sulu asks, frowning at the other human in confusion.

“Then it’s not a fair game and doesn’t really count,” Cadet Mitchell says.

Jim looks at Mitchell sternly: suddenly the lightweight nonchalance is gone, replaced by an emotion which is difficult to singularly categorize. Not quite anger, or annoyance. As far as Spock knows, the two are friends, or at least acquaintances and they have not had grievances. He has no desire to let that change and tries to nudge Jim through their tentative mental link - it has slumbered there ever since their first meld. As if waiting. It does not completely let go, and it is a safety, a comfort: they are т’hy’la, Spock is certain. Otherwise, logically, no such Bond would exist. Spring to life. The nudge, a discreet suggestion to keep playing and ignore Cadet Mitchell, is unheeded.

“Want to explain what you mean by that, Gary?” Jim demands. His tone of voice is steady and even and does not tremble.

“Playing against a Vulcan isn’t fair,” Cadet Mitchell upholds. He does not address Spock - Spock is not bothered. He would rather be left out of the discussion. That there is no such discussion. “Really, it’s like he’s cheating, isn’t it? If Vulcans are so smart and all that.”

Chekov looks up from where he was about to hit the timer and make his move. “What?” he splutters. “Cheating? It’s not Spock’s fault he’s cleverer than us! Why do you make it sound like it? Besides, I don’t think a Vulcan would cheat.”

No. Most humans would assume that. Most humans believe that Vulcan are wholly incapable of lying. Spock does not dispute it. Let them believe.

Cadet Mitchell crosses his arms sourly. “Just saying. I don’t trust non-humans.”

The chill is like an onslaught. Of course, rationally, logically, he already knew that Cadet Mitchell harboured no warmth toward him as Vulcan. But Spock has hoped, hoped, that no one within
Starfleet or its Academy would express such emotion so openly. Because such thoughts beget fear and violence and that is exactly what started the Keep Earth Human League, and the same line of thought has haunted Vulcan as well, haunts so many worlds. And if there was one place Spock wished to feel safe it is here, with Starfleet, because Starfleet will be his home for the foreseeable future and if he cannot trusts the cadets and officers around him - what then? what then?

“I didn’t think you were a bigot, Gary,” Jim says. His voice is ice, and the chess game is entirely forgotten. He is no longer slouching in his chair, though the arm behind Spock’s back remains, an anchor, and now its fist slowly clenches. For a millisecond, Spock recalls Iowa and the bar and the fight that broke out, and the blood on Jim’s face (so brightly red red red) and struggles to keep his breathing under control.

“I’m not! Can’t a guy have an opinion, huh?”

“Opinion is one thing,” Nyota cuts in, her voice low with disapproval: “but you’re simply being an asshole.”

Cadet Mitchell stands up and glares at Nyota. She doesn’t flinch. Instead, what Spock discovers is resigned tiredness, determination, anger. None of the humans are attempting to hide their emotions. They can’t. Spock forgot his gloves this morning.

“The fuck did you call me?!”

The rest of the table is, now, suspiciously silent. All humans in the vicinity have probably heard the past twelve seconds of conversation. Spock ensures that his heartbeat remains steady and undisturbed, and says, without infliction: “I believe Cadet Uhura meant to say that your behaviour is unbecoming of a Starfleet Officer-to-be.”

Cadet Mitchell’s nostrils flare and his teeth gnaw, and threats of aggression flare around him like a beacon. “I’m not going to listen to a freaking robot.”

Jim’s arm shifts, his whole body shifts, and Spock reaches out to lightly touch his elbow. Do not antagonize him further, Jim. There is no point. Vulcans are taught to surpass violence and to forgive. To forget because forgiveness is pointless: Surak’s Teachings are very clear. Let it go.

The human struggles, visibly as well as mentally, his thoughts rapid and worried and true, and the emotions are so sharp Spock could cut himself on them. Slowly, Jim stands, never letting Cadet Mitchell go with his eyes, and his stare is usually never this cold. “What did you just say?”

“Look, it’s not me, I just stated an opinion,” Cadet Mitchell says. He now aims for complaint and, perhaps, complacency; but the trick does not seem to work. “An opinion, man.”

“Next time you want to state your opinions,” Jim practically spits the words, “I suggest you shut. the. fuck. up.”

“Come on, Jim, why are you on that side all of a sudden?”

“What side - the side of decency? Thinking that everyone, regardless of origin, have the same rights and should be treated like living beings? Huh?”

Jim’s heartbeats are fast and his blood pressure elevated. The chances that a physical alteration will occurring is rising by the minute. If necessary, Spock decides, he is willing to nerve-pinch either one of the two in order to halt further progression of hostilities. Since there are many witnesses and the majority of them are on Jim’s side - supporting him - when security is called for, the situation can be explained, and Spock should not receive a harsh punishment for utilizing a nerve-pinch or two.
Jim, he quietly implores.

can’t, an impression: starkly: too fucking pissed off he wants to HURT you spock can’t let him

“So it’s true, the rumours,” Cadet Mitchell says, and starts to laugh cruelly. “Jim Kirk is actually banging the Vulcan! God, you’re disgusting, Jim. Not that I’m surprised, because I always knew you were a slut, and I guess aliens were something you got to tick off your list.”

Something inside of Spock’s chest threatens to go nova, and he is standing too now and he forgets two point six milliseconds of movement, and has to forcibly halt himself before he can strike the human down. The human body is frail. A Vulcan is three point two-seven-one times stronger on average and he knows where the arteries are located, the major musculature, the weak nerve endings and something about his immovable facial expression must have changed, because Spock finds himself right in front of the other cadet, their faces only inches apart, and ingrained in his memory are hours and hours of training at traditional Vulcan techniques of self-defence and hand-to-hand: his father never truly approved of that; Spock had trained in secret, memorized katas, and his hand is nearly at Cadet Mitchell’s neck.

“Spock!” Jim cries out: he is the one lounging forward to take Spock’s arm, and slowly, gently, he guides the hand back down. Spock lets him. Has to let him. If Jim had not intervened … “Spock,” Jim murmurs, close to his ear, softly gently a balm trying to soothe: for a staggering moment, Spock is not a civilized Vulcan but something savage, one of the ancient ones who waged war, a le-mayta pouncing on its prey: “It’s okay, it’s okay.” - Jim must have instinctively sensed his intention.

Cadet Mitchell’s eyes are wide and he smells of fear. His mouth is partly open, as if he has forgotten the art of speech. A fleeting thought presses through Spock’s mind, wild and haunting and savage: Good. Cadet Gary Mitchell should be afraid of him.

The cafeteria is utterly silent. Other cadets are staring at them.

“Get the fuck away from me, Vulcan freak!”

“Walk away, Mitchell,” Leonard says calmly but not without force, holding a hand out to stop Jim from moving forward, just as Jim has done for Spock, trying to be soothing. Similarly, Cadet Sulu and Nyota have grabbed hold of Cadet Mitchell’s arms to ensure that he does not suddenly leap forward to strike anyone. “Walk away,”

Growling, Cadet Mitchell has to be practically manhandled out of the cafeteria by Sulu and Nyota. He shrugs them forcibly off and, at the threshold, glances over his shoulder at Jim and Spock and makes a foul Terran gesture with his hand. “Guess we’re not friends anymore, Kirk!” he shouts, before he’s gone.

“Good riddance, I say,” mutters Leonard on his breath. “You okay, Jim?”

“I - don’t know. Honestly,” Jim says, sitting down heavily. Around them, people are slowly returning attention to their meals and begin speaking with each other again. Spock ignores how they occasionally shoot curious, wide-eyed looks at their table. Sulu and Nyota return to finish their food, but Jim and Chekov do not start playing all at once. It is as if the board has been forgotten and they can’t recall how to move the pieces correctly. Jim makes his next move very sluggishly and like he does not care. “Gary and I have hung out since day one here and suddenly he’s like that? I don’t get it.”
“Well, you’re thick sometimes,” Nyota says bluntly. “Gary has always been an asshole. Not that explicitly, though, but - sorry to burst your bubble, Jim, but Gary’s been crossing lines all since day one. Trust me, this isn’t the first time someone’s had the urge to punch him.”

“I thought you’re vetted for Starfleet and couldn’t be a bigot like that,” Chekov says, hesitantly moving a knight to counter Jim.

“It’s not a foolproof system,” Leonard says with a shrug.

Naturally. There is no such thing.

“Spock, I’m sorry.” Jim blurts.

“Apologizes are unnecessary. You are no responsible for Cadet Mitchell’s actions. I believe it would be more prudent to speak with the Principal of this incident before he is reached by half-false rumours.”

“Good point,” Nyota agrees. “Shit, I wish I’d had my PADD here to record what happened.”

There is no surveillance camera in the cafeteria, only one by the entrance to the complex, recently installed. But Spock has an idea. “There are forty-two other cadets present in this room. Out of these witnesses, perhaps someone has caught footage of the event.”

Jim, like a thrill, leans forward like he wishes to kiss him but stops himself, and Spock is not certain how to feel about that. He enjoys Jim’s kisses, albeit he is also grateful that Jim paused, because they are no alone, and he is not comfortable with all the attention at this particular moment.

“Jim, you and Spock should go to the Principal right away,” Leonard advises. “I’ll stay here and see if anyone got a photo or something of what happened. And maybe someone should figure out where Mitchell went? Make sure no one gets hurt.”

“I’ll go,” Sulu volunteers. It is a logical choice, as Sulu appears to have some physical training and Cadet Mitchell might be so angry he could become violent.

Chekov and Nyota say they’ll remain here with Leonard; it is decided.

Not having any appetite, both Jim and Spock send the remainder of their meals through the recycling unit before heading toward the largest building on campus. On the second floor there are mainly administrative offices, a teacher’s lounge, and a small private eating area for the professors and officers. At the front desk, where one can ask questions as well as be given back marked test and exams, they ask if the Principal is free. Not currently in a meeting, the Starfleet officer informs them while at the same time cradling a communicator against their left ear and typing something into a computer, sending a message ahead; they can walk right in.

Spock has been in this part of this building before. All major Starfleet personnel have offices here, including Captain Pike, albeit right now it is vacant, the Captain on a mission. It is the same with several other offices. Near the entrance of the long hall, giving way to rows and rows of officers, hedged by huge glass windows and soft white couches and decorative lights, is the largest, most important one.

The Principal is not only the leader of the Academy. He is a Starfleet officer of high rank: an Admiral, metal oak leaves glimmeringly attached to his uniform. For him to have a free hour during an otherwise busy afternoon is somewhat of a wonder. Admiral Barnett is seated at his desk, clad in a proper grey uniform, with gleaming insignia on his shoulders and breast indicating rank and
commendations of valour. Through his grand office, one can overlook not just Starfleet Headquarters and the campus but San Francisco Bay. There is traffic both in air and in the water, veiled in mist and grey rain. The room is moderately decorated: the most striking thing is the table set aside for the purpose of displaying a number of models, shapes of the first Terran probes and shuttles, all the way up to their current, most advanced Constellation-class vessels. It reminds Spock of his cousin’s collection but even grander, not hidden away on a bookshelf for few to see it. Above that hangs a wide painting, an artist’s free interpretation of the beauty of a nebula.

“Hello, cadets. What can I do for you?”

“Admiral,” Jim says. “We’re here to file a complaint against another cadet. I’m -”

“James Kirk,” Admiral Barnett says with a smile and stands, offering a hand. “I know who you are; your father’s name is still on everyone’s lips, and your mother Winona is a remarkable Commander. And you must be Cadet Spock, Ambassador Sarek’s son, right? Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir.”

They sit. The grey chairs remind Spock of those in Dr Ogawa’s office: too soft, like they could be used as a trap, just as fresh gespar is utilized to lure the small Vulcan marsupial out of its underground nests.

“So, what’s this about?” the Admiral asks.

Spock says: “Fifteen minutes ago, in the general campus cafeteria, there was an incident. Cadet Gary Mitchell made xenophobic remarks about my Vulcan heritage and also insulted Cadet Kirk. The situation almost escalated into violence and it required the aid of three more cadets to bring it under control.”

“I see,” Admiral Barnett says gravely and types something into his desk computer. “That cannot be tolerated. Cadet Mitchell, you say?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim says. “He’s human and he’s also in the Command Track, last year. We share a lot of classes.”

“I’ll have words with him,” Admiral Barnett says, and it almost sounds like a promise.

“There were in total forty-six cadets in the cafeteria, including Jim and myself, at the time, who all witnessed the event,” Spock says. “Currently Cadet Hikaru Sulu has gone in search for Cadet Mitchell to ensure he does not harm himself or others in anger.”

