The Door

by Pouxin

Summary

Spock and Jim both have their doors. Jim wants his to be open. Spock wants his to be closed.

An alternative STID thing. With more literature. And esoteric faffing. And sex.

Notes

My first ever K/S fic. Be gentle! Amanda Warrington made me give her my firstborn child write this in return for helping me out with my research project, so here it is.

Pairing: K/S - also, mention of past Spock/Uhura, past Spock/T'Pring, past Kirk/OFC and some real time Kirk/OFC/OFC (hey guys, not my fault, it's in the script).

Author Notes: Starts when they're on their way to Nibiru for the 'surveying' mission. Ends when the STID ends, or thereabouts. All the time frames are longer than in the film, as per, you know, science. For the purposes of the story, I had to deviate from STID a little bit, insomuch as Spock and Uhura have broken up prior to things kicking off. There are lots of literature references, which I hope I've mostly cited. There is also a 'revelation' Spock has in Part 5 (forthcoming) which is pretty much flat out stolen from 'The Little Prince'. And a lot of the stuff on auto-teleological super-systems in Part Two (also forthcoming!) is borrowed heavily from Paul Davies' 'The Eerie Silence' (Penguin, 2010). There is also an improbably large number of references to both Shakespeare and R.E.M. Not really sure how that happened.

A quick note on the formatting: If you hover above the Vulcan passages, you can see an
English translation. At the beginning and end of each Part there is a 1st person POV, this in bold. Big lines (_____ ) are when there is a POV change between Kirk and Spock. ** is for normal para breaks.

**Now translated into Chinese by Starflea here - thank you very much lovely ♥**


**Title:** Book Club (Part One of 'The Door')

**Rating:** PG-13 for this part (language, sexual references)

**Word Count:** 14k (this part - there will be 5 parts in total)

**Warnings:** Um... general angsting. Reference to genocide.

**Author notes:** Spockchecked. Beta-ed by the lovely Amanda Warrington. All errors are still my own (i.e. where I've stamped my foot and refused to listen to her sage advice: 'But I like metaphors! But I like flowery, ridiculous language! I don't care what Spock would say!'. I am bad.)

For Amanda, obviously. My friend, fanfic mentor, and beta extraordinaire.
Riverside, Iowa. The back end of the decade. ’39, maybe ’40. Those summers were sticky and hot; sweaty and all-embracing at the beginning, dry and stark at the end. They were a bad couple of summers for crops; I remember the guy who owned the farm down from ours, the hard lines digging in harder still round his mouth as he looked out over his withering fields of flax. The way lines dig in sometimes so you know they won't drop out easy, if at all. His eyes bright, like Sam's would go when he came fast off his bike and tore his elbows up but didn't want to show me he was hurting. He was a tough old bird too, that farmer, never without the back of his hand grazing his gun belt. Even Frank was a little scared of him, used to touch his hat when he drove by in that great beat-up pick-up of his. But the fields of flax drooping under the weight of all that sun were enough to make his eyes bright, his mouth tight, like he was all scraped up inside, like he was trying not to cry.

In the back end of those summers I remember big dust storms would blow in from the plains. You'd get some warning they were coming. The sky would turn thick and red. Heavy and quietly savage as a bruise. Everything would get this weird glow, like you were looking at the world after pressing down too hard on the inside of your eyelids. That dull, pulsing red; solid. Then the storm would roll in, sweeping up half the soil in its wake, everything more earth than air for a few hours. Sam and I would press our faces to the glass of the screen doors, mesmerised by it, the screaming howl of the wind; and then that strange quiet, worse than the storm really, that quiet, the air still so clotted with the rich iron of the ground it looked like a living thing. Of course Mom would holler at us to get away from the glass; it wasn't safe. She hated those storms. They'd make a real mess of everything, afterwards there'd be so much dust on the car you couldn't tell what colour it was; all the windows of the farm would turn thick with grime. It would get into the air con vents and you'd be coughing for days afterwards, your lungs scoured by invisible shards of Iowa dirt.

This was back before things went really bad, before Sam left, before Mom got more interested in drinking than caring about us, before Frank, before Tarsus IV. And I would ask Mom then what was at the end of the sky. Because it looked so complete. Not like it was most of the time, that bright vertiginous blue that you could fall and fall and fall into, and never find the bottom. That sky, the storm sky, was like the end of things, it was everything. There was no passing through that sky. So I would say: Mom, what's at the end of the sky? And she'd say, well, space, the universe. And I knew that, because of dad and everything. But then I'd ask: what's at the end of the universe? And she'd say, nothing, nothing; and I'd say, but what's actually there?; and she'd say OK, OK then Jimmy, a brick wall. A big brick wall. A big red brick wall. Is there a door? I'd ask. No, she'd say. No door.

I'd never believe her though. From that moment on I could see it so clearly, the door in the wall at the end of the universe. I could see every last rust spot on the latch, the way the pale blue paint started to crack in the divots between the panels. I could see that door so distinctly I
knew if the time came I could reach out and touch it, push it. I knew it would open. But I guess that was me. And it was something I never grew out of. With the Kobayashi Maru test, and afterwards, with everything that happened. I was always looking for the door. But she was right; Mom was right, Lyla was right, Spock was right. Sometimes there's just nothing. No way into anything else.

Nothing.

No door.

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Part 1 - Book Club

Don’t ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.
- J.D. Salinger, 'The Catcher In The Rye'

The problem is, he's bored. It reminds him of the endless summer holidays from school as a kid. First: that breathless, excited feeling, a whole summer of unbounded, unfettered freedom. The entirety of the East Fork his for the exploring, including all the places he was absolutely, definitely not allowed, like the gorge down by Matty Johnson's farm. Lazy days of swimming in the creek, trying to dive deep enough to feel the thick, rich silt of its bottom. Dee Hannigan said there was all sorts down there. Treasure. Unexploded mines from some long forgotten skirmish in the First Civil War. Bodies. But then: by the end it just got boring. After all, there was only so much to do in Riverside, and most of his friends disappeared for the summer, went somewhere cooler, Alaska, Scandinavia, off-planet. He would get to the point - not that he'd ever say it, he had a reputation to protect - but he'd get to the point where he'd long for school to start again, just so he had something to challenge himself with, something to think about.

It was books that saved him. Old ones, the real paper kind with greasy smudges on the pages from other readers' fingers and cracks along the spine where the good bits were. "You're not taking a PADD out in this heat," his mother would admonish. "I know you James Tiberius Kirk. You'll only leave it somewhere and it'll get destroyed." So it was paper books he would sneak out to read, nestled into the shade along the cool cheek of the creek. Paper books didn't mind if you left them out somewhere, and they got destroyed. And at 20 credits a pop his mom didn't mind either. Of course, people didn't really print much paperback fiction anymore, so he was restricted to the classics. Swallows and Amazons. The Once and Future King. The Lord of the Rings. Whole worlds he could enter, that would suck him in and spirit him away; away from Riverside, away from Frank, away from everything. While he was reading, it was like he was outside time, and it made him feel magical. Plus it stopped him from going half mad with boredom.

Much to his surprise, it is the same with space travel. It had started off with that same sense of breathless excitement, all those new worlds just waiting to be discovered (treasure! unexploded mines! bodies!) but mostly it was just admin, admin, admin, and staring out into the great starry void of nothingness. Of course it was punctuated by brief moments of action, but even these tended to involve a lot less excitement than he had previously imagined - mostly diplomacy, or 'babysitting' as he liked to think of it, talking fractious Federation members down from the brink of their own civil wars (no mines in the creekbed today, thanks to Jimmy Kirk & Co.).

And now here they are being sent on another surveying mission, to a planet that takes six weeks to reach. Six weeks of endless warp, with nothing to occupy him but epic reams of paperwork. So it is
books that save him again. He has a seemingly infinite supply of fiction on his Reader, but he still likes the paper ones better. The realness of them in his hands. The way they smell. The history. The way they make him believe that the universe inside his head can be infinite, even if the one on the outside sometimes seems not to be. And they take the edge off both the boredom and the low, thrumming, slightly hysterical feeling of stress that lines his belly day-in day-out. The fear that somehow he'll find a way to fuck this up, even if it is only babysitting missions and geographical surveys. Don't fuck this up. When he's reading, he doesn't have to be responsible anymore. He doesn't have to be anything. It also gives him something to try and settle his mind when he's off shift and can't sleep. Can't. Sleep. He never used to have a problem with sleeping. Apparently Captaincy is characterised by boredom, a vague sense of terror, and chronic insomnia. Then, happy low, lie down! Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.

He writes too. Poetry mainly. Sometimes he thinks about writing the story of his life, but whenever he reads back anything he writes about himself, even the damn Captain's Log, it always twangs with insincerity. Because you can't bring yourself to say what really happened. Even to yourself. Plus he always gets caught up in fucking exposition. Exposition is the mark of a cheap writer. Show, don't tell.

The thing is, there is no one to show, no one to tell.

Oh yeah, loneliness. The other thing about being a Captain. At least he has Bones. And Spock. Spock who is sort-of-his-friend. Who he is trying to convert into definitely-his-friend. He's not even sure why. Probably because he's contrary. Probably because we always want our biggest critic to fall for us the hardest.

He saw a therapist once. He had to, to go for Command track. Obviously he asked about Frank. Jim said he understood why Frank didn't like him. Of course he did. He had been a right little punk: bratty, obnoxious, entitled. And it can't have been easy for Frank, following in the footsteps of someone like George Kirk ("Saint George"). Like he doesn't know all about that. He told the therapist - Phil - about the car. He said: "I was such a shit. Honestly. I don't even know why I did it. Just to piss him off. I was... I was terrible, really. I see that now."

Phil had said: "I don't see that. I see a little boy who was scared. I see a little boy who thought any kind of attention was good attention because no one had ever taken the time to really know him. I see a boy for whom his stepfather is the greatest unrequited love of his life."

Jim thinks that's trite, generic psychobabble. He does.

He would never want the love of someone who was not willing to give it. As Spock would say, that would be highly illogical. He would never want the love of anyone, really.

Love.

Whatever that means.

Spock has come to the conclusion that the Captain spends a disproportionate amount of his time reading. Today is a case in point; despite the fact that Jim has at least three Comms from StarFleet HQ that Spock knows are in need of his attention, he finds him in the observation deck, sprawled ungracefully on his stomach, chin propped in his hands, reading a book. Granted, Jim is not actually on shift, but in Spock's opinion, missives are best dealt with as promptly as possible.
Spock studies Jim for perhaps a beat longer than is strictly necessary. It is unusual to see him so still, so relaxed.

"Captain."

When this evokes no response, he tries again, a little more forcefully.

"Captain?"

Jim glances up, eyes a little unfocused, face scrunched up with confusion, the same way he looks on the Transporter when he has just been beamed back from somewhere else. "Sorry Spock, I was lost to the world there. Re-reading Walt Whitman. I haven't looked at his stuff since Junior High. It's some good shit."

"'Good shit' Captain? That would appear to be an oxymoron."

"This is why we need to get you started on some poetry reading. It'll kick all that literalism right out of you. Introduce you to the glorious world of us oxy-morons."

Spock has read some Terran literature, mainly biographies, historical accounts, and philosophical texts, all of which he has found to range from the slightly, to the profoundly, unsatisfying. It isn't that he thinks Earth is bereft of any artistic output of merit. He is prepared to concede that he can take satisfaction from listening to Terran orchestral music. Music is precise, much like mathematics it possesses the ability to transcend culture, to speak beyond the bounds of its creator. Music can be clean and pure. But Terran literature, Terran poetry, that is something Spock doubts very much he will ever consider to be "good shit".

Jim knows this. It does not stop him attempting to persuade Spock otherwise.

"I find it highly improbable that reading Terran poetry would alter my opinion on the structure and usage of the English language. As we have discussed, I find Standard to be a most illogical language. It contains an inordinate number of possible configurations that result in imprecise communication. I have noticed errors of this nature seem to be concentrated in poetic texts. For example, cases where both the spelling and the pronunciation of two words are the same, but there exists two or more possible meanings-"

"Homonyms," Jim interjects happily, as if naming this phenomenon makes it in some way more acceptable.

"Indeed, homonyms. Given the frequency with which even supposedly highly educated members of your species commit errors in their interpretation of poetry because of the imprecise language used in such texts, I very much doubt I would be able to derive anything of value from my reading of them."

"Don't you have poetry in Vulcan?" Jim asks.

"There are... texts that could be described as poetic in nature. Predominantly from before the Time of The Awakening. However, unlike Terran poetry they are straightforward and logical in style, and their meaning is therefore readily deducible."

It is for this reason that Spock sometimes privately wishes that Vulcan had been adopted as the Standard lingua franca for the Galaxy. It is his opinion that many of the diplomatic missions they have been sent on so far could have been avoided if species simply learnt to communicate their needs more effectively. But no, everything must be nuance, and shadow-boxing, and misunderstandings, and duplicity.
"Well, I'm happy to try Vulcan poetry if you like. We could start a Book Club!" Jim's face is full of boyish enthusiasm.

"A 'Book Club', Captain?"

"Yeah, you know, like a club. Where we read books," Jim adds, unhelpfully.

"Would that be 'club' as in a heavy stick suitable for use as a weapon, or 'club' as in a group of people organised for a common purpose?"

Jim gives him a lopsided grin. "Ha. See, some people say you're not funny, but they're wrong."

"I am unclear of your meaning, Captain. Do you mean 'funny' as in causing laughter or amusement, or 'funny' as in strangely or suspiciously odd?"

Jim's mouth quirks, but he raises an eyebrow in slight exasperation. "Know when to quit, Spock."

This is sometimes the way he is around the Captain, and he does not fully understand it. He would not normally partake in this sort of discussion, one where there is no purpose to the questions he asks (for he already knows the answer), where he asks purely for... For what? Is it that he wishes to give Jim cause to laugh? To make his eyes go warm and crinkled at the edges? Why would he wish for that?

"So, Book Club. You up for it?"

"I am still not entirely clear what a 'Book Club' is. Therefore I am presently unable to commit to my membership of such a group."

"It's where people read books, the same book, and then, you know, talk about them. But we could do an exchange, like, you could read a book I chose for you, and I could read a book you chose for me. I'd even read Surak if you wanted."

"Vulcans do not want," Spock replies automatically.

For some reason Jim looks vaguely affronted by this simple statement of fact, and chooses to interpret it as a rebuff on Spock's part. "Yeah, I guess you think I'm too stupid to understand all your highbrow Vulcan philosophy mumbo jumbo. I guess discussing my thoughts on it would be painful for someone of your intellectual capabilities." He's half teasing - perhaps - but his voice has that rigid, bitter edge to it, an edge that only seems to cut against Spock. He has never heard the Captain speak to anyone else in this manner.

"On the contrary, Captain. I assure you I would be most interested to hear your thoughts on the writings of Surak."

In an instant Jim's face brightens again, the clouds passing as quickly as they had descended, the summer storm of his eyes. "Great! I'll look forward to it. It will be good to have someone to discuss books with again. Bones point blank refuses. He says he read enough anatomy books in college to fill up his reading quota for a lifetime. He won't even read Hemmingway, which is ironic, because, you know..."

Spock does not know. But he concedes the point with a slight raise of his eyebrows, because for some reason he wishes Jim to think he does. He wishes to be on the inside of Jim's private universe, his jokes, and his smiles, and that warm, easy camaraderie he gives so casually to everyone else. Spock is sure Jim does not intentionally hold this back from Spock: his happy, everyday affection. The Captain may have many dubious qualities, many weaknesses, but malice is not one of them.
Nevertheless, from Spock he is always holding this back; always guarded, always quick to move to irritation. Spock knows they did not get off to the most auspicious of starts, but he fails to see why Jim does not now grasp how much Spock respects him. He wouldn't be here, on this ship, if he didn't. This ship that is still the butt of many a joke around the Academy (he had heard two Commodores speaking once, in the quad outside the Academy, about The Enterprise. They had been laughing. The cruel, spite-scented laughter Spock remembers from his youth. "I don't know why they're still flavour of the month. It's a disaster waiting to happen. Do you know they've fired more missiles in the past six months than the rest of the Fleet combined." "Well, what do you expect?" the other had said, "They're a bunch of infants. Rockets going off in their pockets like it's junior prom." This is how people view the Ship, the Captain, Spock realises. And by extension this is how they view him). But despite all this, despite the way the Captain bemuses him with his abundance of spontaneous passion and complete lack of logic which make it difficult for Spock to predict how he will act in any given set of circumstances, never mind act as an efficient First Officer, anticipating his Captain's needs; despite the mocking jealousy of his contemporaries, despite the pull of Uzh-Ah'arak, despite the disappointment of his father, despite all these things Spock has chosen to continue to serve on The Enterprise, under his Captain. It is the height of illogic. And the reason for all this is Jim. Spock wishes to work alongside him almost desperately, a strange, thrumming sort of wishing that he is unused to. That feeling, on the Romulan ship, covering each other, moving in tandem... Surrounded by uncertainty and death, it was the most sure, the most alive Spock has ever felt. And even when they are not in accord, even when Jim fudges, and lies, and cheats, and makes brash, arrogant mistakes, Spock finds him uniquely fascinating. He is like the most glorious, and difficult, of scientific conundrums. Spock would like to take him apart, piece by piece, and examine every molecule of him. But it is somehow more than that. Spock has never much felt the need for other people's regard. Of course, he wants them to respect his skill, his intellect, his dedication. But he has never had any need for their warmth, their friendship, nor their approval. But for some reason he wishes this from Jim. And only from Jim. Like anything that is anomalous, this unprecedented desire attracts his curiosity, and so Spock holds it in his mind carefully, examines it from every angle. He remains frustratingly unenlightened.

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The Captain does not mention the 'Book Club' for the next 3.7 days, and Spock assumes he has changed his mind, or else forgotten the idea altogether. Then he passes him in the corridor near both their cabins, just as Jim is coming off shift, and he is about to start.

"Spock!" Jim looks happy. "Finally. Have you got a minute? I thought we could pick out our books for each other."

Spock has precisely 16 minutes before his shift starts, so he raises both eyebrows, yes.

He notices they are approximately five feet away from the door to Jim's cabin. The door which Jim is now unlocking.

"Come in, come in," Jim says, casually, as if this is not the first time Spock will have entered into this, the Captain's private space. "I'll need to have a look at my shelves, get some inspiration. Then we can decide what to start you with."

Jim's cabin is small and surprisingly neat. Spock has always assumed he would be messy, careless. But no, everything is organised with a military precision that mirrors Spock's own quarters. Except for a set of shelves to the left of the doorway which are crammed with old Terran books, squeezed in next to each other so tightly that each one appears to bulge out from its fine paper casing, like overripe fruit. Spock scans the titles across the first shelf. *For Whom The Bell Tolls. A Tale of Two Cities. The Once and Future King. Moby Dick. The Hound of the Baskervilles. As I Lay Dying. The*

The books are his friends. Spock does not know where that thought comes from. It does not make sense.

"Captain," Spock feels compelled to speak. "Why would you take all these antique paper books with you on a mission? They must account for nearly the entirety of your personal luggage allowance. You could access all these stories on your PADD. It is illogical."

Spock tries not to use that word too often, because he knows it makes Jim irritated with him, but there is no other adjective appropriate to describe Jim's actions 67.8% of the time.

Jim actually looks slightly sheepish. He flushes, rubs the back of his neck, gives Spock a half wink. "I'm a bit of a geek about books, and there's something about the paper ones... I don't know, like, they're more real? I like being able to hold them in my hands, each one its own little compact universe. And I like the way they smell." He inhales deeply, as if to compound his point. Spock flares his own nostrils but can smell nothing beyond the crisp, sterile air coming out of the Enterprise's vents, mingled with a slight tinge of Jim's own personal scent, sandalwood and citrus.

"My mother also had a large collection of books," Spock says, uselessly. He sounds fatuous to his own ears, but Jim seems to like this, a pointless exchange of information, of personal histories. He looks across at Spock and smiles, faint but genuine. They stand for a while, shoulders almost touching, examining Jim's shelves.

"May I borrow one of these volumes?" Spock asks. "Instead of downloading your choice onto my PADD."

Jim looks amused and delighted all at once.

"Of course. Here." He pulls out the thickest tome of them all. "Start with this."

Spock examines the book Jim hands him, its battered leather cover, the golden gilt lettering. It reminds him of another book, another time, a lifetime ago. He does not think on this. Breathes, banishes the thought from his mind. Instead he says, "This will be our first 'Book Club' item."

"It will. It's gonna be a bitch to follow-up on, I'll tell you that, but we might as well start at the pinnacle."

Spock has only held one paper book since his youth, and that one only rarely. When he returns to his cabin after his shift, he places it neatly on his pristine desk. Opens the first page. King John. Curious, he bends his face to the pages, pushes his nose into the crease of the spine, and inhales.

That smell. Suddenly he is back in his childhood room, and his mother is sat by his bed. Brown eyes, lamplight. "I thought I might read to you."

He feels a sudden wrench of loss low in his stomach, so vicious and unexpected he finds himself bracing one hand against the side of his desk like an anchor. He breathes out sharply. The olfactory region is right next to the amygdala in the brain, so it is logical that emotion and smell would be so closely linked, that odours would be particularly powerful cues for autobiographical memory. It is indeed a positive therefore, Spock thinks, that his sense of smell is so muted, or it seems he would go about his duties barely able to function for being assailed by thoughts from his personal past. Like this: the smell of well worn paper from long fallen Terran trees. Like the snatches of Nyota's perfume
that would sometimes linger in the corridor long after she had left.

Fortunate. He is fortunate.

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Spock is coming to his cabin on their only shared downtime this week, to discuss Shakespeare. It gives Jim this weird, anticipatory thrill, like he is about to do something daring, or dangerous. He figures it's because he thinks - hopes - that this might be the start of what he has come to think of as The Legendary Friendship, the one old Spock talked about.

More than talked about.

When he'd experienced the mindmeld with the old Spock, everything about him, about Jim Kirk, had been tinged with a glowing gold-y sort of feeling. Every image of him in old Spock's memory had been infused with such light. It was the sort of thing you could get addicted to, if you weren't careful, having someone see you as shining like that. But the other Spock - his Spock - always seemed to spend most of his time acting as if Jim was at best a minor irritant, at worst a complete waste of space. The cold distance in his eyes couldn't have been any further from the warm intimacy in old Spock's if he'd tried. After all, this was the guy who had marooned him on the coldest planet in the whole of Alpha Quadrant for mutiny. Well, maybe not the coldest planet. But right up there. Hell, if you were from rural Iowa and had been through more than a couple of winters and you thought a place was cold then it was fucking cold. But now it seems as if they have reached some kind of accord. Sometimes he even thinks Spock likes him. And this is one of those times. Spock wouldn't be giving up one of his precious free shifts, which he could be spending in one of the labs, or making upgrades to the impulse power systems with Scotty, or discussing the finer points of xenolinguistics with Uhura (or whatever else it was they did together now - Jim prefers not to think on that), to sit and chat sixteenth century literature with Jim if he didn't at least sort of like him. Right?

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"So what did you think?" Jim asks.

Spock is leafing through the book with something approximating bemused fascination, as if it is some bizarre anthropological text. Not exactly the sort of reaction Jim had been hoping for.

"It was... enlightening. I must state a preference for the histories and the tragedies over the comedies."

"Figures," Jim says darkly.

"The comedy is...," Spock seems almost at a loss for words, which is an interesting development. "Different. Puns," and the line between his brows momentarily deepens, "puns. It is the strangest humour I have ever come across. And this is what you would describe as the 'gold standard' for Human literature?"

"Hey," Jim admonishes mildly, "A good pun is its own reword."

Spock raises one pristine eyebrow. “I now see from where you get your sense of humour – such as it is.”
"Always good to learn from the master. Did you like it though? I mean, the stories, the way he uses language, the poetry of it."

"I did not find it uninteresting," Spock says. He continues to leaf silently through the pages. Jim is clearly going to have to work to get the kind of critical debate he was hoping for.

"Well, that's a qualified response if ever I heard one. You must've liked some of it. I mean, take *King Lear* for instance. Now, damn, there's a play."

The lines come back to him, well-worn lines that he has run in his head a hundred times, a thousand, more. He says them now, to Spock.

"*No, no, no life?*  
*Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,*  
*And thou no breath at all? Oh, thou'lt come no more,*  
*Never, never, never, never,*

Doesn't that just slay you? Don't you just think: yes, that's it, that's it exactly."

Spock is regarding him quizzically. "That was one of the many passages I did not understand. Cordelia is hanged, is she not? If nothing has happened that would necessitate various other creatures also having their necks broken, then it is logical that dogs and horses and rats would continue to live while Cordelia does not. It is not clear to me why Lear would even question why they live and Cordelia does not. Edmund did not hang the horses."

Jim feels a sudden faraway prickle of tears, alarming and unexpected, a tightening in his throat. He hasn't cried in... Well. He doesn't cry. Not in front of Spock anyway. Not over fucking Shakespeare. He was foolish to think they could bond over this. Why did he even want them to? Why did he want Spock to love what he loves, to feel how he feels?

"It's not about that, it's about the unjustness, it's about how unjust... You know, all these lesser things keep living, and the being you most value, the greatest person to ever walk the earth, they're dead. Dead. And everything else just carries on, as if their passing did not matter..."

Spock is still looking at him intently, head cocked to one side, that almost-frown. He feels his throat thicken again.

"D'you know what, there's no point trying to explain. If you don't get that Spock, if you don't get *Lear* then you don't get anything."

"It is not that I do not seek understanding, Captain," Spock says softly. "It is simply very different from any way of looking at the Universe that I have ever known."

Jim sniffs.

"Yeah, well. I suppose it didn't make *Lear* very happy. He should have just logic-ed up and got on with it. No useless moping. Driving himself batshit crazy."

The line between Spock's eyes softens, they narrow slightly at the edges. *Amusement.*

"Nevertheless, despite the 'moping' and the 'chiropteran excremental craziness', you think he is a great man, this character 'Lear'?"

"It's not that... I actually think he's a very flawed... It's more that it's my favourite... My favourite play. It... speaks to me, you know? It's one of those texts that just, you know, grabs you by the throat
and shakes you and makes you *feel feelings*.

That eyebrow raise. "*Feel feelings*? Indeed."

It might have been a bit much to expect Spock to be *moved* by Shakespeare, to *feel feelings*. Jim concedes this.

"Tell you what, I'll feel the feelings, you think the thoughts," Jim offers.

"I feel obliged to point out the numerous errors with that statement, starting with your flagrant use of tautology..."

"Deal?"

Spock gives one of his deep, impenetrable looks. For a few seconds Jim thinks he is going to ignore him.

"There is a saying attributed to Surak: *Ma etek natyan teretuhr lau etek shetau weh-lo'uk do tum t'on*. It approximately translates thus: *We have differences. May we, together, become greater than the sum of both of us*. I believe it could be applicable here."

There it is. A little glimmer of that feeling it seems he is always chasing, the golden-old-Spock-feeling. He smiles, lets Spock see it.

"I like that."

Spock doesn't smile back, but his eyes do the soft thing, the thing they normally only do for Uhura.

"It is agreed, then. You will 'feel the feelings', I will 'think the thoughts'."

"Winner."

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Their second meeting is to discuss *The Catcher In The Rye*, which it would appear Spock emphatically does not like (well, as emphatic as Spock can get about anything) - "It is a book about nothing. There is nothing to be gained from reading it. It serves no clear purpose." "That's sort of the point," Jim counters.

He is somewhat distracted by the fact they are holding it in Spock's quarters. Jim had imagined they would be spartan, well-organised, clinical. Instead the decor is surprisingly sensual; thick red velvety drapes hang above the bed, and a number of weird, Eastern looking artefacts are arranged on his shelves, incense burners and statues of strange animals, old ornamental weapons. It reminds Jim of Dee Hannigan's room when she was going through her hippie phase before college, all mystical and faux-spiritual and slightly kitsch. It is tremendously unsettling. Combined with the ridiculously high temperature Spock keeps his cabin at, and the complicated, nuanced flavour of the smell that is just Spock, it is making Jim feel a little light headed, unable to concentrate on the task in hand.

It is when he is making another subtle inspection of the general rich strangeness that is Spock's inner sanctum that he notices the book. There is an actual *book* propped up against the side of Spock's desk, by the only holo in his room, one of Amanda and Sarek and a tiny bundle of cloth that must be a baby Spock. Sarek looks as stern and forbidding as ever, but Amanda's face is positively dreamy, transfigured with a gentle joy, one hand pressed against the side of Sarek's face, in a way Jim can't imagine anyone being allowed to touch the Ambassador. *Ever*. He looks at her, and she looks at Spock. It is a private moment, almost embarrassingly intimate, especially given that Spock, normally
so private and self-contained, has chosen to *display* it, and Jim finds himself averting his eyes, glancing instead once more at the book.

"You *do* own a book."

Then: "Spock?"

"As you were making a simple observation, Captain, I did not realise there was a need to respond."

"I'm just surprised, is all. An actual book. To read for, you know, pleasure."

"It is not-" Spock stops himself abruptly. Appears to reconsider. "It is a book I have found to be most informative. But you are right. I do take some pleasure from reading it."

Jim stands up and wanders over to it. It looks to be very old, maybe a few hundred years, a well preserved copy of *Alice in Wonderland*.


"On the contrary. I found it a most logical book," Spock clears his throat. "'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, very gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.' There is nothing nonsensical about that."

"Well, when you put it like that..." Jim trails off, smiling. He picks the book up, weighs it in his hands, resists the temptation to bring it to his face and breathe in of it. Maybe it is not so weird that Spock likes this book. There is Alice on the front, all prim and curious, in *her science blues*, and the Cheshire Cat, grinning down at her. "We should read this next."

"As I am sure you have deduced Captain, I have already read it."

"Yeah, so have I. Eons ago. But we should both reread it, then we can discuss it."

Spock looks briefly unsettled, but quickly schools his features back into their normal inscrutable placidity. "That would be acceptable."

"Don't worry, Spock. I promise I won't be mean about your favourite book. Not that you afforded *Catcher* the same courtesy."

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At least Jim hadn't asked to borrow his copy. For this, Spock is relieved, and then concerned by his relief. It is illogical to develop an attachment to a material item. He spends several hours meditating upon this thought, trying to locate the importance of the book in his mind, hold it, then let it go. He considers throwing the actual book itself down the waste chute, but at the last second something constricts and bunches painfully in his side, and he cannot. He settles for putting it in a drawer, where he can't see it. Things and people: they all pass with time. The answer is to be above and beyond them. Then their absence or loss is irrelevant to you. *Everything you love will be carried away.* So do not love anything. Be beyond love, outside it. Let it pass through you, and touch you, but do not let it own you. For several days this is what he focuses on, 'till he feels steadier, less unsure. Still. He keeps the book. He does not throw it away. *'I thought I might read to you'.*
When they meet to discuss it, Jim is enthusiastic - "You were right, it's a great book, clever and funny and full of pastiche and sly parody, and then a happy ending! Quite romantic, really." He talks about it animatedly, waving his hands around, leaning back in his chair. Spock has noticed that Jim moves his body a lot when he talks, even by Human standards. Vulcans do not gesticulate, everything that needs to be conveyed is done through language. They barely even move their faces. But Jim is always moving, pointing, shrugging. A waste, Spock thinks. He has always preferred the Vulcan way, the economy of movement - pared down, logical. But something about the way Jim gesticulates is so exotic and expressive and *emotional*. Spock should disapprove of it, it is after all an excessive and unproductive use of energy, but he doesn't. Like all things with Jim it is wasteful, and the waste itself is strangely, almost erotically, compelling. *He could just watch Jim move*. There is a line from *Wonderland*: “You’re not the same as you were, you’ve lost your muchness. You used to be much more…. muchier”. Spock has never understood that line, but now he thinks he does. There is a 'muchness' about Jim. Spock isn't one for imprecise language, but it is the closest he can come to, in words, for what he admires most in Jim. *Muchness*.

Jim hesitates outside Spock's door. Frowns. Yes. Yes, that's definitely music he can hear inside. And not just any music -

*If you believed they put a man on the moon, man on the moon*  
*If you believe there's nothing up his sleeve, then nothing is cool*

The second Spock opens the door he pounces. "Spock - are you listening to *REM*?"

"I am experimenting with Terran popular culture, as you suggested."

"I thought you thought all pop songs were, and I quote, 'trite Terran sentiments set to repetitive synthesised music'."

"I may have been somewhat hasty in my judgement," Spock concedes. "Some of these songs are not without artistic merit."

"REM is not without artistic merit? The maudlin music of choice for your average bourgeois mopy teenager? 'Oh look, I'm so retro and moody'. Honestly Spock, it's all: *wah wah wah*. I can't believe that of all Terran culture you chose *REM*.

Jim pushes past Spock and flops down extravagantly on his usual chair.

"I understand they were well-regarded musicians." Spock looks vaguely affronted.

"That's not the point. Their stuff is like, hundreds of years old and it's not even... Hang on, I still don't get it, *why* do you like it? Jeez, are you having some kind of early mid-life crisis?"

"Captain, I can assure you I am a long way from the central point of my predicted lifespan."

"Have you been smoking weed? Is this you finally getting down with *metaphor*? Fuck me, Spock, this is priceless. Shakespeare doesn't get you, Eliot doesn't get you, even Dylan doesn't get you. But *REM*? REM and suddenly you're all emo and shit? This is just *too* awesome. I can't even."

"Are we going to discuss Shelley, Captain, or do you intend to continue mocking me?" Spock asks
dryly. His tone is even, but his eyes have a slightly wounded sheen, Jim thinks. He stalks over to his PADD, goes to touch the relevant part of the screen.

"Nah, don't turn it off. It's nice. I'm just being a dick, as usual. I'm glad you like some of my species' trite sentimental soft pop. Honestly. I am."

"In that case we can return to your species' trite, sentimental poetry, which I can assure you I still find almost entirely without merit."

Jim laughs. "What are all these kissings worth / If thou kiss not me? I should have known that you would find nothing worthwhile in love poetry, Spock."

It is not that Spock does not think upon romantic love, upon desire. There have been girls for him, boys too, and then a few he would describe as women; each had occupied a few months of his time, filling him, briefly, with strange, irrational desires, with intrusive thoughts about their eyes, their hair, their lips. But then he would find himself drifting away from them, the cool wash of his Vulcan thoughts once again soothing the Human tide in his blood. He would find himself directing them towards another partner, someone he thought they would be more compatible with. Even T'Pring, even though she was his intended. He could see the naturalness of her desire for Stonn, he could see the logic in it. He thinks how it would amuse Jim, probably, that the girls and boys back on Vulcan had looked upon him as unusually passionate, as unsettlingly physically demonstrative.

Even the only Human he has been with, Nyota... He remembers her in the aftermath of the first time they had lain together, limbs supple with sweat, eyes bright, smiling at him - "I wasn't..."

"You were not...?"

"I wasn't expecting... You know..."

He had raised an eyebrow at her.

"Well, that."

"Are you complimenting me or insulting me, Lieutenant? I am finding it difficult to tell."

"Complimenting." - somewhat breathlessly - "Complimenting! I mean... Wow. Just... Wow."

But these are things that Jim will never know.

**

They haven't met for Book Club in nearly a week. Jim has not suggested it, and so neither has Spock. Spock assumes this means their interlude is at an end. There is a feeling this gives him, strange and anxious. He locates the feeling, exhales, lets it move through him, lets it pass. It is unexpectedly difficult.