The Admiral reaches for a communicator and dials a number. It takes two seconds before someone picks up. “This is Admiral Barnett. Please bring Cadet Gary Mitchell to my office, on the double.” He shuts the communicator and looks at Jim and Spock, giving a hint of a smile. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention so quickly. As I said, we can’t tolerate bullies here at Starfleet. Now, tell me exactly what happened.”

“Well, sir,” Jim begins: “we were eating lunch, the two of us along with Gary, Uhura, and Sulu. I was playing two-D chess with Chekov …”

red.

d the sand is red and hot beneath his fingertips. scorching. he kneels beneath the shadow of the outcropping rock, but the shelter flees from him, and he is alone. there is an invisible pressure on his
chest making it difficult to breathe and the sun is strange. it is not the Vulcan sun. Earth? Earth’s
sun? no. it is not right. he cannot recognize it, and the air tastes of sea and salt, but there is no water
in sight. only red. red. red skies, and red on the ground, and he looks down. there is no sand there is
a body, in the form of a sehlat with its throat torn open, but it bleeds red red red like a human. a
crow circled high above and screeches.

there are no such birds on Vulcan and he looks around, confused. the shadow is gone and the body
remains, he is standing upon a battlefield, and the body is surrounded by more. someone is wailing
in the background, quietly, eternally. red. there is no water and there is no food. there is fire. it rises,
rises, rises. why is there a fire? the body tries to move, please make it stop please, he grasps its hand.
it is so frighteningly frighteningly familiar and it burns with fire and hunger, and the child is
weeping, holding a knife while vague silhouettes attack it, and the child fells them one after the other
and there are other children hovering behind him, and they look at him pleadingly. he tries to say
something, anything - to tell them. it’s all right. it is what children are told. it’s all right. it will be all
right (false promises: all that was ever given) but he cannot make a sound, he cannot … cannot
move away from the terrible noise, THE NOISE, and the red red red fire ROARS

Spock wakes up, drawing a sharp, shuddering breath.

He has dreamt of many things in his life, but there had never been children with knifes, or a fire so
loud -

Fire. Children. Tarsus IV.

Jim.

Rapidly, he is out of bed, pulling on his shoes and his communicator. There is no message, but he
exits the dorm anyway. This time of night, the corridors are dark and empty. It’s still raining and he
forgot his jacket and gloves; it doesn’t matter. He is running before he knows it, toward Jim and
Leonard’s dormitory. His eyes adjust quickly to the lack of light. The city is never fully quiet: there is
the background noise of hovercars, the blinking lights, flights approaching the Spaceport. Spock
ignores all of this as he rushes across the smooth lawns and pathways.

This late, the doors are locked. He enters the PIN-code with his left thumb, impatiently quickly, and
he can still feel thunder in his mind and echoes of screams and Jim, Jim is in pain. He is dreaming
again. His communicator isn’t vibrating or beeping; so Leonard has not woken up or cared to send a
message to alert him. Of course, Leonard does not know about their Bond, however tentative it is.
He could not understand; he is not a telepath.

It takes sixteen long, long seconds to find the door and once there, Spock hesitates. It is the middle of
night. But Jim - Jim is in pain. He knocks. There is no immediately reply; focusing, straining his ears,
he hears faint noise, a tired groan, a yawn, a muttered oughh what the hell is it now - Leonard waking
up. He knocks again, and, when the door isn’t opening, he pries apart the door controls to get to the
mechanics. Bypassing the door takes less than the twenty seconds during which Leonard drags
himself out of bed.

“The hell - Spock?!?” Leonard grumbles, squinting at him from where he’s half-sitting in his bed. The
human is too tired to formulate any other words.

On the other bed, Jim is quietly trash ing about. He isn’t weeping or screaming or making a sound,
but it is too much like last time - Spock reaches for him, and Leonard follows the movement with his
eyes.

“Oh,” he says, staring. “How’d you …?”
Spock does not answer him. He leans down and lays a hand on Jim’s shoulder. Jim, he thinks, Jim, wake up. "You are only dreaming." I am here, you are safe. The fire cannot touch you. Jim. It is a dream, ashalik. It is a dream.

At his touch, Jim frowns and stirs, and then he begins to still. His harsh, swift breaths even out. His face relaxes, and then he slowly blearily opens his eyes.

“… Spock?” Jim rubs at his eyes with his right hand. “What … what are you doing here?”

“You were in emotional distress,” Spock answers simply.

“But how - how …?” Jim’s eyes widen, a dawning. “You knew?”

“We are t’hy’la. I felt it.”

“Hang on,” Leonard cuts in. "You felt it? I mean, I know you’re a telepath, but -”

“Yes, Doctor,” Spock answers patiently. “We have, intentionally or not, formed a Bond so deep that I could feel Jim’s distress at such a distance.”

Leonard exhales heavily. “That’s … Jesus. For a Vulcan, that’s - I read about that.”

“I know what it means, Bones,” Jim says quietly, but there is no shame, no anger, only this hint of a smile. But then the smile fades into worry, and he looks at Spock. His eyes are very blue. “Are you okay with it, Spock? If you can feel that, then, I mean. What if I cause you pain? I don’t want that. Maybe we could sever it temporarily or -”

“No!” slips out of him before he can stop it, and both humans stare at him at the sharpness of the word. “No, I have no desire to sever the Bond.” To silence it. To end it. No. No.

The question hovering in the air between them, Jim reaches out to let their hands touch. “I don’t want that either, but I don’t want to cause you distress.”

“Such is the nature of a Vulcan Bond. Severing it could risk it never could be reestablished.” They cannot take that risk. They cannot possibly take that risk.

Jim nods, shakily, an exhale. “I understand. Or, at least, I think I understand.”

They do not go to sleep or part. They head for this dormitory’s common room, which is still and dark and quiet, and Jim presses the code on the replicator for a cup of hot chocolate for himself and tea for Spock. The computer adjusts the lights to only twelve percent, a soft gentle glow that does not disturb the eyes. They do not speak much; it is unnecessary and no cause of tension. Spock takes seat in one of the sofas, accepts the cup of tea, and waits for Jim’s decision. If Jim would like to speak of his dreams, Spock will listen. If he does not want to, Spock respects that. He knows how it is to have nightmares and not have a desire to share information about them. He knows what it is like to wish to have the ability to cease dreaming. Jim does not speak, at least not all at once.

Jim curls up against his side, procuring a blanket from a woven basket by the foot of the couch.

Then he murmurs, a quiet: “Thank you. For being there.”

“Thanks are unnecessary, Jim,” Spock responds, equally softly, and looks at Jim’s face. The edges of fear and pain are being washed away and in the morning, no doubt, Jim will walk through the hallways spotting his usual confident smirk and no one could guess what has transpired in his past. “I
aspire to always be near you when you are in emotional need, ashalik. It is only logical, as you attempt to do the same for me.”

(It is what a human would do.)

Jim smiles, leaning against the Vulcan’s shoulder. His thoughts are as steady as his pulse, so close, the sensation comfortingly present and part of Spock wishes it was like this always. “You’re the awesomest boyfriend, Spock.”

This time, Spock decides not to chide him on the usage of incorrect grammar.

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To: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
From: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
Stardate 2257.111
Subject: Visit to Earth [Standard Federation English]

My dear Spock,

Our shuttle is landing the day after tomorrow at 17:10 in San Francisco Spaceport. I’ll comm you once we’re in range the exact Gate number and the time if it changes. Your father has some business at the Embassy which ought to take at least a week, so hopefully we can meet more than once. Would you and Jim like to meet us at the spaceport? I’ve booked a table at The Nebula from 18:00 thereabouts. There might be more talking than eating, though; you know what your father is like.

Please don’t worry about your father’s reaction in our last communication. He and I have spoken at length, and I can’t imagine he’d actually disavow you and Jim’s relationship. It’s just new to him, and you are still young. To be honest I think Sarek has trouble with the thought of letting go of you - it was one of the reasons he didn’t at first favour you joining Starfleet, because it takes you so far away from Vulcan and himself. But he is warming up to the idea. Also, I must warn you, your father has used every available resource at his disposal to find out information about Jim. To convince Sarek that Jim is a good human will take some time and you must be ready for that. I for one will support every decision you make.

I greatly look forward to seeing you soon.

With much love,

Your mother

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He is called to a Captain’s office just before lunch, after exiting the mathematics lecture. Last time something like this occurred, he had inadvertently made Professor Riker cry, and Captain Pike had warned him not to do it again but there had been no other consequences; he had not been expelled. Spock wrecks his memory but cannot come up with a reason why he could be here. He has not caused disturbances or upset any teacher or cadet to his knowing. His results are impeccable. So then why is he standing here in front of the human Captain Eoghan Callas?

“Cadet Spock, how would you feel about exchanging the classroom for a starship for awhile?” Captain Callas asks. “The Potemkin is leaving port in three weeks for a training mission. Several senior cadets are going, and Captain Pike spoke to me about your results. I think it’s high time you got a real challenge. Normally, this kind of mission isn’t taken on until a cadet’s final year at the
Academy, but in the way you’re advancing, I won’t mind.”

It is a startling and good opportunity. He had not believed he would be elected to be part of a training mission aboard a real Starship until next year. Jim has not been part of one despite his accelerated pace of curriculum. “I would be gratified, Captain. In what manner should I prepare for this training mission?”

“It’s obligatory to write a brief essay on the matter of running a Starship,” Captain Callas says with a small, easy smile, no doubt meant to be reassuring. "Since you’re in the Science Track, maybe focusing from a Science Officer’s point of view would be most … logical, I guess. Just a few pages to give me an idea of your standpoint. The deadline is next Friday. It’s best if you email it directly to me.”

“The essay shall be completed at that time,” Spock says. He remains collected, calm, and neutral; whatever emotional thrill he might feel at this honourable invitation. The USS Potemkin is a Constellation-class vessel of high caliber and he has heard of Captain Callas. The man has a good reputation in Starfleet as a firm, reliable officer.

“Okay, good.” The Captain makes a note in his PADD. "Thank you, Cadet, that’s all. If you’ve got any questions, just contact me. I’ll be on Earth until we leave with the Potemkin on stardate 2257.131. You’ll receive more information later this week, about what to pack and so on.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Before he is dismissed leaves the office, Spock forms the ta’al. It is expected, after all, of a Vulcan to offer such an action at parting, a sign of heritage and respect. “Live long and prosper.”

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San Francisco Spaceport · Earth
Stardate 2257.113

“I’m nervous,” Jim whispers as the hovercab rounds the final corner and slides into the parking lot.

The shuttlecraft landed later than expected. The skies are dark and full of glimmering stars, occasionally being blocked out by sharp white lights and the dark shapes of vessels in flight. Jim is wearing his cadet uniform, recently laundered and pressed, and fiddles with the cufflinks. They are perfectly aligned. He had spent considerable time in the hovercab, as they traversed the city, looking at himself in the mirror. He looks like a model Academy cadet. His behaviour is irrational, but logical for a human: Jim is anxious. This is his first true meeting with Sarek and Amanda, and he wishes to prove himself to be a good person and worthy of being boyfriends.

Spock stops himself from mentally calculating chances of success. He, too, is nervous that the meeting will go wrong - downhill; that is the human term. There is a chance (minor; but major enough to be worrisome) that his father will thoroughly disagree, after all, and then decisions will have to be made. And Spock has only just begun speaking with his father again on agreeable terms. Should his father give orders to cease socializing with Jim, then Spock would be forced to cease communication with him again and possibly his mother. He does not want that.

“There is no need to be nervous, Jim,” Spock assures him. “I am aware it is a natural human reaction, but it would be better if you try to remain calm and true to yourself.”

“What if they eat me?”

Spock gives him a dry look. “You are well aware Vulcans do not consume meat.”
“Yeah, well, these are your mom and dad we’re talking about, Spock, and I’m your boyfriend.”

“I yet fail to see why they could consume you for food.”

“It happens in the movies!”

“I advise you to cease watching such irrational content,” Spock says as they exit the hovercab, Jim handing the driver a couple of credit chips. Despite the late hour, there is quite a lot of activity at the Spaceport, many people of different size, origin, and shape moving in and out of buildings. A short way from the main entrance, a couple of buses are parked and someone is trying to lift a heavy, large bag into the undercarriage compartment. Jim anxiously adjusts his cufflinks again and Spock reaches out, calmly, brushing against his arm. “Jim.”


They head for Gate 12A. Occasionally, Spock glances at his communicator. His mother had messaged once they were in range, a few hours away, and the latest text from two minutes ago indicated they were about to disembark. Jim is vibrating next to him, if not physically then mentally. It is a natural human reaction. Jim does not do too well with figures in authority, and evidently he views his parents as being just that.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“It is late, but we will share dinner. My mother has booked a table in the city. Afterward, my parents will withdraw to the Embassy. Jim, my father will ask you questions regarding our relationship and, logically, your past. Please be as honest as you can be.” It is vital. If his father senses deception in Jim, he may force them to part. Spock does not want to consider that possibility.

“I’ll try. Just … I can’t tell them everything. Not yet, at least.”

“I know, ashalik.”

Two Academy cadets do not draw much attention at a Spaceport, even if one of them is Vulcan. The people moving around here are too tired or busy to care. Several buisnesspeople in strict suits pass them by, as well as a part of a Denobulan family group - only some ten or so of them - and a Betazoid with large, dark eyes, sipping a cup of coffee and constantly looking at the nearest digital watch displayed on the wall. Children are either yawning and whining that they want to eat or go to bed, or, some, running around while parents try in vein to keep track of them. They navigate through the moving mass, passing by the several coffeshops and small, open stores selling typical tourist merchandise - Terrans like that sort of thing.

The shuttlecraft is minimal and of Vulcan design; only somewhat smaller than a typical cargo freighter, it must work with a crew of only three or four. It is illuminated by spotlights from the ground and he and Jim wait by the entrance to the complex, watching through two-story tall windows as it comes to a complete halt, engines cooling down. The ramp at the back lowers, settles. All but one of the people disembarking are Vulcan, their robes stern and displaying the traditional markings of the House of Surak.

They walk through the doors and, as they step into the light, Spock recognizes them. It is not merely his father and mother. The third passenger makes no movement to leave.

“Spock.” His father forms the ta’al.

“Father, mother, T’sai T’Rama,” Spock greets, returning the gesture, and Jim clumsily follows suit - he has yet to master the ta’al. He knew his father would be here, and it would be logical that his
mother would follow if she had the time; but his grandmother? She is part of the Council; she has
duties. For her to come … Then, she must know. Sarek must have discussed the matter with her
beforehand and she deemed it important enough to leave Vulcan, even for a brief time. The
conclusion, and the knowledge it brings, is both confusing and relieving. Whatever her decision,
whatever her verdict, he shall know it before the day’s end. “Na’shaya, ko’mekh-il. Welcome to
Earth.”

By his side, he senses Jim tensing slightly. He must be aware how the words translate.

His grandmother is wholly Vulcan and does not smile, but there is not complete absence of warmth;
she has often been more fond of him than she perhaps wont to. She has never looked down at him
for being half-human; she accepted his father’s marriage to a human, after all, and was there from the
start to support it. Without her endorsement, it is dubious his father could have married Amanda
Greyson, nevertheless had a child with her, and retained not only his position as a highly-esteemed
Ambassador but also his social status on Vulcan. Many still whisper behind their backs, but they
would not dare to criticize Sarek or his wife or their son in front of T’Rama.

“Na’shaya, Spock. It has been sixty years since I last visited Earth; much has changed. But come!
This is not why we are here. Doubtless you already know of our purpose.”

“Affirmative. Ko’mekl-il, this is Jim Kirk, fellow Cadet at Starfleet Academy and, in Earth vernacular, my boyfriend.”

Jim holds up the ta’al once more. He might never be adept at it. Fortunately, his language skills are
much better than his motor skills. “Na’shaya.”

From the corner of his eye, he notices his mother giving him a subtle smile, which is meant to be
encouraging, and there is also some approval directed toward Jim. “T’sai T’Rama,” his mother says.
“It’s been a long journey. It is high time we eat, is it not?”

“Agreed.”

They call for a hovercab large enough for them all; with his parents and grandmother there are also
two of his father’s aides and four of his grandmother’s, but they will head directly for the Embassy
with the luggage. Throughout this, Jim is uncharacteristically quiet. He smiles politely and answers
questions as his charming self, but Spock feels the thrum of nervousness between them. Jim is -
perhaps not scared, but almost, a little. It is a big moment for them both. This is when they will find
out if Sarek approves; if T’Rama approves.

The hovercab carries them over the Golden Gate bridge. His grandmother does not look out the
window very much; she is focused on Spock and Jim, who sit side-by-side opposite to the three
others. The silence is tense but not wholly unpleasant. Jim does not hold or touch his hand; he knows
that it would be too bold and somewhat inappropriate, given that they are not officially Bonded. Not
yet. Not yet.

“May I inquire as to a’nrirh-il Skon’s location?” Spock asks.

“He remained on Vulcan. He shall have to manage the Council without me for a change,” his
grandmother says. She looks at Jim. Jim does not blink or shy away in fear, and she seems to
approve. “James Kirk, your father is known to me, as is your mother. Tell me, is she still a
Commander of Starfleet?”

“Uh, yes, ma’am, she is. I mean - I’m sorry, I don’t know how to address you,” Jim says awkwardly,
stammering slightly.
His grandmother is frank, as she usually tends to be: “If you are to Bond with a Vulcan you must learn the tongue. Therefore, you may address me as T’sai T’Rama until the time you are Bonded, at which point you shall be family. Then I will be your grandmother as much as I am Spock’s.”

Silently, Jim nods, as if his tongue has stuck in his throat.

“There is no need to be nervous. I am well-aware of human emotions. Amanda was similar to yourself when we first met.”

“It’s okay,” his mother smiles at Jim. “She’s like a sehlat on the inside.”

“You mean a big teddy-bear with big fangs?” Jim blurts.

“Jim, that is an inaccurate description,” Spock points out.

“Well, that’s what they looked like when you showed me.”

“So you have melded,” Sarek says, halting further discussion on the matter.

“Y-yes, sir,” Jim stutters. Clears his throat. The anxiety is back, swelling, a rising pulse. But he also tries in reign those emotions in, or at least the physical representations of them. It’s difficult for him, Spock can sense: Jim is, by nature, an emotional person, with great desire to clearly and vividly show what he feels and express himself in actions, in tone of voice and choice of words, in the shape of his face.

“We are mentally compatible, father,” Spock says. “It did not harm either of us when our minds have touched.”

“How many times have you melded?” his father demands to know.

“Only once properly. It was a very deliberate action on both sides, and it was then I realized our compatibility. I have evidence a Bond has been established. We are aware of one another. Twice when Jim was experiencing emotional distress I have managed to sense it from a distance, and I attempted to intervene in order to soothe him. In doing so, our minds have touched.”

His father does not look happy nor unhappy. Only cold and unfeeling, but Spock does not think he truly is unmoved.

T’sai T’Rama inclines her head. “As I suspected. The moment I heard of this from Amanda, I concluded that your continued association with James Kirk was based on mental compatibility. To otherwise seek a Bond would be illogical,” she says. “However, I will not give my verdict on this matter until I have gotten to know you better, James Kirk. Tell me how you first met my grandson.”

Jim clears his throat again. “At the Academy, first day classes started, there’s always this introductory seminar. Admiral Marcus and the Principal spoke. Anyway, Bones - uhm, Dr McCoy, my roommate - he and I were late, got there the last minute, and there was an empty seat at the front row, next to Spock. I said hello and was kind of curious. I’ve never seen a Vulcan so close, and didn’t think there were any at the Academy.”

“True. Starfleet is not an encouraged occupation,” T’Rama agrees. “Continue.”

“We didn’t really talk, there wasn’t time, and afterward our schedules were different. Later we met in the library. I was doing this assignment for a course in Sociology and part of it was about culture clashes, which important in Starfleet,” Jim says, and his voice is gaining confidence and returning more and more, surely, to his relaxed self. “We’re meant to seek out new life and establish relations
with people who can be so different from what we already know about, so hearing things from different perspectives is vital. Anyway, I hadn’t decided yet what to write about, but then I saw Spock sitting at a table reading, and I thought, wow, I can’t not ask him. Uhm.” There is a brief pause, Jim’s gaze flickering between the Vulcans present. “I kind of, kind of at once thought that Spock’s pretty cute and I’d like to ask him out, for a date that is, but I was too much of a coward to do that directly. I asked if I could have a chat with him over a cup of coffee and ask him about being a Vulcan on Earth.”

“And what were your intentions, at that time?” Sarek asks sternly.

It is a detailed and persistent cross-examination, but Jim takes it with grace, or tries to anyway. There is no hesitation in his answer: there is such pure surety to it that it is warming. “To become friends with Spock. As soon as we talked, I realized how intelligent he is, and he’s new so he needed some friends, right? Even if,” Jim adds with a playful smile aimed at Spock, “you told me at first that Vulcans don’t have any.”

“We generally do not, in the same sense that humans do,” Spock says. “Although the situation for me has now changed.”

“Perhaps we could continue this talk at The Nebula,” his mother suggests, a hand on Sarek’s arm, before he can continue to ask Jim more. No doubt Sarek will not fully rest until all of his inquiries have been answered, at length and in detail. “We’re almost there.”

The Nebula is a high-end establishment serving, in general, quite selective clientele. It is favoured by Starfleet officers, various ministers, dignitaries and ambassadors from far away, and the restaurant has gained a reputation for being of high quality and having very good service throughout most of the Alpha Quadrant. Since many of their guests are of non-Terran origin, their food is broadly varied, and each glass booth can be adjusted with different temperatures and atmospheric conditions. Theirs is a comfortable thirty-eight point five degrees Celsius; having predicted this, Spock had advised Jim to mind that when he dressed for the occasion. Nevertheless, neither Jim nor Amanda will be comfortable in the long run sitting here. Soft music, by most cultures considered pleasant, is played by a pianist on a stage in the corner. The chandeliers give the grand room a warm glow.

His mother has already arranged, along with a table, which food is to be served and everything is paid for via his father’s account at the Embassy. A waiter, proper and impeccable, arranges their drinks while another begins to hand out the food. The cutlery is coated in shimmering latinum, and Spock senses Jim’s heart rate pick up again, the human perspiring slightly, as he takes in the sight of the many-sized spoons, forks, knives, and glasses. One by one the plates are placed before them. Spock waits until his grandmother begins eating until he does, and Jim follows his lead.

Conversation returns to where it was halted in the hovercab. It is only logical: his father sees no point in denying that the main reason for this visit is to discuss Spock’s relationship with Jim. He asks about their first meetings and how their friendship cemented and turned into more than that. Spock answers as much and as honestly as he can while also feeling comfortable. Jim, eventually, relaxes again, as the entrée is finished and the main dish brought out. He does not lie, but he evades certain truths.

Jim does not mention much of his life prior to the Academy: he does not talk about Tarsus IV, and Sarek and T’Rama do not ask. Jim does, however, relay with some fondness stories from his childhood prior to that time - his mother Winona Kirk is spoken of with warmth, and only a small amount of lingering regret. His stepfather, Frank, and brother, George Samuel, Jim says, he saw much more often than his mother. By the time Jim was twelve, Winona spent more hours working for Starfleet than at home, regularly away for months or weeks at a time, giving the main
responsibility of her two sons’ upbringing to her new husband. Jim mentions a falling out, but is visibly uncomfortable with delving on the matter, and Amanda interrupts by bringing attention to the Vulcan port wine which is being served and encourages a common toast to sitting together as a family.

There are also questions, beyond the nature and history of his and Jim’s relationship, about their time at Starfleet Academy and their studies. T’Rama is especially interested and this is much easier to talk about. To relay statistics and raw data and numbers. To show what they have learned. It is also an excellent time to tell his parents that he is to join Captain Eoghan Callas of the USS Potemkin on a training mission starting on stardate 2257.131. They approve: his father says it will be a good opportunity for him to see, in reality, what Starfleet is about. A test.

(His father may still have hopes that he will abandon Starfleet and return to Vulcan. Study at the Vulcan Science Academy, find a Vulcan mate. Be contented. But that shall never be.)

He had told Jim the very afternoon the day Captain Callas had asked him to join the mission. Jim had been happy for him and excited, but also expressed disappointment that they could not go together. Something could happen, Jim had said; it’s space, anything could happen. And I’ll miss it. I’ll miss you.

It is strange. They have only been apart once, over the New Year, when he was in Canada and Jim in Iowa. They were still on the same planet, only a few hours away from one another, and a communicator call or text message was always available. At the time, Spock had missed his presence, in part, but they had not kissed yet or begun to form a Bond. This time will be different. Once far enough away from Earth, without a proper subspace relay station, a communicator’s signal cannot reach the planet. The Potemkin’s exact path or the nature of the mission has not yet been revealed, but they will not see each other for over a week and will not be able to send messages. That will be difficult, at first, to handle, Spock suspects, especially for Jim. What if something does happen, Jim fears? Jim could continue have nightmares which Spock wouldn’t be able to soothe.

But to fear for the future is illogical. One can only ever plan ahead, calculate possible outcomes, and try to influence those outcomes in one’s favour. But fear is illogical and … and human.