Not only have they not had a Book Club meeting, Spock has barely seen Jim in days, not until they finally have a shift together on the bridge. Jim keeps giving Spock unfathomable looks, and when Spock corrects him on an error he has made in a minor calculation, Jim's gaze turns from confused to
sad. Spock feels the fluttering again. He has caused offence when none was intended. Still, Jim falls into step with Spock as they head for the canteen. A different sort of fluttering.

"You're pissed with me," Jim states.

"I am not."

"Well you seem pissed with me."

Spock is silent. There is little he can say to that.

"Spock?"

"I cannot comment on how I seem, Captain. Your perception of my internal state is your prerogative."

He can sense Jim looking at him, with an unnerving intensity, but he keeps his own gaze forward, his face serene.

"Is it the REM thing?" Jim asks eventually.

"No."

"Well, whatever I've done to make you 'not pissed' at me, or whatever, I'm sorry," Jim says sulkily.

"Your apology is unnecessary," Spock says simply. He still doesn't look at Jim. He is not sure why, but he feels if he looked at him in this moment, something - he is not sure what, but something - would happen.

"God, you're hard work."

Spock keeps walking.

"Sometimes I get the impression you still don't even like me," Jim says. He still sounds sulky, but there is an undercurrent there: anxiety.

Finally Spock looks at him. "As I am sure you are well aware Captain, I hold you in high regard. Your constant need for reaffirmation of this is indicative of your-"

Jim rolls his eyes and interrupts, "OK, well, tell me three things you like about me."

*Your muchness.* But he says nothing.

"The fact that you're hesitating tells me a lot."

"I fail to see why my providing you with a list of your positive attributes will have any-" Spock starts.

"Just do it! Now. Go! Tell me three things you like about me in five seconds or less."

"Five seconds or fewer," Spock corrects automatically.

"Jesus, Spock, enough with the Grammar Nazism already. They mean exactly the same thing."

"They do not mean exactly the same thing."

"Do so. I should know, it's my goddamn language."
Spock gives him a cool, appraising look, then continues as if Jim hasn't spoken. "For example, would you discern a difference between my saying: 'Captain, you are one of the few intelligent people aboard this starship', and 'Captain, you are one of the less intelligent people aboard this starship'"

To his surprise Jim doesn't even scowl, only breaks into a broad, warm grin, laughs.

"Touché, touché, Mr. Spock." He nudges Spock with his elbow, sending a small dark spark up Spock's arm. "So, you think I'm one of the few intelligent people on board the Enterprise? Is that one of my three things?"

He looks slyly happy, almost mischievous. Spock feels the tight feeling in his side that Jim's displeasure gives him dissipate, only to be replaced by something else, no less unnerving.

"Seventy eight percent of the crew function in the top 0.5 percentile of broadly accepted Universal Federation Intelligence Tests. You are, in fact, one of the many intelligent people on board this starship. My previous statement was simply an example of the correct and incorrect usages of the aforementioned terminology."

"But is that something you like about me?"

"I find your use of the term 'like' bizarre and somewhat inappropriate given-"

"Answer the question!"

"Yes," Spock replies. It feels oddly like something he doesn't want to concede, even though Jim's obvious intelligence is one of the qualities Spock admires him for.


He turns and gives what can only be described as a wiggle.

"I was not aware it was proper procedure for one commanding officer to pass comment on the posterior of another," Spock admonishes.

"Sorry," Jim says, and shrugs apologetically, but his smile has too much of the wolf about it to be truly sheepish. "It is a really great ass though."

To his surprise, Spock suddenly finds his head flooded with images of Jim's ass. Like many other aspects of Jim's personality, it is surprisingly generous. Pert and round. Ripe. Spock thinks of the kasa that used to grow outside his bedroom window, how late in the summer they would become so full and lush it looked like the soft furry skin on the outside might split. How it felt when he bit into one, the sweetness exploding over his tongue, sweet enough that even his insensitive Vulcan tastebuds would curl up with the pleasure of it. Jim's ass. Sweet and ripe. The taste on his tongue.

"Spock - are you blushing? Oh my God, you're blushing."

"I doubt that very much."

"I doubt that very much." Spock knows he has superior vaso-control to Humans. He does not blush. Not unless he so chooses.

"You are! You're thinking about my ass right now, aren't you? Aren't you?"

"I would advise you to desist from this line of conversation at once, Captain, or I genuinely will be, as you say, 'pissed' at you."
Jim duly falls silent, but he spends the whole of the meal looking over at Spock and grinning, and winking. It is most unsettling. But, Spock concedes, less unsettling than when they weren’t talking.

**

This week's Book Club selection is by an author named Charles Dickens. The language is somewhat obscure, which provides a welcome distraction from the content, which, while providing some interesting insights on Terran social structures of centuries past, is predictably overblown and farcical. Spock finds himself skimming through it, mind alert only for parts that Jim might like, that Jim might wish to talk about. He is at the penultimate page when something flutters out of the book, lands face-up on the floor of Spock's cabin. A picture of George Kirk. Not a holo, but an old-fashioned Terran photograph, printed onto thick varnished cardboard. He looks very, very young, despite the fact he is in full Fleet regalia, Lieutenant Commander stripes proudly emblazoned across his arm. He is smiling broadly, Jim's smile.

Spock stoops and then gently slots the photograph back where it has fallen from. He notices the last line of the book is underlined in thick, black ink: "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Spock thinks on this for some time.

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"This book is important to you," Spock says carefully, when they are sitting in Jim's cabin.

Jim is surprised. Maybe all the novel reading is giving Spock a crash course in emotional intuition.

"Why'd you say that?" he asks.

"You have...made some annotations. There is a... photograph of your father," Spock seems unusually hesitant, almost shy.

Jim touches his fingers briefly to the edge of the book, lets them skim the slightly thicker slither of cardboard near the back.

"Oh, that picture. Yeah. I forgot I kept it there. I've had that for years. I used to... Ah. There weren't holos of him up around the house when I was young, but I had that. I used to... look at it. When I was sad. It used to make me feel better. Then... Well, I don't know. It stopped making me feel that way I guess."

He knows very well why, although he would never tell Spock, would never tell anyone. "Like he'd be proud of you. You'll never amount to anything, James. Nothing." He wonders if talking about something real, something emotional like this, will make Spock uncomfortable. If it does, Spock doesn't show it.

"I am sorry," he says simply. Then: "Captain." But the word is soft, more like a balm than a term of professional address.

"He was a great man though, my dad. That's what the bit of underlined text means. You know, dying for your crew, sacrificing yourself for others. It's not." Do you remember how far the walk was? Do you remember whistling? No. Jim forces his mind away from those things. He can't think
on them. He can't. They would drive him mad. "He was a great man," he adds again, quietly.

"He was."

The sit in silence for a while, but for once it feels companionable, not awkward.

"It sucks doesn't it?" Jim says. "The whole dead parent thing."

"It does." Spock hesitates, then volunteers, "It must have been very difficult for you. Never knowing your father."

"Yeah. I would do anything, anything to meet my father. Just to have one hour, one minute in his company. Growing up it was like I had no roots, no tether. It's like I don't understand half of who I am."

Jim thinks of the hours he sometimes spends looking in the mirror. Are these his eyes? His chin? Did he hold his shoulders back like this? Did he smile this way when he was caught off guard by something genuinely funny? He's in there somewhere, in his DNA, in the very marrow of him. But Jim can't find him, can never find him. It's been worse since he met old Spock, found out about the other Universes. Because now he knows that somewhere he is existing, the real George Kirk, and yet Jim can never have him. The Universe dangles this most wanted thing in front of him, then snatches it away.

He says, "Do you think about the other Universes? The ones where she might still be alive? Your mother?"

"Yes," Spock says simply. On anyone else the monosyllabic replies would be off-putting, but from Spock they are strangely comforting. They make it easier for Jim to talk. This is stuff he never talks about, not even to Bones, and it's not like Bones doesn't have his fair share of parent issues.

"He was nice about it. I mean you were nice about it - other you. You said my dad was proud of me."

"Captain - if I may - I do think on these things, but only momentarily. It serves no purpose to dwell on them unnecessarily. It can only bring negative emotions. When I have these thoughts, I simply acknowledge them, and then let them move through me. There is nothing to be gained from thinking about what might have been, about things that we can never have."

"It's a good sort of sadness though," Jim persists. "Thinking about my dad being proud of me. It's a happy sad."

"Oxymoron."

There it is. Almost a smile. The faintest lifting of the corners of Spock's mouth. His lips are surprisingly bowed, Jim notices, his mouth surprisingly generous, and now with the tiny fragment of a smile breaking at the edges, surprisingly sensual.

He takes Spock's advice and does not think about the other things the Universe dangles in front of him, the other things the other Jim enjoyed which he can never have. Spock. His love.
Jim comes to sit by him one day at dinner. He has not done this before, generally either eating alone with his PADD in front of him, or with Bones or Scotty, laughing, talking loudly, exhibiting that kind of brash, overt confidence that is so alien to Spock. Spock feels a little tendril of pleasure lick around his belly.

"So, Book Club," Jim says. "I need to set you something."

"I am rereading Shakespeare. I know you believe I did not give it due diligence last time. It is possible that it will improve upon a second reading. Although I confess, I cannot bring myself to reread some of the comedies. As You Like It."

Spock allows his shoulders to stiffen slightly, notes how this unexpected physical expressiveness makes Jim smile. That tendril again, thicker, more persistent.

"Which one are you reading at the moment?"

"Hamlet."

"Ah," Jim smiles ruefully. "Topical. And how are you finding it? Enjoying all the paternal angsting subtext?"

"It was my understanding that the majority of the character's 'angst' could be ascribed as originating from his mother."

"Yeah, well I feel that. The funeral baked meats on the marriage table etcetera. Frailty, thy name is woman!"

"You are referring to your mother's second marriage?" Spock asks carefully. He has not been this aware of the delicacy of Human emotions since he was with Nyota. It gives him the same sense he used to have around her, always: I will upset her, somehow, even without trying. I will upset her and I will not know I have until it is already done.

To his relief, Jim does not look angry or sad, although there is a distant darkness that encroaches upon the bright blue of his gaze. "Yep. Good old mom. Always had the ability to fuck me over better than anyone else."

Spock inclines his head. "Mothers."

"Yep." Jim pushes some food around his plate.

Spock feels that irrational urge to confide in Jim again, to tell him something secret and personal, to make him let Spock into his private world in return. He speaks before he can think better of it.

"I was once involved in an altercation at my school, the catalyst for which was the subject of my mother."

Jim looks incredulous. "You got into a fight? At school?"

"That is what I just said, Captain."

"And I thought I was the only one who could get under your skin like that. I feel so unspecial." Jim is using the tone that Spock recognises as teasing.

Spock doesn't want to dwell on the similarity of the only two occasions he has lost control of his anger, he doesn't want to think about the things Jim said that day on the bridge, "You never loved
her!" When he searches for that during meditation it is easy to find, for it has taken root deep in the core of him, and it is a barbed and poisonous thing. His loss, his sadness, his anger, his shame. It resists all his attempts to weed it out, to let it be gone from him.

He thinks now on that other time. A time he only rarely recalls. Also about his mother.

"My fellow classmates were prejudiced against me on account of my mixed heritage. And because I would frequently achieve the highest mark in examinations. I may have been... less than humble about this."

Jim grins. "Feeling you there. There's no point not being smug about one's general awesomeness."

"They would try to goad me. They wished me to reveal my Humanity; to lose control. They wished me to cry. If they had done so, they would have known they had won. They attempted various tactics, both physical and verbal, with no success. Then one day... they called my mother a whore. A Human whore, who my father was a traitor to marry. I gave them cause to regret that particular utterance."

Jim looks delighted. "Ha, I bet. Little Spock, being all bad ass."

"My father was disappointed in me. I did not lose control like that again. Until... 'You feel nothing! It must not even compute for you!' "Well, perhaps I have always been somewhat illogical when it comes to my mother."

_Mother. Petakov._

"Yeah. Mothers have a tendency to bring out the bad ass in me too". Jim's eyes are distant, angry on the surface, sad in the core. Then he shrugs. "They say that all the best cowboys have daddy issues, but look at us, huh?" He smiles, but his eyes don't crinkle, so Spock knows it's not a true smile. "Mommy issues all the way."

"But then we are _space_ cowboys, Captain."

And Jim laughs then, a real laugh, the surprised hoarse bark he has when he's not laughing to be charming, or to ingratiate himself with some galactic diplomat, or woo some pretty female.

"Where do you even get this shit from, Spock? Is it the pop music? Well, whatever it is, don't stop it. I like it."

He laughs again and the laugh is glowing, and it makes Spock feel warm inside to have caused it, like he is glowing too.

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Jim invites Spock to the rec room to play pool with him and Bones and Scotty. Bones is less than pleased.

"Christ Jim, we have to _socialise_ with the guy now? It's bad enough dealing with him professionally, but at least he's efficient, I'll give him that. But he's hardly Saturday Night At The Movies material now is he? Every time I tell an off colour joke I'll be worried he's going to have me put in the brig."
"Hey," Jim protests mildly. "Spock can be funny."

"Yeah," Bones says darkly. "Funny like how enemas can be funny."

They were planning on playing doubles, but Spock is late, some crisis in some lab somewhere, so they end up playing a tournament instead, and then Uhura wanders over, and by the time Spock arrives they are well underway.

"Ah, Spock, nice of you to join us," Bones says. "You look particularly devoid of emotion today. Good sleep?"

"My rest period was perfectly adequate, thank you Doctor."

Jim notices how Spock's eyes flicker to Uhura and catch there, unwilling to leave her. "Lieutenant."

She gives a reserved smile. "Commander."

Jim is not really sure what has gone on there, between the two of them. It's not something he can exactly come out and ask, both of them so cool and collected and closed-in on themselves. Maybe something is still going on. He feels a strange hot spike in his belly, sharp and unpleasant. It feels like jealousy, which doesn't even make any sense, because he hasn't been attracted to Uhura like that - actually been attracted to her, not just pretending to be attracted to her to annoy her - in a really long time. Not since the first year of Academy, really. Unless the jealousy is to do with Spock. Spock and his secretly beautiful mouth and his sad, dark eyes. But that would be... That would be really weird.

They finish the game, and then Spock swaps in to play Jim. Swaps in and promptly clears the table, leaving Jim standing there holding his cue and trying not to gawp. Maybe it is Spock he feels jealous about. Because, damn, if that isn't just the hottest thing.

"Where on earth did you learn to play pool like that?" he asks incredulously.

"Calculating the trajectory of the balls if struck at various angles and velocities is not difficult, Captain," Spock says dryly. "It requires only a rudimentary knowledge of geometry and physics."

Jim tries to detect even a trace of smugness in his tone, but fails. He is sure it's there somewhere. No one can be that casual about their startling brilliance at a competitive sport.

"I did not learn to play pool on Earth."

"Seriously?"

"Calculating the trajectory of the balls if struck at various angles and velocities is not difficult, Captain," Spock says dryly. "It requires only a rudimentary knowledge of geometry and physics."

Jim tries to detect even a trace of smugness in his tone, but fails. He is sure it's there somewhere. No one can be that casual about their startling brilliance at a competitive sport.

"I think he's trousered you mate," Scotty remarks happily.

"'Trousered', Mr Scott?" Spock enquires.

"Yeah. When two people are playing pool and one clears the table before the other's even got one ball in the pocket, we call it trousering. Loser has to take his trousers off."

"Indeed." Spock turns to Jim and raises both his eyebrows expectantly.

"What? No! No, I am not taking my pants off," Jim protests. "You took me by surprise, that's all. Rematch!"

They play another two games, with much the same results. Everything is over so quickly that Bones,
Scotty and Uhura don't even complain about having to sit out three times in a row. Jim has always considered himself to be a pretty decent pool player. Scotty can give him a run for his money ("Although it's not a proper game, laddy. You want to try snooker, now, that's a real man's sport"), but he beats Bones pretty comfortably every time. Bones who is now looking a bit too delighted at this unexpected turn of events, crowing with laughter at Jim's sulky expression, and even slapping Spock on the shoulder.

"I'm still finding my feet," Jim grumbles. "Looking for weaknesses in your game. One more round. One more round and I'll beat you."

"I find that highly improbable, Captain," Spock says evenly. "Based on our previous respective performances, the odds of you beating me in the next 'round' are 1,982:1."

"Oh, whatever," Jim snaps. "It's a stupid game anyway. Isn't that right, Scotty?"

"You're on your own there," Scotty says, laughing.

Jim gives him a dark look. "Right, well. It is a stupid game. It's a stupid game and I'm bored of playing."

Spock mutters something in Vulcan under his breath, "ko-elki". Uhura's eyes widen and then she gives a quick, hastily bitten off smirk.

"What?" Jim asks, "What did he call me?"

Uhura looks over at Spock and smiles again. "Princess."

"Princess!" Jim exclaims.

This earns Spock another shoulder clap from Bones: "Princess Kirk. Finally the hobgoblin's come up with something I can get on board with."

They are discussing The Winter Of Our Discontent in Jim's cabin. The conversation has become somewhat more animated than their earlier discussions.

"So you agree that when you kill someone in war it doesn't make you a murderer?"

"Captain," Spock says mildly. "My judgement on the morality of ending another life would always be relational. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

He feels something catch and charge in the air between them, but he cannot tell exactly what it is. Jim's eyes are electric.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," he repeats slowly. "And you really believe that?"

"It is the way of Surak," Spock replies evenly.

Jim looks abruptly to the side, then down at his desk. He picks at the surface with his thumb.

"You know I was on Tarsus IV." It's barely a mumble.
Spock feels a slight surprise at the apparent non sequitur.

"I am aware, Captain. It is in your personal files, which I was given cause to review when you were still a cadet."

The unspoken spectre of the Kobayashi Maru joins the other nebulous things that weigh heavy upon the conversation.

"You think that was OK, then? What he did?" Jim does not look at him, eyes trained intently on a tiny indentation on the side of the desk, which his thumb is worrying and teasing at.

Spock feels a tiny slither of unease. "Captain?"

"You know who I'm talking about. You know what I'm asking."

"You are asking if I agree with Governor Kodos's decision to selectively euthanise approximately half the colony?"

"Bingo." Jim's voice is still unsettlingly quiet, and there is an unusual blankness behind his eyes, eyes that he still won't bring to meet Spock's.

Spock hesitates again before answering. There is a strange helplessness low in his stomach. To lie would be illogical. To lie is always illogical.

"There is some clear logic behind his reasoning. Resources were severely limited. There was insufficient food for eight thousand people. Many had died. Many more would have died. The probability of Federation ships arriving and bringing relief was less than 4.7%."

"And yet they arrived."

"That was not the most likely outcome. You are in danger of consequentialism. The ethical nature of an act must be evaluated as and when it is done, and not based on its results."

"So you think it was the right thing to do? To kill all those people?"

"I can see the logic in preventing many lingering deaths by instigating a smaller number of swift ones. Depending on various factors, it can take the average Human up to forty-two days without food to starve to death. It is a slow and painful way to die. In addition, there is likely to be fighting and violence over scarce resources. As I understand there had already been such outbreaks. Riots. Looting. Robbery. Rape. It is possible to see the logic in Kodos's decision. A Vulcan council may well have decided similarly."

Jim looks up suddenly, eyes a furious blue, raging torrents of clean sky. His voice is still quiet, but his tone is alive with the rough edge of his emotion.

"You're trying to tell me you would have made the same fucking decision? I know you. I know you wouldn't."

Spock looks at him narrowly, warily.

"I am not a member of the Vulcan Council."

"See! I told you! I knew you wouldn't!"

"Captain, you misunderstand. I have learned from the... situations that I found myself in following the death of my mother, that I have a propensity to behave irrationally in highly emotionally charged
scenarios. Nevertheless, if in such a scenario I chose not to act in accordance with logic it would be the wrong decision."

"No, it wouldn't! The ships arrived. Everyone would have been saved!"

"Ethics aside, it would be a logically wrong decision."

Jim's whole hand is now clenched against the desk, his short, blunt nails gritted against the wood.

"Morally wrong, logically wrong? How are those things any different?"

*Riyeht,* Spock thinks. Perhaps the meaning is not entirely unambiguous. He inclines his head.

"There are... Perhaps it is better if we continue this conversation when you are less emotionally compromised, Captain. It is not my intention to cause you any discomfort."

Jim gives a derisive snort, rubs a hand through the coarse bronze hair at the back of his neck.

"Discomfort. Right."

He does not look at Spock. Spock sits very still, waiting.

"Yeah, you're right," Jim says, after a long silence. "You should probably go. I can't talk about this stuff. Not with you."

The word 'you' is loaded, and loaded in such a way that it burrows its way all the way into Spock's bones and sits there for the rest of the day, hot and sharp.

**

When he returns to his cabin after his shift there's a copy of John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* propped against his door. Spock feels a slight confusion. He presumes this is a Book Club item, but surely Jim knows it would be highly improbable for him to have taken the mandatory Interspecies Ethics course at the Academy and not encountered one of the most prominent thinkers in Terran ethical philosophy? He picks the book up, carefully, and takes it into his cabin.

Jim has written in the inside cover, the same thick black ink Spock has noted on others of his books. 'I imagine this will become your new favourite book'. He has pressed far harder into the page with the nib of his writing instrument than is strictly necessary. At the bottom of the page he has written: 'See, we do think about the needs of the many'. The 'do' has been underlined. Twice.

Jim is angry with him, then.

*I can't talk about this stuff. Not with you.*

Spock leafs through the book. At the back, on the final page Jim has written something else, messily, almost as an afterthought: 'I still wouldn't do it. And neither would you. And I am glad.'

__________________________________________________________________

Jim has one of his nightmares that night, one of his suffocating, stormy nightmares, the worst one, the one he used to stay up all night drinking (and other things), just to keep at bay. If you don't sleep,
you don't dream. It's the one where he's back in the storm again, those old Iowan dust storms, but this
time there is no screen door, no Sam, no mom. Just Jim and the storm. All the red sky and no door.
And the dust is the brick dust, blowing in from the big red brick wall at the end of the Universe, and
it scratches in his lungs 'til he's coughing up blood, and it gets in his eyes 'til his vision turns dark. It's
so thick he knows he'll never be able to find the door. It's so thick he can barely see. And then he
wishes he couldn't see, because there are things out there in the dust. Dark things. Crawling things.
Things that reach for him. *Things that whistle.*

He wakes up. His heart is thundering. His lungs feel raw, and he has the irrational thought that if he
coughed now there really would be brick dust inside.

"Lights, twenty percent."

He sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed. Grimaces at the greasy sheen of sweat he can feel
all over his body. There's no point trying to sleep again now.

He goes to the rec room, which is thankfully empty. Types the familiar code into the replicator.

He wishes it smelt like the real stuff does. But like most replicated food, the odour is slightly
diminished, slightly less textured. It feels good in his mouth though. Dense and satisfying.

He chews it slowly, holds the rest of it in his hands as he walks to the observation deck, lets the heat
of his hands warm it through. He thinks of the yeast cells, moving and swelling. *Living.*

He looks out at the stars, the beautiful stars, the stars he always loved. He tries to let their iridescent
magic cast its spell over him. But tonight it's like he can only see the darkness, the darkness between
the stars, the darkness beyond the stars. He can feel it creep towards the answering blackness inside
him, the darkness and the dust. The things that blot out the stars.

"Captain?"

It is Spock. Of course it is Spock. He turns, tries to smile. Holds up the pastry.

"Ah, you've caught me at it. My secret fetish."

"Uncooked bread dough?"

"Can't get enough of the stuff." His voice sounds blank and empty, even to his own ears.

"It is illogical that you would like that, Captain. It is flour, butter, salt and water. I am reliably
informed to most Humans it tastes unpleasant."

"I just like it, OK, Spock."

"But ... " Spock pauses briefly, a tiny indentation appearing between his brows, the same face he
pulls when processing a particularly difficult set of mathematical formulae on the bridge. "You have
a variety of highly flavoured foods at your disposal on this ship, Captain. I do not understand your
decision to eat something which has little flavour and is of little nutritional value."

Jim feels something shift and click inside of him.

"Maybe I like it because for a year of my life this was the biggest luxury you got, and I would steal
pats of it from the bakers where he'd left it out to prove, and I'd run, and run, and then later I'd take
my girl out to the desert and we'd eat the whole fucking ball of it like it was ambrosia. Not
everything has to be logical Spock. Food is about a lot of things. Emotion. *Love.*"
Jim can hear that his own voice has been rising throughout his speech, 'till it's only just below a shout. He feels weirdly buzzy and energised, tightly bound, wired. But he isn't angry, not really. He wants to hate Spock in this moment. He wants Spock to look at him like he looks at other people when they say something Spock thinks is stupid, or illogical, or foolish, or just quintessentially Human. But instead Spock gives him this unbearable look, not quite pity, not quite compassion, caught somewhere on the path between confusion and sympathy, and it kills him, that look, Spock trying to understand him, Spock wanting to understand him. In a way no Human ever would bother.

Spock looks at him for a long while, and Jim knows how he must appear, hair in disarray, sweaty, wild-eyed, holding a lump of raw bread dough. Spock looks at him for a long while, and then he says,

"Tell me about your girl, Captain."

Such an un-Spock-like thing to say.

And so Jim tells him about Lyla, and for a while some of the brick dust blows away, and it is like he can see the sky again.

Spock

Shi'Kahr, 2236. It was a hot summer that year, too hot for my mother who would spend most days in the cool darkness of the anterior halls, sleeping. Her skin would become pale, not like the ruddy brown it would turn in the cooler months, when she would be up all day, either at the school or round the house, singing, laughing. More like Vulcan skin, and she would keep Vulcan hours. In the summer she would only come out when the darkness did, like one of the night blooming cacti that used to shed their scent over the sands of the Sas-a-Shar every evening. She would spend the majority of the night with my father, in his study, talking in her low, musical voice. He did not speak of it, but I would notice in those months when he would have her company long through the darkness, that his shoulders would unstiffen, that he would hold his fingers less rigidly by his side.

She would frequently come into my room those nights, the times I was not meditating. Sometimes she would talk to me, sometimes she would just sit, tilt her head back and close her eyes, smile. Sometimes she would read to me. It began that summer.

"Do you remember when you were little I used to sing to you before you went to sleep?"

I could indeed recall it. "I do, Mother."

"Well, I thought I might read to you."

"From Analects?"

"No, a story."

"A story?"
"Yes."

"A history?"

"Yes, except these are things that never happened. Well, they did happen, but only inside someone's head."

I had heard of fictions before, of old oral legends and of warrior poetry from before the Time of Awakening. They were not much spoken of. We did not study them at School.

"These are... Vulcan 'stories'?"

"No," my mother had given one of her less wide smiles, I knew the word even if I did not understand the feeling, _melancholic_. "Earth stories. I thought you might like them. I have one with me that my father gave me as a child. He used to read it to me. Here."

She had held out a book; a paper book. I had not held one before, only seen them on display in the Grand Library. It was heavy in my hands. It smelt of old things, long forgotten. There was a female Terran child on the front, hands folded behind her back, staring up at a surprisingly small and somewhat fluffy looking le-matya perched in a tree. The le-matya was snarling broadly, that much was as expected. The child appeared unconcerned. Perhaps this was indeed akin to the old Vulcan legends; despite her frail appearance the girl was a brave warrior who felt no fear in the face of her own certain death at the claws and teeth of the diminutive predator. This story would be about her own acceptance of her fate.

I studied the cover for some time. There was looping Terran script on it, in a type of gilt, but I had not been sufficiently advanced in my studies at that point to read it. "What is it about?"

"A little girl who falls down a rabbit - an animal - hole and meets lots of fantastic creatures and has adventures."

I had felt mild consternation as I listened to my mother, and leafed through the book, which was full of brightly coloured tableaus depicting various scenes from the story. "And this is possible on Earth? Human children fall down animal burrows and the creatures themselves wear clothes and talk?"

She had smiled, more warmly that time. I think on that sometimes, my mother's smile. The words to describe it. _Fond. Indulgent_. The smile she used to give only to me. "No. Like I said, it's all made-up."

I had looked at her gravely, handed the book back. "Mother. Reading such a story is highly illogical. What is the purpose of you reading to me about something that never happened, and never even could happen, beyond someone’s imagination? I believe I shall decline your offer."

Unlike any of the others since, her smile never wavered, even though I know now I must have upset her. She never gave me to believe I had caused her offence, that I was in any way lacking, that she wished I were different. She always was alone in that.

"Just see," she had said, "You might like it more than you think. Listen:

'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'
‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where-’ said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.

‘-so long as I get SOMEWHERE,’ Alice added as an explanation.

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough.’”

I remember thinking that the narrative thus far appeared logical. Perhaps Carroll was less a story-teller and more a Terran philosopher, a scholar, a logician. She read the entire book to me that summer, and the volume that followed, and I found it a constructive use of my time, listening to Carroll alternating between logic and nonsense, considering the alienness that was the human mind. Sometimes so similar to mine, sometimes so entirely different.

I recall that on occasion I would specifically ask for her to come and read to me prior to my retiring for the evening.

"Someone's impatient." That smile.

"Vulcans are never impatient, Mother."

But it was not the story itself that I truly wished for. No more than it had been the singing. It was my mother's warm hand on my brow, the occasions she believed I had already fallen asleep when she would run her fingers very lightly all around my face, down my nose and across my jaw, and then up the curve of each ear. Little dark embers of comfort sparking off each finger and burrowing into my soul. And I would allow myself the rare luxury of my own nonsense thinking then; you are my favourite person in all the Galaxy, my most special, Mother, petakov. "My little one." Her voice, its modulating tones and shifts, more like music than the flat manner of speaking that was customary among Vulcans. "My baby boy. My heart's own darling." Things she would never say when she knew I was awake. Things I would not allow her to say.

On occasion it comes back to me, though unbidden: I was someone's heart's own darling once. I am reminded of it at foolish times, inappropriate times. When my father's mouth pulls momentarily tight with disappointment, when Jim rolls his eyes at me and then cuts them sideways at McCoy and sighs, the blankness behind T'Pring's face the last time I saw her, the last time I will ever see her. Nyota, her hand on my ribs "Why won't you let me in? Let me in here." The things that give me a strange, unnamed twisting feeling in my side, and then will come the thought: I was someone's heart's own darling once. But now she is dead, the only one who ever thought that of me, and if some benefit can come from her death it is that that thought, that weak, illogical thought, will grow as distant as the rest of her memory. There will be no time for nonsense, only rationality. The chink in the armour will knit over, the door that was left ajar will be closed, and never again will it open. And on balance that is indeed a positive outcome.
The Girls Who Came Before

Chapter Summary

A *lot* of slash happens. There will be some plot eventually, I promise, but I'm afraid so far we have: Part 1 - all the reading, Part 2 - all the sex. Sorry.

Chapter Notes

**Pairing:** K/S (plus some mention of past Spock/Uhura and Jim/OFC)
**Rating:** A decidedly smutty NC-17 for this section. Back to PG-13 for Part 3 though ;-)
**Warnings:** Explicit sex. Mention of genocide, mention of famine.
**Notes for this Part:** Some of Surak's sayings are stuff I've dug out from Fanon. Some are pinched from Rumi and Hafiz. None of them are mine. (As to why Rumi and Hafiz, IDK, obviously I am *very* new to *Trek* but Surak seems a little mystical to me. Having said that, there's one in Part 5 I've nicked from Mark Twain, so...)
**General Notes:** My first ever K/S fic. Please be gentle ;-)! Amanda Warrington made me give her my firstborn child write this in return for helping me out with my research project, so here it is. (NB if anyone feels inclined to take part in the research project, which looks at women's involvement in explicit m/m slash (amongst other things), it's [here](#), and you would have my eternal gratitude).

Part Two - The Girls Who Came Before

*Soo we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The Great Gatsby'

*Jim*

Lyla. She had a thick smell, different from the other girls I knew, who smelt popsicle fake, new plastic candy. Lyla smelt like mysterious things, womanly things, complicated spices, fur, rare fruits, silk. Silk and stockings. Invitations. Initiations into a world I wanted to be part of. When I put my hand on her breast she neither shied away from me like a scared filly, nor pushed herself into it like some girls did, archly sexual, with a knowingness they could only affect. Instead she just relaxed into my touches, casual, like it was nothing special, like this was just a thing we did. She was both excited, and unexcited. She was like... Well, she was like a boy. Except, deliciously, not like a boy. With her softness; that difficult, glorious smell; the flare of her hipbone. When I'd ask her she'd just say: *Well, I like you, Jim. I like you touching me.* Like it was the most normal thing to say in the world. I'd try to explain, how the other girls were either too frigid or too slutty and she was just right, and she'd laugh. She'd say: *I*
can't believe you actually think like that. You're such a prick Jim, you're being a prick. But she wouldn't move out from under my hands. Her tongue would still find my mouth, salt and caramel.

I'm not a prick, I'd say, I'm just lucky. And I know I'm lucky. That's why you like me anyway. You like the lucky.

I'd chance my hand lower.

Yes, she'd say dryly, and you're getting luckier all the time.

The other girls I'd been with had all been older; although she seemed older still. Like a woman already. But she was the youngest girl I'd ever kissed; my year at school. She wasn't the most popular girl, she was too detached, too uninvolved. But she was the first girl in my year to get breasts, and that bought her a certain kind of popularity. Her skin got greener then, too. I'd thought of the irony: the opposite of lemons, as she got riper the greener she got. All those prodigious curves.

Which is why it was harder than anything to watch her skin shrink to urine coloured rice paper along the stretch of her bones, to watch her undulating roundness slim down to the flat prairie grass of my childhood.

The hunger was like nothing else. Her eyes would get wild with it. Her eyes like violets. Her lips would crack, and the splits would look like spoiled meat, and it made my stomach turn. This was not a planet used to starvation, the old skills were dead, but I was a farm boy, all the way from Iowa, Earth, and I knew some tricks. I set some traps, caught some things, vermin mostly, the odd scrawny reptile. I would skin them for her and light a fire, out of town, where the patrols wouldn't find us. The flesh of whatever I'd caught that time would barely be out of the flames, still on my makeshift spit, before she'd be on it, all that laconic detachment gone. But then, she was dying. We all were.

After she'd eaten whatever burnt offering I'd brought her, we would make out for a while, my hand on the shrunken shell of her breast. Or we would look at the stars, waiting for the relief ships to appear, making wishes. Her low voice in the darkness: star light, star bright. I wish I may, I wish I might. She was the first girl I ever fucked, out there in the desert, under the wide unrelenting sky, heavy as a wall. And I loved her, desperately, the excitement bursting from my loins as my belly roiled and clenched with hunger. As my heart broke in my chest. So skinny, the flesh of her ribs bleached in the moonlight, each one fluted so lovingly, white as the bones she almost was.

Afterwards we would lie in the fragile cage of each other's wasted arms, and I would stroke her softly, whisper to her, half delirious with love and the fuzzy lightness of hunger.

I love you and I'll save you. I swear. I swear to God. You'll be alright. We'll get out, and I won't let anything bad happen to you again. Ever.

Mostly she would look at me, eyes bright with irony, or tears, or hope, or something between the three.

But one time, near the end, she shushed me, put the curve of a bony finger to my lips.
Don't. Don't. I'm dying Jim.