The subject matter returns, in the end, to him and Jim again; it is inevitable. Dessert is being served and the sky is now dark, lit only by stars and artificial lamps. Spock feels full from all the good food, contented; Jim is much more relaxed now than he was in the beginning, especially since T’Rama and Sarek have proved not to be human-eaters.

“You consider yourselves to be t’hy’la. But it is a heavy word, not to be trivialized,” Sarek warns.

“I do not use the term lightly, father. We are ni’var.”

“And so you see it. I have yet to agree. You are both young, and the pass of time can change many things. However,” Sarek says, and looks at Jim so seriously that the human’s back automatically straightens, “I do not utterly condemn this relationship. It is clear to me that you care for my son deeply. So it must remain. But I do not allow for a finalized Bonding until you have both completed your studies at Starfleet Academy. Shall either of you attempt to do otherwise, my answer will be swift and irrevocable.” Unsaid and implied: Sarek would immediately see to the cessation of their relationship, and a flare of fear (illogical illogical) burns in Spock’s blood, and he has to blink and look at his parents’ faces in order to regain focus and control. “Should it come to such a Time, there must be a ceremony on Vulcan.”

“Yes, sir, I understand,” Jim says, almost as if he were speaking with an Admiral and this was his trial.
“There’s no need for such formalities,” his mother says with an encouraging smile. “Welcome to House Surak, Jim.”

Around twenty hundred hours, his father and mother decide it is time to retire, and T’Rama expresses fatigue. She is old, even by Vulcan standards. She will join them at the Embassy where fine rooms have been set aside for the distinguished High Council member. The agreement is made to meet once more later this week, at some time when Spock’s schedule allows it. His mother suggests they do something similar; she will, no doubt, browse the available entertainments for theatre or opera or something else which Sarek and T’Rama as well as humans may enjoy. They will stay in touch via communicator.

They say farewell on the curb. He and Jim linger side by side, watching as his mother, his father, and his grandmother climb into a hovercab and it pulls away, headed for the Embassy. Then they flag down a second hovercab. The driver is a chatty Tellarite who has a radio playing in the background, and it takes some effort to filter out the noise; Spock is tired and his shields drained, and tonight, he decides, he will sleep deeply instead of meditating. Hopefully so deeply that he will not, cannot, dream.

“That,” Jim announces once the vehicle starts moving, “was terrifying.”

“You exaggerate,” Spock says.

“Maybe a little bit. Your parents care so much about you, and … I, I guess I didn’t expect that kind of examination.” Jim scratches at his neck, glancing out the window and the buildings and lights rapidly passing by. The streets are quite crowded. “Uh, Spock, does this mean you should meet my mom at some point?”

Spock considers it. He has read much about Winona Kirk, as well as George Kirk. She is a decorated officer, a good Commander from the reports, distinguished. Yet Jim speaks of her with broken fondness, and there are painful memories as well as joyous ones. A darkness that doesn’t fully go away, and once upon a time Winona left her son on Tarsus IV and he lived through the fires - he had no choice but to live through the fires and the famine, and Spock shudders and rapidly closes that line of thought.

“If you wish it,” he says finally. “Only if you wish it.”

Chapter End Notes

2017-10-07: Maybe you’ve wondered why there’s an “act i” in the chapter titles. When I started writing this fic I decided that instead of making a series with different fics in it (which also works), I’d force myself to write it in order by making it a very big fic where each chapters has to be published in the right order. It’s spliced into smaller chunks, much like the acts of a play. This chapter begins the second act, but it takes place pretty much immediately where chapter ten left off. All acts go together, but have slightly different focus - act i has been a bit all over the place, setting up characters and so on, and that’ll continue, of course, but here we’ll follow a few new storylines while hopefully also wrapping up some old ones. Once I get so far that I catch up with the movies’ timeline, there’ll be new acts.
I’ve upped the rating from T to M. I decided to do that mainly because of the violence in
this fic, so that I could feel more comfortable when writing, not having to worry as much about if I’m being too detailed or dark. I’ve added a few new relationship tags: Ben Sulu/Hikaru Sulu, because they appear briefly in an early chapter, and Christine Chapel/Nyota Uhura because they’re finally together. Chapel/Uhura is my fav TOS ship besides Jim/Spock, and I’m sad there’s no Chapel in the alternate reality. There is one in this fic verse though! The two of them will definitely appear more in the future. Okay, this is a really long note. I’ll finish it by clarifying that I borrowed the second equation that Spock solves (the really long one, which I probably got wrong) from this site here. I admit I don’t know this kind of math (at all) because I’m not as smart as a Vulcan. At all. (who is?? except maybe the women working for NASA in the early days before computers were all that smart, like Katherine Johnson, who is awesome btw) So I can’t promise there aren’t errors with the math or the other science-y stuff that appears in regularly in this fic, like chemistry. Thank you for reading!

**Russian-English translations:**

Это невозможно That’s impossible!
act ii: part two

Chapter Summary

act ii. part two.
A surprise meeting.

yel-hali
(noun)
starship
a ship that can achieve warp speed

Shi’kahr · Vulcan
Stardate 2240.280

According to old Vulcan law, established during the time of Surak and later refined, there is nothing to stop a Mind Healer from interfering when the signs are clear that a Vulcan child requires stabilization. A Vulcan displaying emotion too vividly is at risk to themselves and to others: the risk of violence: of outbursts, and such dangers are not allowed.

Some reject these ideas, and some flee into the far reaches of the known galaxy in order to escape the oppressive Teachings of Surak. Some argue that emotion is fundamental and Vulcan, and Vulcans must feel. Not suppress, not fear emotion – the constant paradox.

Laws on Earth are different, but at the time Spock is not aware. He has only just begun to grasp the reality of his father being Vulcan and his mother being human. The challenges lying ahead are vague and he cannot perceive them. He is only a child. His father urges him to read and listen to Surak’s Teachings, embrace them, and each time he scrapes his knees and cries or is overcome by the natural reaction to laugh, his father tells him to be quiet. Spock does not understand. He is only a child.

Spock meets his half-brother once. He is three Standard years young, and Sybok is so much older and strange and emotional. He is almost human, but he is not; he smiles, he even laughs like a human, like a human; yet there is not a speck of red blood in his veins. Spock’s father and the teachers constantly remind him to reign himself in and he is beginning to learn the basics of logic and scientific thought, and there, they say, three is no place for emotion. But then Sybok visits on a dull grey morning, and father reluctantly allows him inside the house, and Spock feels a flash of fear at the sight of this strange Vulcan, tall and bearded and with hands so rough at the edges; his speech isn’t carefully refined and weighed. There is light in it, and Sybok’s eyes sparkle as he kneels before the child and smiles and says: Hello, young one. I’m Sybok. I’m your brother.

Suddenly Spock is not afraid of him anymore, and Sybok lingers a full day and he tells him stories – not Earth stories, such as his mother tells, but Vulcan ones. Old ones, from the Times Before the
War, before Surak and their Enlightenment. When they were a savage race who fought one another. When they felt. Sybok says that out there lie the answers to everything and logic cannot give them all.

Shortly thereafter, his father orders Sybok away, saying that he is a dangerous on a young, pliant, open mind. It is not allowed. Sybok smiles sadly and ruffles his hair, and Spock is only three years old and does not comprehend the reality of it when Sybok says goodbye.

Sybok does not return to Vulcan, but Spock does not forget.

Sybok had never melded with him. He had said that he would like to, in a future, once Spock was old enough to understand. The child does not, at the time. He is three years old and his father has explained telepathy and how humans do not usually possess this common force, and he has said that one must not read other’s minds. That Spock was too young and too feral and not understand enough. Not Vulcan enough. Not controlled enough. Spock tries to grasp what the words meant, to go from the abstract to the concrete.

His mother smiles, but he is not allowed to do so himself. He must not. It is not Vulcan. It is difficult to resist the urges, and he fails so many times. His father is cold and never smiles. Vulcans do not smile.

But, father, Spock argues the evening when his half-brother has disappeared: Sybok is Vulcan and he smiled.

No, his father says sternly: He is v’tosh ka’tur. He is no longer Vulcan.

The words are new and Spock remembers them, but he does not fully understand. But he says: Yes, father, because he has learned that those answers are the best and do not lead to disappointment or lies. Sometimes, he has to lie, even if his father and the teachers have all said that they are Vulcan and Vulcans do not lie.

To: Amanda Greyson (amgreyson001@vn.a)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2257.128
Subject: Communication hiatus [Standard Federation English]

Mother,

I will be unable to communicate for at least two Standard weeks due to a training mission aboard the USS Potemkin, commanded by Captain Eoghan Callas of Earth. Out videocalls will have to be cancelled for this time. I shall attempt to contact Vulcan from Memory Delta when we reach it; the visit is scheduled to stardate 2257.138 between 07:00-18:00 Standard time (exact time of arrival unknown). However, due to the nature of the mission, this is uncertain. Please state in reply to this message whether you will be too occupied to answer a call on that stardate.

I look forward to the mission. It is determined to be an interesting experience and, in many ways, a more definite test of my abilities as a Starfleet Cadet than any lecture or examination on Earth could be. It will not be like the simulations or the Kobayashi Maru.

Jim will not accompany me on this mission as he is to undertake a similar one next year. The training mission is usually reserved for seniors, but given my accelerated studies Captain Christopher Pike has helped arrange this. I have been dispensed hiatus
on my courses for the two weeks. The Professor of Advanced Xenolinguistics has given me a small assignment due the week after the ship’s return in order to make up for the lost time; that is adequate. The mathematics teacher told me to ‘take time off’, which is illogical, albeit I comprehend his meaning that I should focus on the mission at hand; therefore I have no other assignments.

Once I return to Earth, I will contact you.

Live long and prosper,

Spock

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**USS Potemkin · Coordinates: Unknown**

**Stardate 2257.131**

Warp factor five. It is a leisurely pace of a *Constellation*-class Starfleet vessel, enabling it to traverse approximately zero point three-four-two lightyears in a Standard day, and it does not strain the engines. The instruments show no signs of danger or alarm, and the crew works with calm efficiency. Captain Eoghan Callas had warned them that while aboard, they are not tourist: they are here as Starfleet cadets, about to become officers. As such, certain discipline and order is expected and required. They walk in orderly lines and are not allowed to deviate or disturb the crew. All cadets will have this chance, to visit a starship and serve, in practically every sense of the word, for a two-week training mission. This time, Spock has been given the chance; Captain Pike helped arrange it, considering it is better he does this now. The teachers and Admiral Marcus had agreed, looking at all his test results and reviews. In preparation for this task he had written a simple sixteen-page essay on the matter of running a starship; the Captain had remarked in an email that he found it excellent. Since he studies an accelerated program, only loosely tied to the Science and Command Tracks with other courses thrown in, he is now surrounded mostly by strangers. Four-year cadets: seniors.

Jim is not here; he will take part in a similar exercise next year. Before they were out of range, Spock exchanged messages with him on the communicator. Jim had wished him good luck; illogical. There is no such thing as luck. Spock had thanked him anyway. Before leaving campus that morning, Jim had knocked on the door at 05:48 hours, as if to check on him, and they had embraced and kissed in both the Vulcan and the human ways.

The *Potemkin* is scheduled to rendezvous with the USS *Lexington* on the edge of this quadrant in eight days. Before that, they will visit Memory Delta, a previously empty planetoid devoid of life where the Federation has set up one of its several library outposts, where copies of all gathered knowledge of the Federation is to be stored. Craft often make protective orbits around it, but the planetoid itself possesses no shield, due to its open-minded and peaceful purpose as a place of shared knowledge. Spock has often wanted to visit such a place, and is pleased to note that they will spend a full forty hours there, twelve of which will be free for the cadets to spend as they will. It will give him ample time to explore literature he has otherwise been unable to get hold of on Earth or Vulcan. After that, a route will take them past a number of unknowns - they have not been given explicit information. No doubt it will be an exercise of its own, so all cadets must prepare for the unexpected and be ready for anything. Once they reach the *Lexington*, the two ships will join in a simple battle simulation, before heading back to Earth.

They have been shown around the ship’s main areas: Engineering, the Bridge, each nacelle, decks one through three. They broke Earth orbit two hours ago. During the tour, Spock takes notes on his PADD when necessary; the visit to Engineering and seeing the engines in action, as it were, was most enlightening. After some time, they are back at their starting point outside of
“... and this concludes our tour. Cadets, you’re going to be shown to your quarters. Remember to stick to your guide groups at all times unless otherwise instructed. Drill exercises will begin at 12:30 hours shiptime. Questions?” No one raises their hand. The human Captain quirks a lightly humorous smile. "Crystal clear - I like it. All right. Dismissed.”

The cadets begin to disperse into their assigned groups, each being guided by a senior crewman. In Spock’s there are three others, all of them human; next to the crew, still in they cadet reds, they all appear remarkably young and inexperienced, and Spock does not feel very grand at all. Their guide, a Medical Officer in blue named Dr Mark Piper, leads them from the turbolift to Deck 12 where all living quarters are located. Their light luggage, tagged with microchips at the Academy, has already been transported to the correct rooms.

“This is so exciting!” whispers one of the cadets on his breath, the male human. "Hey, you’re the Vulcan. You’re a senior all of a sudden?”

“Negative. I study an accelerated course, and was allowed the opportunity to join this exercise mission,” Spock answers.

“Cool. I’m Robert Tomlinson, but call me Rob; everyone does.” The cadet must know something about Vulcans because he doesn’t try to shake hands, which would anyway be somewhat awkward when walking.

“Greetings. I am Spock.”

“I’m Janice Lester,” says the second human, whose brown hair is tied back in an elaborate updo; Spock recognizes her. he saw her the night of the dormitory fire. She is a friend of Nyota’s. ”Science Track.”

“She always says that, because she’s a huge nerd,” the third cadet pipes in. She, too, Spock knows the name of before she says it. ”Angela Martine.”

“I’m hurt, Angela,” Cadet Lester says with a touch of the dramatic, albeit she does not exude any sense of true pain. Another nuance of human interaction. Spock concludes the two are good friends. ”The proper term is well-educated and deeply immersed.”

“That’s four words,” Cadet Martine responds in a stage-whisper. ”Or five.”

“Shh,” Cadet Tomlinson hushes them when their conversation has not gone unnoticed by Dr Piper, who turns their head slightly to look at them, but there is no angry words or chastisement, only the hint of an amused smile.

After some minutes, they reach a door marked D12-36H, and the doors slide open as they approach. ”Here we are,” Dr Piper says. ”It’s only 11:30, so take your time reading the info on your PADDs and choosing a bunk. I figured you’d rather do that yourselves. Everyone’s got my comm number, right? It’s tied to the ship’s internal comm system, so if you’ve got questions or there’s an emergency, call. I’ve got to return to my post in the Medbay, but I’ll swing by in time to pick you up for the drills.”

“Thanks, doc, sir,” Cadet Tomlinson grins.

Dr Piper takes his leave, and they look around the room. They are standard starship quarters, albeit equipped with two bunkbeds rather than a single one. There is no much other furniture. A small closet unit in the wall, in front of which their bags are neatly placed; nightlamps. There is no
replicator. There is a single round window, giving way to a view of stars passing by swifter than light can travel, streaks of blue and white and black. The humans peer out in excitement.

“This is so cool! Simulations are one thing, but we’re finally here, aboard a real starship,” Cadet Martine says, leaning against the windowframe to stare out into the darkness.

Spock does not look out: he has been on starcrossing vessels before, journeys between Earth and Vulcan, and on occasion other worlds when he accompanied his father on his work when Sarek had hoped that his son would take up the same kind of work, in politics. He surveys the narrow beds. There is no space for his meditation mat, which he had folded up neatly and placed at the bottom of his bag. He will have to utilize the bed, which is not ideal. Perhaps he should try to sleep instead of meditate.

“Okay, I get top bunk here. Objections?” Cadet Lester says, gesturing on the bed to the right.

“Nah, I prefer the bottom,” says Cadet Martine and then, for some abstract reason, blushes when the two humans look at her in some way which Spock struggles to properly decipher. Human interaction is still quite strange. ”Not like that. I mean. Shut up!”

“I didn’t say anything. You’re the one jumping into the gutter as soon as you get the chance, Angela,” Cadet Lester says with a roll of eyes.

“You got a preference?” Tomlinson asks the Vulcan.

“Negative.”

“I’ll take the top, then.”

“Oh my god,” Cadet Martine sighs and buries her now reddening face in her hands.

Yes, humans are strange. Very strange. No matter. It is easier to meditate if he is closer to the floor, but it is a pity he will not be able to light a candle.

They were allowed to bring clothes and personal items to a certain weight and size. Spock packed, in addition to his meditation mat and a single candle, a spare uniform, his thermal underwear - which will be necessary: the average temperature aboard the ship is a low two-hundred and ninety-four point seven degrees Kelvin - and the tricorder which Jim gifted him. The other cadets were not as practical. Cadet Martine has brought with her, it seems, a quite expansive as well as expensive make-up kit. Cadet Lester brought with her three pocket books, two of scientific nature and one wholly fictional, some old Earth literature which Spock has only vaguely heard of from his mother, about the illogical story of a boy with magical powers. Why a scientist would read that he is uncertain, but the Cadet is human; that explains it all. Cadet Tomlinson brought with him a deck of Terran cards, and proceeds to challenge them all to a game of poker.

He spends three minutes explaining the rules, as Spock has heard of but never tried the game.

“Man, you’ve got the best pokerface ever,” Cadet Tomlinson exclaims when, for the second time in a row, Spock reveals his cards: a straight flush. Learning the rules was quite simple, in the end. There are much more complex games being played by Vulcan children. He is not sure humans would enjoy them and only find them boring and tiresome, requiring too much from their minds. “If this was twenty-first Earth, you’d win a fortune for sure.”

“Bet you can count cards too,” Cadet Lester adds.

“What exactly does that entail?” Spock asks.
“You memorize the cards and using the method of elimination figure out what everyone else’s hands are, basically,” Cadet Martine explains.

Ah. Of course. ”Memorizing only the fifty-two cards of a standard deck is an easy task,” Spock says. Truthfully, at times it is difficult to comprehend just how the human brain functions. How, sometimes, even the most clever and intelligent of humans cannot make calculations of odds or predict outcomes. Vulcan is so full of brilliant minds that coming to Earth was, and remains, a shock, lingering.

“Now you’re just bragging,” Cadet Tomlinson says.

But Cadet Martine shakes her head. ”I knew a girl once who could do it.”

Spock acknowledges her curiosity as well as Cadet Tomlinson’s doubts. ”It is not impossible. For example, I knew to split the two queens because I calculated the odds of receiving, in the next round, eighteen or higher was sixty-two point seven percent, as the cards left in deck consisted of two fours, two fives, three tens, one nine, one two, one seven, two aces, three -”

Cadet Lester holds up a hand in a human sign to show she wishes for something to stop. ”Slow down, slow down. You memorized them? The whole deck? While we played?”

Spock only looks at her. Clearly, that is what he was attempting to explain. ”Yes.”

“You’re my new best friend,” Cadet Lester says promptly, and Spock has to blink in order to, in some way, show surprise. He … is?

“The ability to count and memorize Terran game cards are a basis for friendship?”

“Jan, you’re confusing him. Be nice,” Cadet Martine says, but smiles. ”But, yeah, in Jan’s world it is a very good basis for friendship. Proving you’ve got brains and stuff. Welcome to the club, Spock.”

And that is when the alarm goes off. The time is 12:07. It could be the drill has started early; Spock had already calculated that there was a chance of over fifty-seven percent that this would happen. After all, the cadets must be prepared for the unprepared, and to start a drill at an appointed time does not fall into that category. Their group had been instructed to report to Engineering during the first drill, so that is where they prepare to go. They quickly grab whatever items that could be necessary; Spock takes his tricorder. Outside of their door, Dr Piper is waiting, and he leads them through the corridors at a swift, decisive pace, ignore the turning red lights and the constant shrill alarm. Everyone else on the move is equally as focused and intent.

« Red alert, » a computerized voice warns them in an even, calm tone. Lights flash. Red. « Red alert. Report to your designated areas. This is a drill: repeat, this is a drill. »

Personal log of Cadet Spock, stardate 2257.132

The drill exercises we have taken part of in the past twenty-four hours have been satisfactory and enlightening, with each drill we are moved to a new location of the starship so that we may see most of its functions in action through different officers. I have taken extensive notes of the mission thus far. The Potemkin is currently travelling at Warp 6 through the L-298 system, which has been charted but is uninhabited and uncolonized. We will reach Space Station K-7 en route to Memory Delta in sixteen hours.

The Potemkin will reach Memory Delta in fifty hours. Once there, each cadet will be
assigned a task specified by our group leader; in our case Dr Piper. There will also be
given a few hours of free time, which I intend to spend researching with the help of the
library's vast databanks. After that, we will meet the USS Lexington under the
command of Commodore Wesley at coordinates 55.02.12. My prediction is that a
simulated ship-to-ship battle scenario will play out at that time; it is logical.

The humans snore.

They all fell asleep quickly and deeply, all of them exhausted. Spock lies in bed, staring at the back
of the top bunk, hands crossed over his chest beneath the covers. Despite the thermal underwear
beneath his pajamas, it is quite cold. On duty, as it were, he had not been allowed to wear
gloves according to Captain Callas, who is a strict man, firmly adhering to regulations and they
clearly state the manner of dress of on-duty personnel aboard a starship. Gloves are not allowed. It is
no matter. The mission is for two Standard weeks: Spock can endure. He meditated much before
they set off in order to strengthen his mental shields just for this kind of event.

The cold is, at present, a bigger problem. He could ask the three other cadets if he could alter the
room’s internal temperature by just a few degrees, but doubts it would be in their favour. He should
have brought with him the extra thick socks his mother had knitted for him and included in the
package she sent two months ago.

In San Francisco on Earth, it is midday. Jim is attending a lecture - interstellar engine mechanics, if
his schedule is unchanged. For a moment, Spock imagines what it would be like if Jim were here.
They would spend hours speaking about the day and their hopes for the future, and reflect upon the
stars and the vastness of space. They would curl up next to each other beneath the covers -

He shoves the thought aside, steeling himself. He must not distract himself in this manner. Finding no
rest, he turns over to lie on his side, back to the wall. He can see the window from here. The stars.
He looks at them, their haze and glory.

He thinks of Earth and of Vulcan.

He tries to sleep.

Janice Lester wakes up first, her hair at disarray and she yawns widely and blinks, as if momentarily
confused.

Spock is already out bed and the covers have been neatly rearranged with perfectly square corners,
and he’s showered and donned his uniform, and sits on the bed reading on his PADD. He has read
through all information given to them concerning the Potemkin and its mission twice, and is currently
working on the copy of his essay in temporal mechanics which he brought with him. There is a
sentence bothering him.


“05:43 hours shiptime,” Spock informs her. “We are not allowed to seek out the mess hall for
sustenance until 6:30.”

Lester falls back into bed and rolls over, covering her head with her blanket. “Gimme … five
minutes …”

Eighteen minutes later, Lester has dragged herself out of bed and is taking a shower, and Cadet
Tomilson wakes up with a start and almost falls out of bed and onto the floor, only catching himself
against the frame just in time. Spock has revised the sentence and moved on to recheck the calculations made on page five of his essay. All seems to be in order, so he double-checks that everything has been saved, before closing down the writing program and opening one of the digital books he had stored onto the device in preparation for this journey.

“Whaa…?”

“Good morning,” Spock says. “Although technically it is not morning.”

It takes a moment for the cadet to orient himself. “Now I remember. Wow. What time is it? Breakfast time?”

“Not for another twenty minutes.”

“Hey, throw me my bag, will you?” Tomilson asks, pointing at his bag, which is half-open and lying haphazardly on its side on the floor. Spock complies, assuming the cadet now realizes that he is too tired to climb down to retrieve his clothes. And, preferably, a comb. “Wow! You’re strong,” the cadet comments as Spock hands him the bag with ease.

For some reason, the cadet remains in the bed as he dresses, quite inefficiently, and does not descend until Cadet Lester exits the shared bathroom, fully dressed and her hair pinned up in good order. While the male human brushes his teeth, Cadet Martine comes to, Lester gently shaking her shoulder. By the time the mess hall opens, they are all ready to go there. Cadet Tomilson brings his PADD, using a three-dimensional map downloaded to it to guide them, but Spock finds it unnecessary as he has already memorized the ship’s full layout.

Most cadets have woken just as early and are already present, forming queues to the replicators. Many are stretching and yawning. A few crew are also there, sipping coffee, eating sandwiches, or playing chess; some have recently finished their shifts, others have just woken up. Spock selects the only Vulcan dish he can find on the menu, and after a few seconds a steaming bowl of ploumeek shur appears.

“Over here,” Cadet Lester waves a hand, urging him to sit down at the same table as her and Cadet Martine. Seeing that it is a logical option, Spock does so.

“Everyone, this is Spock,” she introduces him to the other cadets there, whose names he has not yet learned. “And that’s Vincent DeSalle, Lori Ciana, John Farrell and Janice Rand.”

There are greetings exchanged, a hand or two waved. Spock answers with the ta'al once he has placed his tray on the table and he sits. The food’s taste is slightly misaligned, but given that no Vulcan serves aboard the Potemkin there has been no one to review or adjust the replicators’ Vulcan food settings.