No, I'd said, forcefully, with real conviction. No, you'll be OK. I know.

She said it again, so resigned she sounded almost content. I'm dying.

No. No. This isn't it. This isn't it, I promise. There's a door, and we'll all get out.

You mean, there's a door for you, Jim. Not for everyone. For you.

Why would she say that? I'd given her everything.

I didn't know if she meant that Frank would sort things for us in the end; that the Federation wouldn't let George and Winona Kirk's son die on some godforsaken shithole of a planet in bumsfick nowhere, but wouldn't mind about Lyla ZgSelastaria, daughter of nobodies. I didn't know if she meant the luckiness I used to brag about, like she knew somehow that I'd be lucky even in that desperate time, even when everyone else's luck had died along with the last harvest. But, worst of all, I knew it was true. I knew that whatever happened I'd get out, I'd find the door, even if it meant leaving everybody else behind. I knew there was nothing I wouldn't do to survive. Nothing.

And what kind of person did that make me?

Jim has taken to touching him. He is a tactile person, Spock has noted, always touching his crew; a hand on the shoulder, a nudge with his elbow, in Chekov's case the occasional ruffle of his hair. But he has not previously touched Spock. People tend not to touch Spock. Which is how Spock prefers it. Being a touch telepath he picks up little nips and snags of other people's feelings if their skin comes into contact with his, and while he can control it almost effortlessly, it makes him feel slightly uncomfortable, as if he is being deliberately invasive. It is easier just not to touch. But he misses it, his telepathy. He feels it slackening in his head like an unused muscle. When Jim touches him he feels it flexing violently into life. It is both joyous and terrifying. The pure emotion that burns behind Jim's fingers - Spock can feel it burrowing under his skin and seeping into his veins like some sort of strange and wonderful disease. Each touch stays with him, itching and stinging, for days, painful and awkward; but his skin still sings for it. He feels hot and swampy inside. His head hums, there is a constant low-level vibrating behind his eyes. He is careful to avoid Jim's touches whenever he can, but it makes no difference. Touching Jim makes him feel sick. Not touching Jim makes him feel sick. Spock does not like paradoxes.

He meditates many nights on Surak, who says: makau klon-tu heh mahr-tor hertak-tor. It does not help.

He takes to working double shifts. He doesn't need sleep in the same way the Human crew members do, and there is always work to be done, especially now they have dropped temporarily out of warp to scan a solar system on the way to Niribu for possible Minshara-class planets. When he is working, when he has immersed himself in mathematics, or chemistry, or engineering, or code writing, he does not have to see Jim. And when he does not see Jim, he does not think of Jim. To this end he cancels Book Club. And then again. He does not think upon what Jim might make of this. He is busy, he is working. Jim will understand.
Jim corners him one day, as he is heading out of one of the seldom used science labs, deep in the belly of the Enterprise. Spock likes it because it is silent, and largely pristine.

Jim's lips are pursed, and his eyes are narrow slits of cerulean.

"Spock!" He stops him by bracing one hand lightly against Spock's upper arm, and Spock is thankful for the layer of cloth that separates him from Jim's skin. "I've been looking for you for ages. Where are you going?"

"I am due on the bridge in 17 minutes, Captain."

"But I asked for you upstairs and they said you've been working on the botanical analysis for... what, 8 hours? And now you're working a shift?"

"I was needed in the laboratory. I assure you I am fit for work. If I become aware of any impediment to my ability to function at the required level I will naturally-"

Jim looks even more annoyed, although his voice stays even. "That's not what I meant. I meant you're doing too much, working too much. I'm worried about you."

"Allow me to assure you your worry is groundless."

"You don't need to work that hard, Spock. We're not that busy."

"Captain, I am sure I do not need to remind you that forty seven percent of the Enterprise's crew are still in their first two years of service. They require supervision and training, something which I am well-placed to provide. You would ask me to turn down such requests from junior crew members?"


"If someone asks me to do something and it is within my capacity to..."

"You just want everyone to like you," Jim interrupts, inexplicably.

"It is of no matter either way whether anyone 'likes' me. It is logical that I should work to the best of my ability, and as First Officer that involves the mentoring of less senior crew members."

"Look, no judgement," Jim holds his hands up in supplication. "I want everyone to like me too. But you have to know your limits. There's no point running yourself into the ground just for people's good opinion."

"I am simply doing my job," Spock replies. He keeps his eyes fixed on the end of the corridor, away from Jim.

"Well, you won't be able to do your job for much longer if you keep running yourself ragged like this. It's not just me who's noticed. You've been a little 'off' recently."

"If you wish to register a complaint about the standard of my work, may I request that you invite me to a formal meeting, Captain. As for what others think, I am not one for idle gossip, and I am surprised you are."

"Spock," Jim's voice is suddenly soft. "Look at me." He does. "It's OK for you to think about what you need sometimes. What you want. I know you think being emotional is a weakness or self-indulgent or something, and don't get me wrong, it's great having someone so rational on my team."
But you have to be able to be a bit kinder to yourself sometimes. You have to cut yourself some slack."

"I treat myself exactly the same as I would treat any other crew member."

Jim carries on as if Spock hasn't spoken. "What do you want right now?"

"Vulcans do not want," Spock replies reflexively.

Jim makes a small plosive sound, but it's more fond than exasperated.

"What do you desire then? Right now? If you were going to - I don't know - give yourself a treat. Which you deserve, by the way. Something just for you. What would you wish? What would you do?"

I would kiss you. Unbidden, and unexpected, like all the best of thoughts, the worst of thoughts. Stealthy, unexpected, and yet at the moment of contact it has always been there, always there. It has always been stalking there, somewhere in the dark thorny patches of his mind, ever since the first time their eyes met at the Kobayashi Maru hearing. The full plushness of Jim's infuriating mouth. I would kiss you.

And then, despite being psi-null, it's as if Jim has somehow read his mind, because he suddenly tips forward on his toes and gives Spock a hard, brief kiss. A chaste kiss, a brother's kiss. A kiss. It is barely a flicker in the passage of time, a small scrap of a moment, unremarkable. Spock feels his whole katra shake.

Jim settles back down on his feet. He looks uncertain, confused, nervous.

"Shit. Shit. I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that."

Spock stares at him. It's the end of Jim's shift, so there is a fine dusting of dirty bronze stubble across the top of his lip. Normally he looks so clean and boyish. Suddenly Spock is aware of his strength, his power.

Jim rubs a hand over his face. "Spock, I'm-"

Spock takes his Captain's face with both hands, lets Jim's stubble grind against the sensitive skin of his palms, pulls him towards his own mouth. He presses their lips together, closed-mouthed, unbreathing. His thumbs find the softness of Jim's eyelids. He holds their mouths together. It is all he can do. Lifetimes pass, seconds.

Jim fists a hand into the collar of Spock's uniform, pushes him away, backwards.

Says, "Fuckin'... Just..." Then his arm is around Spock's neck and he is really kissing him, warm and wet and mobile, his tongue sampling the plumpness of Spock's upper lip, the delicate skin inside. Spock kisses him back, frantic and messy, uncaring of anything asides from this. Jim pushes him into the wall, and Spock lets him, sucking Jim's tongue into his mouth, feeling their teeth clash, needing more, more of this, more of Jim.

Jim pulls away slightly, lowers his mouth, lets his forehead rest against Spock's. He is breathing hard. He half laughs. His eyes are closed. Then he says softly, "Hey." And two of his fingers find Spock's, and his fingers are slightly damp with sweat, and Spock's skin sings for the moisture. What are all these kissings worth / If thou kiss not me?
Spock is coming round for book club. But he can't just be coming for book club. Not after yesterday's kiss. He can't. Right?

Jim doesn't know why he feels so...nervous about this. He hasn't been nervous around a love interest since he was a little kid. He is James 'T for Tomcat' Kirk, never knowingly underseduced. But then this is Spock. This is...different. Other people have always been so obvious in their desire, so understandable and easy to please. But this is Spock; Spock with his strange, solitary, private eroticism. Spock.

He changes his outfit three times (ridiculous). He puts some shoes on, then takes them off again, because he figures it looks more casual. He spends five minutes deciding how many buttons to undo at the neck of his shirt. He thinks about pouring some wine, then remembers Spock doesn't drink, that alcohol has only a negligible effect on Vulcan physiology. He thinks of drinking some by himself, beforehand, just to take the edge off. He cleans his teeth, then cleans them again because his mouth starts to taste coppery with anxiety. Music! He manages to locate some REM on the Ship's database and is trying to decide between 'Nightswiming' and the aptly named 'Fuck Me Kitten' when he hears his door chime, so he just hits play at random, and some godawful misery fest starts up from the speakers in the corner. Shit.

He activates the door.

Jim's door opens. Spock is aware of the weight of the book in his hands. The Great Gatsby. Jim walks towards him, half smiling. Spock notes that Jim's shirt is open low enough that you can see his collarbone, fine and fluted. The light shadow of darker hair underneath. Jim's eyes are blue, and his shirt is a darker blue. There are delicate lines etched around his eyes. His feet are bare, vulnerable. There is downy hair on his arms, golden at his wrists, bronze at his elbows. His sleeves are rolled up far enough that they strain against the solid bulk of his biceps. He has freckles. Tiny imperfections, things that Vulcans do not have. All these things that Spock notices.

Jim. Suddenly he is all that Spock can sense, as though he is all that there is. Spock can even smell him, lush and intoxicating, sandalwood and citrus, lemons and patchouli. He feels a surge of longing so palpable salvia squirts in his mouth. He places a hand on Jim's jaw to push his head back, buries his face in the soft part of Jim's neck, inhales. The smell is fantastic. He wants to taste it. He wants to taste everything. He runs his tongue along Jim's throat and it tastes like vanilla, spicy and sweet, dark cream. He walks Jim backwards, hearing the door slide shut behind him, until they are braced against Jim's desk. He lets the book drop onto the desk, uncaring. He needs his hands to remove Jim's shirt, his pants, his underwear, to reveal Jim's thickly muscled body piece by piece, until there is only shimmering clean skin laid out in front of him. By now the desire to taste is overwhelming.

"Istau tu nash-veh zahv-tor."

Jim's breath sounds heavy in his throat, and he is laughing quietly, eyes bright and happy. "I don't
know what that means, but whatever it is, yes. I say yes, yes."

The vanilla of Jim's neck, the cinnamon of the light down of hair over his chest, the yeasty zest of his armpits. All these things Spock finds with his mouth. Spock knows that compared to many other species in the Galaxy Vulcans have a muted sense of taste, hence their preference for strong, spicy foods, but suddenly it is like his tongue has come alive. Everything about Jim tastes incredible. Kissing down his body is like wandering through the bazaar in downtown Shi'Kahr, the smells of incense and spices, mulled wines, cured meats, exotic fruits freshly split and exuding damp freshness, both cool and fiery, *yon-savas*.

He takes Jim's penis in his mouth, and that has a whole spectrum of seasonings all of its own. Salty and smoky; rich, dark flavours; an underlying pinch of tart sweetness round the slit. Down to his testicles, his perineum, his anus, the scent there musky and male, the most intimate of all Jim's flavours. *Pheromones,* Spock thinks, with the part of his brain which is still attempting to cling desperately to logic, it is Jim's pheromones which smell thus, which have this effect on him. There is clearly a strange chemistry at work, something which calls to Spock's biology in a way that he is helpless against. He returns his attentions to Jim's penis, which is beginning to weep gently at its tip, almost like ejaculate, but clearer, more syrupy. *Fascinating.* Spock's body produces almost no natural lubrication; Vulcans are a desert species, built to conserve fluids at all costs. In this as in all things, Jim's body is generously, exotically wasteful, his skin already flushed with a sheen of sweat, his slit beaded with this new, delicious liquid. Spock swallows down on Jim's penis. There is a hunger in him like that which he has never known, fierce and irrational and terrifying. He is aware on some level that Jim's hands are caught in his hair, that Jim is talking.

"Oh fuck, Spock, fuck, fuck. I'm gonna come, I'm gonna... Just... I'm gonna come..."

Then Jim's semen floods his mouth and Spock is surprised by the amount of it, and the flavour, almost sweet. Vulcans produce only a tiny amount of ejaculate, sharp and bitter, but Jim comes in long, viscous jets, over and over. Spock sucks until there is nothing left, then pulls off gently, rests his head against the flat of Jim's belly. He can hear Jim's heart, his blood so close to the surface of his skin. Jim's whole body radiates satisfaction, pleasure, satiation, and Spock lets these emotions wash into him, fill up the empty spaces.

"Fuck," Jim sounds breathless, exhilarated. "Sorry that was so quick. I just... I love how you swallow me. Like you can't get enough of me."

He laughs again, then hauls Spock upright by his underarms, presses his hot, hard body against the full length of Spock's. Spock has not been with a lover who laughs so much before, and he decides he likes it, the lightness of it a counterpoint to all the dangerous, dark desire he can feel blooming along his nerves. Jim leans against him, licks his tongue up the outer rim of one of Spock's ears, presses their fingers together. Spock shivers.

"Let's see about you now, shall we?"

Jim reaches and untucks Spock's shirt, unbuttons his fly, slips inside. Spock's penis, even hard as a rock as it is now, is dry. Spock looks transfixed at how wet Jim's mouth is, at how he carelessly spits on to his palm before reaching for Spock's phallus, the glorious glide once Jim's hand is on him. He is used to rough, unlubricated friction when being touched by another male, and he thought he liked it. But no, *this* is what he likes. Jim's wet hand on him, and Jim's *heat.* Spock knows, theoretically, that the average Human's body temperature is only 7.6 degrees Fahrenheit higher than a Vulcan's, but right now Jim's body feels like a furnace pressed up against him, his hand like a spray of liquid fire. Everything about Jim is hot, and so, so wet. And Spock has been so cold, so cold and so dry. He orgasms quietly, his face pressed into the vanilla dampness of Jim's neck. They rest against each
other, Jim half sat on the side of his desk, panting.

"Well, shit." Jim laughs. "You know I had this whole seduction thing going, right? I even put on REM."

Spock lifts his face away from the broad sweep of Jim's shoulder. "I apologise if my desire was somewhat... precipitous. I did not mean to interfere with your plans."

"Nah, I prefer it your way. Trust me."

Jim leans forward and kisses him, warm, wet, warm. Spock feels his penis twitch against the wiry hair of Jim's thigh. Jim raises one thick eyebrow.

"Seriously?"

"The... physiology is different from the organ of a Human male. It is less reliant on hydraulics, and therefore refractory time is shorter."

"Well, aren't you just the gift that keeps on giving." Jim scrapes his blunt nails up Spock's inner thigh, smiles when he feels Spock stiffen under the sensation. He bites Spock's earlobe, then pulls Spock's shirt up and over his head. He makes a pleased sort of sound when he sees the thatch of dark hair across Spock's upper torso, pushes in closer, rubs their chests together. Spock can feel his skin luxuriating against the wetness of Jim's.

"You are wet," Spock observes.

"What? Oh, sorry, yeah, it's a bit gross, I-"

"It is highly arousing."

Jim's mouth gives a surprised quirk. "Yeah?"

"Affirmative."

"I figured because you don't sweat at all you might find it all a bit..." Jim sticks his tongue out in an exaggerated display of disgust.

"I find the difference sexually compelling. Vulcans are able to absorb moisture through their skin. Occasionally, in the Autumn, mist would come down from the mountains, and we would walk in it with our robes pulled up, so our bodies would take it in. It was the most exquisite of sensations."

"Well, in that case, why don't I show you just how wet I can be, huh?" Jim holds Spock's eyes firmly in his as he sinks to his knees, and then Spock can feel the hot moisture of Jim's breath clouding against his penis; watches as Jim parts the wet, succulent bow of his lips. Jim lets the soft skin of his bottom lip drag obscenely against the underside of Spock's penis, an infuriating damp friction that makes Spock's fingers quiver with some nameless need. Jim opens his mouth.

Jim's Comm beeps, followed by Spock's in quick succession.

Jim gives a small grimace of frustration. "Shit." But he immediately scrambles to his feet, one hand reaching for the discarded Comm, the other for his underwear. He glances at the Comm briefly, his frown quickly transfiguring into an enthusiastic looking smile. "Q-Class planet. We need to go and take a look."

***
Spock goes to the laboratories, and spends 2.3 hours examining biochemical information that is being sent back from the probes in order to ascertain whether it is worth coming back to conduct a full survey of the Quaris Class planet at a later date. He is interrupted from this process by his Comm beeping, once again. It's a message from Jim, and it says simply: 'You should eat'.

When he arrives at the dining hall, Jim motions him over, and Spock feels something inside him that had been held tight relax, a release of a tension he did not realise he was feeling. They talk about the potential of the planet they are orbiting to maintain life. Spock has chosen Plomeek curry, usually one of his preferred food stuffs, but it tastes of even less than normal, ashes in his mouth, whereas he can still smell Jim sitting there, scant feet away from him, like a warm, spiced bun.

"The gravitic waves are gonna make it a bitch to stay in orbit around," Jim is saying. "Sulu's flat out making all the corrections."

While Spock is able to concentrate on what Jim is saying, he experiences a high number of intrusive, illogical thoughts as he watches Jim speak. You are like a banquet. And I wish to eat, and eat. Spock has never experienced a desire like this before. It is confusing, shameful, too much. He needs to meditate. Although...perhaps it would be more logical to let it runs its course, the easier to then eradicate it from his system.

They leave the mess and head to the turbolifts. Once inside Spock presses Jim up against the wall, kisses him, hard, insistent.

Jim laughs, pushes him off. "Spock! I'm due back on the bridge in 20 minutes."

"I am confident of our ability to utilise those 20 minutes to their fullest capacity, Captain," Spock replies, running one hand down the firm muscles beneath the smooth material of Jim's command gold, towards the waistband of his trousers.

Jim wriggles away from him. "Jesus, you're keen."

"I apologise if my enthusiasm is not reciprocated, Captain. I will of course-"

"I wasn't complaining", Jim's eyes are a bright, sparkling blue. "Trust me, I'm not complaining." He leans back into Spock's personal space, lets his hot mouth graze Spock's ear. "I'll ride you ragged if that's what you want. Just... wait 'til later when we can take our time with it, yeah?"


Jim grins. "Everything you say in Vulcan sounds filthy to me now."

Spock holds himself very straight, tries for a modicum of measure in his tone. "I assure you it is not 'filthy', Captain. It is a quotation from Surak on the virtues of patience."

"And I'm sure this is the exact context he meant it in," Jim says dryly.

Spock tries not to look directly at him as they walk along the corridor, it is too much, Jim is too much. He had desired the others, but this is like nothing else, like a fever in his blood.

Still, Spock assumes it will pass. All these things pass.
Jim hesitates outside Spock's door. He has no idea what it is, this thing that has happened, is happening, between them. He feels blind-sided by it, all this want seems to have come out of nowhere, and then exploded into this...thing. This surprising thing. He would never have thought Spock to be so ardent, so aggressive, so uninhibited. It is deliciously unexpected, and Jim is not sure what to do with it. When he sent Spock that message earlier he'd thought about adding 'We need to keep your strength up'. He'd even typed it out. Actually, he'd typed: 'You should eat. We need to keep your strength up ;-).' But then he'd got rid of the winky face because he wasn't a twelve year old girl. And then he got rid of the suggestive comment because he realised he had no idea if Spock even had any intention of ever doing anything like that with him again. But then, in the corridor, after dinner... Jim has been with a lot of women, a fair few men, and a number of beings that he would describe as intersex. Like a lot, a lot. But it is a long time since someone has been this desperate for him, this intense in their desire. He finds he likes it more than he thought he would.

He chimes, and the door slides open. Spock is sat at his desk, inscrutable as ever. Jim steps inside, feels the hot air envelop him.

"Jesus. It's like a fucking sauna in here." He pulls at the collar of his shirt.

"It would be illogical to expend excess energy keeping my body temperature moderated when I am off duty," Spock offers by way of explanation. "I often lower the temperature in deference to your higher body temperature when I know you are coming to my quarters. I confess, on this occasion I forgot."

Jim smiles at him, the smile that he knows makes his eyes sparkle. "You forgot? If you say so. I reckon it's all just a ruse to get me to take my clothes off."

"If that is what happens, then I shall admit, my preference to be warm will have had some unexpected advantages," Spock replies dryly.

Shit. Is that Spock flirting with him? He feels slightly bewildered by it all, out of his depth. But he knows this, other people's desire; he can do this. It is a dance he learnt all the steps to a long time ago. He walks over to where Spock is sitting, goes to straddle his lap. But Spock stops him by clasping his hips in both hands.

"Spock-" Jim starts, but then Spock's face is pressed against him, and he is mouthing at Jim through his pants, the firm outline of the proud bow of his lips flush against Jim's rapidly hardening cock.

Just like the first time, Jim is divested of his pants and undergarments before he has time to properly register it, and then he feels the hot drag of Spock's mouth on him. Spock's mouth is strangely dry, and it takes a while before the salvia builds up, but Jim finds that he likes it, the friction is delicious, the rough sweep of that tongue. His knees feel quivery, he braces a hand against Spock's chair.

"Spock, let's..."

In one swift motion Spock stands, and Jim finds himself physically picked up before being deposited on the bed. Well, that's new. Before he can decide if he enjoys being manhandled around the cabin, Spock's mouth is on him again, first on his own, then, briefly, on his neck, and then back on his prick, his scratchy, dexterous tongue awakening nerve endings Jim wasn't previously aware he had. Jim grits his teeth, groans.

"Jesus, Spock, that's... That's..." He bites his lip to stop any more noises coming out. He knows Spock thinks he talks nonsense at the best of times.

Spock pauses briefly, looks up, his eyes almost black, his brows drawn low.
"Captain. I would request that you let me know if you are experiencing pleasure. As vocally as you see fit."

Jim wonders at what point in this process he will stop feeling surprised. "You want me to... You want me to talk dirty to you?"

"I would like to hear how I please you," Spock replies simply.

"Sure, OK. Well...." Jim feels suddenly shy, which is ridiculous, he is James T Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise, intergalactic superstud. He does not get tongue tied during sex. He does not.

Spock lowers his head again, his cool fingers stroking up Jim's spread thighs, his rasping tongue moving over Jim's balls. Then lower still, fingers pulling and rubbing as the tip of his tongue skates around Jim's hole. It's the same feeling he gets from the Transporter in the split second he's beaming, a sudden pull and snatch in his belly, the rest of his body humming with the surprise of it, his brain struggling to keep up with the intensity of the sensation. He feels desperate, uncentred, feeling Spock's tongue lap up and into him. He moans quietly, one hand finding his own dick and jacking it gently, then squeezing around the base, trying to regulate his breathing, trying to get a handle on how far gone he feels looking down and seeing Spock - Spock - still fully clothed on his knees between Jim's legs, licking into him, sucking him, biting at his hole. Everything thrums and sizzles. Then Spock eases a spit-wet thumb inside him, and he pushes back against it, breathing out hard through his mouth.

"Yeah," he manages, "Oh, yeah."

It earns him a wicked corkscrew of the thumb, and he feels his eyes flutter shut.

"Mmh. Spock."

Without stopping the motion of his hand, Spock kneels up and reaches past Jim, retrieves a vial of something from the shelf behind his bed. Jim is glad - he's noted that different species have varying awareness of others' levels of self-lubrication, and he wouldn't want - then Spock silences that train of thought with a kiss, that rough tongue against his own, wetter now, and with the sharp tang of Jim's own scent on it. Spock laves down his body again, and then there are two wet fingers thrusting rhythmically into Jim's pulsing hole, Spock's tongue still licking at the tender stretched flesh around them. Then three, four. It would be uncomfortable, but for the magic of Spock's mouth, and Jim feels his balls growing tight and hot. He fists his hands in Spock's sheets.

"Spock-" he starts.

Spock looks up, his fingers still twisting and stretching. "I am a touch telepath, Captain. I can sense when you are about to ejaculate. I will not let that happen until you so wish it."

Jim laughs, although it comes out more like a breathless gasp. "Christ, I don't know whether that's hot or creepy. I-"

This time Spock cuts him off by abruptly withdrawing his hand, flipping Jim round onto his belly, and then pulling him up onto his knees. He hears the sound of Spock undoing and pushing down his pants.

"I wish to penetrate you now. Would you like that?"

"I- Yes, yes. Yes, just do it. Stick it in me."

"I hope to achieve considerably more finesse than that phrase would imply."
"You were the one who told me to talk- uh..."

Despite Spock working him open so delightfully thoroughly, the first blunt push inside still makes Jim wince a little with the sting of it, but then he feels a flood of strange warm pleasure emanating from Spock's hand on his hip.

"Are you... Is that...?"

"I would not have you feel any discomfort."

"I don't mind the... ah!" His back arches involuntarily as Spock pushes deeper inside. Now he can feel the sharp edge of pain at his opening, mixed with a localised glow of numbing pleasure from where Spock's hand is touching his hip. It is the strangest feeling, pinching as it sweetens, the sugar and the medicine.

"Shit, that's good," he breathes as Spock starts to move, barely giving him any time to adjust, starting up with an almost frantic pace.

"Tell me how this pleases you... I wish to hear more."

"It feels amazing, you feel amazing. You're so... hng..." Jim hangs his head down so his forehead rests against Spock's pillow, breathing hard, feeling Spock's thick cock catch and burn against his prostate. "You're so... Oh, Christ."

"Tell me how it feels to have my phallus inside of you."

"It feels incredible. Your cock all the way inside me... It feels..." Jim raises his head, looks over his shoulder, finds Spock's treacle black eyes with his own. "Do you like that? Do you like seeing me all spread open and stretched around your cock? Can you feel how tight I am for you? Huh?"

Ah. That's what Spock likes. His eyes flame with pleasure.

Jim smiles, turns his head back round again, concentrates on pushing his ass back against Spock's narrow hips, clenching himself around the hard length of Spock's thrusting prick. Bracing his weight on one arm, Jim reaches round with his other hand, finds the sprawl of Spock's fingers against his waist.

"Kiss me your way while we're fucking," he instructs, tangling their fingers together, and he hears the sharp intake of breath this earns him, feels Spock's hips stutter slightly from their punishing rhythm. "Oh, you like that too, huh? You like kissing me while you're balls deep inside me?"

Spock doesn't answer, but he grinds into Jim even deeper, the angle just right.

"I'm so hard for you right now, Spock, you've made me so hard. You feel so good. Yeah. Yeah. Just like that. Keep doing it just like that. You're going to make me come. You're going to make me spunk all over myself."

"Dungau-khrasaya nash-veh," Spock says, and Jim thrills at the rough, rusty edge to his voice.

"Yeah, do it. Come on. Fill me up with your come. I want to feel it inside me. I want to feel it dripping out of me all night."

Spock makes an inarticulate noise of release, and Jim can feel his hands tighten around his hips, can feel the warm fluttering deep inside him. Spock's barely finished coming before his hand is on Jim's cock, still wet from the lubricant. Smooth, pulling strokes, with an exquisite twist at the tip.
"God. Spock."

Then Jim is coming too, his pleasure a great dark wave, points of light pinwheeling before his eyes, like flying through space.

He collapses down onto the sheets, breathing hard, Spock landing heavily on top of him, the material of his uniform creasing into the bare skin of Jim's back. Jim is suddenly acutely aware that he is completely naked, pink-flushed and drenched in sweat, whereas Spock is still nearly fully dressed, cool and unruffled as ever. But then Jim can feel Spock's heart skittering frantically in his side, can feel Spock's breath against his ear like burning; dry winds over the desert.

When Spock awakes he is warm. Warm. Something deliciously hot is bundled up against him, cozy and vibrant. And there is sunshine streaming onto his face. For a moment he thinks he is on Vulcan again, he is young and loved, mother.

He opens his eyes.

Jim. Jim, lying on his stomach, chin propped on one elbow, PADD propped up on Spock's pillow.

"Morning," Jim says, and he gives his stunning, lazy smile. It makes his eyes crinkle, sets off the slight bracketing of wrinkles at either side. His hair is all mussed up, haphazard and too long, in flagrant violation of StarFleet regulations.

Jim, in the sunlight of this strange Quaris Class planet, thicker and more golden than the sun on Vulcan, and it makes Jim's limbs even more golden than usual, all long, golden, long and golden Jim.

He is so incredibly beautiful it makes the breath stall in Spock's throat, something like fear. For one second all he wants to do is run away. He cannot control this. He cannot control this feeling for Jim. It is all too Human, and too consuming, and too lacking in reason, and it is terrifying. It is shameful. He cannot contain it, it will be too much for him. K'oh-nar.

He needs Jim to leave. Now.

Jim sees it, somehow. Just as the Enterprise moves back into the planet's shadow, his smile drops slightly and a sudden wariness descends over his face, a shuttering behind his eyes. He raises one hand almost as if to push Spock away, and Spock can see the vulnerable underside of his wrist, the translucent skin there, the quick blue smudge of a vein. He thinks how close blood is to the surface on Humans, how one tiny false move can hurt them so terribly.

Spock feels something pop low in his chest, a tight, unbearable feeling. He lets himself take a moment's blankness. Exhales. Centres. He forces himself to meet Jim's eyes. He pushes the fear, the shame, back down to somewhere else, somewhere deep inside.

He tries it; a smile, the nearest he can get to one anyway, his muscles struggling with the unfamiliar shape. "Ha'tha ti'lu." He knows Jim likes it when he speaks in Vulcan.

Jim doesn't believe it. The casual joy of that first smile doesn't return to his eyes, but nevertheless, the hand that was raised in defence now slides lightly over the thick v of hair under Spock's collar bone.

"Was that 'good morning'?

"It was."
"And is it a good morning?"

"It is."

"You know it's not really morning anymore. Although I guess it will be again soon."

"Everything is relative."

Spock leans in to kiss him and tries to forget. Tries to forget the thing he felt pop in his chest, tries to forget how much this new way of feeling about Jim is the most terrifying thing he's ever encountered.

The next week is a blur. The whole crew is busy finishing off their brief initial survey of the as yet unnamed Q Class planet, but every spare moment Jim gets he spends with Spock. Spock. It reminds Jim of High School, being with someone like this, being mad for their touch, every minute together just kissing and touching and fucking. It reminds him of Lyla.

Spock. In his bed, in Spock's bed. On the desk again. In the lift, quick and rushed and frantic, Jim wiping off his hands afterwards on Spock's science blues, ignoring the vaguely indignant look this earns him. In the shower, with the function set to 'water' because Jim loves the way it makes Spock tense with pleasure, the way he turns his face up into the spray like he wants to drown in it, the lush green flush it brings out on his creamy pale skin.

Jim knows Spock wants him (whatever he might claim about Vulcans not wanting things) but he doesn't know what exactly it is about him that Spock wants. He remembers the strange closed expression on Spock's face that first morning, Jim has seen that expression before. The tired look of someone who is bored with everything Jim Kirk has to offer. The look of someone who knows there was nothing much of value on offer there in the first place.

Just sex then. Just sex. And they are friends, now. They are friends. So sex, sex and friendship. Jim can manage that. After all, that's all he wants, really. But he at least wants Spock to confirm that, to confirm the sex is good.

"Do you think I'm good looking?" he asks one day. They've had a rare shift together, are walking back to their cabins.

Spock gives him a mildly disapproving look, says nothing.

"You must, right? You think I'm good looking." Then he adds quickly, "And don't pretend you don't understand the terminology."

"I am sure you are well aware, Captain, that your physical build is of the optimal proportions for a man of your age and species, and that you have aesthetically well-formed features."

"Yeah, but do you think I'm good looking."

Spock pauses, and directs Jim with one of his blank, intense, vaguely threatening sorts of looks.

"I think you are the single most physically appealing creature I have beheld in my entire life," he says gravely.
Jim grins broadly. "Awesome." Then: "You're not gonna ask me back?"

"It is unclear to me what you think I should be asking of you in return."

"If I think you're good looking?"

"It is of no consequence whether-"

"Oh, don't give me that aloof Vulcan crap," Jim says, keeping his tone light and teasing. "You honestly expect me to believe that you don't care either way whether I think you're handsome?"

This time Spock's glance is positively baleful.

Jim leans in to him slightly, despite the foreboding brows, lowers his voice. "I do, by the way, Spock. You are, like, insanely hot. Like, obscenely, insanely hot. Lose-my-mind hot. Disgustingly good looking."

He feels Spock's body move almost imperceptibly closer to his, like he wants not to but can't help himself.

"It is a contradiction in terms-" Spock begins.

"Mmm," Jim cuts him off by licking a broad stripe up the side of his neck. "Tell me more about your terms. I really want to contradict them."

Spock says, reprimanding, "Captain." But his voice breaks a little on the last syllable, and it makes Jim feel something like happiness, something like relief.

Jim. Spock thinks of the strange buzzing flutter that washes over his skin whenever Jim looks at him and smiles, looping low into his guts. However long he spends in quiet contemplation, searching for the joy he takes in Jim's regard in his mind and trying to move through it, past it, he cannot. If he thinks on it too much, the pleasure of the thought itself jerks him out of meditation, back into his physical body, the body that yearns for Jim's touch.

Spock does not know what this is. But he knows what it is not. He knows what it cannot be. He has tried this before, after all, being with a Human.

Nyota.

She asked him once, she had said, do you like romance, Spock?

She was teasing, but - was this what she wanted? He could not tell. She had never seemed like someone who would want such a thing, as he understood it.

She had said, under all that Vulcan reserve, I think you're just an old school gent at heart.

She had said, well, let's try.

She had drawn him a bath, the only bath in the Enterprise, in the wetroom off Sick Bay. He did not comment on how this was for medicinal purposes; he did not think upon what she must have told Dr. McCoy. Pleasure. She washed his hair. She lit candles. She left him to soak, his scalp still radiating a bone deep thrum of contentment.
When he came out of the bath and returned to his cabin, she was lying on the bed, in the candlelight. There were rose petals over the bed, some scattered across the tight, proud globes of her breasts.

*I went all out,* she said, and smiled, almost embarrassed, but her voice was throaty. Her dark skin glistened with oil.

It was not that Spock had been immune to her seductions. He enjoyed the things she did to him, that night and others, and when she sat up on the bed and pushed him back on it, he let himself give into the pleasure of that moment. When she went down on him, her narrow shoulders, the curve of her waist; and when she rose up, her hips flaring sweetly in his hands as she rode him, these were all things he took gratification from. It wasn't that he didn't admire these things about her. And he could recognise it as happiness, the feeling he had when he made her happy. The beautiful, deep way her eyes would go evoked in him a strange, suffocating kind of tenderness. And she would see it in him and she would *glow.*

*Don't say it, she'd say, you don't have to say it.*

Spock knew what she meant. Love. Did he love? He enjoyed how brilliant she was, how beautiful. There was a gathering about his stomach sometimes when he looked at her. He would touch his hands to her nose, her brow. **Lovely.**

And then, as with all things, there was a falling away. In the beginning it was one thing, and now it was something else.

*Don't say it.*

And she meant something else now; *do.*

He had never disliked this in Humans: their capacity for love. From what he had observed of it, it was often capricious, lightly given and lightly taken, and he had seen it make people cruel and stupid, jealous and broken. He had read about it ruining lives, breaking families, destroying Empires. He certainly had no need for that kind of love; no desire to either give or receive it. However, whatever McCoy might say about him, he could see the good in it as well as the foolishness. He remembered well the fierce comfort of his mother's love. **My heart's own darling.** But it was not for him, it was not the Vulcan way, and he thought she had known that, had understood. He had not thought she of all people would need it. But she did.