Breakfast is shared with much talk. Humans generally seem unable to eat without constant noise. They exchange news and gossip and emotions and opinions as easily, as naturally, as breathing. It is enlightening and, by now, Spock is fairly used to it, from the many times he has eaten in cafeterias and restaurants surrounded by humans. He does not join any of the avid discussions – most centre around expectations and hopes about the mission. Many questions. Commentary about the drill yesterday and the proceedings, and some of the cadets begin an analytical discourse of ship activity in practice versus how it has been described in theory.

Spock filters most of this out, listening but not actively, not paying especial heed to any particular conversation. The room feels smaller and more crowded than it should be. There is a tour of the Bridge scheduled for his group in two hours. Before that, there’ll be a small seminar held by some of
the ship’s engineers; Spock predicts that it will involve some hands-on experience resulting in greasy hands for several of the cadets. After all, the literature they had been told to read in preparation for this mission included a brief guide on the upkeep of Starship engines. He is quite looking forward to that.

He considers, briefly, what time it is in San Francisco right now. He wonders what Jim is doing.

“… and the Bridge is the brain of the ship, just like the Warp Core is its heart,” the Chief Engineer explains while the turbolift carries them upward. The doors slide open, and they quietly enter the Bridge as to not disturb the people at work there. The Captain is sitting in his chair, looking toward the wide viewscreen, which currently shows the stars swirling past as they are travelling at warp.

Spock had been right about the seminar. He’d made extensive notes while the engineer spoke, and then the Vulcan had been among those selected to assist in a few simple, everyday checks of the ship’s mechanics. As a result, he had had to change into a clean uniform in-between the seminar and this tour of the Bridge, and he’s sent the first uniform through laundry to get rid of the oil stains.

“Looks like we’re having another calm day,” the Chief Engineer says, nodding toward the viewscreen. Then he gestures toward each of the stations in turn, explaining them. Spock already knows the layout and configuration of not just the Bridge but each nook and cranny for this type of vessel, but he does not say so aloud. He mentally takes note of what the Chief Engineer is saying and looks around.

Captain Callas’ First Officer is standing by the navigational controls, looking down at a datascreen with a frown and discussing something in low tones with the helmsman in question.

“Captain, I’m detecting foreign object one half parsec away, and it’s closing fast, but only on impulse engines,” reports one of the helmsmen suddenly.

“Keep an eye on it. Configuration?” Captain Callas asks.

“Unknown, sir. Wait - the scans are clearing up. Some type of vessel, roughly fifty meters in length, could be cylindrical. It doesn’t match any of our records. Can’t detect weapons or identify ship functions.”

“Slow us down to meet them. On screen,” the Captain demands. The order is fulfilled. The viewscreen, once full of stars, is overlapped with a digital image of a vague shape quickly approaching. A course is plotted, based on its trajectory; using current speed, it will cross paths with the Potemkin, only a few hundred kilometers off the bow, within eighteen minutes’ travel at current speeds. The Captain gives the gathered cadets a wry smile. “Looks like you’ll get to see some excitement after all, cadets. Helmsman, plot an intercept course. Bring us up parallel with them.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Spock studies the actions made but something about the ship is … oddly familiar. It is difficult, at first, to pinpoint exactly why. But as they get closer and closer to the unknown vessel, the scans clear up, and the shape becomes more and more defined. And then - yes, yes, that is a Vulcan vessel. An older type, and heavily modified, but the base … It is Vulcan. It is Vulcan. But this is not the same quadrant of space as Vulcan, and the Science Academy or other institution would not send such an old and modified vessel out this far for a scientific mission. It is illogical. Nor would it be used as a cargo vessel or transport; a freighter is much more efficient.

Its placement in spacetime is illogical.
“Distance closing – two hundred thousand kilometers.”

“Sir, the vessel is altering course, coming right at us.”

It is close enough now to get more than a digital scan’s impression: a small, dark speck appears on screen. Even at maximum magnification, it is too far away to get a clear view of it.

“Evade, but bring us down to their speed. Hail them, all frequencies, and hook in the translator,” the Captain commands.

“Frequencies open, sir,” the Communications Officer says.

“Unknown vessel, this is Captain Callas of the Federation ship USS *Potemkin*. Please identify yourselves. Our intentions are non-hostile.”

For several long seconds, nothing happens.

“Vessel is slowing down,” a helmsman reports.

“Looks like they heard us.”

“Captain, they’re responding. Audio only.”

“Let’s hear it.”

The voice on the other side is deep and slightly raspy from subspace interference. It speaks in Standard Federation English without discernible accent. It sounds almost human. "Captain Callas, this is the Traveler. I am on a peaceful mission of discovery and seek no violence nor confrontation. Upon seeing your ship with our sensors, I plotted an intercept course, hoping to catch your attention. This is an old ship, and I have had some technical malfunctions. Any assistance would be greatly appreciated, should you wish to render it. I would be in your debt.”

Captain Callas looks thoughtful and makes a gesture at the Communications Officer, wordlessly ordering him to briefly cut the connection. “Well. A ship of that size … only one crew?”

“Running scans now to confirm it, sir,” the Chief Science Officer says. “It seems the ship is equipped with shield generators not currently online. No weapons. It could be some type of science vessel.”

“Or it could be a trap,” Callas murmurs, so low only someone with a Vulcan’s sensitive hearing could detect it. Then he straightens and nods, an unspoken order, and communications are reestablished. “Traveler, this is the *Potemkin*. As a sign of goodwill, I am willing to beam aboard a team of engineers to your aid.”

“Captain, I would gladly come to you, should be more comfortable with it. Also, at the moment I don’t think the lifesupport systems could support more than one being at a time. My most dire need is to replace the carbon dioxide filter, as the levels are starting to reach critical. I assume you will have security officers in place in accordance with Starfleet regulations. I am alone and unarmed. If you give me the coordinates to your transporter room, or wherever else you wish to receive me, I will beam over.”

So the stranger knows of Starfleet. They must be known to the Federation, then, Spock concludes.

“Sir, reading one lifesign, most likely humanoid,” the Chief Science Officer reports.

“Acknowledged. Helmsman, transmit the coordinates to our Transporter Room, and have a security
The stranger materializes. They are clad in simple clothes; functional, not extravagant, and they have a dark muzzled beard and slanted eyebrows. Their ears are curved into a sharp point, and the stranger is wearing an oxygen mask which they remove as soon as they’re aboard, taking a deep breath as one does after longing for fresh air for hours and hours. They are smiling. The stranger is Vulcan and not really a stranger at all.

Spock stares.

It is Sybok. He is older; yes, with deep lines set into his face, from weariness rather than of age, especially around his eyes. His beard is fuller than most Vulcans’ would ever be, and his hair at disarray. But it is Sybok. He is smiling. His eyes gleam. It is Sybok.

The Vulcan holds up a hand in the ta’al, facing the Captain. “Captain Callas. I’m honoured to make your acquaintance. I -”

The Vulcan has noticed the cadets, standing to the side, behind the security officers. His eyes land on Spock’s face and widen (illogically; vividly) dramatically.

“Spock?”

“You know each other?” Captain Callas asks, intrigued and also suspicious. “Cadet, explain.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Spock answers, not certain if this emotion inside of him could be shock. Sybok. Sybok is alive. (Dangerous: he is v’tosh ka’tur. He is emotional, irrational; dangerous. Dangerous. A perilous influence. Forbidden. So Spock has been taught ever since he last saw him, three years old and uncomprehending but trying to.) “This is Sybok of House Surak of Vulcan – we are of the same House. However, I was not aware that he was still alive. We have not been in contact for seventeen Standard years.”

“I see. Why would a Vulcan travel alone in such a run-down vessel?”

“I believe there is a human saying: desperate times require desperate measures,” Sybok says. “I acquired the ship cheaply on Hekaras II after suffering an accident with a subspace anomaly in that system to my last vessel; unfortunately, the seller did not inform me about the faulty lifesupport system. The air recycler hasn’t worked properly for years, I think. I’ve tried to correct the damage, but lack the spare parts and do not have a functioning replicator onboard. I have a schematic of the exact materials I require; all I need is some time and space to work.” There is that smile again. “No wonder they were so eager to sell. It’s frankly a piece of junk.”

“I’m certain we could come to an agreement, Mr Sybok,” Captain Callas says, somewhat bewildered. Clearly, he has never encountered - or imagined - a Vulcan speaking or acting in this manner. All Vulcans are distant and cold and unmoving, and Sybok uses contractions and human sayings and openly smiles.

(Vulcans do not smile.)

“I thank you for your kindness, Captain.”

“I’ll arrange for my Chief Engineer to speak with you about your situation and render assistance. In the meantime, we’ll remain at this position.”

“I’ll be in your debt. I’ve programmed the ship’s autopilot in accordance with our current heading,
but maybe it’s best you hold onto it with your tractor beam as well. The nav computer can be a bit fiddly,” Sybok says.

“Of course,” the Captain replies, relaying orders through his communicator. The alert is cancelled, and the smaller ship is gently grasped by the other’s tractor beam to be towed. “If I may, Mr Sybok, I admit I am … curious. I’ve met several Vulcans in my lifetime, but none quite so – unique.” Captain Callas hesitates for thirteen milliseconds before settling on the word, which could be construed as either positive or negative, albeit the human is obviously aiming for something neutral and inoffensive.

“Let’s say I am not on anyone’s list of favourite guests, and leave it at that. I’m the – black lamb?”

“Sheep,” Spock corrects him, having heard Jim use the expression once and instantly memorizing it, and Sybok nods at Captain Callas. The Captain does not appear fully convinced by this story.

“The black sheep of the family,” Sybok smiles. “And if I maybe, Captain, I would like to speak with Spock and maybe have something to eat. It’s been too long since we met. Unless he’s otherwise occupied?” He looks at Spock again, his gaze open and curious and yet difficult to read. He shows his emotions, but not exactly like a human would, and Spock is more used to discerning human expression. “A cadet? I had no idea there were Vulcans in Starfleet. I have so many questions.”

“The schedule has to be rearranged anyway. Mr Sybok, you are welcome to stay aboard the Potemkin as our guest. We’re headed toward Space Station K-7 and will be there in only a few hours.”

“I’d gladly stay with you all the way there. Hopefully I will have my ship fixed by then,” Sybok says and inclines his head. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Cadet Spock, would you mind escorting Mr Sybok to the mess hall?”

Two security officers accompany them, and they keep their phasers visible. Regulation. Procedure. Sybok doesn’t seem bothered. They gain quite a lot of attention walking through the hallways. His voice and movements are vivid. They aren’t controlled and cold, and, with a pang of regret and unwordable emotion flooding his system, Spock has the urge to embrace him like a human would a friend after being long apart.

He had thought Sybok was dead. When he was six years old and asked about his half-brother, Sarek had said he had gone away; and when he asked, again, carefully, wording the question as cogently as possible, at fifteen, he had received a similar answer. Sarek had not expressed sadness, but admitted that he could no longer feel his first son’s existence and the rational conclusion was that Sybok’s katra must have passed on. Spock had mourned, as much as he was allowed to.

“How you’ve grown! It’s peculiar, really. I keep trying to imagine you as a three-year-old. Tell me, Spock, everything that’s happened.”

“That would be illogical, as we do not have the time for a tale that would take years,” Spock answers.

“Ilogical,” Sybok echoes wryly: and there is an undeniable hint of (illogical) disappointment and disapproval and grudging resignation. “I see Father drilled the Teachings into you, after all. Very well. What’s the abbreviated version?”

“I rejected the Science Academy in favour of Starfleet. This is my first year as a cadet; I plan to graduate in 2258 with a focus on Science primarily, and Command secondarily.”
Sybok nods and hums. “I like that idea, a Vulcan in Starfleet. I take it Father didn’t like it.”

“Not at first, no. Albeit lately he has admitted he is not wholly against the idea. Several developments have led to this conclusion.”

“Such as?”

Spock decides he wants to tell him. Despite their years apart, so many unknowns, Sybok is his half-brother and his memories of him are sharp and fond and vivid. “I intend to Bond with a human.”

Sybok halts in the middle of a step, and the smile is gone. “You intend to Bond?”

There is no point in … what was the term Nyota has taught him? … ah, yes: ‘beating around the bush’. “Affirmative.”

“With a human?”

“Yes.”

Then Sybok starts to laugh, a warm and hearty sound. The security officers are staring, mouths agape. They probably believed Vulcans are incapable of making such a sound.

“I wish I was there to see his face! Tell me about this human.”