In the beginning, they had discussed it openly. She had seen what it had done to him, the loss of his mother, had known he was capable of something approximating the feeling she thought would grow between them.

*Do you imagine yourself ever falling in love?*

*I do not see the point,* he had said.

*It isn't culturally appropriate? K'oh-nar?*

*It is not only that. I do love, Nyota. Just not people; things. Everybody dies. Bodies we love must always be taken. It would seem illogical to attach yourself to something so temporal.*

A smile, a shrug. **Well, you know what they say. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away.**

He had been surprised. *You are religious, Nyota?*

*No, no, but you know. There's a balance.*
He had considered this for a few moments. *You are wrong. There is no balance that I can see, empirically speaking. If I build on your philosophy, the Lord takes and he takes and he takes.*

She had laughed at him then, indulgently, *trust me to end up with a damn nihilist.*

But then at the end she had been sad.

*There are things you can't give me, Spock.*

*I know*

*You don't know. That's the problem. And you know, that's not even what's worse. What's worse is that there's things I can't give you.*

*There has never been anything lacking in what you have provided for me, Nyota. You are, in every way, exemplary.*

She almost rolled her eyes at that, her great, dark, sad eyes. The she had shaken her head, softly. *But you won't let me love you, Spock, and you won't let yourself love me back. You remember what you told me your father said that time? That he married your mother because he loved her? You have to let me do that. You have to let me in so you can start to love me. But you won't. You won't.*

She had put her hand on his ribs, where his heart beat, fast and light.

*Why won't you let me in? Let me in here.*

**

Yet Spock cannot stay away from Jim. His smell, his taste, the explosions of emotion that radiate off his skin. How startlingly responsive he is, his flesh leaping to Spock's touch, how willing he is to narrate to Spock the exact nature of his desires. The way he makes Spock's head hum and glow, his telepathy vibrate with desire. This is something entirely new, something he had not experienced with Nyota. Sometimes when he and Jim are together Spock's mind yearns to connect with Jim's so strongly that it gives him a headache.

On the last evening they spend in orbit around the Quaris Class planet, he is lying in Jim's bed, Jim sprawled out alongside him, naked and hot. As they kiss Jim presses the side of his face into Spock's hand, turns his head, vulnerable, trusting. But he can't know what it is he is offering. Spock goes to remove his fingers, but Jim stops him, warm hand on his arm. Finds his gaze.

"Yeah," he says hotly. "Do it. I want you to."

Spock can feel Jim's hand drifting up his arm to his neck, the aftershock the touch cracks over his skin. He thinks of shooting stars, the trails they leave as they blaze across the sky. Jim puts his hand over Spock's, presses Spock's fingers hard against his cheek, his temple. Spock says the words.

Then he is inside Jim and it is like no one else. Like nothing else. Like roaring upwards into a blazing blue sky. *So much* sky, going on and on and on, but somehow every bit different, dynamic. Air currents leaping all around him. A thrilling feeling, like falling the wrong way, falling and falling, that surge of adrenalin in the base of your gut, primal in its intensity. Almost terrifying, but there is a paler azure comfort there too, something safe and shining. And so much golden light. Acid brightness of the sky, syruping softness of the light. Contradictions. Of course Jim's mind would be like this, all things at once. Everything gloriously glowing, bright, hot, leaping.

He feels a golden sort of want, curling around him, smelling like nectarines, tangerines.
Jim's mind. The motion of it.

He senses: I love you, and it is almost scalding, but Spock welcomes it, that fire, he has been cold, so cold, and now Jim's love is all over him burning him up from the inside out and it is the most glorious thing, like falling into the centre of the sun, and the pain, when it comes, is sweet.

**

In the aftermath, Jim is sweetly drowsy in his arms.

"Are you sure you are not experiencing any discomfort, Captain?" Spock asks, for the third time. He does not normally like to repeat questions, it is redundant, but he has not seen Jim like this before. "It is common for psi-null individuals to react poorly to mindmelds, especially if they are not used to them."

Jim burrows into his shoulder. "Nah, 'm'fine, just exhausted. Good exhausted."

Spock brushes the tip of one finger across the corner of Jim's eye.

"Igen-kur."

"What's that mean?"

"Cerulean."

Jim smiles sleepily. "Good word. That's a ten point word."

"Your mind. Igen-kur. Kahs'khior'i."

"What's that?"

"Shooting star."

"Hm," Jim makes a small, pleased sound.

Spock thinks he should store these memories up, hoard them somewhere deep, deep inside, where the Vulcan in him can never find them. That way he can keep them forever, so when he is alone he can use the thought of them to warm him, the way the memory of the Vulcan sun on his skin makes even the longest Terran winter seem more bearable.

**

On the way out of the solar system they encounter an ATSS. They have to delay dropping into warp so that they can have a brief communication with it. Spock works closely alongside Nyota, both of them enjoying the thrill of testing their intellectual abilities to their maximum capacity, her code breaking, his mathematics. It is old, very old, and its logic is so perfect it feels like a song. It exchanges some formulae with Spock, shows him possibilities he had not yet considered. This is what Spock loves about mathematics, that it possesses such unlimited diversity and infinitely many surprises, that even if he were to live to be as old as the ATSS there would always be another mathematical theorem for him to prove and admire. This ATSS is polite enough, but its mind is too subtle, even for Spock's, and after only 1.7 hours it loses interest in the Enterprise and her crew, returns to its solitary orbit of the distant star.

Jim stays off the bridge the whole time.
"You did not want to communicate with it, Captain?" Spock asks, the next time they are sitting together in the dining hall.

Jim gives an elaborate shudder. "Nah. Those things freak me out."

"Auto-teleological super-systems 'freak you out'?" Spock clarifies, surprised.

Jim wrinkles his nose with distaste. "Yeah. I don't know. I think it's the fact they're sort of alive but not alive. It's creepy."

"I am unsure what you mean by 'alive', Captain. ATSS are fully conscious."

"Yeah, but they're not... I don't know. It's hard to articulate. All I know is they give me the heebie-jeebies."

It frustrates Spock that so intelligent a man can be so irrational, so superstitious, so guided by parochial Human thinking.

"It is the future, Captain. The survival prospects of machine intelligence are far superior to those of any flesh and blood entity. ATSS are therefore a far safer and more durable repository for intelligence than brains. You should accept that biological intelligence is merely a necessary but fleeting phase on the path to truly intelligent, logical life forms."

Jim is giving him a slightly insolent expression, nose still scrunched. "You and your logic. See, that's what I don't like about them. They're just, you know, maths. You can't really talk to them. They don't care about what's going on in the Universe. They don't have any personality. They're nothing. They don't have a soul."

"It is unclear to me why you would value 'personality' so highly, Captain. A sense of self is detrimental to progression. ATSS do not care about 'personalities' and this makes them fearless. They can redesign themselves, make changes, merge with other systems, and grow. 'Feeling personal' about your mind is a distinct impediment to progress. This is why Vulcans try to be logical, not emotional, in all things. As for not caring about what is 'going on', engagement with the physical universe is transitory. One day we will learn all there is to know about what we can see."

"So now you're saying you wish you were more like an ATSS."

"Indeed."

"Do you wish I was more like an ATSS?"

"I would wish for you to progress on your path to intellectual enlightenment, Captain. Indeed."

Jim rolls his eyes. "You're being ridiculous. They're machines. It would be a completely worthless existence. They can't appreciate what it is to be alive like we can. They can't feel."

Spock raises one eyebrow. "The importance you place on 'feeling' perplexes me. Emotions only lead to foolish decisions, to errors, to miscalculations in judgement that can never be taken back. I will remind you of the complaints you have made to me on 14 separate occasions in the past about our diplomatic missions. I believe you described them on each occasion as 'endless babysitting missions, trying to talk people down from the ledge'. ATSS never need 'talking down from the ledge'."

Jim pulls a face at him. "Check you out. What's so important about feelings?" He lets the tip of his index finger ghost against Spock's, causing a sudden dark flare of satisfaction to run along Spock's arm. Jim sees, smiles. "A machine can't make you feel like that."
With supreme Vulcan discipline, Spock suppresses a sigh.

Jim grins. "See. You can't deny it! I'm better than a machine."

"I am not saying ATSS are 'better', Captain. I am saying they are more efficient."

"Hm," Jim is wearing an expression which Spock can only describe as mischievous. "We'll see about that. I have something in mind. Come to my cabin straight after your shift."

NeuroWhips. Jim has had one stashed away in the bottom drawer of his desk for several months now. It's worth its weight in gold as far as he's concerned. For whilst they look like innocuous little grey cylinders with three tiny dials at one end, fifty or so years ago if you saw one of these, you knew you were in trouble. Used on the brain they made the recipient feel like they had a rusty screw wedged under each one of their fingernails. They had been very popular with the more despotic regimes around the Galaxy as they meant people could be tortured to Kingdom Come without any risk of death; leaving their bodies essentially intact, even if their minds were broken. For while the pain might have been an illusion, it certainly felt real, according to the few people Jim had met who had had the misfortune to experience them used in anger. The Federation had outlawed them years ago, but they had enjoyed an unlikely rebrand and burst in commercial popularity across Alpha Quadrant when they were slightly adapted and reissued on the common market as a sex toy. The functionality had always been there. The three dials had always controlled the intensity of the neurological experience, the type of neuron being targeted, and the combination of stimuli involved. If the neuron dial was switched the other way, instead of a dull blade digging into your scrotum Jim had discovered it made you feel like someone had a wet tongue on every inch of your cock. The manufacturers had simply adapted the neuron dial to stop at the halfway point, and there it was. Four inches of pure pleasure. The Magic Wand. They even sold them with the same cuffs they used to make for the torturers: NeuroCuffs, tiny grey bands that simply locked the wearer's muscles in place, using their own strength to hold them steady.

So now Jim has Spock in a position he hasn't previously imagined even in his wildest fantasies, cuffed in place and spread-eagled against the wall of his cabin. It had taken him a while to get Spock to agree to it, but Jim is nothing if not persuasive. Still, Jim hadn't anticipated quite how hot it would be. He has gotten used to Spock being dominant in bed, rolling him around, bending him this way and that according to his desires. And Jim likes it. He likes it when Spock is rough. And he likes it when Spock is gentle. He likes the fact that Spock can pick him up, lay him down softly on the bed, it makes him feel like a kid again; small, safe, cherished. But there is nothing - nothing - in this whole Universe, Jim has decided, hotter than making Spock lose control. And he can't make Spock lose control, not completely, if Spock gets a chance to touch him, with his hands or his mind. So. Now for the first time Jim has Spock entirely at his mercy, tied up. Naked.

Jim is in full dress uniform. Even the hat.

He's been at this for a while now. Even with the Wand, even with the intensity dial jammed hard up to 10, it takes a while to get Spock to crack. His self-control is quite frankly staggering. But Jim senses he is reaching the end now, eyes blown impossibly black, usually immaculate hair hanging into his face. Engagement with the physical universe is transitory indeed.

Jim lets the Wand hover gently, circling the very tips of Spock's splayed fingers, the insides, where he knows the nerve endings are the most sensitive. He doesn't need to actually touch Spock with it. He just needs to get it close enough that it can tell the nerves there what part of the pleasure centre in Spock's brain needs to be stimulated, and how. And how much.
"Do not -" Spock's voice is ragged. "Do not - stop. Stop."

"Don't worry, I'm not planning on stopping. Jesus, you should see yourself like this, all dishevelled and hard and writhing. I think I've actually made you sweat. You look like porn. You should..."


Jim feels the involuntary thrill that dances up his spine whenever he gets Spock to go into Vulcan. He must be even closer than Jim had thought. Jim touches the tip of the Wand to one of Spock's firm little nipples, and Spock shudders in a breath.

"Why would you want me to stop? You seem like you like it."

"I do - But I would... I desire you."

"You've got me. I'm. Right. Here." Jim emphasises each word with a light tap along the line of hair trailing down from Spock's belly. He knows what that feels like. He's become somewhat of a connoisseur of the onanistic pleasures of the Wand, because, hey, the ship's a small place and there's long breaks between shore leave. A man has to learn to make his own luck, sexually speaking. So he knows that the Wand on the lower belly where Spock has it now feels like two hot blondes are making out with each other and somehow all your erogenous zones got caught in the middle of it.

"I desire you, Captain, not, ah -" Spock is panting now, rough with it. "It feels... Not like when you touch me. It feels... Cold."

"It feels cold? I think there's a setting for that, hang on..." Jim smirks at the slight look of irritation that crosses Spock's face at Jim's deliberate misinterpretation of his statement. Boot's on the other foot for once, Literal Boy.

"No - hnng - not like that, I mean... I mean... It is merely... It is merely pleasure, it is not like when you have your mouth on me, it is... Empty."

"Ah hah! So you admit that there's some things machines can't do quite as well as people. You admit that you want the feelings sometimes, not just the sensations."

"Why must you... Why... Ah... Captain, please. Captain. I desire you."

Jim ghosts the Wand over the tight furry sac of Spock's scrotum. Down there it feels like someone has got your balls in their mouth and is somehow sucking them from the inside out.

"Tell me what you want."

Jim wonders if he will ever be able to get Spock to admit to wanting anything.

"Your mouth on me."

"Where?"

"Kanok-wilat," Spock practically hisses it, his eyes even darker than usual.

Jim circles the tip of the Wand parallel with the crest of Spock's engorged cock, not quite touching it. Spock's eyes roll back in his head most gratifyingly, and when he speaks it's ragged, barking.

"Ah, enough! Kroykah! No more of that. I desire your mouth on my penis. Your mouth, Captain. You."
"Say my name then. My name. Not all this 'Captain' stuff. Which is kind of hot I admit, but also really weird."

Spock closes his eyes, breathes out slowly through his nose.

"James."

Jim relents, throwing the Wand down on the floor and sinking to his knees. He runs his hands lightly up Spock's lean, muscular thighs. The he takes Spock's cock into his mouth, just the way Spock likes it, using plenty of spit. For some reason this always seems to drive Spock insane. Well, as insane as a Vulcan can ever be driven. He pulls back, lets a shimmering thread of saliva connect the olive flushed head of Spock's prick with the jut of his lower lip. Spock sees it too, and Jim gets the response he always looks for, that minute shift behind Spock's eyes as they turn from soot to embers. Yeah, lose it. I want you to lose it.

He loosens the force field on one of the NeuroCuffs, and Spock's hand immediately finds Jim's mouth, his thumb roughly pushing against Jim's lips, smearing the moisture there, opening it wider for his impatient cock.

Jim sucks at the pad of Spock's thumb, hard. Bites, then releases.

"Can one of your precious machines do this?"

Spock looks at him blankly, eyes endless in their dark pleasure, lids lazy over them.

Jim takes Spock's fingers and presses them to the sweet spots on his face as he slides his tongue back over him. He looks up at Spock, making his eyes go all big and innocent as he sucks on just the tip of Spock's heavy prick. He watches Spock's mouth tremble in response, feels the nudge of Spock against his mind, lets him in. Just a light link, not a full meld. Jim flickers his tongue, sucks Spock's cock in deep, deeper, until his nose is buried in the soft, crinkled hair of Spock's groin. Jim thinks at him, through the gossamer thread of their link: could it do this?

"N... No."

- Admit it

"A machine could not make me feel like you do."

- So - tell me I'm better than a machine

"Captain - It would not be factually ace-"

- Tell me! Or I'll stop

"You are better than a machine."

- Thank you. I love it when you talk dirty to me.

Spock looks wrecked, but he still somehow manages to arch one eyebrow as he moves his hand away from Jim's face.

"As I am sure you were taught at school: you should not talk with your mouth full. Across most sentient species in the Galaxy it is considered terribly impolite."

- Last word freak, Jim thinks at him, even though he knows Spock can't hear it now he's broken the
link.

Then Jim takes him over the edge.

**

Afterwards Spock is lying on Jim's bed while Jim showers before his shift. He's left the door open, because he figures Spock probably appreciates the view. Because, you know, he's the finest thing Spock's ever seen. Spock isn't really looking at him though. He's looking into the middle distance, and he seems even more pensive than usual.

"There was a girl for me once, too," he says quietly, and Jim wonders if he has misheard him over the static hiss of the sonic.

"What do you mean, 'a girl for you'? You mean...Uhura?"

"No. Before Nyota. I was betrothed."

Jim switches off the shower, doesn't even bother wrapping a towel round his hips as he sticks his head round the doorway.

"You were engaged?"

"That is not quite the word for it, but it is near enough."

"A girl at the Academy?" Jim still can't quite get his brain round the notion of Spock being engaged.

"No. On Vulcan."

"On Vulcan? How old were you, like, seventeen?"

"I was seven," Spock replies evenly. "But we stayed betrothed until... She died. When the planet was destroyed."

"I'm sorry," Jim says.

"There is no need for you to apologise, Captain. You were not responsible." Then he turns his face away, towards the wall, adds quietly, "There was someone for her before that anyway. When the time came she would have...gone to him."

"You mean she was cheating on you?" Jim asks incredulously.

Spock does not look round. "I suppose you could describe it as such."

Jim picks up his discarded uniform from the floor of the shower room.

"See, this is why I don't do the relationship thing. Too fucked up."

As he stands and turns he sees Spock stiffen, so slightly if he hadn't been entirely naked it would have been invisible.

"Indeed," he says evenly. He sits up, starts reaching for his own clothes.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Why had he said that when all he wanted really was Spock, Spock to be his, his? What he should have said is: I won't be like your shitty childhood sweetheart. I won't ever leave you for anyone else. I won't ever make you feel like you're not good enough, because you're perfect.
Perfect, perfect you. Perfectly you.

But then if he said that, he would know. He would know when Spock didn't say it back.

Spock

She was beautiful. From the first time I saw her, I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever encountered. Her dark hair, her fine brows, her perfect, dark Vulcan eyes. Surak had said that to love with the eyes was a false love, but I admit that I did love her with my eyes. My imperfect, Human eyes.

We were promised to each other upon my seventh birthday, but it was not until my fourteenth year that we attempted a full meld for the first time.

It was in the Grand Hall of my parents' house. Both our sets of parents had retired to the anteroom to give us some privacy. It was a private act: melding. Intimate. I had experienced melds before, with both my mother and my father, with my teachers at school, with my grandmother. But never with a girl. Never with my intended. Never with someone as beautiful as T'Pring. I tried to slow my heart where it skittered and jumped beneath my ribs. We had raised our fingers to each other's faces, said the words.

T'Pring's mind had been cool and green, nothing like Jim's. But still orderly, beautiful, full of fearless symmetry. I had only been in it for a few brief moments, before I had felt myself yanked away from it, so quickly I felt woozy, unsteady on my feet. Then I was back in my own skin again, which suddenly felt too hot, too tight, and T'Pring was standing in front of me, looking at me with something approximating disgust. It was gone in a second, replaced with her usual calm passivity.

"My apologies, Spock, son of Sarek," she said.

I felt her shields go up, sheltering that peaceful green space from me like walls around an oasis.

I had tilted my head to the side quizzically, a foolish Human gesture that only compounded my error, although I did not know that then. I pushed a question along the bond, felt it curl uselessly around her shields.

A slight quirk between her brows.

"I was not expecting...," she gathered herself. "Your mind is not like others I have seen."

"In what way?"

"It was dark. It was disordered ... It was... You are angry, Spock. The anger was... disconcerting."

Her eyes were so very, very black.
She turned, looked towards the door. Her thick hair, her narrow back.

"I suppose it is because it is partly Human," she had said, and then she gave the tiniest shudder of distaste.

And so then I knew. Just like the outside of me, the inside of me was wrong, was un-Vulcan, was not worthy, was lacking.

I knew then I would never be enough.
Riddles In The Darkness

Chapter Summary

Spock and Jim stress out. Then write poetry about each other (I know, right). Scientifically improbable conversations happen about cold fusion devices. Spock is bewildered by how often characters weep in *The Odyssey*.

Chapter Notes

**Rating:** R (this part) for language, sexual content  
**Warnings:** Mention of genocide  
**Author notes:** I apologise for the science in this chapter. It literally is a science vortex of horror. I tried my best but there's a limit to what I can do to save it (thanks *STID* writers!)... Both in terms of having to keep (vaguely) within what the movie did and the fact that I gave up Physics after GCSE. And the GCSE mainly involved mnemonics about sanitary products (Distance=SpeedxTime folks!). Still, I had a bash. While I've pinched Surak stuff from all over canon/fanon, special mention must be made of [this most excellent website](#) by Sidzhan where I've taken a lot of the teachings from for this chapter. I've managed to shoehorn some evo-psychobabble in here in honour of Professor Donald Symons - funtimes! Spock has 'moved beyond' that though, as any self-respecting scientist would...

**General Notes:** My first ever K/S fic. Be gentle! Amanda Warrington made me give her my firstborn child write this in return for helping me out with my research project, so here it is. (NB if anyone feels inclined to take part in the research project, which looks at women's involvement in explicit m/m slash (amongst other things), it's [here](#), and you would have my eternal gratitude). Beta-ed by the lovely Amanda Warrington

*It ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love.*

- Raymond Carver, 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love'

**Jim**

When I was a kid I'd sometimes have these overblown fantasies that he wasn't dead at all, he'd faked his own death and gone deep undercover for the Federation. That it was all part of some elaborate plan; some elaborate, universe-saving plan. My father, hero of the Universe. And one day he'd come back, just stride through the kitchen door, loose and easy, a quick smile on his face, rough hand soft on the back of my head, messing my hair up, and he'd say a dad thing, one of those things only dads say. He'd say: *Hey, Jimmy, want to come shooting with me? I can show you how to build a proper deer blind.* All casual, like he'd never not been there,
like it had always been us, just me and him. A father and his son.

It never went away. Even when I was a teenager there was a secret part of me that still thought this could be true. I'd get back to the farm after a day spent playing hooky from school down by the East Fork, and instead of Frank waiting to bawl me out for some misdemeanour, or worse, Mom, back from wherever she'd been sent to, smile too fixed and voice too bright, half a chopped lime on the counter (because, hey, if you can put lime in it it's not proper drinking, right?), he'd be there, sat at the kitchen table like he belonged there: Hey, Jim, want to go shoot some pool? Bet you could give your old man a run for his money...

Even on the day I graduated StarFleet my eyes still sought out his in the crowd. He'll come to this, surely, they'll let him come to this, his own son. He'll be in disguise, of course, but if I see him I'll know, I'll know. I half expected to feel a hand reaching from behind me, clasping my shoulder: James. I'm so proud.

Pretty dumb, I know.

I still wonder when it will be safe for him to come out of hiding and come find me.

___________________________________________________________________________

They establish a deep orbit around Niribu and Jim is practically buzzing with excitement.

"Now this is what I signed up to StarFleet for," he says, as they examine the scans and readings.

He insists on being part of the initial landing party as is his wont, something Spock has always found highly illogical. A Captain's place is on his ship. However well-planned, however benign a planet may appear, early reconnaissance missions are always laced with danger, and if anything should befall the Captain, then it would have serious implications for both the ship and her entire crew. If anything should befall the Captain...

But Jim will not see reason on this, and Spock has almost given up trying to persuade him. And privately, Spock will admit, there is something in Jim's unjaded enthusiasm, his desire for adventure, his radiant curiosity, that Spock finds compelling. It is all part of his muchness.

"I just... If anything happened and I wasn't down there I would feel responsible," Jim says, glancing down at the chess board distractedly. "You know."

"It is highly improbable that you would be responsible, Captain."

"Yeah, I know that," Jim says, barely trying to hide his irritation. "But I'd still feel responsible. Remember feelings? The things you think are merely a necessary aberration on the path to enlightenment."

He stomps his knight down on the board.

Spock raises one eyebrow. Jim has been unusually short tempered with him recently, caustically snappy, almost like he was before... Well, before this mission. Before Book Club, and before they became lovers. Before. Spock can see no reason for it. He can only deduce the Captain is
experiencing increased cortisol levels in is brain, due to the advent of their mission on Niribu.

"It is commendable that you are so concerned for your crew," Spock tries, conciliatory. He finds he is less able to remain unmoved in the face of Jim's anger now than he was before. Now it causes something to constrict painfully inside him. He chooses not to consider why that is.

Jim looks across the table at him and his expression softens, and then saddens, in quick succession. He rubs a hand over his face. He looks suddenly tired.

"Yeah, I just... I didn't used to be very good at being responsible. I let a lot of people down. I did... I did some really bad things. Things I regret every day."

Spock thinks how this isn't a side to Jim that many people get to see, this quieter, more reflective Jim. He thinks of the boisterous, laughing, arrogant Jim, the one he presents to the rest of the world, the one with a cavalier attitude towards what others may or may not think of him, of his bad behaviour. The duality is fascinating to Spock. He sometimes wonders how so much could be packed into one man. Even a man like James Kirk.

"Forgive me for saying so, Captain, but you do not strike me as a man much given to feelings of regret."

Jim looks over at Spock through his splayed fingers, which are still covering his face.

"Yeah, well. I probably don't regret the stuff you think I should. I don't regret beating your dumb test."

_Cheating._

Given Jim's current mood, Spock decides to let this one slide. He slides his Queen smoothly across the board.

Jim's face is still buried in his hands. He sighs.

"I regret... I regret... When I was..." He starts quietly, and then fades off altogether. Spock waits, watching. Eventually Jim gives another sigh, this one even wearier than the last, and lifts his head up again. His eyes look distant. "I suppose you think regret is stupid and illogical."

Spock considers his answer carefully before replying.

"It is not illogical. But the purpose of such an emotion should be to learn from past mistakes so as not to repeat them in the future. Once that lesson has been learned no further purpose can be served by continuing to dwell on an unfortunate outcome that happened historically. There is an important principle in the teachings of Surak: _kaiidth_. What is, is."

Jim pulls his mouth tight, chews on the inside of his lip.

"But what if the mistake is a really bad one?"

"Mistakes are inevitable. How you deal with them is not. Surak tells a story in the _Analects_ of a composer whose fingers slip on the ka'athaira, and who plays notes he does not intend. He is embarrassed, in front of his students. But if he were a true composer he would instead allow these accidental notes to guide his composition towards a new direction. Surak says, _the melody gains new interest and is better for the wrong notes_. This is _kaiidth_."

Jim scratches along his jaw.
"So you don't regret anything?"

_Brown eyes, so like his own, but warm, warm, lit up from the inside. That melodic voice, that made everything sound like singing. Mother. "You never even loved her!"

Spock allows himself to blink once, slowly.

_But she knew, how could she not? She knew._

"I never told my mother that I loved her," Spock says softly. "I regret that."

Jim pauses, index finger pressed against his cheek. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but stays silent. He sucks at his top lip; looks at Spock for a long beat.

"So what's the valuable life lesson to be learned from that, then?"

On others it would sound sarcastic, but Jim's voice is soft and low, and he has a strange, pinched, hopeful look on his face that Spock cannot place.

"That I should articulate to those I value what they mean to me."

"Exactly," Jim says. He looks almost expectant.

"I have always believed though, Captain, that our actions are far more important than our words. I demonstrated to my mother my regard for her through my treatment of her. She was aware of my devotion."

"Doesn't sound like you've learnt the lesson to me, Spock."

Now it is as if Jim is being cruel, but he still has that unplaceable look on his expressive face, that tint of sadness.

"I -" Spock begins, and then stops. The barbed thing in his katra shifts and pulls. Jim, that day on the bridge. _"You never even loved her!"_ This must be what Jim believes, what he still believes. Just like Nyota, Jim believes him in some way deficient, lacking, imperfect. Unable to reciprocate a Human's love, and therefore undeserving of it.

"If she was here now, would you tell her?" Jim asks. His eyes are fixed on Spock's now, an endless blue.

"Yes," Spock says simply. It is the truth. To lie would be illogical.

"Well, then."

Jim looks at him for several long, tense beats and then shakes his head. He turns his attention back to the chess board, starts humming a tune under his breath. Then he sings softly: _don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone._

Spock is surprised.

"My mother - she would also say that."

Jim does not look up from his contemplation of the chess board.

"Well, your mother was clearly a woman of not only wisdom but fine taste in trite sentimental Terran pop music. I wish I had met her."
The fucking has been different recently. Ever since that first mindmeld. No less vigorous, but slower, more assured, less desperate. And Spock stays afterwards, lets Jim touch him, touches. There's less of that blank distance in his face, the distance Jim saw the time he first slept in Spock's cabin. But this is Spock, Jim reminds himself. *Spock*. Spock who couldn't even tell his own mother that he loved her. And Jim is, well... He is what he is. He knows better than to think of this as something which it isn't, something which it can't be, something which he doesn't even want it to be. He doesn't. Want.

He is lying on his back in his bed, watching the patterns the Niribian sunshine throws across the ceiling as they make their geosynchronous orbit. He holds one arm up in front of his face, flexes his fingers, makes shadows dance.

Spock reaches up too, runs one finger lightly over his knuckles.

"Your hands."


"I have noticed them before, but I did not wish to pry. You did not wish to use the dermal regenerators?"

"Nah. Well."

He hears the cotton of his pillow rustle, knows Spock has turned his face in question.

"I dunno. When I was a kid I thought they made me look hard, you know. Plus girls seemed to like them."

Spock raises himself up on one elbow and looks down into Jim's face, his head tilted quizzically to one side. Jim curls his hands into fists, making the scar tissue stand out, tusk pale against the ruddiness of his skin.

"Because it looked like I could fight. Like I could handle myself."

"Handle yourself?"

"You know. You want to look like you know how to take care of yourself. Take care of what's yours."

"You take care of what belongs to you."

There is no censure in Spock's tone, but Jim realises how stupid he must sound to someone as calm and reasonable as Spock.

"It's dumb really. You're right. I should get rid of them. Now I'm all grown up. It probably isn't the done thing on diplomacy missions. To show you've previously resorted to the odd fist fight to settle a disagreement."

Spock has captured one of Jim's hands in his own, pulled it in close to his face, and is looking at the scars intently.
"I may have to agree with your girls, Captain. A man who can 'handle' himself. It is not...unattractive." He licks his top lip.

There is a tightening and a loosening in Jim's belly, like things are melting and freezing inside him all at once.

"You like the bad boys, huh?"

"It would appear so." He brings Jim's hand to his mouth, lets the tip of his cool, dry tongue flit across each bony round, each soft valley.

"I wouldn't have thought it of a nice young man like you, Mr. Spock."

"You think I am 'nice'?"

"Don't worry. I know you can be nasty when you need to be." He bites his teeth at Spock, in an exaggerated show of aggressive desire.

"You have many scars." Spock's voice is quiet, almost tender. He sweeps one broad thumb across Jim's eyebrow. The scar there. Cool and slow. Rubs it back again. His eyes are caramel melting. "Is this the result of an altercation in a drinking establishment?"

Jim gives him a half smile. "You're just jealous, because you have ridiculous eyebrows."

"Vulcans are not jealous."

"Bullshit."

"I am not clear as to the link between my previous statement and bovine excrement."

"You're a lying liar from Liesville. You're super jealous. You have this weirdly territorial thing going on in bed. Trust me."

Spock makes a noncommittal non-noise - the nearest he gets to an admission.

"You told me yourself." Jim does an approximation of Spock, all clipped monotone: "Vulcans are possessive lovers."

Spock looks at him indulgently. Runs his thumb back across the scar.

"Anyway," Jim says, "That's an old one. One of my first. Even I was too young to get into bar fights once, believe it or not."

Spock's eyes darken a little.

"He did this to you. Your stepfather."

It is more of a statement than a question.

Jim shrugs, feeling awkward. They haven't spoken about Frank much, but Jim supposes he has said enough that Spock is able to deduce what must have happened.

"Yeah, well."

Spock doesn't press it further. But he sweeps his thumb across, again and again, so gentle Jim can barely feel it, then his lips, kiss-chasing the scar across his brow.
"Nash-veh spo’tu," he breathes, quiet enough that Jim has to strain to catch each word. "I, too, take
care of what belongs to me. This shall not happen again."

Jim asks him, casually, while he is standing shoulder to shoulder with him in the laboratory, looking
at flora samples.

"Have you ever been in love?" He doesn't move his gaze from the slide in front of him, but Spock is
uncomfortably reminded of Nyota, her sad, dark eyes.

But maybe this is not where this conversation is leading. He remembers Jim, last week getting out of
the shower in all his golden nakedness, "This is why I don't do the relationship thing. Too fucked
up." He thinks of the numerous times he has seen the Captain with women in bars, in the street, on
diplomatic missions. The way they seem to turn soft and malleable under the warmth of his eyes. He
remembers his opinion of Jim as a cadet. Cadet Kirk is a liability. He drinks too much. He is
promiscuous. That other Jim still exists, he is still there, he is still part of the complexity which is
James Kirk. That Jim would not want to be in love, certainly not with someone like Spock. Spock
feels suddenly foolish and naive to have made so many assumptions about Jim's simple question. He
has been inexplicably tired for the past 6 days. It is interfering with his ability to think clearly.

So he gives Jim the same answer he gave Nyota, 14.5 months ago.

"I do not see the point."

"I suppose it is highly illogical. Falling in love."

Jim's tone is completely level. For a strange, irrational moment Spock wants nothing more than to
touch him, skin to skin, so he can get a sense of Jim's emotional state. The need is so sudden and
intense he feels his fingers flutter with it. The next moment he feels appalled at his own invasiveness.

Jim still isn't looking at him. If Spock could even just see his eyes, he might know.

"It is not entirely without logic. Vulcans used to 'fall in love', as you put it. There is a certain
evolutionary advantage to a strong parental bond when rearing children, particularly children with a
long infancy, such as both Humans and Vulcans, who benefit from having two care-givers. And an
emotional bond is doubtless stronger in times of stress and competition over scarce resources than a
bond based entirely on logic. Indeed, I can acknowledge the biological advantage in displaying a
wide range of emotional responses to attract social allegiances of various kinds. It is simply that
Vulcans have chosen to move beyond that."

"How nice for you all," Jim says dryly, keeping his eyes fixed on the samples on the bench.

"I would also add that romantic love, from what I have observed, is largely temporal. Even if the
emotion itself lasts, which I notice it does rarely, the people who are beloved do not. And grief is one
of the most futile and destructive of all emotions. It is one Surak warned against explicitly. He talks
of it as a kind of dying, even as your heart continues to beat. He urges us to be instead like the
dzharel or the shavokh. They do not scream and cry when their mates die. They adapt. Life
continues."

"Zarel? Shavok?"
"Cattle. Eagles."

"Right. OK." Jim's tone is still light, even when he says softly, "A dog, a rat, a cat."

Then he is quiet. Spock knows he should allow the conversation to end. But he says something anyway, he can't not.

"Captain, you must know I hold you in very high regard. You are in possession of many qualities which I both respect professionally and admire personally. I-"

Jim does look up then, and his face is relaxed, and his eyes are a passive, clear blue. He looks no different than he did when they were discussing the varieties of Niribian plant life.

"I get it, Spock, I get it." He smiles. "Vulcans don't fall in love. That's fine. Jim Kirk doesn't fall in love either, so we're all good."

"You have never been in love, Captain?"

Jim's smile doesn't falter.

"Well, I thought I was once, as you know. But I was - what - fifteen? I was just a kid. What did I know? Nah, I'm with you on this. I don't see the point."

This should satisfy Spock, but for some reason it doesn't.

He thinks of the blaze of Jim's mind, the hot, syruping force of it, the sense he got from it: I love you. He knows that this doesn't necessarily mean Jim loves him. Jim is psi-null, the inner architecture of his mind will be sprawling, uncontrolled (beautiful, golden, free). He should be pleased that Jim does not want something from him that Spock cannot give. He should be satisfied that Jim does not feel anything for him that he is unable to reciprocate. But it is there anyway, a sudden surge of irrational, greedy desire, the wish to hear Jim say it out loud, over and over, I love you I love you I love you. It is entirely illogical. And it is a weakness. A selfish weakness. He has no need of being loved. Not Human love anyway, a love that is grasping, and cruel, and capricious, and hot, so hot.

He thinks of the searing brilliance of the sensation of love in Jim's mind, like being flayed alive, but the whips are made of ribbons of pure joy, silk soft and dancing. Love me, love me, love me. Love you.

No.

He does not go to see Jim after he comes back from conducting a geological scan later, but instead meditates for some time. He thinks upon his favourite of all Surak's sayings: Ri vath kau eh ri vath rok nam-tor na'etek hi etek kau-tor. Spock does not feel wise. He feels more unsure of his own mind than he has ever been in his life.

Jim should be reading the report that the anthropology team have drawn up about the Niribians, but he can't concentrate on it. It is interesting stuff: their customs, their religious beliefs, their social structure. This is normally his favourite part of any mission, finding out about the people, the day to day of their lives, for them so mundane, for him so exotic. Although it's frustrating with pre-warp
cultures like the Niribians that he is not able to meet them, not able to connect with them face to face. The anthropology report is the next best thing, but nevertheless Jim finds it hard to stay focused on the page in front of him. He feels hot and stuffed up in his chest and behind his eyes, like he is developing a cold, or having one of his allergies to something. He feels weirdly melancholic and tired. Even since they’ve come into orbit around Niribu he has been having the nightmares again. He hadn't had them in weeks. The stress is back too, low and constant in his belly. Don't fuck this up.

It makes him realise how much he has been relying on thoughts of Spock to cheer him up when he has been feeling off-centre. He has been treating Spock, thoughts of Spock, memories of them together, like some sort of charm to ward off all the bad things that he knows are inside him. Spock, his silver-dark talisman; both the stars and the space in-between them. But it's stupid because... Well, it's stupid. He isn't anything special to Spock, not really. He certainly isn't Spock's talisman. And he knows it's also stupid to depend on anyone or anything too much anyway, because at the end of the day, it's just you, you alone.

He thinks of his father. He thinks of the picture of his father, the one Spock had found caught between the pages of A Tale of Two Cities.

He remembers being young. Eight or nine years old. Mom was off planet, he and Sam had been left with Frank. He remembers having some row with Frank, the usual thing. He thinks it was before Frank started hitting him, but he can't be sure. He remembers the aftermath of that row though, that day. He can play it back in his head in vivid technicolour. He remembers thundering up the stairs, that hot, tight feeling in his chest. Slamming his door, throwing himself down on his bed. He remembers being extra loud, he had wanted the attention. But Frank hadn't come. He remembers supposing he should be glad. The feeling of furious tears brewing inside his nose and throat, tickling like an oncoming storm. Reaching up to the shelves above his bed. Pulling out the book, his father's book, and taking out the photograph from the back pages. His father, in full Fleet regalia. Lieutenant Commander Kirk. Heavy features, thick arms, neat golden hair. Smile all high school quarterback. Blue eyes sparkling with promise.

He had rubbed his desperate fingers over the photo, wished he could somehow climb inside it. Dad. He had been breathing heavily, panicked little hiccoughs of air. But slowly, slowly, as ever the picture served to calm him. I'm here, Jimmy. I'm here.

So he talked to his dad, told him all the things that were making him feel angry and sad, and his dad listened, those sparkling eyes patient and kind.

Frank's voice behind him was like ice. Jim hadn't heard him come up the stairs.

"Oh, that's right, you just talk to your photo of Saint Fucking George. Like that will make everything better."

He had quickly shoved it under his pillow.

"I didn't - I wasn't -"

That frantic feeling, like he had been caught doing something really bad. And the shame. That Frank had come in and seen this, the most private of rituals, something that had been just between Jim and his dad.

"What I'd like to know is what did that sonofabitch ever do for you? 'Cept run off an' get himself killed the minute you were born. Fucking nada, that's what. I'm the one who provides for you. Who
puts food in your ungrateful little mouth. Who puts a roof over your head. But I just get your fucking whining ingratitude, and he gets all your breathless hero worship. You and Sam, the pair of you. It's pathetic."

Frank had strode over to the bed, hauled the pillow from under Jim, snatched at the photo, gone to rip it up.

"No!"

The horror had been a dark lance in his heart. That's all Frank had wanted really. Jim's desperation, his complete helplessness. He had tossed it back into Jim's lap.

"It's not even worth it. Keep your damn picture. I mean, like he'd be proud of you. You'll never amount to anything, James. Nothing. You're just a worthless little brat. Hell, even she can't stand to be here with you. The sooner you get that through your thick skull, the better."

He'd put dad's picture back inside the book, placed the book carefully back on the shelf. But he didn't look at it so much after that. It didn't comfort him anymore, not like it used to. It didn't speak to him. After a while, he forgot it was even there.

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He had Comm-ed Jim to discuss with him the latest irregular findings from the geological surveys. Jim had messaged back: 'Can you wait in my cabin? I'll be there in 5 (approx., don't hold me to that!) Code is 5952'.

Spock has not been in Jim's cabin before without Jim. It gives him a vague sense of excitement, to be here in Jim's private, most intimate space, alone. He feels his heart catch and pick up in his side, and immediately regulates it. Illogical. He spends the first five minutes standing at parade rest near Jim's desk, fixing his eyes on a specific point on the wall, trying to centre, to turn inside himself. But it is difficult to be in Jim's room and not want to look around, to smell, to breathe in, to immerse himself in Jim. Spock looks over at Jim's desk, the desk where he first tasted Jim's skin, where he first took Jim's phallus into his mouth. He suppresses a savage slither of lust that cleaves through his belly, hilts itself low in his groin. There is a stack of messy papers on the corner of Jim's desk, covered in the familiar black-ink looping scrawl that Spock recognises from the numerous notes Jim makes in the margins of his books. Spock is intrigued. He is not sure why Jim would choose to write on paper like this, when he has all the functionality of a PADD at his disposal. It is so antiquated and strange. He takes a small step closer to the desk, glances down at the papers.

Poems. They are poems. Jim's poems.

Once again Spock feels his heart kick in his side.

Then he sees his name. It is on the top of the first page, so he can't help but see it. Well, not quite his name. Rumplespockskin.

Before he can register fully what he is doing, Spock's eyes scan down the page. It is only for one brief, illogical moment, for he knows this is wrong, he is violating the Captain's privacy, but he cannot help it, and his gaze catches on the last stanza.

'and there I was all rich with romance
and you so mean, you so poor
but those rare times you smiled at me
you span gold, gold, gold from straw'

Spock feels a surge of something like nausea in his guts. Jim thinks him mean, mean and poor. It is as he has suspected. He is lacking, wrong, imperfect. Jim will tire of him, will turn his great, golden mind on to someone else instead, open it up for them like he had for Spock, usher them in to all that warmth and brilliance.

He breathes deeply, forcing the sick feeling to dissipate. But his mouth feels even drier than usual, a slow pound starting up between his eyes. He needs to meditate. Now. Right now. He leaves Jim's cabin.

Jim chimes again at Spock's door.

"I know you're in there, Commander." Nothing. "If you don't let me in in the next five seconds I'm going to use my override." Still nothing. "I know you've got some geological goodness to share with me." Nothing. "OK, fine: 5, 4, 3-"

The door slides open. Spock is standing by his desk, and Jim notes that he looks even paler than usual, except for a light greenish tinge high on his fluting cheekbones. His eyes are dark and clouded. Jim feels his stomach constrict with concern.

"Are you OK? You don't look well."

"I will be perfectly adequate after I have been able to meditate, Captain."

"Shall I come back later? Geology can wait."

"That will be unnecessary. I will cover the key findings with you now."

They sit at their customary seats round Spock's desk, and Spock fills him in on the seismic activity the science team has detected and is now monitoring. Spock seems even more withdrawn and taciturn than normal.

"Spock, are you sure you're alright?" Jim asks.

Spock sits rigidly, hands clasped in front of him, eyes fixed on a point to the left of Jim's shoulder.

"Captain, I have cause to apologise. While I was waiting for you in your cabin at 17:40 hours I read one of your personal papers. It was just a fragment - four lines of a poem - but it was an invasion of your privacy, and I apologise unreservedly."

"O-kaaaaay," Jim says slowly. "I mean, sure, that's fine. You're forgiven. You've seen inside my head for Christ's sake, I'm not going to begrudge you looking at a bit of my amateur writing. But that still doesn't really explain why you're so... agitated about it. I mean, Spock-agitated, which isn't that agitated, admittedly, but you're being all pale and sad and weird. You can't have thought I'd be that mad at you?"

Spock does not reply.
"Or is it that you hate it. Trite sentimental garbage, or whatever. God, it's worse than Shelley, isn't it? You hate it even more than Shelley, and you want nothing more to do with me. Is that what it is?"

Jim winks at him, gives him the benefit of one of his rueful Jim Kirk smiles, the one that's been known to make seasoned Ambassadors blush and giggle like schoolgirls.

Spock continues to stare past him, and for a moment Jim thinks he will simply refuse to answer him, but then he speaks suddenly, all in a rush, sounding different from how Jim has ever heard him before.

"You think I am mean. And poor. You are quite right that I have often been ungenerous in my treatment of you. It is logical that you would choose to acknowledge this. In addition, if you meant by your use of the term 'mean' that I have been cruel, or by your use of the term 'poor' that I have in some other way failed to reach the standard required to be sufficient, or average, I accept that."

Ah.

"Spock, come on," Jim says gently, "You know I don't think that."

"It is what you wrote, Captain. I fail to see why you would write it if you do not think it."

Jim can't help but roll his eyes.

"This is why I would never agree to show you any of my writing, you take everything so damn literally. If you actually bothered to even try and understand metaphor-"

Spock cuts him off, his voice unusually caustic, even by Spock standards. "Then you should write poetry for Doctor McCoy. He has an abnormal regard for metaphor."

Jim feels his frustration mounting. It's been a long day and he doesn't really feel like dealing with Spock being so wilfully obtuse.

"Jesus, Spock, I don't want to write poetry for Bones, because I'm not... I don't feel... Let's just say I don't feel poetic about Bones."

Spock looks at him, blinking.

"I do not understand. How is it possible to 'feel poetically' about a person?"

Jim can almost hear the scare quotes.

"Because poetry's about, you know, passion and .... extremes! Hyperbole. Bones is just, you know, my friend. Actually I feel kind of bad I said that now. I could totally write some sort of Homeric friendship epic about Bones."

"Then might I suggest you do that," Spock says, scraping back his chair. "Now, if you will excuse me, Captain, I wish to retire for the evening. As you yourself have noted, I am fatigued and require rest. I request that you return to your own cabin."

He stands and looks pointedly at the door.

"You make it sound like it was a horrible poem," Jim is exasperated. "It was a lo-..., it's, you know, it's a poem that's essentially really nice about you, Spock. Look at the last line!"

"I did not understand the last line. It is not possible to transmute vegetable matter into precious metal through the medium of a Terran spinning wheel. It would take several hi-tech..."
Jim interrupts him. "Do you even know the story of Rumplestiltskin?"

"I could find no record of 'Rumplespockskin' in any of the Terran databases on the Enterprise's systems."

Jim finds himself smiling, even through his irritation. Spock can be kind of adorable sometimes.

"Well, I mucked around with the title a little."

Spock continues to stare fixedly at the door.

"Look, the last line, the whole thing actually, it's about how... You don't give much, you know? But when you do, your smiles, they're like gold to me, Spock. They're the most precious things I've ever been given."

In fact sometimes Jim thinks Spock's tiny little half smile is the only single perfect thing in the entire Universe, a note of total clarity among all the scratchy dust and errors.

Spock looks at him then, dark coffee eyes.

"Nevertheless, you think I am mean and poor."

"No, just... Just I'm all," Jim waves his hands around, miming something extravagant and gushing, "And you're all..." He funnels them back in again, clasps them in front of him. "You know?"

Spock stares at him.

"OK, you don't know. Look, it's hard to say in words, I mean, I tried, but you still don't get it."

"You do not normally have any great difficulty articulating yourself, Captain."

"Well, you should try writing a poem. See how easy you find it."

"I have made my opinion of Terran poetry very clear on precisely 23 previous occasions. I have no intention of-"

"Yeah, yeah. You wouldn't be able to anyway. You're, like, physically incapable."

"I have a score that is in the top 0.001% of Federation Intelligence Tests. I assure you I am perfectly capable of mimicking the style, structure, and content of Terran poetry."

"Go on then," Jim says, "Write a poem. About me. Do it now, Mr Literary Genius. Let's see if you manage to write something nice about me without me getting the wrong end of the stick."

He stands and hands Spock his PADD.

"Captain-"

"Just do it!"

Spock purses his lips. "Very well."

He takes the PADD, looks at Jim for a long moment, and then starts to type, his long, elegant fingers nimble across the screen. He hands the PADD back to Jim when he is done. Jim doesn't know what he was expecting - maybe some sarcastic limerick, or something icy and logical, perhaps a Haiku. Instead he reads:
Your heart is hot
It shifts and moves under my hands
Like the fine sands of the Sas-a-Shar
It is a fine thing, your heart
Fine and hot

At night I stalk these clinical
Corridors
Like a le-matyas
Sniffing for it
It will give itself away
It is too warm, too shuddering
It cannot resist
I hope
I prey

"Well, shit," Jim says.
"I mean...it's derivative. But, yeah. Yeah." He pauses, tries to meet Spock's eyes, fails. "That's about me?"

"It is not about anyone. It is an exercise in literary style."

"You stalk the corridors sniffing out my heart?"

Spock blinks at him. "I cannot smell your heart, as you are no doubt aware Captain. I simply followed literary conventions to...."

"My hot heart?"

"I cannot-"

"What do I smell like?" Jim asks. He feels suddenly happy again, like reading Spock's poem has pulled a plug underneath his belly and all the stress that has been gathering there all week has simply drained away.

"Yourself."

Jim watches Spock's nostrils flare.

"Spock," he says, "Are you smelling me now?"

Spock doesn't answer, but his eyes grow bigger, blacker. Jim steps into his space, close, closer, until he can feel Spock's breath against his neck. He nuzzles up into the soft underside of Spock's jaw.

"Can you smell it now? My fine hot heart."

"Captain-" Spock's voice has that rough, ragged quality that makes Jim's stomach pull up, his groin tighten. He runs the edge of his tongue up the pointed curve of Spock's ear.

"Why don't you do me like you did that first time? When you had your mouth all over me."

Spock makes a low, animal noise in the back of his throat, and then his mouth is on Jim, his mouth,
his hands, and they do not leave him for some time.

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Afterwards he is in Spock's arms, and Spock is trailing the delicious cool of his fingers up and down Jim's spine.

"I was thinking," Jim says into Spock's chest, "You know that time we talked about Tarsus? About Kodos?"

Spock's fingers momentarily still on Jim's skin, then start their stroking again.

"I recall."

"Well, he wasn't logical. Kodos I mean."

Spock says nothing, just strokes, strokes.

"There were these little birds. They were kind of like swallows. I don't know if you had an equivalent on Vulcan?"

"Haurok," Spock says quietly.

"He ordered all these little birds to be eradicated because they were eating the little grain we had that wasn't diseased. But once they were exterminated the insect populations just exploded in the fields, in the granaries, so the net result was the same. Well, the same except you couldn't hear the birds singing anymore."

No singing, only that dull background hum, the thick greasy buzz of the insects. Out in the desert with Lyla in his arms, under a birdless sky. The silence. The whistling - no.

"That wasn't logical."

"No," Spock concedes.

It seems far away, here in Spock's arms, in Spock's bed, with Spock's cool spicy smell around him. But it will never be far away, not really. It is always there, just beneath the surface, always inside him. The crawling darkness inside of him.

"It got really bad after that. People would soak the leather from their chairs until it was soft enough to chew. They ate the plaster from the walls. Pets -" Here Jim hesitates. "When there was nothing else, people would eat the mud. You could mix it with the chaff, with weeds and water, and then leave it in the sun to bake. It made you feel full for a while. But it would block up your intestines, you know, it would-"

"Captain," Spock interrupts him gently. "I am well aware of the common behaviours of various species, including Humans, in times of famine. You need not distress yourself by running through them now."

Jim pushes himself up on his elbows, looks down into Spock's face.

"But you don't know what it was like for me."

Spock is so very still. Only the passing shadows on his face, the darkness and sporadic ember glow of his eyes.
"No. I do not."

"I am not just part of one homogenous mass of human behaviour. I'm me."

"Yes. You are."

"I want to tell you what it was like for me. I want you to... I want you to..." Jim feels his voice catch in his throat.

"Captain," Spock says, softly. His hands resume their light sweeping motion up and down Jim's back.

"Don't you want to know?"

Spock's eyes flicker.

"Anything you wish to tell me, I shall listen."

Jim lowers himself back onto Spock's pillows, rests his head against the fur of Spock's chest.

"It was a bad time. You were right, that thing you said before about how people behave. People did some really... terrible things. I did some terrible things."

"All creatures will do what they must in order to survive," Spock says measuredly.

"You wouldn't. You don't."

"It has taken almost two thousand years for Vulcans to school themselves in the ways of logic, Captain. I do not believe it would be fair to make a comparison between my species and what would appear to be the Natural Order of animal behaviour throughout the Galaxy."

"Sometimes I wish I hadn't. Survived. I feel it was too much. Like, it wasn't worth it. Sometimes I feel that it's left this black, rotten hole in me, and no matter what I do, no matter how hard I try to be... To be... Nothing I do will be good enough to make up for that."

"Captain. These are the experiences which have made you the man you are today."

Jim snorts. "Exactly."

"You are an exceptional man. You are one of the finest men I know."

"Oh." Jim feels suddenly very far away from himself. "But what if it's not enough, Spock? For every great day I have, I know I have to share it with all these horrible memories. For every great thing I do, there's all the shitty, selfish things I did. What if nothing I do is ever good enough to make up for the bad things? What if it never feels better?"

Spock is silent for a few long beats. Then he says, "There is something Surak says: Ri vath natya-vik k'svi khaf-spol-tu. Ein boshau k'tik sov-masu-rom. Vath ri irak-glu na'ish. In Standard you would say: There are different wells within your heart. Some fill with each good rain. Others are far too deep for that."

Jim thinks on this phrase for a while, runs it carefully through his mind. He smiles softly into Spock's chest.

"And this from a man who claims he doesn't understand poetry."
A little while after that, Jim is hovering above the velvet precipice of sleep, when he thinks he hears Spock say: “I would not have you any different.” But that might just have been part of a dream.

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"We should not be this close to a populated area, Captain," Spock admonishes.

Jim has been inspecting the fine dusting of bone white ash across the vibrant red foliage of a nearby tree.

"It's fine. We'll hide if anything comes our way. Our tricorders will give us plenty of notice."

"I do not think 'hiding' is an appropriate course of action. In a situation like this prevention is far better than cure, and the Prime Directive clearly states that-

"I'm aware of protocol," Jim mutters. "But you were the one who said we can't get accurate readings unless we get in closer to the volcano, and it's not my fault that - in a move which makes even Humans look pretty logical in comparison - they've decided to build their biggest settlement right next to the damn thing."

"I can provide you with numerous instances from the history of Humanity where civilizations have chosen to live in close proximity to active volcanoes, Captain. Kagoshima, Hilo, Seattle. As I recall, even your home state was affected by a volcanic eruption last century which--"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, Humans are dumb. Although in defence of the Iowans, Yellowstone is big. It's pretty hard to live anywhere within a 1,000 mile radius and not be at risk. It's hardly like we were nestled into the foothills."

Spock glances round, eyes dark and calculating. "We certainly do not need to physically be here, this close to the settlement, in order to ascertain what is needed for our calculations. We have numerous drones on board the ship which are more than capable of performing all these activities on our behalf. Granted, the magnetic fields interfere with our ability to control them remotely from the Enterprise, but there is nevertheless no need for our presence so close to a large Niribian settlement."

Jim runs his finger down the length of a long, crimson fond, holds the dust that's collected to his nose, inhales.

"But it's different, isn't it, actually being here? Seeing it yourself. Touching it. Smelling it."

"I am unsure why smelling Niribian foliage, or volcanic ash for that matter, would add anything to our understanding of the situation that cannot be ascertained via data collected by a drone."

"Yeah, but that kind of data doesn't really help you get a feel for a place, does it? What it's like. What it's like to live here. What it's like to be a Niribian. The look of it, the sound of it, the smell of it."

"You seem to have developed an unnatural preoccupation with your olfactory sense."

"Well, it's important, isn't it? To understand a place. It's like when I think of home, I think of how it smells. The smell of summer in Iowa. The scent when the corn's being cut. Hawaiian Tropic sun lotion, new flip flops on hot pavement, warm dog's belly, burgers on a barbecue. That's home. That's how it feels to be home, to have it in your ears, your eyes, your nose."

Spock continues to regard him with his dark, impassive eyes. Jim thinks of Vulcan, old Vulcan, wonders if he's been horribly insensitive.
"I'm sorry if..." he starts. But then he finds he wants to know if Spock thinks like that about Vulcan, about his home. "Do you not miss those things? About Vulcan?"

"If you are asking me if I feel any great nostalgia for the way my planet of origin smelt, then the answer is no."

"No? Not at all? Not ever?"

Spock's face is perfectly still, perfectly cool.

"No."

But Jim knows that is a lie, he had felt it, felt it in the mindmelt with Old Spock. The burst of hot, white grief that sliced inside his soul as he watched his home destroyed. The surge of longing for things passed, for things that now would never be again. He had seen it too, the beautiful things that old Spock mourned: the iridescent blue of the wing feathers of a desert songbird, the dewy secret white softness of a night blooming flower showing herself in the silvery sands, the austere paleness of the swooping cliffs of a mountain range, now all vaporised into dust.

"You must, Spock. You must. I mean... If you don't, then... I remember the time on the Romulan ship, and I think, well then, what were you fighting for? What were you fighting for if not to try and protect all the little things you love. All the perfect, tiny, inconsequential things that make it all worthwhile."

The smallest flicker behind Spock's eyes.

"You wonder what I was fighting for? You think I am without loyalty, without a sense of justice?"

"No, no, that's not what I meant at all," Jim says quickly. "I just meant... Well, it's never those lofty ideals you're fighting for at the end of the day, is it? It's the little things. It's the things like the smell of home. Like some random act of kindness from a stranger once. Those are the things. Those are the things that make it OK."

Spock looks away from Jim abruptly, takes a long, quiet breath.

"I understand your point, Captain. However, on this I think we will have to, as you say, agree to differ."

Jim touches the red bough again, the white dust on the red bough.

"We can't let this planet destroy itself," he says. "We can't let these people lose everything that they would fight for. Everything that makes it OK."

Spock says nothing, but the tiny indentation appears between his brows. Jim thinks how that indentation is becoming one of those small, beloved things. One of the things that makes it OK.

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"We need to have a Command meeting, sort out some kind of plan," Jim is saying.

"This would be the 'kind of plan' which involves violating rules we are duty bound to uphold?" Spock asks.
Jim waves his hand dismissively, as if this fact is only of the smallest consequence.

"I don't know. If we need to. We need a plan that will stop that volcano blowing and destroying everything in its path. All that beautiful jungle. Those people. Everything they've built, everything they've made."

"I understand your position on this Captain, but need I remind you that we are on a surveying mission. It is not within our remit to interfere with the planet's geological processes. To do so would contravene orders."

Jim looks at him in exasperation, gesticulates broadly round the observation deck. "But then what's the point of any of this? What's the point of StarFleet if not to try and make the Galaxy a better place?"

"The point of StarFleet in cases such as Niribu, as I am sure you are well aware, is to explore and observe. It is not to - I believe the phrase is - 'play God'. The Prime Directive advocates a course of total non-interference. Nature should be allowed to run its course."

"I'm not saying we should make contact with them. I'm saying we should do something to save them. Without them even knowing about it."

"Nevertheless, a strict adherence to Article II, Paragraph VII, would appear to advocate against any intervention. The risk of any action we take leading to contamination of the Niribian culture is-""
Vulcan reasoning processes than a categorical imperative to mindlessly obey orders. I believe the Federation would agree with me on this.

Jim's eyes crinkle, go soft and blue, the colour of Lake Yuron on a fine, clear day.

"You're sort of awesome when you want to be, you know?"

"I would not get too excited, Captain. Your fight will be with the laws of physics, not with me. It is still entirely unclear to me what, in a situation such as this, we are able to do."

"Well, I've been thinking about that," Jim says, his face growing alive and animated. "I was thinking we could use a cold fusion device."

"I fail to see how that would achieve anything, Captain. You cannot prevent a volcanic eruption by detonating an atomic bomb. That would, in fact, be counterproductive."

"Sorry, I was being sloppy. I mean, like, a counter thermal Rankine wave device. Start a massive endothermic reaction initiated by fusion, where the device then sucks the thermal energy from a volcano and uses it like a thermal electric generator would to power the reaction itself, you know? It would just, like: boom. Flash freeze it. Inert volcano. That thing you said about Yellowstone yesterday got me thinking. It's basically what we did with Valles as far as I know."

Spock sifts through the mangled mess of Jim's sentence, finds the glowing kernel of the idea at the centre of it.

"Even if that were to work, it would simply delay the inevitable. Freezing the top layer of molten rock in an erupting volcano will create unbearable pressure, eventually leading to an even more powerful explosion than the one we are trying to avert."

"Yeah, but we could rig it so it could penetrate right down through a hundred or so kilometres of rock, freeze it from the inside out."

"If we were to perform such an action we run a risk of freezing the planet's centre, Captain. The magnetic field would then disappear, the ozone layer would be destroyed, the atmosphere would be severely compromised. The Niribians would still die."

"Well, then, we'd just freeze it enough to divert it, you know. There's other volcanoes along that fault line. Ones a lot further away from the centre of Niribian civilization."

"Given the numerous uncertainties and the large parameters for error, the chances of that being successful are less than-"

"Well, you'll think of something, Spock. You'll think of something. You're always pointing out to me what a genius you are. And you are. Total genius. It's very impressive."

Jim is smiling as he says this, soft and easy, and Spock knows he shouldn't feel the little warm bud of pride that unfurls in his chest at Jim's words, knows Jim is trying to flatter him into acting in a way which is in flagrant violation of StarFleet regulations, but he feels it anyway.

"Irrespective of my cognitive abilities, I am not sure how your preliminary plan is even possible. The process of deactivating the Valles caldera that you mention, as well as the occasions I am aware of where we have controlled volcanic activity on T'Khasi, involved dedicated teams working for a number of years. It is not a process you can imitate in a matter of weeks using items you can find onboard a starship."
"Look, why don't you just have a look inside my head?" Jim asks, stepping close enough to Spock that they are almost touching. "Then you'll see what I've got. You can see my plan, then add all your science-y magic to it."

"'Science-y magic'," Spock repeats, allowing one eyebrow to arc up his forehead.

"You love it when I'm being oxymoronic. We've established that."

"I have already informed you that repeated mindmelds may contravene your psychic health. As you are not a telepath, you will struggle to convey specific ideas into my mind during a meld - that is a skill even Vulcans have to learn. In addition, such an attempt may have unknown consequences and I am unprepared to take such a risk."

Jim makes a 'pft' sound.

"You always say I'm gonna hurt myself, and yet every time I meld with you I feel incredible."

"I will admit, the ease with which we have been able to meld is unprecedented in my experience. It would appear your mind, despite being Human, is unusually receptive to mine."

Jim's hand has found Spock's, and he is using the blunt edges of his nails to stroke the sensitive skin on the underside of Spock's fingers.

"Are you calling me a mind slut? Shit, did I do the telepathic equivalent of rolling over on my back with my legs in the air?"

He grins at Spock broadly.

"I can play hard to get. Here." He places Spock's fingers against the side of his face and screws his eyes shut, bunches his face together. Spock deduces he is trying to shield, as he has probably been taught in Command training, but all it amounts to is a runaway train of thoughts Spock can feel echoing through the weak link the touch establishes: 'nononononononnon
effort for Spock to hold his gaze steady. *Always, still, this hunger.* "There's only so much homework I can do in one evening. Besides," he adds, "I'm really interested to hear what you think of this one. I figured it might finally change your mind about poetry. Maybe it's similar to the old Vulcan warrior epics you talked about? Plus I was thinking when I chose this for you that it would be super topical, because it gives me a feeling of what it might be like when we get our five year mission. All those weird and magical planets for us to explore, just like Odysseus."

"Magic is a fictional concept, Captain. In the unlikely event of the Enterprise being sent on a five year exploratory mission, we would not encounter any "magical" planets. Simply planets where our current scientific understanding is not sufficient to fully grasp their nature."

"Yeah, well. Ino giving Odysseus the 'currently unexplained by science' veil has less of a ring to it than the 'magic veil.'" He stretches again, cracks his knuckles. "What did you think of the book? Did you like it?"

Spock's picks his way carefully over the piles on Jim's floor and sits down on his customary seat, gives Jim a measured look.

"It is very long and very strange," he says.

"Mr Spock's damning verdict on one of the greatest literary works in Human history: 'long and strange.'"

"More precisely, I found it to be excessively repetitive; the narrative is needlessly drawn out and inconsistent."

"But did you like the characters though? The plot?"

"No," Spock says simply. Then when Jim starts to roll his eyes at him, he expands, "I accept that a lot of what is described throughout the book is allegorical. Nevertheless I found the story a difficult one to engage with, even compared to those which we have read previously. It is a very 'Human' book, one which is particularly fixated with emotion. There is a lot of weeping. The hero cries twenty-three times throughout the course of the story. This would seem to be implausible behaviour for a man in his position."

"I guess there is a lot of melodrama in it," Jim concedes. "But you have to remember, Spock, that back then crying was a bit different from how it is now. It was all passionate and erotic: 'While I sit at home sometimes hot tears come, and I revel in them, or stop before the surfeit makes me shiver'. See. Sexy crying."

"Precisely. Emotion is fetishised to an unusual extent, and none of the characters are able to reflect on past events without engaging in histrionic behaviour. Nothing is recollected in tranquillity. It is bizarre behaviour, even amongst Humans. Especially Human males. It would raise grave concerns for me over your ability to carry out your duties as Captain of the Enterprise if you began to weep on a regular basis."

"Don't cry or you'll start a mutiny. Got it." Jim smiles again, easily. He looks happy, relaxed. Spock can see how much he enjoys this, the challenge of a seemingly impossible project, helping other beings, finding a way out of a difficult situation. Other crew members seem anxious and stressed since their earlier meeting, but Jim seems to be relishing it, his eyes are glowing. "I guess Odysseus does cry a lot, but it's heroic crying - authentic and primary. Moral. He cries because he misses his kinsmen and his vineyards, his fallen comrades. He cries at the futility of war."
"On the contrary, I would argue that a lot of his weeping is, in fact, amoral," Spock counters. "It is largely self-pitying or done for affect. For example, when Book 5 opens with him 'weeping, his eyes never dry, his sweet life flowing away / with the tears he wept for his foiled journey home'. The logical response to such a scenario would be to continue to attempt to formulate a plan to escape. To instead sit and cry is both unproductive and indulgent."

Jim sucks in air through his teeth.

"Harsh. But possibly fair. Although, you know, there's nothing wrong with just being sad. With crying because you're sad. Sad and lonely."

"It is my opinion that much display of Human emotion, far from reflecting a genuine empathic state, is wilfully manipulative and self-serving, particularly highly visible displays of weeping. There are some lines from Carroll, when the Walrus claims to feel sorry for the oysters even as he eats them: 'I weep for you,' the Walrus said:/ 'I deeply sympathize.'/ With sobs and tears he sorted out/ Those of the largest size./ Holding his pocket handkerchief/ Before his streaming eyes."

Jim laughs at this - "I'll never get used to how much you like nursery rhymes."

Spock adds, "Although I accept, upon reflection, that insincere emotional displays are perhaps more logical than sincere ones. At least then there has been a rational choice to use a display of emotion to some pre-decided end. But neither is truly logical. Neither will lead to tranquillity."

Jim squints at him, as if an idea has just occurred to him.

"Those bullies, from your childhood...?" He fades off, chews at the plush pout of his lower lip.

"I am aware of the Vulcans to whom you refer, Captain."

"The ones who wanted to make you cry. Were they successful?"

"They were not. Besides, Vulcans cannot cry, at least not in a sustained way. Their tear ducts would not be able to continuously secrete water in such a fashion."

"Can you cry?"

"I do not believe I can. Certainly I never have."

"Aren't you curious to find out? If you're able to?"

"It does not matter if I am physically able to or not, Captain. Crying is not just physiological, it is psychological. It is, as you would say, 'in your head'."

"And nothing gets in your head, huh?"

"No. It does not."

Jim gives a little snort, leans back on his chair again.

"I guess not."

Spock does not think about the ways in which Jim has got inside his head, the way in which Jim is always there now, in his thoughts. The warm afterglow of each meld with him smouldering at the edges of Spock's consciousness, how Spock can sense it like a quietly banked fire, the comfort of its light and heat. He does not think on the things he feels for Jim, what they might mean. Desire. A protective form of affection. Friendship. Respect. Admiration.
Jim doesn't know what this thing is with Spock, but he knows it is unlike anything he has had with anyone before. And it is confusing, Spock's hands on him, drawing the most delicious fire in their wake, sparks of lust like agony popping and fizzing across his skin. That this is Spock doing this, his friend. Who is still a friend to him, even when they are fucking. He doesn't know what to do with that, how to hold those two things in balance in his head.

Some nights when Spock is there he has the dream, the red dust dream, the dream where he cannot find the door, and on those nights Spock presses cool and dry against him until his heart rate slows down and the sweat dries on his skin. On those nights Spock will speak to him softly, calming. Letting Jim talk about whatever might be in his head. Like that first night on the observation deck. Tell me about your girl, Captain.

Once Jim says to him, "I can't be this to you anymore, Spock. We can't be all things to each other. I can't talk to you about Lyla, Uhura. Christ, don't you ever get jealous?"

Spock's fingers, proprietal, curving round his hip.

"Vulcans are not jealous. Besides, Lyla is dead, Captain. It would be illogical to be jealous of someone who is no longer alive."

"But aren't you worried I might have wanted her more than I want you?"

Spock's eyes opaque, soft. His hands ghosting across Jim's brow, where the sweet spots are.

"Such a worry would serve no purpose."

Jim still feels broken and misshapen from the dream, not quite himself. He feels a sudden surge of frustrated confusion, that he cannot understand what this, this thing with Spock, is. Why is Spock here? Why is Spock here, in his bed, holding him, if he doesn't even care?

"So what you're saying is you don't give a shit either way how I feel about you?"

The little indentation between Spock's brows.

"You are a man of integrity Captain, of honesty. I know if you did not desire to be here, you would not be here. I know that. I know you."