“Very well. He is also an Academy cadet, in the Command Track. James Kirk, the son of George Kirk –”

“– killed with the USS Kelvin in 2233. I know who the man was. Seems everyone does. He must have a lot on his shoulders, then, so much to live up to. And his mother’s a Commander, too, isn’t she?”

“Affirmative. Jim is under much pressure, but he does not buckle beneath it.”

“And father approves?”

“Yes. He and T’sai T’Rama have both given approval.”

“Good. Good. And he treats you all right? I might have been gone for a long time, but I won’t see my little brother treated unwell.”

“Jim has never hurt me, physically or mentally, and does not intend to. We are t’hy’la.”

“Spock, you’re only twenty Standard years old and already believe you’ve found your t’hy’la?” Sybok shakes his head, and he is serious again, as he rarely is. His expression darkens. “Humans are fickle. I think it’s a rushed decision. But who am I to protest? I’ve never met this boy. You met at the Academy, I take it. Are you courting in the Vulcan or the human way? One of the many there are.”

“Both, I believe, and neither. It is … a compromise of traditions,” Spock says. “Father will not allow a Bonding to be finalized until we have completed our studies and been assigned positions within Starfleet.”

“And hopefully not even then,” Sybok says wryly. “You may not comprehend, but I do; after all, I was older than you when my mother died, and father had given me several talks about Bonding. About it being time soon to settle down and yadda, yadda, yadda; he really wanted some grandkids, and he was frightened that I’d be alone for my Time. Then I turned away from the Teachings, from Vulcan, and we never spoke again. And then he goes marrying a human, and has you! Don’t take
me wrong; you’re my little brother, and nothing’ll change that. But father can really be a hypocrite sometimes.” The older Vulcan makes a thoughtful noise at the back of his throat. “I’d like to meet James Kirk and judge for myself.”

“If our relationship is appropriate?” Spock guesses.

“To see if I should congratulate him or wring his weak little neck.”

“Sybok, it is not -”

“- proper to threaten someone with violence, I know. Not according to the Teachings,” Sybok says and rolls his eyes. “And you’re both adults and can make your own decisions. Still: last I saw you, you were three years old. It’s a bit of a shock to hear you’re planning on Bonding with a human. Amanda Greyson is a good specimen, and she has done father good; but is James Kirk of the same caliber? I have my doubts.”

His brother’s concerns are justified. He has not met Jim and does not possess all the fact regarding his past and character. For all Sybok knows, Jim could be as liar, taking advantage of Spock’s relative youth and naiveté of human ways and of emotions. Even when he was small, despite their different heritage, Sybok always was fond of him. He would read stories, much like his mother; later, Spock realized that his brother’s fallacy for emotion let him understand and approve of Sarek marrying Amanda, this emotional human. And something stings when considering how their father turned Sybok away and had him declared void, cut him off from the House forever, labeled him v’tosh ka’tur – and yet Sarek married a human.

Emotions can create and destroy.

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**Personal log of Cadet Spock, stardate 2257.134**

_The Potemkin is approaching Space Station K-7 with a new passenger aboard. My half-brother Sybok was picked up fifteen parsecs away from our current position travelling in a malfunctioning freighter. His craft has a damaged lifesupport system as well as many other faults, which are being repaired by him and a team of engineers lent by Captain Callas as a gesture of good will. His ship, the Traveler, is now being towed by us as we are travelling at Warp 4 and should arrive at the station at 15:20 hours shiptime. The primary schedules we have been given show that the Potemkin will only linger in orbit for five hours for general maintenance while cadets and crew may enjoy downtime. I employ to spend those hours with Sybok and learn what has occurred in the seventeen point two years that have passed since last we met._

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**Space Station K-7**

**Stardate 2257.134**

“Let’s have a drink!”

“You consume alcoholic beverages?” Spock asks. “Alcohol has no physiological effect on Vulcans.”

“Maybe not, but the taste is interesting and it’s always consumed in very fun environments – plus, does there _have_ to be a physiological effect, hm? I like watching people. It’s free entertainment. Come on, let me show you. It’s been years since I visited a proper Space Station, and I hear there’s a bar here for crews to utilize in their downtime. Let’s check it out.”
It is probably a bad idea, but Spock has nothing else to do, and he would like to spend time with Sybok now that he has the chance. If Sybok can become relaxed enough with eating and drinking, maybe he will answer some of Spock’s several questions. Where has he been all of this time? What has he seen and learned? And where is he currently headed?

So many questions.

The barman is human and exudes tiredness and stress and hunger; they obviously cannot silence their mind very well, each thought loud as a beacon, and Spock concentrates not to overhear. His brother orders a drink with ease, a fiercely orange beverage with swirls of hot red within it, something strong and cold from Risa, and Spock, unfamiliar with most alcoholic drinks, orders one of the same. The barman raises their thick eyebrows at the two Vulcans in surprise but doesn’t comment and Sybok hands over the credits.

“Might want to be careful with that,” Sybok says as they go in search for a table. “That could knock out a human for sure.”

“My human heritage has not made me susceptible to alcohol,” Spock informs him.

“Oh. Right. I keep thinking you’re that child …” Sybok trails off, shakes his head. Sighs. They take seat in a quiet corner of the otherwise quite busy room, where the lights have been dimmed, albeit the Vulcans have no trouble with that. Spock takes a tentative sip. The taste is full and overwhelming, a burn.

Sybok drinks heartily. “Ah! Nice, very nice. I haven’t had proper Risan brandy for years; it’s so rare outside Federation territory.”

Outside Federation territory? His brother has been travelling so far out? Spock looks at him sharply. “Have you journeyed for all this time?”

“Not much else to do, a Vulcan of my reputation,” Sybok says with a shrug. “I’m not allowed at the schools or the Temples, can’t do research or work without it haunting me. I guess, a bit like you.”

Spock does not take the bait to speak about his own life and hardships and he does not mention kahs’wan, the cold of the desert as he wept over I-Chaya’s bloodied body, or Stonn’s harsh insults, or the probe of the Mind Healers as they corrected him. He asks: “Where have you been, Sybok?”

“Oh, here and there.” The answer is frustratingly vague, and Spock realizes that his brother, for all this time apart, has not changed in that. Open with his emotions but not with his intentions. There is less than a twelve chance percent he will manage to wheedle it out of him where has been for the past seventeen years, the planets visited and deeds done. “I’ve become a bit of a nomad.” Sybok’s gaze is knowing and intent, and softens around the edges. “I know you’re curious, brother, but I think it’s better if you don’t know.”

“Why? Ignorance can never be the better choice,” Spock argues, no longer touching the, honestly, quite foul drink; he cannot taste the appeal in it. “Can you not tell me anything?”

“Sometimes knowledge is dangerous. Or something. Look, Spock, I didn’t mean for you to be dragged into this – it’s my own journey. I never expected to run into you again.”

The honesty is appreciated but, for illogical reasons, Spock’s side faintly aches. His brother might mean to protect him – how, why, and from what remains as of yet unknown – but they have not met or spoken for years and years. For nearly two decades, Spock has been told – believed – Sybok to be dead. Their father never gave any indication of otherwise. After Sybok’s declaration of being v’tosh
"ka’tur," their father forbade all contact and essentially disowned his eldest, and few Vulcans would dare associating with him.

Sybok sighs again, taking a sip of the brandy. “It’s … I did plan on contacting you again one day, check up on you. I did once. Father never told you, I gather – maybe he never found out. You were twelve and I passed by a Vulcan colony to replenish my supplies. I still had some old friends, back then, who maybe didn’t trust me but they … accepted our differences. I heard you passed kahs’wan flawlessly – congratulations.”

Not flawlessly, but Spock does not correct him. “If you were so close,” he begins to say instead, but Sybok shakes his head.

“Visiting wouldn’t have been a good idea.”

“I thought you were dead,” Spock says quietly. “I was told … I believed you were dead.”

Sybok does not smile. “I know.”

At that moment, someone enters the room: not a Starfleet officer, nor a merchant seeking to lure someone to buy their goods while inebriated and easy to fool. No. It is not a human. As they are part of the Federation, the sight of an Andorian aboard a Space Station is not strange or out of the ordinary, even if Spock now associates their species to two individuals who caused him pain. The presence of the Andorian should not rock his solid foundations, but it does, and he suppresses a shudder.

Abruptly Sybok goes quiet and hunches over his drink as if attempting to hide his face. The Andorian passes them by with their pack to them, as they are sitting in a corner far from the door.

Spock looks at his half-brother, demanding an explanation for this behaviour.

“I might have been pursued by a few less-than-happy characters,” Sybok ventures vaguely, refusing to look at the quite busy bar. “Or, rather, I pursued them.”

Spock does not like the sound of that. “Sybok …”

“A couple of Andorians and a Klingon,” Sybok goes on, “of a particularly mean taste in hand-to-hand weaponry. In fact, I think she intends to show off her skills with the mek’leth on a live subject … Someone like me.”

Oh no. “What did you do?”

“That’s not very important right now. Spock, do me a favour and get out of here, and tell Captain Callas it’s probably best you continue your course for Memory Delta immediately.”

“I will not leave you here to their vices,” Spock says firmly.

Sybok sighs and smiles wryly. “I see why you’d fit among humans, after all. That’s a very grand thought and I’m grateful, sa-kai, but really –”

The Andorian has noticed them, having circled the room with wide eyes and now they narrow, landing on Spock, who is sitting so that he faces outward to the room. The Andorian speaks loudly and clearly over the background noise of other conversations, laughter, clinking glasses, and generic music with more base than treble.

“You. Vulcan.”
Spock meets the aggressive gaze calmly and decides being rude in return would only provoke the Andorian, possibly resulting in violence. That must be avoided at all costs. He does not know why his brother has been in pursuit, and he doubts Sybok will tell him the full truth – but whatever the reason, there must be a way to resolve the issue peacefully. “I do not believe we have met.”

“We haven’t.” The Andorian is standing right behind Sybok now and demands his attention: “You, the other one. I know who you are. You are Sybok of Vulcan. Face me and we shall settle this once and for all through Ushaan.”

Ushaan. An old Andorian tradition: Spock has read about it. A battle of honour, bound by codes and approximately twelve-thousand one hundred and thirteen regulations. A fight to the death. For this Andorian to issue this challenge, it means their and Sybok’s quarrel runs deep indeed. What has his brother been doing to gather such an enemy, who would approach him on a Federation Space Station with the intent to fight him to the death?

The Andorian is tall and rather thin. Due to the species’ fast metabolic rate, Spock can already predict that, in unarmed hand-to-hand, there is a seventy-two percent chance that his brother could beat the Andorian by merely exhausting them. But he would rather it did not come to this.

“I wouldn’t challenge someone so flippantly, Shran,” Sybok says, sighs, and downs the rest of his glass of brandy in one go. “Well. I guess there’s nothing else for it.”

Swiftly, he stands and swings around, aiming his fist for the Andorian’s abdomen, in the soft area where their lungs are located. The Andorian stumbles back making a noise of shock as air is driven out of its chest cavity and Spock stands, reaching for his communicator to summon the attention of Captain Callas or anyone aboard the Potemkin. The violent move is not unnoticed. Within moments, many others are standing and some shout, and an officer in red lunges forward, attempting to separate the Vulcan and Andorian who now are

It seems his half-brother is as impulsive as he remembers. Spock flips open his communicator and ties into an open frequency which he is certain is being monitored by the Potemkin in orbit. “Cadet Spock to Potemkin. A fight has broken out on the station. Requesting you send down a security team. Please acknowledge.”

“This is the Potemkin,” he hears the Communications Officer reply in a confused tone: “Please repeat.”

“A fight has broken out in the bar of the station -”

“Look out!”

Spock ducks just in time. A glass which might have contained Parrloxiian wine flies through the air and smashes against the wall behind him, scattering sticky blue liquid across the floor and shards of glass onto the couch. Indignant, he finishes his message. “A fight in the bar of K-7. I advise you send a security team to help contain it. Cadet Spock out.”

There is no time to elaborate and he shuts the communicator and pockets it, still crouching underneath the table. The sound of the fight, pained groans and sharp clatter and the dull thumps of fists against bodies, must have been picked up. It should only take a few minutes for security to get here. That is, if they take his message seriously.

Glancing up, he sees that Sybok has gained the upper hand of the Andorian but they remain on the floor, wrestling almost like this was an old match in a pit of sand hundreds of years ago. In the chaos, several others are fighting, and those who do not stand around in a circle, close to the walls,
attempting to avoid the violence. Several cadets are involved in the brawl, throwing fists, and the thrum of emotions is dazzling and confusing and reminds Spock too much of Iowa, and also of the ball –

A second Andorian has appeared. This one is … familiar. Yes.

He shivers. No; but how? The two Andorians who took him captive were taken by the Federation and handed over to the Vulcan Embassy to answer for their crimes. They were charged and, last he heard, facing time at a penal colony. So what is this one doing here?