Jim pushes Spock away then, almost savagely, rolls over to face the wall, gives a short, humourless laugh. "No, you don't. You don't know shit about me. You don't know shit. If you actually knew anything about me you wouldn't want me at all."

He feels Spock's hands on him again then, the small of his back, the nape of his neck. Soft words, Vulcan words.

"Shh, shh now, t'hy'la. I know, I know you. T'hy'la."
But Spock doesn't know him. And Spock doesn't love him. Jim doesn't know if Spock *can* love him. He doesn't know if Spock can love anyone.

Love.

Whatever that means.

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**Spock**

Jim once said that when he looks in the mirror he wonders if he has his father's eyes. I know that my eyes bear a striking similarity to my mother's. They are undeniably Human in their appearance. A fact that used to unsettle me, in my youth, before I had learnt how to find the stability in my core, to remain unmoved by things that I cannot change, to find serenity instead. I remember the day I fought with Stonn at school. *'Look at his Human eyes'*. I remember looking at my reflection and seeing that it was true. I remember feeling confused and ashamed.

After my conversation with my father that day, I had spoken briefly with my mother.

"Stonn and the others are right. I can never be a proper Vulcan with these Human eyes," I told her sombrely. "Even if I learn to be just like Surak, others will always be able to see emotion in them."

Then I had added, carelessly, "I hate them," knowing that it was not appropriate to feel hate, but feeling my control eradicated past the point of caring.

My mother had reached for me across the table where we sat. I allowed her to touch her fingers gently to mine.

"Oh, Spock. It is they who don't understand Surak. He would say that you should celebrate your diversity, your difference."

"But my eyes are a symbol of my Humanity, which means I will never be able to fully control my emotion. It is a weakness."

When my mother spoke there was no censure in her tone, only warmth, gentleness.

"I hope one day you come not to see it like that. That you will see it as a strength. Remember the story in *Og-Elakh i'Kaiidth* about Surak's mother and the sandblossoms?"

I could recall it. Surak's mother regarded sandblossoms as weeds, and had told him to pull them out from the cracks in the wall so the neighbours would not see and think his family did not tend to their garden. But he had not. That summer when the rains did not come all the cultivated flowers in her garden, her prized nar'ru vines, did not grow. But the sandblossoms grew and covered the wall in gold, and Surak's mother was glad he had not pulled them. It was an allegory to illustrate kaiidth.
"I do."

"Well, then. Not only would he say there is no point hating something you cannot change, he would say that someday you might find great beauty, great comfort, in something you now see as a defect. That is my hope for you, tal-kam."

Nevertheless, as I grew older I learnt to school my face and my body to compensate for the unwanted intimacy in my Human eyes.

I learnt how to be Vulcan. I learnt how not to even care whether or not I had Human eyes. I learnt how it was of no consequence.

There is an irony here, one I would never tell Jim, even though he would appreciate it. That I so loved my mother's eyes. Warm, and dark, and deep.

The emotion in her eyes was always something beautiful to me. That last time I saw her, turning to face me on the cliff top, the sadness in her eyes as she saw our Home being destroyed, how it sang to some nameless feeling in me, something I had long learned to suppress. To move past and let go. That feeling like breaking. And there it was in her eyes, I did not need to feel it, she could feel it for us both. Her sad eyes as the rock beneath her feet began to crumble. She gave a cry when she fell, but there was still no fear there, only sadness. Only a great, bottomless, falling sadness.

I reached for her then, but it was too late. Perhaps if I had been fully Human I would have reached for her before then, I would have reached for her when I saw her sad eyes, I would have drawn her to me and held her in my arms, we would have shared our grief. If I had been holding her she would not have fallen. But it is pointless and illogical to dwell on such things. I did not reach for her in time. Her great, dark eyes. Kaiidth.

I reached for her and it was too late. I reached for her. There is a part of me that is still reaching.
Jim rescues Spock from a volcano. Existential dilemmas follow. Lots of angsting. Followed by more angsting.

Chapter Notes

**Rating:** NC-17 (this part) for language, sexual content, adult themes  
**Warnings:** Mention of genocide. Severe abuse of science (not all mine) and scientific inconsistencies not in keeping with *Trek* canon (also not all mine). Some vaguely dubcon-y undertones to one of the sex scenes, but only if you squint at it.  
**Author Notes:** Beta-ed by the lovely Amanda Warrington. My first ever K/S fic. Please be gentle! Amanda made me give her my firstborn child write this in return for helping me out with my research project, so here it is. (NB if anyone feels inclined to take part in the research project, which looks at women's involvement in explicit m/m slash (amongst other things), it's [here](#), and you would have my eternal gratitude).

*The world is a fine place and worth the fighting for and I hate very much to leave it.*  
- Ernest Hemingway, 'For Whom The Bell Tolls'

**Jim**

I don't know if Sam was always Sam, because it would get confusing with two Georges in the family, or if mom just started calling him that after dad died, because the name hurt too much. I kinda think the latter, because sometimes when she was all drunk and sloppy and sappy she would call him "Little G" and dance him around the room standing on the tops of her feet and press kisses between his eyebrows. She loved him better than me, but then why wouldn't she? He was her golden boy from a happier time, from when she was young and impetuous and married to a rising star in the Fleet; and everything was expat cocktail parties and interstellar tennis club. I was a constant reminder of the day that all changed, of the day she had to go back to her dad's farm in Iowa on a widow's pension, to the sleepy town she hated, "how green was my fucking valley", to the place she thought she'd escaped. And every year my birthday would come around, and she'd try and be brave, and make me a cake, and smile at me, but her hands would be shaking and I'd know that day would never be my birthday, it would always be the day the man she loved was taken from her.

We didn't talk about dad on that day. We didn't talk about dad on most days. Not mom, and not Sam. I know he remembered dad, but he never spoke to me about it; I used to think because he was mean, but now, I don't know... Maybe he thought it would hurt too much as well. Maybe those memories were too precious for him to share, and he wanted to hoard them up inside himself like treasure. Bright, shiny memories of my hero father.
There was one time, one time he talked about him. He'd come to bail me out. I'd been in the lock-up 12 hours by then, wasn't expecting anyone to come for me. Me and the guy at the desk had a game of beirut going on. My eye was swollen half shut so I'd pretty much lost depth perception, and the guy kept winning, which seemed to make him happy. He'd let me bum a couple of smokes anyways, and I reckoned I was half way on the path to charming myself out of the goddamn cell already, bail or no bail. I wasn't expecting to see Sam, all clean and wholesome looking, with his expensive looking haircut and movie star jawline. He was doing his postdoc by then, I think, at UCB, living with Aurie in some fancy apartment in Oakland. I wondered what had happened to the old Sam, the Sam who used to race dirt bikes and get into fights at football games and fuck Kasey Hannigan in the bushes down by the creek.

"Baby Brother," his voice was unreadable.

"Doctor Kirk. You're a long way from home. They give you time off from curing space cancer?"

Sam got that tight look of annoyance on his face, a look the old Sam never used to get.

"I'm a molecular biologist. Not a medic."

"Yeah, well, exactly. Everything's biology, when you think about it."

I gave the guard a wink and he smiled back.

"Apart from all the things that aren't," Sam said. He was trying to sound jovial, to match me and the guard, but he still just sounded annoyed. He paid my bail. We walked across the lot to his car, and he offered to give me a lift home.

"Not home. Drop me at Dee's."

He didn't say anything about that. I thought it was because he understood.

"So how come you're on delinquent-sitting duty?" I asked. "Where's Mom? Propping up the bar at some space station somewhere?"

"Working."

"Working. Ha." I laughed without humour. "Working on her 6th gin and tonic most likely."

Sam looked pained. "I know you don't think much of her, Jim, but she's a damn fine biologist. And it's the nature of that kind of work that -"

I snorted derisively. "You make it sound like she got into Fleet on her own merits. We both know what she really is; just some cheap hick farmgirl who spotted her meal ticket out of here and latched on to him as fast and as hard as she could. Riverside is crawling with them. You should know, you fucked half of them before you wised up and met Aurie."

The muscle was working next to Sam's mouth. Good. "I don't know how to respond to that."

"Then don't."

We sat in silence for a while, Sam keeping his eyes fixed on the road. Then he looked over at
me briefly, looked away. "You know what she's doing. She's working on developing a new kind of fungi-resistant wheat strain. The same thing she's been doing for five years. Ever since Tarsus-"

"I don't want to talk about Tarsus," I said shortly.

"Well, I think that's part of the problem, isn't it? If you'd talk about it instead of, I don't know, whatever this is that you're doing," Sam had gestured vaguely in my direction, at my bruised face and dirty clothes, "If you tried to actually turn some of the experience into a positive, like mom's being doing."

"Don't start that shit with me." I was angry now. I could feel it.

"You need to stop punishing her for what happened. It wasn't her fault. In fact, she pulled that planet back from the brink. She-"

I gritted my jaw. "You weren't there." Because of course he wasn't there. Because no one was ever there when it mattered.

"She tried-"

"Oh, she tried? Like she tried to be a good mother? Like she tried to give up drinking? Like she tried to stop Frank from knocking seven kinds of shit out of me?"

Sam took a deep breath, said quietly, "We all tried with you Jim".

"Fuck you. Just fuck you". I'd been furious by that point, though I didn't know if I was more pissed with Sam, or with myself, for caring, for feeling my throat get scratchy and tight.

Sam drove on in strained silence. He still looked perfect, but his fingers were so tight on the wheel they'd turned almost white.

After a while he said, "You're more like her than you think, you know."

"Oh, and I suppose you're more like him?" I said acerbically.

"I'm just trying to make something of my life. That's all. It's called being a grown-up. You might want to give it a go sometime."

"Oh, right, because it's just that easy."

"It's as easy as you want to make it. Not everything has to be so hard."

**Easy.**

"I know. I can get out of this anytime I want, Big Brother. Any time I want. I know exactly where the door is. If I wanted to be, I could be Admiral of the whole fucking StarFleet."

I left the last bit unspoken: *I'm the one who's just like him. I am. Me.*

"Right," Sam replied flatly. "Well, I won't hold my breath".
I thought of another time, a time that felt like a lifetime ago. I thought of climbing up on the roof of the barn, watching the sunset. It was cold after that, but I didn't get down, just sat there in my t-shirt, knees tucked into my chest, shivering. My eyebrow itching like crazy where the blood was drying. The dull knuckle shaped bruises brewing along my cheekbone. At some point Sam scrambled up and sat beside me. It was the night of the big game, and he was in his football shirt already, the green and red one, KIRK on the back in gold letters. He didn't say anything, just sat there next to me, our knees almost touching, our elbows knocking together. Toddy Hannigan came calling for him, but he just watched him ring at the door, speak to Frank, and then shrug and drive off. He didn't shout down to him. It got dark, and even colder. Sam must've been cold too. But he still just sat there, shoulder to shoulder with me in the blackness. After the longest time I said: "Aren't you going to be in a whole bunch of trouble for missing the game?" And he looked at me for a long beat, and then gently touched the side of my eyebrow. "Fuck 'em," he said quietly. "Just fuck 'em." Then I grinned at him and he grinned back. "Me and you vs. the Universe, huh bud?" He ruffled my hair. "You'll do OK, Jimbo. You'll be alright."

That day in the car I said, "What happened to you, Sam? Sometimes I feel like I don't know you anymore."

"That's because you don't," he replied sharply. And then he looked over at me, at my swollen eye, and split lip, and the smell of half a bottle of bourbon and a night in the cells hanging on me like a well worn coat, the kind of coat you wear every day, and shook his head. "Dad would hate to see you like this. He'd hate it. He would be so ashamed."

But he said that last bit so sadly, and it didn't sound like he was trying to hurt me, it sounded like the truth.

The night before the Niribian mission, Spock comes to Jim's cabin. The door is open, how Jim prefers it ("I hate feeling closed in. It's why I like Space so much"), but when he looks inside Jim is lying flat on his bed in just his boxers and undershirt, apparently asleep. He goes to leave, but Jim raises his head.

"Oh, hey," Jim murmurs sleepily. Pats at the sheets to motion for him to come in.

Spock presses the door shut behind him, sits down on the side of Jim's bed. Jim allows his eyes to drift close again. He is smiling.

"Glad you're here."

Always this desire to touch him, to taste him. Just like the first time. And it still makes Spock feel shaky on the inside, almost sick, panicked. He forces himself to breathe steadily. But he lets himself touch Jim. His bare legs. The stocky musculature of his upper thighs, the bony knobs of his knees. The fine bronze hair over his shins. There are veins there, on his calves, thick ones, standing out from the surface of his skin, meandering in lazy zig zags. Spock lets his finger trace one all the way from Jim's calf to the soft vulnerable divot behind his knee.

"Ah, my varicose veins," Jim says, his voice still gruff and low with tiredness. "Too much street hockey as a kid."
"Varicose veins," Spock repeats. He has not heard the term before. "Most illogical. Why take such a circumnavigatous route to the heart?"

"Force chains. The way force is transmitted though a granular material means that it meanders. Rivers. Lightening. Blood. Come on, Science Officer. You know that." Jim has opened his eyes now, propped himself up on his elbows, is looking at him smugly. Spock feels a momentary spike of surprise at his own lack of analytical thought.

"You are quite correct. Apparently I am not thinking clearly."

"Apparently." Jim's smile turns softer. "Because of tomorrow?"

"No," Spock says, recklessly, impetuously, thrillingly, "It is you, your nearness."

Jim's smile deepens. "I make you come over all illogical."

"You do."

He finds Jim's mouth. _Rivers. Lightening. Blood._

**

They fuck in the morning, and it has a strange, desperate sadness to it that Spock does not understand. The mission is not without danger, granted, but it is hardly the most risky thing the Enterprise crew has done. But somehow it feels like this might be the last time. He cannot tell where this thought has come from, but it awakens a kind of anger in him, and he finds himself pushing into Jim even harder than usual, squeezing tight around his arms and thighs, biting at his neck until he leaves a dark rosy mark there. Spock is always surprised by how readily Jim's blood leaps up to his touch, like if Spock sucked a little harder his whole heart might follow.

Jim looks dazed afterwards. He touches the mark on his neck.

"I hurt you. I am sorry."

"No, no, it was good, you were good." Jim looks at him. _Good. Just maybe not such a good idea to be indulging in something quite so vigorous when I've got to be running all over the place today like someone from a Boy's Own Adventure story._"

"I apologise." The shakiness, last night's shakiness, comes back and takes root inside him. He needs to meditate, to centre himself before he goes down into the volcano. He touches his fingers lightly to Jim's. "I should go. I will see you on the bridge."

"See you."

It's a long trek through the dense scarlet jungle, and Jim feels uncomfortably hot under the double layers of his wetsuit and coarse, blue robes. There's a dull ache between his legs which he usually finds enjoyable (memories of Spock, his long fingers, his thick, dark cock) but which right now he could really do without. The air feels thick, gritty and hard to breathe. He wonders if they have left it too late. The vista is alive with sparks that dart like fireflies, settling on the trees, the ground, their
clothes, whirling and dancing. He ignores his throbbing asshole, the sweat collecting under his arms, down the small of his back; pushes harder towards the fluttering yellow flags he can see in the distance.

Bones touches his arm lightly.

"Here's as good a place as any. I'll be waiting for you."

"You'll be alright?"

"Sure. I'm not the one playing matador with the natives. Besides, I love the smell of sulphur in the morning."

Jim looks up pensively at the snorting volcano, tries not to breathe too deeply.

"You think we've enough time?"

"I have every faith in Spock's anally retentive attention to detail. Although I know what you mean. It feels like the sky is falling in."

Jim looks up at blue above him, hazy now through the smoke and red flickerings of flames and ash.

"Ha. It's dust blowing in, brick dust from the big red brick wall at the end of the universe."

Bones looks at him quizzically.

"Have you been breathing in too many fumes, Jim? Am I going to have to get a hypo out?"

"No, it's nothing, just a silly thing I used to think."

He carries on by himself, almost at a run, trying hard to ignore the rotten egg stench that roils in his belly. The pathway towards the temple is a long, creamy ribbon of perfect hexagonal stones. Even now, with his heart hammering in his chest, and his whole body wired with adrenalin, Jim can appreciate the care, the craftsmanship that went into creating this path. This is why this is right, he thinks, this is why we can't let them die. This is why it's worth it. Even Spock, even Spock going into the volcano itself, going into the heart of the darkness.

The temple is a giant, vermillion pyramid structure, wrought out of the living vines that grow in the jungle, so that it flexes and twists - alive. Jim skirts it nervously, finds what looks to be a lesser used entrance. The anthropology team had assured him that today was an important day in the Niribian calendar, that the whole settlement would be in the temple for most of the day, in quiet reflection and worship. He steps into the ruby gloom, out of the dusty sparks of the volcano's sputterings, and sees to his relief that he is indeed at the back of the temple. The central atrium is full of Nirbians, prostrate on the ground, skin chalk white with the ash which has been collecting on the bark of the jungle trees, thrown into sharp relief by the vibrant yellow of their ceremonial headdresses. Directly in front of Jim are seven powdery looking scrolls, hung from ropes descending from the ceiling.

That'll do, Jim thinks. That'll do as well as anything. He needs to take something they want. He needs them to want it badly enough they'll chase him for it, all of them. That way they'll be out of the kill zone when Spock activates the counter thermal Rankine wave device.

He grabs a scroll, notices as he does so the sudden weight of countless black eyes coming to rest upon him. Then he turns and runs. Runs.

He barely notices the hexagonal stones this time, they fly past in a blur beneath his feet. He prays not to trip. Everything is smoke and redness. He can hear the Nirbians behind him, close behind him,
gaining fast, calling something in their strange, birdlike tongue. He runs.

From the window of the shuttle over Niribu Spock can see the way the crimson vegetation snakes across the dark greyblue water of the lagoons. Force chains. He looks at the thick clotted puffs of smoke coming from the mouth of the volcano. The shuttle lurches again violently, causing Sulu to mutter darkly about corrosive volcanic ash and damage to air intake systems. Nyota finishes securing his suit, presses a kiss to the glass of his helmet. Her eyes are soft, sad.

"You got this," she says, gently, moving to the front of the shuttle to sit with Sulu.

Then he is plummeting into the gaping mouth of the volcano, towards the blazing red and yellow honeycombs of fire. He wills his body to accept the fall, not to fight it. It is so hot though, so bright. He feels his fingers tighten reflexively around the bungee wire that fastens him to the shuttle like an umbilical cord.

He can hear Sulu over his comm.

"Spock, I've got to pull you back up."

'I still wouldn't do it. And neither would you. And I am glad.'

"Negative," Spock replies. "This is our only chance to save this species. If this volcano erupts, the planet dies."

He looks down, eyes scanning for somewhere to aim to land, but everything is a smoking mess of hot molten rock. His own breath is loud inside his helmet.

He hears Sulu again, voice tense.

"Pull him back up. Now!"

Spock feels the wire break. He gives one small grunt of surprise. Then he is falling. Falling. Mother.

He lands hard, feels the breath punched from his lungs. Bounces. Rolls. His hands scramble for purchase against something, anything. He lets go of the device. 4.6 seconds after the wire snapped he finds himself on a tiny outcrop of solid rock amidst the restlessly tossing lava. Spock does not believe in miracles, but the odds against his surviving such a fall are startling, 4,982:1.

"Spock, are you okay?" Nyota asks over the comm.

He rises unsteadily to his feet, scanning the rock around him for the Rankin device. If it is destroyed, then all is lost. There. He sees it, nestled into some boulders near where the lava thrashes and writhes.

"I am, surprisingly, alive. Stand by."

Spock hikes carefully down to the fallen device. Even in the specially designed suit he can feel the heat; the wet, licking heat. It is nothing like the dry, arid heat of Vulcan. This is a heat that wants to melt you down its throat, to consume you utterly. He can hear himself panting from the exertion, breath scratchy and rough.
"Spock, we're going back to the Enterprise. We'll get you out of there," Nyota says over the comm. Her voice has a strained, desperate quality to it. This is a lie. They will not get him out from this volcano. Spock knows this. He knew it the second the wire snapped, perhaps even before. He breathes out steadily. *Control.* He has a job to do.

He secures the device, plugs his tricorder in to activate it, sets the timer to three minutes. There. It is done.

The flames leap bright around him, blinding plumes, fantastic in their fury. The volcano growls at him from her belly, throaty and low. So this is how he will die then. He sinks to his knees. **Breathes.**

_______________________________________________________________________________

Another spear whistles past his head. There was nothing in the anthropology report about Nirbians being such bad shots, but Jim thanks his lucky stars that they are.

Bones is bellowing behind him.

"Jim! Jim! The beach is that way!"

His eyes catch on a low hanging chalky branch, and he lodges the scroll in it, lets the paper unroll. Hopefully that will distract the Nirbians from keeping up their constant barrage of spears.

"I know. We're not going to the beach."

He heads for the cliffs, the sparkling azure of the faraway sea.

"Oh no, no, no, no!" Bones laments. "I hate this!"

Jim glances over his shoulder, gives his friend a tight look of sympathy.

"I know you do."

Then he is jumping, falling, falling, the sea rushing to meet him, shimmering and white flecked in the sunshine. *Look at the sea. Look at the sea, not at the rocks.*

The water smacks into him viciously, forcing its way into his nose, buffeting angrily against his chest. But when he opens his eyes under the water he can see Bones alongside him, looking pissed but unharmed. He wriggles out of the restrictive robes, pushes his breathing apparatus into his mouth, turns away from the cliff face, starts swimming.

There she is, through the blue and cool of the water, his girl, shining in the deep.

The minute they are back on board and the watertight hatch shuts behind them, Scotty slides the main doors open, complaining vehemently about the damage the salt water is doing to the ship.

Jim cuts him off. "Scotty - where's Spock?"

Scotty gives a small grimace, his tone switching from admonishment to concern.

"Still in the volcano, Sir."
Suddenly the Nirbians, the volcano, everything else, seems nothing. Spock. Why had Jim let him do this? Why had he let Spock go into that volcano? He’d wanted to do it, but Spock had insisted, had pointed out the superior ability of Vulcan physiology to endure extremes of heat.

"Is that not why you called our planet what you did in Standard?" he had asked, "After the God of Fire, the God of Volcanoes?"

"But you don't believe in Gods," Jim had protested.

"I believe in my optimally heat-resistant physiological makeup," Spock had responded measuredly.

Spock was right, and at the time there hadn't seemed much point in arguing. But he should have. He should have said no. He should have said that he would go instead.

You know the real reason you didn't go into the volcano, why you let Spock go instead. No. The guard, hand on his phaser, voice resigned. "Your choice, son." NO.

He runs to the bridge, Bones and Scotty right behind him.

"Lieutenant, do we have an open channel to Mr. Spock?"

Uhura's voice is unsteady, her eyes wet.

"The heat's frying his comms, but we still have contact."

Jim's eyes meet hers, for a slow beat. He gives her a small nod. This is what it is like to love him, then. This is something they can both share.

He hits the comm button on the console in front of him.

"Spock?"

He tries to keep the note of desperation out of his voice.

Spock sounds calm, steady, serene. He sounds like Spock. "I have activated the device, Captain. When the countdown is complete, the reaction should render the volcano inert."

"Yeah, and that's gonna render him inert," Bones states from the left of the console.

"Do we have use of the transporters?" Jim asks.

"Negative, sir. Not with these magnetic fields," Chekov replies, and Jim knows this, knows the planet's magnetic field is powerful enough to block an indirect lock-on and transport, but there has to be a way. There has to be a way.

"I need to beam Spock back to the ship. Give me one way to do it."

"Uh, maybe if we had a direct line of sight..." Chekov offers.

"Hold on wee man, you're talking about an active volcano!" Scotty cuts in, turning to Jim. "Sir, if that thing erupts, I cannae guarantee we can withstand the heat!"

"I don't know that we can maintain that kind of altitude," Sulu adds.

Jim sucks in his lower lip, feeling the slim tendrils of anxiety start to take root low in his belly, start to flower into something like dread. No. There is always the door, always. He just has to find it.
"You mean, there's a door for you, Jim. Not for everyone. For you.

Spock's voice comes again from over the comm.

"Our shuttle was concealed by the ash cloud, but the Enterprise is too large. If utilized in a rescue effort, it would be revealed to the indigenous species."

He sounds like he is reading the weather forecast, not signing his own death warrant. Jim braces his hands against the console, feels the tight dig of his fingers, frustration.

"Spock, nobody knows the rules better than you, but there has got to be an exception."

"None. Such action violates the Prime Directive."

Bones steps forward, so his is standing shoulder to shoulder with Jim.

"Shut up, Spock! We're trying to save you, damn it!" he snaps.

"Doctor, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

Jim thinks of Spock sat on the spare chair in his cabin, Steinbeck open in front of him, saying those exact same words. The things he said to Spock that day. Things he can never now unsay.

"Spock, we're talking about your life!" He is shouting.

"The rule cannot be broken..." Spock's voice fades out into grit and static.

"Spock!" Jim calls, frantic. Then turning to Uhura, "Try to get him back online."

Uhura starts snapping desperately at buttons on her Comms station, her usual elegant grace long departed.

"Ninety seconds to detonation," Chekov announces.

Jim can hear Bones breathing heavily next to him. He speaks quietly.

"If Spock were here and I were there, what would he do?" He doesn't glance across at Bones, can't bear the knowing look he might see in his friend's eyes.

"He'd let you die," Bones says simply.

There is a flickering feeling in his chest, tight and hopeless.

No, no.

He will not let Spock die.

__________________________________________________________________________

Spock looks into the heart of the fire. Only fools think fire is red or yellow. It is blue at its melancholy edges, green at its envious heart. Sadness, envy. These things must be gone from him, he must find this in him and let it go, go.
Jim. The thought is desperate; an angry, wanting thing. *Jim, no!* If he could just see him one more time, if he could just... He thinks on Surak, who says: *Goh'rom-halan na'eifa ashau k'bezhun. Fai'ei na'eifa ashau k'khaf-spolong k'katraong inam-fam dahshaya.*

He closes his eyes, exhales. There it is in his katra, the deep joy he takes in his own existence. *Let it go. This is just a passing.* He spreads his arms into the heat. The fire will claim him. In many ways the fire has already claimed him.

He finds the blankness there, the acceptance. He lets his head fall back, lets his ears fill with the silence. Breaths out. *Let it go.*

Then he feels that familiar suck and pull in his belly, and when he opens his eyes he sees the transporter room. He rises to his feet feeling strangely disjointed. He had already surrendered to it, his soul had already gone. Now he feels the flex and wrap of each sinew, anchoring him into his body, a body he had already let go. He does not understand.

Jim comes skidding into the room, calling his name. He stops in front of him, eyes bright and anxious, chest rising and falling.

"You all right?"

"Captain, you let them see our ship," Spock states. It is the only explanation for how the Enterprise was able to pull him out of the volcano's belly.

McCoy, who has followed Jim into the room, waves a dismissive hand at this, rolls his eyes.

"He's fine."

Jim is looking at him in exasperation, shaking his head, thick eyebrows knitted together in bewilderment. Jim's eyes are so blue, there is nothing bluer, or more true.

Nyota's voice sounds over the comm.

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Is Commander Spock on board, Sir?" There is a low, strained quality to her voice.

"Safely and soundly," Jim replies.

"Please notify him that his device has successfully detonated," she says, clipped, angry.

Jim grins, eyes crinkling, the fan of wrinkles that Spock had already known he would never see again.

"You hear that? Congratulations, Spock. You just saved the world."


Jim just looks nonplussed, scrunching his face together as if Spock's admonishment is not even worth his time.

"Oh, come on, Spock. So they saw us. Big deal."

Spock regards him for a long moment.
"Captain, if you do not mind, I would speak with you privately."

Jim shrugs, irritated.

"Sure, after we debrief."

"Now."

Jim's eyes darken.

"Was that an order? Because that sounded like an order."

"It is simply a request to talk with you privately at your earliest possible convenience. I wish to say things I think would be inappropriate to raise in a public forum."

"Fine," Jim says tightly. "We'll find a conference room."

He rolls his eyes at McCoy on the way out of the transporter room, walks quickly along the corridor - pausing only to find a Comm to instruct Sulu to take them into orbit - until they find an empty cabin, keys in his code.

They step inside.

"What?" Jim asks.

"You have let your personal feelings about me interfere with your ability to captain the ship," Spock says. It takes a surprising amount of effort to keep his tone level. His breath feels hot and heavy inside his helmet, the same as it did when he was falling.

"I've let -" Jim cuts himself off, his face rapidly turning rosy with anger. "You know what, no. You don't get to say that to me. You don't get to tell me how to do my job."

"As your First Officer it is my duty to 'tell you how to do your job' if I believe you have been compromised to the extent that you are unable to do that job. Captain."

"I haven't been compromised. I made a decision, the right decision, a decision everyone else on board this ship agrees with. Apart from you. I mean, what, you don't think your life is more important than rules? They're just rules, Spock. They don't mean anything. Not like... Not like what you mean."

"They are not 'just rules', Captain. They are in place to maintain the balance of power across the Galaxy, to ensure the peaceful development of preWarp cultures. You know exactly why we have these rules. Exposure to our technology could change the course of history on a planet like Niribu. It could lead to civil unrest, to violence, to loss of life, to suffering, on a scale that it appears you, for one, are unable to imagine. So, yes, I regard my life to be less important than adherence to rules that are in place to safeguard countless lives of others. Your decision to violate the Prime Directive in order to facilitate my rescue was entirely illogical."

Jim's teeth are gritted hard behind the plump swell of his mouth, hands fisting rigidly by his sides. "There is nothing fucking logical in suicide either Spock!" he almost snarls. "Every fibre in your being should scream out. I don't know what that shit was you were pulling back there in the volcano, but it wasn't logical, I can tell you that much."

"It was not suicide, Captain. That would imply agency on my part. It was a simple process of placing the needs of the many over the needs of the few. I am sure you would have decided similarly."
"Well, self-sacrifice is apparently something I'm not much good at," Jim says tightly. He looks down to the floor suddenly, a strange, raw expression coming over his face. Shame, Spock thinks. Shame, sadness. "I wasn't going to give you up. I couldn't- I can't-" He cuts off, the muscle at the side of his jaw working furiously. His face is still pink, his eyes strangely bright.

"If you are finding yourself unable to make effective command decisions then we should reconsider the nature of our relationship," Spock says quietly.

Jim's gaze snaps back up to meet his, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"That's what you want? That's actually what you want?"

No. He wants Jim in his arms, warm and naked, he wants every inch of Jim's flushed, humming body pressed tight and bare against his, he wants Jim's wet, mobile mouth on him, he wants Jim's hands clenched around his hips, he wants Jim's hard pink phallus impaled deep inside him, he wants to see Jim's eyes crinkle up with laughter, he wants Jim's hand, casual, on the back of his head on his way out of a room. He wants all the things he had to give up in the volcano, all the things that had cost him so dearly to set aside. He wants.

"Vulcans do not want," he says tautly.

Jim looks at him for a long, steady beat, unblinking.

"That's utter fucking bullshit, and you know it, and I'm not taking that from you," he pitches his voice low, but the rage is still there, thick and coiled. "Take that fucking helmet off."

Spock feels a momentary pang of confusion.

"Captain...?"

"Take that fucking helmet off right now, Commander. That's an order. I'm still your Captain, whether you like it or not."

Spock removes his helmet with surprisingly unsteady fingers.

"Captain, I-"

But Jim is on him before he can finish, cat quick, pressing the solid muscular bulk of his body against the unyielding plates of Spock's space suit, his mouth smashing fiercely into Spock's, hot and savage. Spock parts his lips, more in surprise than passion, and Jim's tongue is immediately inside him, wet and ferocious. There is emotion flooding from Jim's skin, rage, desire, relief, something else, something multi-faceted and vibrant that Spock struggles to place. It is overwhelming. Spock feels like a tsunami has crashed over his control, destroying it utterly, leaving only devastation. It is the most terrible and the most beautiful thing he has ever experienced.

Jim pulls back, flushed and panting, mouth swollen with the force of the kiss.

"The rest of it - get it off."

Spock looks at him mutely, helpless.

"That's another order, Commander. Off."

Spock sheds the suit quickly, fingers fumbling hastily over the surprisingly delicate hooks and catches, nothing like the slow precision Nyota had employed to put it on him.
Jim watches him intently, eyes still clouded with anger, brows like thunder. When Spock is down to his undershirt and thermal leggings he looks over at Jim, who makes an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Off."

Once Spock is entirely naked, Jim steps closer, not quite touching. His gaze is locked on Spock's, a uniquely tumultuous blue. He is so close that Spock can feel the heat radiating off him. He does not touch Spock. It makes Spock quiver, everything in him wound so tight he feels like he might break under the weight of it. It is all too much. Jim is too much.

"Captain-"

"Take off my wetsuit," Jim says, voice still laden with quiet menace. "There's a fastening at the side."

"We should not-"

"You seem to be struggling with your ability to obey orders today, Commander. I'll say it again, slowly, so there's no room for confusion. Take. Off. My. Wetsuit."

Spock finds the catch, starts to unzip the suit. His fingers stray, brushing against the growing exposed expanse of Jim's glowing skin.

"Did I say you could touch me?"

Jim's tone is caustic, and Spock lets his hands fall away immediately. Jim has never been like this with him before, not when they are being intimate. He feels lost, adrift.

"If you touch me, you'll know what I'm feeling. I don't want you to know what I'm feeling, Spock. I want you to be in the dark, like I am with you. Like I am with you all the fucking time. In the darkness."

He steps back out of Spock's reach, finishes shucking off the wetsuit himself. He is naked underneath, just the proud, fluting lines of his body.

He is flushed pink and gold all over, skin already slick looking with a sheen of sweat, penis already half thickened with blood and lying heavy against the dark blonde hair of his thighs.

"Is that how you like me, Spock? In the darkness?"

There is a thundering in his temples, a strange, blind sort of wanting.

"No. No. I like you in the light."

It is imperative that he touch Jim. Now. Spock steps forward, runs one hand firmly up Jim's stomach to his chest, lets his fingers splay over Jim's sternum. Feels the slow and heavy thump of Jim's heart shuddering under his touch. He bends his head, flicks his tongue over one dusky pink nipple, feeling it harden instantly in his mouth. He thinks of all the things about Jim that harden so enthusiastically under his touch. His own phallus rises in response, pulsing and angry against his belly. He bites at the little bud in his mouth, hard, hearing Jim make a shocked, wet noise in the back of his throat. He drags his tongue up over Jim's clavicle, finds the darker spot his mouth left there that morning, worries at it again with lips and teeth. He lets his fingers dance against the side of Jim's face, but Jim says, savagely, "No." So he slides his hand down instead, finds the heat of Jim's tight little pucker, eases one finger inside the twist of muscle, enters Jim that way. Inside it is damp and hot, still slick.
with Spock's earlier emissions. The sensation against the highly sensitised skin of Spock's fingers is exquisite.

Jim groans, and the sound is like music.

Spock adds another finger, enflamed by the residue of lubricant and his own semen that he can feel coating his skin.

"Fuck, Spock," Jim sighs, voice dark and smoky.

"I wish to be inside you," Spock replies, kissing at the side of Jim's face, the hair on his temples.

"You are," Jim says, resting his forehead against Spock's. "You already are."