The second Andorian is holding something glimmering in his hand. Just like last time. A knife.

(knife) (pain) (cold) (blood) (can’t breathe too difficult to breathe)

The thought flashes through his mind faster than he can process and stop it: the knife, and dark green blood, and he imagines what this Andorian could do to Sybok, could hurt him, could kill him – since he is obviously their target. His half-brother is too busy trying to nerve-pinch the first Andorian to see the second coming in time.

Spock makes a decision. He is upon the Andorian before it can full turn its head, and there is surprise registering on its face.

“You!” it cries out and tries to stab him. Spock sidesteps.

Sybok has finally stilled the first Andorian, and two Starfleet security officers rush into the room. Unlike the onlookers they do not gape at the situation but at once set to work, separating those who are physically fighting. It seems several people have taken the opportunity to strike each other. Shattered glass and spilled beverages litter the ground.

“Spock!” he hears a shout. Sybok. He is now standing, his hair and beard at severe disarray and there is a dark bruise on his forehead.

“I am fine, Sybok.”

The Andorian arches the knife in front of itself defensively, and Spock takes a further step back to avoid the sharp blade. “Two Vulcans and they know each other. So that’s why you’ve been following me, Green Skin.”

“And I caught up, Devos. It’s over,” Sybok says.

“That’s enough! Drop the knife, or I’ll have to stun you.”

Captain Callas has arrived on scene. His face is a storm and he holds a phaser.

Spock hopes this will not lead to his expulsion from the Academy. He made a promise to Captain Pike in Iowa to not get involved in any bar brawls. He could be considered guilty by association, since Sybok threw the first punch.

The Andorian doesn’t obey. It steps forward, intending to use the knife, and it is hit in the side with a phaser beam set to sun. It collapses heavily onto the floor and a security officer moves to restrain it, while Captain Callas issues orders for his crew to return to the Potemkin immediately, including all cadets, and that everyone else must disperse.
Sybok’s jaw is bruised and he returns to Spock’s side; for the first time, there is true caution as well as something that could be concern behind his expression. He does not ask, however, if Spock is all right.

“That went well,” he says lightly.

Spock looks at him. “I question your definition of the word ‘well’.”

Within minutes the bar is emptied and Spock has been transported back to the ship along with his half-brother, and they are escorted to the medbay to be checked for injuries. Dr Piper frowns as he works; rumours might have reached him about what happened on the station, or they will soon enough. There are other cadets in the bay and two security officers with bruises and scrapes, but no one has suffered any serious injury.

“That,” Sybok proclaims with a pleased sigh and stretches his arms above his head after Dr Piper has finished running a dermal regenerator over his brow, “was the best fight I’ve had in ages!”

“Sybok, this is serious. You could face charges of assault for this,” Spock says quietly. The thought of his half-brother being punished makes him irrationally uncomfortable and … saddened? … It is difficult to pinpoint and name these emotions.

“Don’t worry, sa-kai. If it comes to it, I’ll find an escape pod.”

It is obviously meant as a joke, unbecoming of a Vulcan, but there is also truth beneath the statement, and Spock has an itching thought that Sybok might have fled from similar situations in the past in just that manner.

Selfishly, he does not want to see his brother go.

Captain Callas paces back and forth. Though his face is schooled, for a human, his emotions otherwise outward are not so: he seethes, a constant current of irritation and frustration and displeasure. That not just one but several Starfleet cadets have been involved in violence on a Federation Space Station could be part of a bigger problem, and the Captain is clever enough to recognize who - or what - might have been the catalyst in this case. He has watched surveillance recordings and researched the persons involved. He ceases pacing and turns to address Sybok, who does not flinch or blink.

Beside his brother, Spock waits, standing with a straight back and hands laced behind it, concealing all tensions he feels. He worries what will happen now and what the repercussions will be, for himself and the other cadets, and for his brother. Sybok may have his faults, but Spock cannot believe he would do violence against anyone without cause.

“Tell me how the hell I’ve ended up with two criminals in my brig,” Captain Callas demands and holds up a PADD to read from it: “‘Ekken Shran, Andorian, and Utarn Devos, Andorian, sentenced to nineteen years at Tantalus V for kidnapping, extortion, fraud, murder’, and a number of other charges I’m not going to bother with repeating. Now, Mr Sybok, tell me how these two men, who should be behind bars, got to K-7.”

Sybok looks the Captain in the eye. “One of those charges is physical mutilation. And the person Devos kidnapped was my brother Spock. Stardate 2256.319 – look it up, or talk with one of your admirals. I may not be on speaking terms with the rest of the family, but I try to keep up. Some things I missed, yes, but I heard what happened, at least the names and the most important details,
and made it my business to find out who did it and why. I guess my emotions got the best of me. I heard that Devos was sentenced to a penal colony and I was happy. Yes, a happy Vulcan to know that the person who’d hurt my brother would never get a second chance. But then, three months ago, I got word that he’d escaped, killing a guard in the process - one of you humans. I’ve been tracking him ever since. I caught the scent three and a half weeks ago in the Hekaran system.”

“Where you got your faulty ship,” the Captain fills in.

Sybok nods. “Correct. I lost my ship in a firefight and had to jettison in an escape pod. I crash-landed on Hekaras II, picked up whatever I had left, and haggled myself to buy an overpriced piece of junk just so that I could catch up. In the firefight I managed to launch and attach a subspace tracking device to his ship’s hull. I tracked it to where you found me, but at that point my lifesupport system was failing and my warp drive had stopped working.”

“And the Andorian was on course here?”

Sybok pulls something out from his pocket. It looks similar to a PADD, albeit somewhat smaller and modified. “I used this to follow him. As you can see,” he says, gesturing at the screen before handing it over to the Captain, “the ship is about a million kilometers from the station in a wide irregular orbit, probably attempting to mimic a rogue asteroid. I guess you’ve been picking something up on your long-range sensors for the past two or so hours that confounds you. That’s their ship. They’re working with at least one more. A Klingon. She doesn’t like me very much.” Sybok speaks far too flippantly than what is appropriate for this situation.

The Captain shifts his focus to Spock. “Did you know of this, cadet?”

“Negative, Captain. I did not know that the Andorian had escaped custody. In fact, I had not bothered to find out his name. And last I saw Sybok, until we found him drifting in space, I was three years old on Vulcan. I know nothing of this chase.”

Captain Callas believes him, and Spock is not lying. “I see. Well, I’ve got a few calls to make. Mr Sybok, please don’t attempt to leave my ship. I’d hate having to put you in the brig too.”

Sybok smiles. Charmingly. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Captain.”

In fact, he would not, Spock quietly thinks. Sybok is fully Vulcan, nothing human to taint or enhance him; even if wishes for it, he cannot dream.

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To: James T. Kirk (james.kirk@sa.com)
From: S’chn T’gai Spock (schn.tgai.spock@sa.com)
Stardate 2257.134
Subject: re: Training mission [Standard Federation English]

Dear Jim,

The training mission is going well. As I am writing this message, the USS Potemkin is holding orbit around Space Station K-7. Originally, this visit was scheduled to last only five hours, after which we were to head for Memory Delta. However, due to recent developments, this stay has been extended. Captain Callas is waiting for USS Regula I to catch up with us on its return voyage to Earth; I estimate, based on the ship’s current position, speed, and trajectory that they will reach K-7 in 2.831 days. There is a logical reason for this alteration.
On the way toward Memory Delta, six and a half hours ago, the *Potemkin* came across an unknown ship floating in space. It responded to the *Potemkin’s* communication signal as the *Traveler*. The ship’s warp engines and lifesupport systems had broken down, and their sole crew beamed aboard. His name is Sybok of House Surak of Vulcan, and he is my father Sarek’s first son. He is fully Vulcan; his mother, my father’s first wife, is dead. I never told you about Sybok before because I felt there was no logical reason to mention his name. He rejected the Teachings of Surak and left Vulcan when I was three years old, and I met him only sparsely before then and never since - until now. My memories of him, while few, are fond. However, this chance meeting had also its causes.

Sybok still has not told me everything, but I have gathered that he has been seeking two Andorians, possibly in league with a Klingon. There is a vendetta, but there are some details Sybok still refuses to share even with Captain Callas. However, one of these Andorians is named Utarn Devos, and he was among those who arranged for my kidnapping on stardate 2256.319. On stardate 2257.41 Utarn Devos escaped from the penal rehabilitation colony on Tantalus V, to which he had been sentenced, in doing so killing one human guard and possibly injuring another. Sybok has been seeking him ever since he heard of this. When the *Potemkin* reached K-7, we disembarked and, incidentally, so had the two Andorians. Sybok believes that, as he had been tracking them, so had they kept tabs of his movements, shadowing the *Potemkin* here. A fistfight broke out on the station, but it was subdued, and the two Andorians are currently in the ship’s brig. They refuse to speak or confess guilt of any crimes, even to those already on record.

The Andorians were travelling in a Klingon warbird which is currently in wide irregular orbit around this station. The Captain has ordered all cadets to remain on the station while he engages the *Potemkin* to meet the Klingon ship. Via communication with Admiral Marcus, the Captain told me, he has been ordered to make the Klingon ship and its crew surrender to Federation authorities. The two Andorians will be brought to Earth by *Regula I*. It is possible that more Andorians, or more than one Klingon, remains on the Klingon vessel; it remains too far out for accurate sensor readings and might possess a cloaking device of some kind.

Due to my relation with Sybok, which is also the cause for his chase of the Andorians, Captain Callas allows me to remain onboard the *Potemkin* during this confrontation. We will deploy in sixteen minutes. This is all I have time to write at this moment. Once I can access a Federation server again I will contact you by email or, if possible, via a subspace video communication link.

I hope that you are well when this message reaches you. My thoughts are with you, *ashalik*.

Live long and prosper,

Spock
**Vulcan-English translations** *(source: http://www.starbase-10.de/vld/)*

This wordlist applies to all chapters of this fic, so it will change and grow as the story does. Words are listed foremost in the order of which they first appear, but some words are repeated.

**ta’al** the traditional Vulcan hand greeting

**kahs’wan** a test to pass into adulthood; ordeal of maturity (a remnant of Vulcan’s old days as a warrior culture)

**ploumeek shur** soup made from the *ploumeek* vegetable

**dif-tor heh smusma** live long and prosper

**na’shaya** a word or gesture of welcome or salutation

**vash g’ralth** a Vulcan salad dish

**v’tosh ka’tur** someone without logic; one who has left behind Surak’s teachings; someone who embraces emotion

**kolínahr** the purging of all emotion

**sehlat** Vulcan animal native to the area around the Forge; quite large, furry, with six-inch fangs. Spock’s pet sehlat was named I-Chaya

**le-matya** a predator native to Vulcan; appears somewhat like a mountain lion. Its bite is poisonous

**ti’amah!** let me go/release me/let me out!

**kaiïdth** what is, is (part of Vulcan philosophy)

**yerak t’orenau** the educational pits in the floor used by the school Spock attended as a child (lit. “bowl of study [verb]”; I couldn’t find the word for ‘education’. I made up this term, based on how in the 2009 movie we see Vulcan children studying in these ‘bowls’.)

**Telan t’Kanlar** the bonding of the children; the betrothal bond which is made during **koon’ul**

**koon’ul** Vulcan betrothal at the age of seven

**koon-ut-la** childhood bonding/betrothal ceremony (specifically the mind meld)

**pon farr** mating time, occurs approximately every seven years once a Vulcan is an adult

**kal’i’farr** marriage

**si-kun-utik** outside of marriage, extramarital

**ku’nat’kali’fee** mating [as in marriage] or challenge; the rite itself where two preordained betrothed Vulcans meet and either one of them can proclaim the right to choose a champion to fight to the death should they not want to marry

**t’hy’la** bondmate

**nahp, hif-bi tu throks** your thoughts, give them to me (the opening phrase of a mind meld)

**s’ti th’laktra** I grieve with thee

**rai** no (as in opposite of ‘yes’)

**Shi’Oren t’Ek’Tallar T’Khasi** Vulcan Science Academy

**ni’var** ‘two who are one’

**barkaya marak** Vulcan food dish: a kind of vegetable soup

**balk’ra** Vulcan food dish: a kind of casserole made of a squash-like vegetable

**ka’athyra** the kind of lyre which Spock plays

**Yeht Whl’q’n** “True Vulcan”, a group of xenophobic extremists who want non-Vulcans off the planet. *I invented them, based on KEHL, so they’re not canon.*

**ko’mekh-il** grandmother (ko’mekh = mother)

**a’nirih-il** grandfather (a’nirih = father)
T’sai Lady (title of honour)
sa-kai brother

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