__________________________________________________________________________

They lie in Jim's bed. Around them the Enterprise, around her the stars. Jim can hear the fast canter of Spock's heart low down in his side. Spock's heart. Jim thinks of that icy, silky calmness Spock displayed in the face of death, his infuriating inability to understand the emotion behind Jim's decision to rescue him - those things must all be a front. Behind it must lie the kindest, softest, sweetest, best heart that Jim has ever known. A heart capable of that kind of altruism. Jim has never seen anything like it, that acceptance in the face of death. Well, almost anything. He's essentially a country boy, is familiar enough with the Church from his childhood, and he can't escape it; the subtext. Yet not my will, but thine be done.

"Weren't you scared?" Jim asks.

Spock is silent for a long beat.

"No. I chose not be afraid."

"How can you choose not to be afraid? Of dying?"

"Surak teaches us to accept death. To understand that every life comes to an end, when time demands it, even our own. Loss of life is to be mourned, but only if the life was wasted. I would have thought you would understand that, Captain. You have risked your own life on various of our missions on thirty-seven previous occasions. Many of the risks being entirely needless."

"Yeah, but that was different. I never just waited to die with some beatific look on my face being all: needs of the many blah blah blah. I was trying to live."

"What I was prepared to do was a necessary sacrifice. You often act as if your safety is of no consequence to you whatsoever. A fact we have discussed previously when I have expressed concern for your continued well being."

"I'm bullet proof," Jim states, matter of factly. This is one thing history has taught him. Lucky Jim.

"I can assure you, Captain, you most certainly are not," Spock replies tartly.

"It's a turn of phrase," Jim mutters. When Spock doesn't say anything, Jim rolls over, props himself up on his elbows, looks down into Spock's face, silver cream in the darkness. "The risks I take on missions and stuff. You know I don't actually want to die, right?"
Spock's dark gaze meets his. "There certainly is no logical explanation for much of your risk taking. You have a history of such reckless and self-destructive behaviour, from early childhood. For example, the occasion you drove your stepfather's car over a cliff. I fail to see why you would perform such an action unless your intention was to cause yourself serious harm."

"I wasn't gonna die," Jim says incredulously. "I never even thought I might... I just had to do something, you know. I was so angry."

"And when you are angry I have observed that you make errors in judgement that may result in your untimely demise," Spock replies.

"But I know I'm not going to die," Jim insists. He takes Spock's hand, presses it to his face. "Here, feel it."

And he shows Spock the feeling, the feeling he has, how he always knows he is not going to die. Not when he's jumping from a speeding car, not when he's picking a fight with four angry looking thugs in StarFleet uniform, not when he's hurtling through space towards a moving platform, not when he's bleeding heavily deep within an enemy ship, not when his face is swollen so fat from one of his ridiculous allergies that he can't breathe, not when he's ninety pounds soaking wet and his stomach is so tight with hunger it has turned numb. He shows Spock that he is going to live, and live, and live. I'll show you the door, Spock, he thinks, and lets Spock see it, the door in the wall at the end of the Universe. Not going to die. Always a way. It's like with the Kobayashi Maru. You gave me a test that was a brick wall, a big red brick wall, and I found the door. I found it, Spock. I found the door. It's always there; the door. You've just got to know how to look for it.

"Sometimes it is better not to open the door. To accept," Spock says quietly.

Jim feels something flutter at the edges of his consciousness then. A dark weight. Spock dying. He doesn't want Spock to see what that felt like. He twists his head away from Spock's fingers, bites down on his bottom lip.

"I don't want you to just 'accept' it. I don't want you to die, Spock."

"I -" Spock begins.

"Vulcans do not want, I know, I know," Jim sighs, drops his face back down into the pillows.

"If there were a choice, I would choose to live," Spock states. "And I would choose that for you, also."

"Would you? Bones said you wouldn't go back for me if the situation had been reversed, you know," - damn him for his weakness in telling Spock this - "he said you'd let me die."

The hesitation before Spock replies does strange, cruel things to Jim's heart.


Jim feels like he is hovering on the edge of a precipice, only this time there isn't the usual thrill sparking inside him that accompanies all those other risks he showed Spock earlier, only a sort of nameless swooping terror. Maybe sometimes he pushes too far. Maybe sometimes there are risks not worth taking. The risk of the truth, Spock's truth. He would let you die.

"Actually I don't want you to answer that," Jim interrupts. "Just - just don't answer that."

Spock is silent momentarily, then he says in a new voice, a voice Jim has not heard before, gritty and
"If you were to die-" He pauses as if searching for the right words, something he never usually does. "If you were to die-"

"I said don't," Jim cuts in again, sharper than he meant to, even though the sore scared part of him is soothed by the uncharacteristic emotion in Spock's tone.

So Spock doesn't. But he holds Jim almost reverently when they make love, both hands cupping the back of his head as if he were the most precious thing in all the Galaxy.

**

"Has he said thank you yet?" Bones asks him as they have lunch in mess hall.

Jim shakes his head. "No. And I don't think he's going to. He still thinks I made the wrong decision, rescuing him."

"That's because he's a glorified supercomputer. He wouldn't know Human kindness if it punched him in the face. You know it was the right decision. I know it was the right decision. Everyone on the goddamn bridge knows it was the right decision."

"It was the right decision," Jim says, firmly.

"Damn straight. We saved the planet, we didn't lose a single member of the crew... Even if there was a certain amount of luck involved in it," Bones grins at him.

"Not luck. Incandescent genius and precision planning," Jim corrects.

"If you say so."

**

But Jim knows he has always been lucky. One of the chosen ones. "You mean, there's a door for you, Jim. Not for everyone. For you." He can still feel Kodos's eyes on him sometimes. So brief. Blue eyes, eyes from the edge of the universe. Just a few words.

"Why is this one here?"

Touching his phaser to Jim's shoulder.

The soldier who had been escorting the group Jim was with into the stadium had instantly straightened, swallowed heavily.

"Sir, his BMI is already dangerously low, and his educational scores place him in the bottom 50 percentile of his class."

Kodos had given a tight shake of his head at that, exasperation settling over his features.

"No, look at him. How many times do I have to explain the criteria to you? Put him on one of the shuttles back to the compound. Now."

Then he turned back to Jim again. Smiled.

"It's your lucky day, kid."
Lucky.

He'd had the whole shuttle ride back to the compound to think about what might be about to happen in the stadium. A horrible creeping sort of knowing slunk into him, into his bones and skin. Still he didn't believe it, didn't want to believe it, couldn't. But then when he got home his mother had been sat at the kitchen table, cheeks pink and eyes wild, a quarter bottle of whisky in front of her. The relief on her face when he walked through the door told him everything that he needed to know.

"James, thank the Lord!"

She had gone to him, taken him almost ferociously in her arms, pressed a kiss to the side of his face, her breath sweet with the alcohol.

He hadn't returned her embrace.

"Why are all those people in the stadium?"

She hadn't said anything, had just squeezed him tighter still. He pushed her away, staring at her intently until she met his eyes.

"Why are all those people in the stadium?"

She had twisted her hands anxiously in front of her, her mouth pulled into a tight bud, then blooming into sadness.

"I don't know," she had said quietly, but he knew it was a lie.

"Lyla's in there! Mom! And the others. My friends from school. Tommy, Kevin. They're all in there."

His mother had just looked at him, her eyes swimmy with unshed tears.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. I'm so, so sorry."

"Screw this," he had said, and turned to leave, but he felt her hand on his arm, frail and birdlike.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Back to the stadium. I have to get Lyla out of there."

"No!" Her grip on his arm tightened into a vice. "No. You're staying right here."

He turned to face her.

"Why? Why? Tell me what's going on."

She had sucked hard on the inside of her cheeks, taken a deep breath.

"People are dying, Jim. Starving."

"Yet I notice there's enough grain to make your whisky. Mother."

She let her arm drop.

"That's not fair. I thought you were... I thought you were..."

"You thought I was what?"
But she couldn't answer him, could only stare at him wordlessly with her trembling eyes.

"Right, I'm going." He turned again, and again she snatched at him.

"You are not!"

"I am. Let go of me."

"James Tiberius Kirk. I will make you stay in this house if it's the last thing I do."

"Let go of me!"

"Why do you want to go back there? Why do you want to get yourself killed?"

He had pulled free of her, but she had thrown herself bodily in front of the door.

"James. For God's sake. Don't do this. Think of your father."

His name, never usually mentioned, suddenly crackling in the air between them, like a live thing, hot and dangerous.

"What has any of this got to do with dad?"

"He died for you. For us. To save us. You... now you're just going to throw that all away."

"No, you're the person who threw it all away. You're the person who brought us here to die. Because that is what's happening, isn't it? All those people are going to die."

His mother had taken a deep, ragged breath.

"You think I don't blame myself everyday for bringing us here? You think if something - anything - happened to you I would be able to forgive myself...?"

Jim had felt the anger rising in him then, a great, silent, white thing, ringing empty in his ears, a pounding vacuum behind his temples.

"Guess what? Shit did happen to me. And you know what else? I don't think you're going to have any problem at all forgiving yourself. You've always been pretty good at getting out of trouble, Mom, whoever you had to leave behind."

She had slapped him then, the sting of it ringing across his face, blood belling in his ears. It was the only time she had ever hit him. He was used to it from Frank, but from her... The shock of it made everything inside him stop and stand still, staring. She had looked just as surprised as him.

"Jim. Jim, I..." She had reached up, tentatively, but he had had enough by then, he had shaken her off and opened the door, and then he was running. Running. But he should have known then he was just like her. "Your choice, son". He should have sensed the crawling darkness inside of him. The thing that made him back towards the door.

**

There is a strange awkwardness between him and Spock now, and Jim doesn't know how to fix it. He's done everything wrong, he thinks. The way he behaved in that conference room - he doesn't want to think about it. Still, Spock comes to Jim's cabin for book club. They are discussing For Whom The Bell Tolls, and Jim is suddenly struck by what a poor choice it is, because:
“Dying was nothing and he had no picture of it nor fear of it in his mind. But living was a field of grain blowing in the wind on the side of a hill. Living was a hawk in the sky. Living was an earthen jar of water in the dust of the threshing with the grain flailed out and the chaff blowing. Living was a horse between your legs and a carbine under one leg and a hill and a valley and a stream with trees along it and the far side of the valley and the hills beyond.”

And then, even worse: ”He was just a coward and that was the worst luck any man could have.”

He should just tell Spock. He should just tell him. Then Spock will know, and he will know all that Jim is, and it will be better than this, than the not knowing, than the darkness.

"There's something I want to tell you,” Jim says, slowly.

Spock tilts his head.

"Captain?"

"It's about why... With what happened on Niribu, in the volcano, it's... I - Lyla - at the end. I wasn't with her."

Spock looks at him gravely. "I know, Captain. You have told me about your fortunate release from the stadium."

"No. No - that's not... There's some things I haven't told you." It's almost a mumble and he hates himself for that too. For not even having the guts to speak about the things he did. Coward, coward, coward. "I - They took me back to the science compound, where I lived with my mom and we had a row. I said some pretty awful shit. You know me. Speak first, think later."

He tries a smile. Spock just looks at him, infinitely patiently, seeing everything, like always.

"I - y'know, I figured out then exactly what they were doing. I ran back. I got through the gates, through a side door, one I figured they wouldn't be looking at too closely. But there was a guard who stopped me before I could get into the arena. I tried to fight past him, you know, I tried to get to where they all were. Kevin, Tommy. Lyla. Lyla. We were struggling. And then he let me go. He let me go, and he cocked his phaser towards the door into the main arena. And he said... He said: "Go in then, if you like. Your choice, son." And I... I... I turned around. I turned around and walked through the door I'd just come through and I walked back to the compound. I walked back the whole way, I wouldn't let myself run, and I didn't look back, not once, but I could hear... I could hear... They say it was quick, and it was quick, but I could hear it nevertheless. I was... I whistled. I whistled the whole way back so I wouldn't have to listen. But I could hear it anyway."

And all the way I could hear my own breath too, he thinks but does not say, hear my own heart. My coward breath, my traitor heart.

"I whistled," he can feel the bile at the back of his throat, thick and acrid.

His hands are shaking. Spock's eyes are endless.

"Captain. That was the right decision. There was not anything you could have done."

But Jim has always known there was something; always known what it was.

"I could have found her. I could have held her hand."
Spock knows he has failed Jim in some way. He did not respond to the story from Jim's past in the way Jim had hoped that he would. That much was obvious from the shuttered look in Jim's eyes, the sad droop of his normally smiling mouth. But he cannot understand - neither what he should have said to Jim or why Jim finds this memory so distressing, feels as though he is in some way remiss for his behaviour. Jim was offered a simple choice: to live, or to die, and he chose to live. No benefit would have come from his death in the situation as he had outlined it. And yet he blames himself for something, and Spock should have been able to make it better, and yet he could not. He has failed Jim in just the same way that he failed Nyota.

But it is worse even than that, he has shamed himself, he has given in to this surfeit of destructive, illogical emotion. It is because of his strange, uncontrollable passion for Jim that the Prime Directive was violated, that Jim failed to perform as a StarFleet Captain should. This thing he has with Jim, it has compromised him, it has compromised Jim, it will destroy them both utterly.

And yet... And yet... Everything about Jim is still endless intriguing to Spock. Jim is Fu. He makes Spock behave entirely irrationally even as he makes his logic sing. When he is with Jim, it is as though he sees a whole new facet of IDIC. Every moment with him a new surprise. It should not surprise him. Jim. But it does. That he exists. The most fiercely, gloriously surprising thing that Spock has so far encountered in the Universe.

**

He does not see Jim alone again after the discussion about Tarsus. Jim does not suggest Book Club, does not come by Spock's cabin, does not sit with him in the mess hall. Spock counts the nights he is not with Jim. Seven nights. Eight nights. Nine nights. Twelve nights (O time, thou must untangle this, not I / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie). Fourteen nights. They will be back in Earth's orbit, off duty, in six night's time.

He should be satisfied at this turn of events. It is logical, it is the correct course of action. He is not satisfied.

Jim comes on the fifteenth night. He is already dressed for sleeping, his hair in disarray.

"Can't sleep," he states. He gives Spock an unintelligible look, part entitled, part nervous. "Sleep here?"

There is a rising lilt to his voice at the end, but his eyes hold no question. Or maybe it is the other way round. Spock feels adrift from himself, collapsed-in and uncertain. Jim's sudden return into his cabin is like the storms that used to blow in from the Sas-a-Shar; unexpected, violent, devastating. Thrilling.

It is the first time they have lain together without fucking in a long, long while. Spock had forgotten the sweet torture of it, close but not touching. He thinks: never and always touching and touched. Jim's eyes are already drooping when he lies down. He shucks off his t-shirt, his boxers; then he is bare. He doesn't attempt to touch Spock. Although he does turn his face into Spock's pillow, makes a noise like a sigh at what scent he finds there.

He sleeps. Spock lies very still alongside him; listens to the impossibly slow slump slump slump of Jim's heart. Watches the tender flickering behind his fragile eyelids, the fluttering beat of his living body. He touches gentle where bones skim skin: Jim's brow, his collarbone, his hip. Where the veins
lace too tight: his wrists, his temples, his cock. Vash. Spock’s hands shake with it. This is the most illogical thing: bodies we love must always be taken. It is chance which has spared Jim so far, which has given Spock this temporary gift of his body, in all its messy delicacy; with all its bounty, fluke and preciousness. But it won't spare Jim forever. It won't. There is no Jim in the future. Just him, sa’awek. Spock looks at the lines around Jim's eyes, thinks of his own skin, still silky smooth. Looks at the trace of grey in the stubble flecking Jim's chin. Thinks of Human bodies buffeted by sickness. Human hearts and minds that grow calloused and hard with the rubs of the world. He knows what he must do.

But in the morning Jim turns to him, fixes his hot mouth on Spock's, threads his warm, capable hands into Spock's hair. As always the desire is like a fever inside him, he cannot cool himself sufficiently to pull away. They kiss on and on, desperate, deep, biting kisses; their hard penises trapped inbetween their bellies. Then Spock shifts, and his fingers graze against Jim's psi points. He feels an urgent flare crackle down his arm, explode in his head. Yes. He holds his hand steady, says the words.

Normally the bright dynamic gold of Jim's mind is all-encompassing. So warm and open, that feeling of falling, of falling and soaring all at once. This time it is like a hunkered grey cloud has passed over the sun. Some things on the edges shudder away from him, turn their backs. Secrets. He keeps his mind from you. And why wouldn't he when you have nothing to offer him in return, and when your very craving for him is weakness? It is natural that Jim would do this You are... and you didn't even ask.

Spock feels a slither of revulsion shake up his spine. What is he doing? Despite the vibrant thrum of Jim's mind he is not a telepath, he gains nothing from these melds, and this time Spock didn't even enquire if he wanted it, he just pressed his hand to Jim's trusting temple, and took, and took, and took. He goes to withdraw, but it's too late, even though everything is wrong, not right, wrong, he still feels the pleasure bounce through him in a flurry of yellow sparks, t’hy’la, yes, share with me. He is too deep, it is too much. He loses himself in the meld.

When he finally pulls his hand away, Jim's eyes are big and blaming, sad.

"I am sorry," Spock says, quickly, quietly.

"No, no," Jim says, reaches out his hand for Spock's.

"That was not a positive experience for you," Spock observes.

Jim shrugs lightly with one shoulder, awkward. He uses his other hand to stroke two of his fingers gently along Spock's.

"It was different from the ones before. But it's always... good. I always like it when you do that. And I like how much you enjoy it."

"I do not-... A mindmeld is not meant to be an enjoyable experience, but rather an illuminating one. And that cannot have been illuminating for you, and for that I apologise."

"Not meant to be enjoyable... ," Jim's voice tapers off, narrowed to a point of incredulity. "You're saying you don't enjoy being inside my head?"

"I am simply saying that the purpose of a meld is not enjoyment. While melds are necessary for the mental, psychic, and telepathic stability of my species, they are not intended for the purpose of pleasure."
Jim looks annoyed, raises one sceptical eyebrow.

"Not intended for pleasure, right. Well, pardon me if the jizz all over my stomach tells a different story."

Hot, bright shame slices through him. He remembers T'Pring, the disgust that she felt for his mind that was so strong she had temporarily been unable to conceal it. The disorder, the lack of control. And Jim feels the same.

"If I have..."," He hears the tremor in his voice, steels himself, "If I have experienced some measure of enjoyment from our melding then it is a weakness on my part, it is because I have allowed myself to be unschooled, to give in to my baser desires. It was wrong of me."

"Sure," Jim says tightly. "Because you don't find the inside of my head enjoyable."

"It is... Melding is, by its very nature, a highly intimate process. Aside from immediate family or teachers it is something that Vulcans only undertake with their betrothed, or their spouse. I see now that I have been irresponsibly remiss in initiating them with you, when you have stood to gain so little from them."

Jim sits up suddenly, sheets pooling around his middle. He hugs his arms tightly around himself, knuckles white.

"Right, OK, I get it. You've been sticking your hand in my mental cookie jar when we're not even going steady. What does that make me, like, your psychic whore or something?"

"You misunderstand me, Captain. The fault is entirely mine. It is I who has gone against what is culturally acceptable, who has been morally deficient in my behaviour. You are entirely without blame. It is not appropriate to continually initiate melds with a being who is not one's immediate family, or spouse. There can be...unforeseen consequences."

Jim releases a sharp puff of breath, fixes his eyes to the wall above Spock's head.

"What are you so worried about anyway, Spock? What are these 'unforeseen consequences'? That we might end up accidentally bonded or something?"

"No," Spock says quickly. "That can only happen...at certain times, or with the intervention of a third party, a gifted healer."

"Well, good," Jim replies. "Because that would be a real shitter wouldn't it? I mean, terrible. Awful. Imagine that."

He gets out of bed abruptly, pulling on his boxers, his t-shirt.

"You are angry, Captain," Spock observes. "Please enlighten me as to what I have done to elicit this response in you."

"I'm not angry, Spock. Why would I be angry? We've been over all this before haven't we? I've told you I don't want a relationship. You don't want one either. There's not a problem. I'll see you around."

He practically stalks out of Spock's cabin, shoulders tight with tension. After he has gone, Spock spends the remaining 3.6 hours before his next shift meditating.

He locates the tiny little spark of hope he had once had that Jim would be interested in forming some
sort of permanent bond with him, having a 'relationship'. That they were t'hy'la. He always knew Jim's thoughts on this, and to allow himself to think on how things might be, had been nothing but irrational foolishness. He lets it go.

When Jim gets back to his cabin he has to shut his eyes, brace his hands against his desk. He hangs his head low, feels the snag and pull between his shoulder blades. Inhales. Exhales. His hands dig into the edges of his desk so hard he can feel the wood cut against his skin.

He makes an inarticulate noise of anger, sadness, frustration.

He had been so happy when Spock's fingers had found his meld points. Yes. This is what he always wants, what he needs. Spock inside him, truly inside him. And normally Spock being in his head feels like a cool stream, bright spots darting in and out of the shallows like minnows, sloughing in and out of snatches of dappled sunlight. But this time he could feel the silt of his own insecurities fighting the flow. He thought he could stop it, could keep those messy, ugly parts of his mind hidden from Spock, but he'd obviously failed. Hence Spock's clear distaste when he pulled away.

What had Spock seen there? What had he seen to make him behave like that? He must've seen all the filthy, shitty parts of him. The parts even his mother can't love. People who he'd loved before and failed, who he'd betrayed. Lyla. Sam. "Dad would be so ashamed". That stupid fantasy, of his dad being in hiding. But why would he come back for you? For you? Why would you think you could possibly be enough?

He can never be enough. Never. Never.

**

In four days they will be back in San Francisco. Jim tries to stay away, but he can't, he can't. So he makes his way to Spock's cabin. The day or so since he had the row with Spock have been like a dark weight pushing down on his chest. He feels thick and slow with it, like he is moving through treacle. Every time he thinks about being back on Earth it's almost like the opposite of homesickness. A dark dread that clows in his heart when he thinks about being back in the U.S., about the prospect of having to go back there, home. Of his mother, Sam. The nephew he's never met. All the people he has let down, failed.

But here is Spock, rising from his desk in greeting, his sharp, spice smell, his hard arms, the soft part under his jaw. Jim hesitates on the threshold of Spock's cabin, uncertain. But he shouldn't have to ask. How long has this been going on for now? Three months? More? Doesn't that make Spock, like, fuck, his boyfriend? Shouldn't he just be able to hug his goddamn boyfriend? With a bravado he does not feel he strides across the room and slams himself into Spock, pressing their chests together, grabbing a rough handful of hair and pulling him against his mouth. Spock stiffens briefly, but then acquiesces, his lips part, his tongue finds Jim's. Oh, thank God. Jim feels almost shaky with it, after that horrible conversation the morning before last, he just wants everything to be right again, to be fixed, he wants Spock on him, in him, he wants his eyes to go that gentle caramel colour, he wants to hear him say his name in that deeper, darker voice. He wants. He runs one of his own hands up under Spock's undershirt, enjoying the minute trembling of the muscles under his touch. With the other he takes Spock's hand and presses it, insistent, against his temple, the side of his face. He will do it better this time, he will be better. He will only show Spock the good things, the bright things,
and then for Spock he will be shining, like the other Jim was for the other Spock. Then it will be OK.

Spock hesitates, pulls back gently from the messy urgency of their kiss.

"Captain - We should not..."

"Why? I know what you said before, but I promise you I like it. I like feeling you in me." He shrugs, raises one eyebrow with deliberate lasciviousness. "In more ways than one."

"We have already discussed this," Spock says simply. He goes to kiss Jim again, but Jim stops him, hands roughly pulling on the fine hairs at Spock's nape.

"Right. So putting your cock in me is fine, but heaven forbid you actually get your pristine brain dirty poking around in the dark recesses of my mind. Because, you know, that would actually imply intimacy."

"Intimacy which you do not want," Spock's voice is unusually tight.

"I don't think this has ever been about what I want, or don't want," Jim replies acerbically. "It's always about you, Spock. I want this, I don't want this. I want to be in you, oh, no, I've changed my mind, I don't want this, I don't want you'."

"Vulcans do not want," Spock says measuredly.

"Oh you know what, just, fuck off," Jim releases his grip on Spock's hair, pushes him away. "Seriously. I'm done with this. Done."

"Captain-" Spock starts.

"No. No. I don't want to talk about this anymore, I've had enough. I just - that's it."

"You are angry with me again," Spock observes. "Your anger is most illogical, and-"

"I don't know why I ever thought this would be a good idea," Jim interjects furiously. "It's like trying to have a relationship with a goddamn robot..."

Spock arches one eyebrow, "Relationship?"

"See, there you go again! Making me feel like shit, all the time. Stupid me for thinking that you actually... Well, my mistake: obviously it was never a 'relationship'. It was just fucking, and it was also about the dumbest thing I've ever done. Well, I won't be bothering you anymore Spock. That's it. It. Over."

He walks out of Spock's cabin. He doesn't look back. After all this is something he has done a thousand times before; leaving. He is a master of leaving.

______________________________________________________________________________

Spock replays the last conversation over in his mind. Every expression, the nuance in every word. His eidetic memory leaves no room for uncertainty.
Everything about it wrenches and rips. There was a brief, bright moment when Jim had called what they had a 'relationship', but Spock knows that this is just a lack of clarity in the Standard term. Jim is 'done' with him. Done. Jim may ask him to leave the ship. It is possible he may never see him again. His heart starts beating so fast in his side at this that he feels light headed with it, nauseous. He thinks of the occasions during their missions that he has been able to prevent Jim from coming to serious harm. He thinks on the possibilities of what may happen if he is not there to protect Jim, to work alongside him. Even worse than the prospect of never seeing Jim again is the possibility that he might... That an event might befall him in Spock's absence. That he might... That an event might befall him in Spock's absence. That he might... He cannot...

A day before they dock Spock chimes at his door. He stands stiffly, formally, hands clasped behind his back.

"Captain."

"Commander."

Jim does not invite him in. He braces one hand against the doorframe and leans into it, affects a casualness he does not feel, a direct contrast to Spock's rigid posture.

"Can I help you?"

"I came to apologise."

"I see. And what do you think you need to apologise for?" Jim tries to tramp down the desperate little thrill he feels at Spock's words.

"Many things. The breakdown of our working relationship is my fault. I have mismanaged the situation between us, and I accept full culpability."

Spock's eyes are on his, but his gaze is darkly impervious, shielded.

"Right," Jim says shortly. He sticks his chin out, meets Spock's gaze. "Anything else?"

"I... I see no reason for what has occurred between us - on a personal level - to affect our working together on the ship, Captain. I believe we are an effective command team. As such I wish to affirm my preference for continuing to serve with you aboard the Enterprise."

Something tight and unpleasant clenches inside Jim. All Spock cares about is their working relationship. Obviously. He should never have expected any different.


If Spock is relieved, he doesn't show it. But then, he never shows anything.

"I am gratified to hear that you are in agreement. If my illogical behaviour and lack of self control had caused a rift in the Enterprise's command team it would have been most regrettable."

Afterwards Jim thinks about that word. How precise Spock is in his choice of language. So, Jim thinks. He will become one of only two things Spock regrets. Not telling his mother he loved her before she died, and fucking Jim Kirk. Regrettable. Regrettable Jim Kirk.
Spock

There was always too much feeling in me. I spent my whole life struggling against it. Sometimes, it was exhausting. Sometimes it was as though everything inside me had been worn out by it, worn down to nothing, fine as the material weaved from the coat of the sha'amii, that you could read a PADD through. And with it came shame, shame. Another emotion. Another weak, Human feeling that I could not fully control.

There was a way. Kolinahr. I thought of it often. How it would be to finally be free of the never-ending tide of my own feelings; to be pure, empty, clean. I was unsure my parents would necessarily approve. My father, I believed, wished for me to become a diplomat like him. And my mother... My mother. The only one for whom I was perfect, who did not wish me to be more Vulcan or more Human, who wished for me to be as I was. When I thought of undertaking Kolinahr, the only thing that gave me pause to consider was how it would affect her.

I had asked her, one day, when I was eighteen standard years.

"May I ask a personal query?

"Anything."

"Should I choose to complete the Vulcan discipline of Kolinahr, and purge all emotion, I trust you will not feel it reflects judgment upon you?"

"Oh, Spock. As always, whatever you choose to be, you will have a proud mother."

I remember the ease of her response surprised me, even then. I knew it would hurt her if I were to cease to be her son, I knew she must be lying. I could not see what logical function her response served. To spare some imagined regret on my part?

"You will not be sad?" I had asked her.

"Of course I will be sad," she said. "But if that is what you choose, then I will also be happy."

"That is the height of illogic, Mother. Granted I do not feel such emotions myself, but I am given to understand that one cannot be both sad and happy at once."

"You can be everything at once, Spock," she said, and she gave me her softest, gentlest smile. "Trust me. I love you, so of course I will be sad if you complete Kolinahr. But I will also be happy, because you are doing what you desire, and that is all I ever want for you."

"I do not see what the point is," I had said.

She had looked confused. "The point in what?"

"The point in loving me, when it will only make you sad."

"Oh, Spock." Her eyes were very dark, and very clear. "Every love story is a potential grief story. That's the whole point."
"Then it would have been better for you not to have come here," I observed gravely, "Not to have had a Vulcan child."

"Oh, no, no." She had reached out then, run her forefinger up the curve of my ear, something she had not done in years. "Don't say that. I would never think that. I had my love story. I would never change that. I couldn't. You and your father - you are the greatest things I have ever achieved with my life. My loves. And that will always be that, no matter what else happens."

I find myself thinking on these things with surprising frequency of late. Love. Grief.
The Weight of Things

Chapter Summary

Basically the events of the film for this part. But with more Shakespeare. And REM. And apologies to *The Iliad* for the bits I pinched for the fight scene and the warp core climb scene - but a) gotta love the classics and b) the parallels between the Trojan horse and Khan's torpedoes were too good to resist.

Chapter Notes

**Rating:** NC-17 for sexual content, mild violence, adult themes

**Pairings:** Overall K/S, but I'm afraid all you get in this chapter is Kirk and the Caitain threesome. Jeez, it must have been, like, 3 years since I've written a het sex scene!

**Warnings:** MAJOR spoilers for STID. Some reasonably explicit het sex, so just shut your eyes for that bit if it's not your thing.

**Notes for this part:** This bit kicked my ass. I do not like having to stick rigidly to film dialogue, as it turns out. There are two scenes in here which are very verbatim-y which I am NOT happy with, but they proved impossible to cut without adding a metric tonne of exposition, so... *sulky face*. Hope it's not too painful to read. And then next: my favourite chapter! Hooray!

Some beautiful art for this section courtesy of kares9 can be found [here](#).

**General Notes:** Beta-ed by the lovely Amanda. My first ever K/S fic. Be gentle! Amanda Warrington made me give her my firstborn child write this in return for helping me out with my research project, so here it is. (NB if anyone feels inclined to take part in the research project, which looks at women's involvement in explicit m/m slash (amongst other things), it's [here](#), and you would have my eternal gratitude).

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*It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone.*
— John Steinbeck, 'The Winter of Our Discontent'

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**Jim**

The last time I saw Mom was at graduation. It was weird to see her in her Fleet uniform. She looked strong, together, *different*.

"You're sober," I said. I kept the *for once* to myself.

"879 days." She looked at me askance. "You're not."

I shrugged. "Big celebrations." Paused. "I swear to God, if you start anything-"

She interrupted. "James."
She looked sad again then, slumped. She sounded small and defeated. More like how I remembered her.

Maybe I had always known her small and defeated. Maybe I had never known the real Winona Kirk. Before life got to her, and did all the things that life does.

We went to a restaurant afterwards, just some cheap bar that served burgers in downtown San Francisco, and had dinner, and it was... nice. She didn't drink, but I did, topping up all the booze that had been left in my system from partying with Bones the previous night. It was probably a bad idea. I got a little sloppy, a little melancholy. I wasn't used to spending time with her like this.

"If you knew," I had asked, "If you had known what would happen with dad, that he would die and leave you, would you still have... would you still have chosen to be with him?"

She had those great pure blue eyes, my eyes.

"Come on. You know what the answer to that is."

I shrugged, looked down at my glass of beer.

"Even if you knew what it would lead to: Frank, and the drinking, and Tarsus, and all those people dying, and your son being such an epic fuck-up. Even then?"

She touched my face gently to turn it back to hers, then kissed two of her fingers and pressed them to my cheek. I remembered her doing that when we were little.

"I'll settle up here," she said. "Goodnight, Jimmy. And good luck."

I stayed sat at the table after she left. Watched her weave her way through the crowd of people stood round the bar. The bronze strands in the golden grey of her hair gleamed in the lamplight like something very ancient, and very precious. I could feel my heart beating, slow and tortured in my chest. Just before she reached the door to the street, she turned, light on her feet. Caught my gaze. Held it. She mouthed one word: yes. Then she was gone.

**

He spends the first night back on Earth sitting in a room in the hotel Fleet puts them up in while they debrief listening to the entire back catalogue of REM on the hotel's entertainment system and drinking three quarters of a bottle of bourbon 'til he passes out. Stupid. He's acting like this is an actual breakup, when he knows you can't break up with someone you were never even in a relationship with. Not a 'capital R' relationship anyway.

So the next night he goes out with Bones. They hit up some bars, drink some beers, flirt with some girls. It works for a while, cheers him up, but then Bones gets all maudlin, talking about Joss and bringing up holos of Jo on his miniPADD , complaining about how he can't see her 'til Spring Break.

"I really thought I could make it work with Joss, you know," Bones says. "I really loved her. I guess sometimes people are too different. I guess sometimes love isn't enough."

Fuck this. On the third night he picks up two stunning Caitain girls and takes them back to his swanky SanFran bachelor pad, the one he wishes he could personally give a guided tour to to every
asshole back in Riverside who told him he would never make anything of himself. Spock has never been here. Spock will never get to go here. Because that would be too intimate and Spock doesn't do intimacy. But then neither does James T. Kirk. What he does do, though, is this: making people feel good. With his smile; with his hands, and mouth, and cock. The girls laugh at his jokes, and touch him, and look up at him from under their long silky eyelashes with genuine warmth, genuine desire.

He puts on a vintage Beastie Boys LP because it's about as far from REM as you can get. He pours them all shots because, hey, it's nice to be able to get a little loaded with your lovers. They're soft, and juicy, and warm; in all the ways Spock was hard, and dry, and cold. They laugh and smile easily. They don't make him work for it. But they don't look at him with eyes that are endless with understanding, they don't touch their fingers lightly to his, they don't know that when someone scratches the left hand side of his lower stomach that he - Stop.

He loses himself in their touches, their tastes, their fragrance. Their hair smells good, girlie and flowery. He enjoys the firm give of their tits, their sweet, pointy little nipples. One of them licks the other's pussy, and she's squirming and giggling, and Jim sucks at her throat, tonguing round the divots where her whiskers grow, and she threads her nails through his hair, digs them hard into his scalp, giggles some more at the noise he makes. He moves down to the foot of the bed, licks the second girl through her panties, the smooth curve of her thighs warm around his face. Even though she's slender, there's still that feminine plumpness there, and he relishes it, lets it wipe out everything that came before it.

"Mmmm," she says, hitching her hips to slide out of the damp material. "Come up here and do that properly."

While he's doing what she asked, fingers deep in her tight slickness, tongue lapping gently against her clit, she brings her tail up and uses it to tease at his pucker, but he can't...no...

"What's up, baby?" she smiles, slanty violet eyes soft with amusement, "You don't swing that way?"

He crooks the fingers he has inside her, earning himself a soft gasp.

"Sure, just now I really want to be inside you."

The other one tosses her pony tail.

"I hope that was 'you' plural, Jimmy, because I need you in me something crazy."

She slides down the bed to join him, takes over touching the second girl while he lines up behind her, uses the head of his cock to tease her, rubbing it across her sweet little pussy, getting it nice and wet. Dragging it up her soaking slit and over her clit until her back arches and the breath catches in her throat and she's moaning at him to do it, just do it.

Then his Comm beeps, and his heart gives an irrational lurch: Spock. He fumbles frantically around in the sheets, searching for it.

"Oh, Jim!" the first girl says, kneeling up and dropping a kiss on his shoulder. "Come on. Let it go. Jim!"

He locates it, practically dives on it.

"You're not actually going to answer that, are you?" the second one asks, and she sounds kind of pissed, and he tries not to reflect too much on the fact that he would rather speak to Spock, via a Comm, about Fleet procedure, than fuck two gorgeous, funny, horny Caitains, who he's just spent the past half hour making nice and wet for him.
It's a fine Terran morning as they make their way across the quadrangle. Blue skies, the first pale green shoots arching into life on the trees, the Spring sunshine glimmering on the waters of the bay. Jim is all matching bright enthusiasm, carrying his hat in his hand, that easy casualness he always has. He looks relaxed, happy. All the tension he has held in his face whenever he has looked at Spock recently seems to have disappeared. Everything will go on as before then, Spock thinks, as it was before Book Club. Before Book Club and all that came after. And that is fortunate. *Fortunate.*

"Spock, I'm telling you, this is why he called. I can feel it." Jim is practically bouncing on his toes with excitement.

"Your feeling aside, I consider it highly unlikely that we will be selected for the new program," Spock replies curtly.

"Why else would Pike want to see us? Forget about seniority. They gave us the newest ship in the fleet. Who else are they gonna send?"

"I can think of numerous possibilities..."

Jim turns to face him, walking backwards without breaking pace.

"A five-year mission, Spock!"

He punches him lightly on the chest, once, twice. The casualness of the touch. If he didn't have an eidetic memory Spock would wonder if he had simply imagined how desperate, how needy, Jim's touches used to be.

"That's deep space! That's uncharted territory! Think how incredible that's gonna be!"

Three Terran females walk past, all neat curves in their StarFleet dress uniform. Spock has a sudden, sharp flash of the last time he saw Jim in dress uniform. Blue eyes almost cruel, but still dancing with a softness, a desire. *Tell me I'm better than a machine*. Jim's hot, fluid mouth on his penis. The sooty flutter of his lashes. The great warm wash of his regard when Spock placed his fingers against Jim's psi points. It is illogical to have hoped for more than that. For more than Jim's great regard. It is a relief that their ill-advised dalliance has not soured that. It should be enough. And yet it is not enough.

Jim turns around again, gives his easy smile to the three females. The fake, slick one that doesn't crinkle his eyes.

"Hey Ladies. Jim Kirk."

Two of the girls turn their heads to gaze back at him, send him coy little looks. Spock feels a troubling thump in his brain, as if someone is running the backs of their knuckles roughly over his subconscious. *Jim has had intercourse with someone else.* He knows it on some deep, primordial, pheromonal level. It gives rise to a strange atavistic rage in him, a desire to take Jim into his arms and press against him, cover him in his scent, so everyone will know that he is *Spock's*, marked and claimed, his alone. He feels his telepathy give a sly shiver, as if to say *yes, yes, we must claim him, in every way, claim him as ours, body and mind, and then he will never be apart from us, never and always touching and touched.*
"Uneventful," Pike says evenly. He is sitting behind the sleek lines of his desk, leaning back on his chair, looking absently down at a PADD on his desk. But something is off, Jim can feel it.

"Admiral?"

"That's the way you described the survey of Nibiru in your Captain's log," Pike continues, picking the PADD up and then putting it down again with a studied casualness that makes Jim feel uneasy.

"Uh, yes, Sir, I didn't want to waste your time going over the details."

"Tell me more about this volcano," Pike says, pushing himself back in his chair and clasping his hands in his lap expectantly. "The data says it was highly volatile? And if it were to erupt, it would wipe out the planet?"

"Let's hope it doesn't, Sir," Jim replies, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall above Pike's head. He can't know. There's no way he can know.

"Something tells me it won't," Pike says, still with that same studied calm, turning his head to look directly at Spock, who is standing rigidly next to Jim. Jim can sense Spock's dark gaze slide across to him; forces himself to keep staring straight ahead. If he looks at Spock now too much of what he feels will come out in his eyes, and then Spock will know. It was difficult enough to act friendly and casual with Spock earlier; to try and pull off both that and sincerity in the face of Pike's disconcerting line of questioning would be impossible, even for a man of his considerable diplomatic talents.

"Well, Sir, volatile is all relative. Maybe our data was off."

"Or maybe it didn't erupt because Mr Spock detonated a cold fusion device inside it." Pike's tone has turned to iron. "Right after a civilisation that's barely invented the wheel happened to see a starship rising out of their ocean. That is pretty much how you described it, is it not?" He gestures at Spock.

Spock filed a report on him? After everything? After that moment in his cabin later that same evening when Spock's voice caught and scratched in his throat as he said "If you were to die..." and then made love to Jim almost reverently, lying back supine and shaking, his hands on the back of Jim's head as Jim had thrust languidly inside him. After that. After that Spock had still gone and filed a report on him. He feels the shock of it cut into him, sharp as a whip.

"Admiral -" Spock begins, but Jim cuts him off.

"You filed a report? Why didn't you tell me?"

Spock's dark impervious eyes meet his, cold and distant as ever. Jim feels that first hot lick of surprise start to sting, start to hum with betrayal.

"I incorrectly assumed that you would be truthful in your Captain's log," Spock says, voice infuriatingly level.

_He doesn't care about you, he never cared about you._ The pain that stings and spreads under the
crack of Spock's cool disregard is laced with anger, and Jim doesn't try to keep it out of his voice.

"Yeah, I would have been if I didn’t have to save your life."

Finally he gets some sort of response, a small flicker of one of Spock's eyebrows, a slight raising of his voice. "A fact for which I am immeasurably grateful and the very reason I felt it necessary to take responsibility for the actions –"

"Take responsibility!" Jim laughs without humour, turns his face away from the hard, angular lines of Spock's face. If he keeps looking at Spock he'll have to touch him. Shake him, hit him, *something.* "Yeah, that would be so noble, Pointy, if you weren’t also throwing me under a bus."

"Pointy?" Spock's eyebrows have drawn into the centre of his forehead in annoyance. *Good,* Jim thinks. But he wants more than that. He wants Spock to feel what he feels. He wants Spock to feel this: the dark lash of betrayal. "Is that a derogatory reference?"

"Gentlemen," Pike cuts them off, rising from his desk and leaning awkwardly on his stick. "Starfleet's mandate is to explore and observe, not to interfere."

Spock looks at Pike coolly.

"Had the mission gone according to plan, Admiral, the indigenous species would never have been aware of our interference."

"That’s a technicality," Pike snaps.

"I am Vulcan, Sir. We embrace technicality." There's a slight edge to Spock's voice, a sharp sort of something.

"Are you giving me attitude, Spock?"

"I am expressing multiple attitudes simultaneously, Sir. To which are you referring?"

Spock regards Pike squarely, unflinching. In any other set of circumstances Jim would be delighted by this newly sassy, pissy incarnation of Spock, but right now he can barely look at him, anger and betrayal still shifting and crashing in his gut.

"Out. You’re dismissed," Pike says quietly to Spock. Spock turns to look at Jim but he immediately snaps his head forward, refuses to meet Spock's gaze. Whatever he might find there, he has no wish to see it. That Spock thinks so little of him that he would be prepared to *go behind his back,* to make him look small and foolish and a liar in front of Pike, Pike of all people... Spock tries unsuccessfully to catch Jim's eyes for one more brief moment before he spins gracefully on his heels and leaves the room.

"Do you have any idea what a pain in the ass you are?"

Jim keeps his eyes fixed forward, his stance rigid. He does not turn to see what might be in Pike's eyes either. Other things he has no wish to discover. Someone else he will have disappointed, let down, *not been good enough for."

"I think so, Sir."

"So tell me what you did wrong. What’s the lesson to be learned here?"

*What's the valuable life lesson to be learned here?* What had Spock said when Jim had asked him
that? Something about actions instead of words. Well, Spock's actions had certainly made it very clear exactly what he thought of Jim.

"Never trust a Vulcan," Jim replies acidly.

"See, you can’t even answer the question," Pike snaps, tone tight with exasperation. "You lied. On an official report, you lied. You think the rules don’t apply to you because you disagree with them."

He moves to stand close to him, close enough that Jim can smell the woody scent of his aftershave, remember the strange, almost paternal comfort it usually gives him. The man who believed in him. The man who was proud of him. The man who had seen something in him that no one else had ever taken the time to see.

"That’s why you talked me into signing up in the first place. It’s why you gave me your ship."

"I gave you my ship because I saw greatness in you. And now I see you haven’t got an ounce of humility."

Jim turns to face him, the anger that has been simmering low in his blood since he learnt of what Spock had done rising at the sight of the disappointment he sees reflected back at him in Pike's eyes. He's seen it before: mom, Sam, Frank.

"What was I supposed to do? Let Spock die?"

"You're missing the point."

"I don’t think I am, Sir," Jim snaps. He can't imagine Pike would have behaved any differently. He can't imagine anyone would. Apart from Spock. He'd let you die. "What would you have done?"

"I wouldn’t have risked my First Officer’s life in the first place. You were supposed to survey a planet, not alter its destiny. You violated a dozen Starfleet regulations and almost got everyone under your command killed."

"Except I didn’t!" Jim exclaims. "You know how many crewmembers I’ve lost since—"

"That’s your problem—" Pike interjects, but Jim keeps going.

"—I took command. Not one. Not one-!

Pike is almost shouting now, more angry than Jim has ever seen him.

"You think you’re infallible. You think you can’t make a mistake!"

Jim looks off to the side again, breathes deeply, tries to get a handle on the toxic mess of anger and hurt and frustration he can feel stewing in his guts. He has let Pike down, but then Pike has let him down. Pike was meant to believe in him, no matter what. Pike was meant to be there for him. Pike was meant to... Spock was meant to...

"It’s a pattern with you. The rules are for other people."

"Some should be," Jim mutters. He sounds like a petulant child, he can hear it, but he can't help himself. This was the right decision. The right one. He knows it.

"And what’s worse is you’re using blind luck to justify your playing God."

Jim looks at him for a long beat of silence, gritting his jaw. There is nothing he can say. All these
people who can't see the door.

"Given the circumstances this has been brought to Admiral Marcus’ attention. He convened a special tribunal to which I was not invited. You understand what StarFleet regulations mandate be done at this point."

Jim feels the first snake of fear uncoil itself low in his abdomen and slither along his spine - no...

Surely... He looks across at Pike mutely, waiting for him to make it alright, to charm the snakes away.

"They’ve taken the Enterprise away from you," Pike continues, softer now.

Jim feels his lips part. He almost gasps. But even then there's not enough oxygen. There will never be enough oxygen. Everything rushing inside of him. The snakes tooth at his heart, venom like old memories. 'You'll never amount to anything'.

"They’re sending you back to the Academy," Pike is saying.

Jim goes to move his lips, but no sounds come out. It's like the dust dream, the worst dream, the one with no door. His mouth feels dry, raw and dry and full of dust. He licks his lips, tries to talk.

"Admiral, listen-" he manages. His voice sounds rough, quiet

"No, I’m not going to listen. You don’t listen to anybody but yourself."

"I can justify... I understand regulations, but every decision I made-" he tries desperately, but Pike silences him, eyes glacial.

"I can’t listen. You don’t comply with the rules. You don’t take responsibility for anything and you don’t respect the chair." There is something that is very like disgust on Pike's face. "You know why? Because you're not ready for it."

It's like a great wash inside of him then. A great wash of darkness.

**

When he strips his uniform off he lets it fall, crumpled to the floor. It's like shedding layers of his skin. Until all that's left is the bare bones of him, just Jim Kirk, not Captain, not a StarFleet cadet, not George Kirk's son, not the shining, golden Jim that had belonged to the Old Spock. Just Jim Kirk, and once you take all the trappings away it turns out there's not very much left there at all.

He lays down on his back on the hard, cool floorboards, and stares upwards at the ceiling. Thinks how he's lost everything that made him worth anything. Lost the Enterprise, lost his girl. Lost his man. Spock.

He lies like that as the room grows dark around him. Lights dance in from the bay, sweep over his skin, leave again. He thinks of the stars, his beautiful stars. Lost.

"Music, five," he says, and it comes on, but it's fucking REM, obviously.

*Oh life, it's bigger*
*It's bigger than you*
*And you are not me*
*The lengths that I will go to*
*The distance in your eyes*
He lost these things because he deserved to lose these things. Spock's regard, his beloved girl, his ship. He knows that, deep down. Hadn't he taken - stolen - her in the first place anyway? From Pike, from Spock. Because he had always wanted her for his own. From that first breathless glimpse of her in the shipyard, his bike still warm and thrumming between his thighs. And then watching her grow from the same soil as him, rich and glossy and corn-fed, shining in her splendour under the Iowan sun. And he had wanted her, wanted her, and yes, Pike was right, he had not been ready, he would never be ready, he was selfish, and greedy, and he always would be, and there would always be the crawling darkness inside of him, and the whistling...

He gets up from the floor, feeling his joints creak in protest. Finds some jeans, his old leather jacket. He needs to go out, go out and drink, and then find a fight. Get beaten - delicious relief of fists sinking into his guts, sharp toe jabs on his sides, the bright white joy when a rib cracks. Maybe I'm done for this time, maybe it will pierce the soft grey sides of a lung, flabby and heaving, and I'll die here, gasping for breath on some piss soaked side street. But it never is the end. His body has been trained well. It recovers. But until then he can have the respite it offers. Because if nothing else he wants the pain to be feral and new again, instead of this; the old predictable ache of his own unworthiness, as boring and excruciating as morning head.

The night is cool and indigo shimmering in her not-quite-darkness. He finds a blues bar, small and dingy, settles himself in it. Orders a bourbon; another. The singer's singing everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die. And then he's in Spock's arms again, and Spock says "If you were to die..." - no. Another bourbon then. The same colour as the pale amber of Spock's eyes when he was amused, the little half smile. Another. He feels the heat of it start to collect in his belly, vibrating there. The way the Enterprise used to hum all around him, soft and pleased, as if she was whispering to him all of her secrets. Another.

A girl comes in and takes a seat further along the bar. She smiles at him, looks down and then back up quickly from beneath sultry lids. Yes. That's what he needs. If not fighting, fucking. Something. Something real and animal and raw. He smiles back. Goes to speak, knowing the lines will come. The well worn lines.

Pike takes the seat between Jim and the girl, cool and blade thin in the grey of his uniform. Jim doesn't know if he can bear it. The weight of yet more disappointment. He sighs, stares down at the bar.

"How'd you find me?"

"I know you better than you think I do," Pike says, and his voice is unexpectedly gentle. He signals for a drink. "And the first time I found you was in a dive like this. Remember that? You got your ass handed to you."

Jim shakes his head. "No."

But he remembers. Remembers seeing Pike come into view from where he lay sprawled on his back across a table. The stern nobility of his face. Stern, yes, but never disapproving, not even then. Not like how it had been this morning.

"You don't?"

"No, that’s not what happened."

"That was an epic beating."

"No it wasn’t."
"You had napkins hanging out of your nose."

Jim laughs then, despite the black clot of misery that is lodged in his heart. And Pike chuckles too, and it feels good, like maybe everything isn't so dark and broken.

"Yeah, that was a good fight," Jim concedes.

"A good fight." He can sense Pike shaking his head, resignedly. "I think that's your problem, right there."

Jim doesn't look at him. He cannot take any more lectures today on just how far he has fallen short of the mark. Can't Pike see that he has taken enough? That he is already flat on his back with his face smashed in, struggling for each mangled breath? That he has reached the end of the good fight? He turns his head away, defeated.

"They gave her back to me," Pike says softly. "The Enterprise."

*Oh, my girl.*

"Congratulations." Jim forces his voice not to shake, forces his hand to stay steady as he pours himself another bourbon. "Watch your back with that First Officer, though."

"Spock’s not gonna be working with me. He’s been transferred," Pike says. "The USS Bradbury."

Jim feels the alcohol scald its way down his throat. He'll never serve with Spock again, then. Not even if he earns back a place on the Enterprise's crew. Never see him. Maybe a handful of times, at large Fleetwide functions. A glimpse every now and then, across a crowded room. His chest feels tight, all put together wrong, capsizing.

"You’re going to be my First Officer," Pike adds, and Jim turns to look at him in disbelief. "Yeah, Marcus took some convincing, but every now and then I can make a good case."

Jim feels almost lightheaded with the speed at which everything has switched from despair to hope. He looks at Pike anxiously, like at any moment he might take it away again, this unexpected gift.

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. That I believe in you. That if anybody deserves a second chance, it’s Jim Kirk."

Jim feels something warm and gooey spread like sunshine inside his chest, and he has to look away quickly, bite his lip to stop the sudden flare and sting in his eyes.

"I don’t know what to say," he manages.

"That is a first," Pike says wryly.

He smiles at Jim, quiet and tender and so utterly commonplace, and it's the smile that Jim used to dream about, the one his dad would be wearing when he was sat at the kitchen table; the one his dad would be wearing when he would ruffle Jim’s hair; the one his dad would be wearing when he found Jim at graduation and told him he was proud. It is *that* smile, the one Jim has always wanted.

"It’s going to be okay, son," Pike says. And it's the door, and everything is going to be OK.

Pike's Comm beeps, and he flips it open, reads. "Emergency session, Daystrom. That’s us."

When Jim nods, sniffs, has to bite on his lip again, Pike punches him gently on the shoulder.
"Suit up."

Jim knows then that it is OK, that nothing has been too badly broken that it can't be fixed, that maybe, one day, everything can be OK. Everything can be OK.

__________________________________________

When Spock sees Jim in the Fleet foyer in his dress uniform he feels something like relief flood clean and bright into his side. He had heard - idle gossip he realises now - he had heard that they had sent Jim back to the Academy, that he would no longer be involved in active service. This had made Spock feel something oily and dark in his stomach. Guilt. Illogical. He had been following procedure. There was nothing incorrect in his actions. He knows this. But still. The thought of Jim grounded, taken away from the stars... It is incogitable.

"Captain-" Spock starts, trying to catch his attention, but Jim doesn't look at him, doesn't even break stride, heads straight into one of the turbolifts. Spock follows him.

"Captain," he tries again.

"Not any more, Spock. First Officer. I was demoted, and you were reassigned."

"It is fortunate that the consequences were not more severe," Spock says, allowing himself one brief moment of weakness, allowing the feeling of relief to soothe him.

Jim sighs heavily, mutters darkly under his breath, "You’ve got to be kidding me."

"Captain, it was never my intention-"

"Not Captain," Jim turns to face him then, blue eyes flat and emotionless. "I saved your life, Spock. You wrote a report, I lost my ship."

His voice is blunt, hollow with a nothingness that makes Spock feel hollow in return. The doors hiss open, and Jim turns abruptly, stalks out towards the meeting room. Spock hurries after him.

"Commander. I see now that I should have alerted you to the fact that I submitted the report."

"I am familiar with your compulsion to follow the rules but you see, I can’t do that," Jim finally pauses, turns to look at him. "Where I come from, if someone saves your life, you don’t stab them in the back."

"Vulcans cannot lie," Spock replies, noting the defensive edge which has crept into his tone, despite the fact that he is only stating a simple truth.

"Then I’m talking to the half-Human part of you, all right?" Jim sounds angry now, but it's better than the hollowness. Anything is better than the hollowness. "Do you understand why I went back for you?"

Jim's eyes. Their endless blue. He has that hopeful look, the same one he wore the day they played chess and Spock told him about his mother. He is waiting for something, waiting for Spock to give him something, and once again Spock does not know how he can give it.

Jim licks his lips, a nervous habit that gives him away far more than he realises.

"The truth is…," he starts, looking briefly down at the floor, before looking back up at Spock, "I’m
gonna miss you."

He keeps his gaze on Spock's, expectant blue. Spock opens his mouth, but the words do not come. He recalls a line from Lear. Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth. He does not know what he can say. There is nothing that he can say.

Jim sighs heavily, shakes his head. Then he turns and walks away.

A part of Spock, perhaps the half-Human part that Jim had mentioned, wants to reach after him, pull him back. He remembers the cool comfort of Jim's skin. He had thought that if he was no longer having physical relations with Jim, if that aspect to their relationship was over, all those hot needful things inside him would be over too. Now he wonders if they will ever be over. Or whether they will burn. Burn, and burn, and never end.

**

Spock does not stare at Jim during the meeting that follows. Does not think on the quality in Jim's voice when he said he was going to miss him. But he finds that even though he does not look at Jim he can still sense him, can feel him fluttering at the edges of his consciousness, is aware of his every gesture, his every breath. He feels rather than sees Jim become tense and confused as Admiral Marcus details Harrison's terrorist attack on the London archives, instructs those gathered on how they will hunt Harrison down. It is almost as if he is sharing Jim's thoughts when Jim begins to speak. Jim is right, of course. They are all gathered here, all of the command team currently in SFHQ, in a room which Harrison's level of clearance would enable him to know the location of. And Harrison has a jumpship, a jumpship which while it may not have warp capabilities, certainly has fire power. And so-

Then Jim is standing, shouting "CLEAR THE ROOM!", and the glass behind him explodes into whiteness. Jim. Jim. There is a lurch low in Spock's side that causes him to miss his next breath, but then he sees Jim, on his feet and running into the thick of the fray. The temptation to follow him, to cover him, to protect him, is almost overwhelming, but Spock knows that would not be the optimal use of his resources. The initial explosion has left many wounded, and Spock is first and foremost a scientist, he knows enough of emergency medicine to be of the most use tending to the injured. The needs of the many.

He is crouched over Captain Stevens when he sees Pike crawling awkwardly towards him, grunting with the effort, his clearly damaged leg dragging behind him. In the split second Spock starts to rise to help him, phaser fire hits Pike square in the chest in a flurry of greenish sparks, tossing him casually to one side as if his weight - his bones, his skin, his muscle - were incidental. Spock rushes to him, scoops him up under his arms, drags him to a sheltered alcove. Spock finds himself breathing hard, his hands unsteady. Not logical, it is not logical. Pike will die, Spock knows it, no one can withstand a direct hit to the chest like that, and there are others more in need of his help, others he could actually save. He knows the value of triage. But this man was his Captain, this man saw in him what he desired - logic, stillness, acceptance, something warmer than his father's stern disapproval but still reserved, respectful - and gave him all those things. This man was his friend.

He lays Pike gently on the ground, even though he knows that gentleness is about to tip over into meaninglessness for Pike at this point. There is blood on Pike's chest where the phaser hit, oozing dark into the grey of his uniform, but it is the blood coming from his mouth that concerns Spock, for it shows that somewhere inside Pike something is badly torn, ripped and open. Pike knows this too. His eyes, normally so grey and mild, are wild, rolling, stormy.

Spock lowers his hand to Pike's face. Pike will die, and everything he might know that might help Fleet will go with him. Spock thinks to gather this potentially helpful information. He pushes gently
against Pike's mind, knowing that Pike might lack the words to give him permission, but that even in his weakened, fading state he will be able to reject Spock's attempt to meld if he does not want it. But Pike does not reject Spock's soft, almost hesitant psychic touch. Instead his mind practically yanks Spock into the maelstrom inside it. Anger. Confusion. Loneliness. Fear. There is nothing useful there that Spock can discern or salvage, only the nameless, gaping terror. Spock tries to project calm and light and acceptance, but he feels something unlock between them, and Pike is gone, gone. Gone before Spock can offer anything more than a dazed kind of sharing. Then there is a darkness, a darkness than seems to roll towards him in a flood, and Spock quickly pulls his hand away, breaking the link before that blackness can touch him. Pike's face already has the narrow, absent look of one whose katra has departed.

Someone drops to their knees beside him, gasping for breath. Jim.

He turns and looks at Jim aghast. Jim's cheeks are flushed glowing pink, his eyes bright and damp with horror. Jim turns then to Pike, digs his fingers in, desperate, to the tender valley of Pike's neck, as if he thinks he can somehow unearth the life there. There is none. Spock knows this.

Jim's face crumbles in on itself. Spock watches the slow fall of his head onto Pike's chest. The rhythmic clench and release of his fingers around the stiff fabric of Pike's dress uniform. Grasping at something which is already gone.

Still reaching, always reaching. Mother.

When he lifts his head again Spock notes how the lines stand out around his eyes. Those mortal lines. Tears. Spock has not seen these before on his Captain. He would take them up with his fingertips, absorb them into his skin. He would undo them, undo all things that have ever hurt Jim. But he cannot.

Jim rises unsteadily to his feet, his hand on Spock's shoulder, blindly. Leaning, then squeezing. The bare skin of his fingers brushes against the hair at the nape of Spock's neck. Through this tiny touch of skin on skin, comes the distant storm of Jim's emotions, and Spock quivers against it, the darkness that has swept over Jim's bright light.

Spock cannot do anything. What could he possibly do? This is the futility of tying yourself to another, when you can do nothing to ease their pain, when you cannot protect them or save them. When they will die, and in their death there will be all the things Pike felt at his passing. Anger. Confusion. Loneliness. Fear. There is nothing he can do for Jim, nothing he can say. Spock thinks of Nyota then. When she came to him after his mother died. Her dark Human eyes soft with compassion. 'What do you need? Tell me. Tell me'. This is what he should say now, to Jim. But he cannot. Because whatever it is that Jim needs, it can never be given.

He sees Jim later, much later, and McCoy has his arms around him, and is saying something, low and urgent, and Jim is nodding, nodding, his head resting lightly on the broad sweep of McCoy's shoulder, and this is the comfort Spock cannot give him, the comfort he cannot give.

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When the ash from the ruins of the HQ blows into his face it reminds Jim of those dust storms. The storms from his youth, the storms from his dreams. He thinks on the shapes he would see out in those dust storms; black, hunkering, secret things. Black life in the red night. He remembers his mom's cool hands on his brow. Just a dream, Jimmy, it was just a dream. But it was never just a dream. He'd always known that things stalked out there in the dust, evil things. Not just creatures, but the bad
things in people, those were the things that really chewed you up, and you were just as likely to find them on Earth as anywhere else. There is a man who has done this. Their eyes had met for that one, brief instant as Jim had managed to bring down his ship. Blue eyes, eyes from the edge of the Universe. And Jim will find that man, and he will make him pay for this. This. Pike. It's going to be OK, son'. It won't be OK, but he'll make him pay for it anyway.

Even when he finds out Harrison has gone to Qo'noS it doesn't deter him. He'll follow him all the way to the fucking wall at the end of the Universe if he has to. But he will follow him. And he will find him.

He's not entirely sure how Harrison managed to get to Qo'noS in the first place. Scotty had explained how the portable transwarp beaming device that Harrison has used was in its very nascent development stages, and was designed to transport inorganic matter over interstellar distances. It was certainly not something ready to teleport anything as complex as a living creature.

"In all the reports I have been able to access on this device, such transportation has been impossible," Spock had confirmed. "Attempts to transport living creatures have so far resulted in the deaths of 1,378 mice, five tribbles and one rhesus monkey. There have been no successful transportations of sentient beings across even minor distances."

"Then how has that son of a bitch managed it?" Jim had asked.

"I am unsure, Commander. The most obvious response would be that Harrison does not consist of organic material, but that would be highly improbable. However, the simplest theory is often the most accurate."

“Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth,” Jim had said, and there had been an answering flash in Spock's eyes.

"The Sign of the Four'. One of my favourites, Commander."

"Mine too."

Marcus gives him back the Enterprise. He is surprised there is no hesitation in his heart when he asks Marcus for permission to reinstate Spock as his First Officer. But then Pike's death has wrenched something open in him that he cannot close, and despite everything that has happened between them this is still the man who once said "You will feel the feelings, I will think the thoughts" and told him they were greater together than the sum of their parts. This is still the man who said "I would not have you any different" as Jim dozed upon his chest. This is still the man who said "If you were to die..." and then held him like he was the most precious thing in all the Galaxy.

There really is no other man Jim could chose to stand alongside him. It's not like he even has a choice. Perhaps he's never had a choice as far as Spock is concerned.

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Spock tries to talk with Jim on the shuttle to the Enterprise about the immorality of killing Harrison in a covert assassination mission, of not even giving him the opportunity to stand trial for his crimes, but Jim doesn't seem to want to listen, and they are constantly interrupted, first by Doctor McCoy and then by a dubious physicist named Carol Wallace who Jim seems to have taken on as a supplementary Science Officer. Entirely illogical, now Spock has been assigned back to the Enterprise. But then Spock deduces that Jim's decision might not be based primarily on logic. He
thinks on the soft, bright way Jim's eyes settled on Carol's face. He remembers Jim's eyes turning soft, yielding bright for him, the impossible heat of Jim's hands - no.

As soon as they board the Enterprise, where they can have some privacy, Spock pulls Jim to one side.

"We have had numerous discussions upon matters such as this during our 'Book Club' meetings, and the man I know would not condone this course of action. It is tantamount to murder. In addition, the possible risks from such a course of action - war with the Klingons - far outweigh the possible benefits. This is a revenge mission. It serves no moral or practical purpose. I urge you to reconsider."

"And what would you have me do instead?" Jim asks, the muscles working in the tight set of his jaw.

"I would ask that you consider first diplomatic means of."

Jim cuts him off abruptly, throwing his hands in front of him in frustration.

"What, so you think I should just walk away from it? Like you thought we should have walked away from what was happening on Niribu? I guess that's what you think I do, huh, walk away? Well, fuck you Spock, I don't walk away. Not anymore, not after Tarsus. Jim Kirk doesn't walk away."

The last few words are almost a shout.

Spock regards him levelly. "You are allowing your personal feelings to intrude upon what should be a rational, command decision. You are not just James Kirk. You are Captain of the Enterprise, you are a representative of StarFleet, and a citizen of the Federation. It is not for you to act according to your personal whimsy, especially not on a matter of intraGalactic importance."

"Personal whimsy? In case it escaped your notice, these were orders we were given by the most senior Admiral in StarFleet."

"And they were deeply flawed orders. Such an action on our part is not only personally immoral and strategically dangerous, it is potentially damaging to the Federation itself and all the planets it represents. Taking unilateral action against the Klingons is imperialistic, as is executing a man without allowing him to stand trial. The Enterprise will be responsible for confirming the worst suspicions other species already harbour regarding the purpose of StarFleet and its intentions. I note I am not alone in these concerns. Mr Scott has already tendered his resignation over the issue of-"

Jim cuts him off.

"So, we do nothing. We do nothing, then." He rubs his hands violently over his face. "Is that what you want? Maybe Harrison can just go and team up with the Klingons, and they can both go and invade another fucking planet, and we'll just sit back and do nothing because: oh, we might look imperialist and: oh, who died and made us the Galaxy Police? Well, I tell you who died, Spock. Pike. Our friend. Your friend. Or is your friendship with him something else you find 'regrettable'?"

"I am not suggesting we do nothing. The first action we should take in such circumstances is to arrange with the Klingons for Harrison's extradition-

"Like they would ever, ever, agree to that!" Jim explodes. He turns and braces both his hands against the wall of the cabin. "Fuck! FUCK!" He presses his forehead against the smooth bulwark, is silent. His knuckles are white, the scars there stand out whiter still, tusk pale and angry.
"If you had your hands on him right now what would you do to him?" Spock asks quietly.

"I would kill him," Jim replies. It's barely a whisper.

"Do you think that it is the correct course of action to kill those who harm us, however grievously? And by correct, I should clarify, I mean both logically and morally."

Jim raises his head until his eyes meet Spock's. He sighs heavily.

"No. Of course I don't. That's why people who are emotionally compromised shouldn't make decisions about general principles."

"Exactly, Captain."

They regard each other in silence for a long beat.

After a while, Spock says, "There is a quotation from the writings of Surak that I believe is relevant to the current situation: Thrap-fam'es nufau if svail ik kal'ta-mor f'timut plesh-tor. 'Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.'"

Jim lifts his hands from the wall, locks them behind the back of his head. His colour is still high, his eyes bright and dangerous.

"Do you know what, I'm really not in the mood for all your hippie mumbo jumbo bullshit right now. I'm not a violet. If someone puts their heel to me, I'll bite it."

"Then I will remind you of the lines from your favourite play, upon showing mercy in difficult times: Mine enemy's meanest dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire. We have a duty to protect that man against those who would wrong him. Even if they are our superiors. Even if they are ourselves."

Jim gives an ironic sigh.

"Lear. Right. Lear. Now I get Lear. Now I get - what? - a request from you of all people to feel feelings? To be a better person? You know who said that line, Spock? Cordelia. And you know what happened to Cordelia? She was executed. That's what showing mercy gets you, Spock. I thought you of all people would be able to appreciate that."

"Captain-"

"No, I can't hear any more of this. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a ship to run."

**

Spock can sense Jim's presence on the bridge spark and prickle along the edge of his consciousness. Just as in yesterday's meeting he feels hyper aware of every move Jim makes, the rhythms of his body, the patterns of his speech. Nevertheless he does not allow himself to turn and look at Jim, not until Jim has Nyota open the shipwide comm and starts to address the Enterprise crew. If Jim is still angry, he does not show it. It is his Captain's voice he uses, clear and firm, authoritative, sure.

"Attention, crew of the Enterprise. As most of you know, Christopher Pike, former captain of this ship - and our friend - is dead. The man who killed him has fled our system and is hiding on the Klingon homeworld, somewhere he believes we are unwilling to go. We are on our way there now. Per Admiral Marcus, it is essential that our presence go undetected. Tensions between the Federation and the Klingon Empire have been high and provocation could lead to all-out war."
Jim turns then in the command chair and looks directly at Spock. He looks directly at Spock for 5.6 seconds, and Spock feels every beat of them reverberate through his skin, his blood, his bones, into his katra. He observes how the lines stand out on Jim's forehead, thinks of how much deeper they have grown these past nine months. He looks at the amazing clarity of Jim's eyes. He thinks of Jim's words, written in the back of *Utilitarianism*, the copy Spock still has in his desk drawer, lying alongside *Alice*. 'I still wouldn't do it. And neither would you. And I am glad'. Spock looks and looks and it feels like something is being tested between them, it feels like something very fragile and very rare might be about to break. There is a stone in his belly, a poker of heat behind his temples. Jim's mouth quirks, pulling down with some emotion that Spock cannot place. He breaks their gaze, turns back to the comm.

"I will personally lead a landing party to an abandoned city on the surface of Qo'noS, and we will capture the fugitive John Harrison and return him to Earth so he can face judgement for his actions. All right, let's go get this son of a bitch. Kirk out."

Spock feels something gleam inside of him, something which has been pulled and frayed but holds firm, stays true. He rises from his chair, walks over to where Jim sits, gaze troubled, eyes focused on something in the middle distance which only he can see.

"Captain, I believe you have made the right decision. If I can be of assistance I would be happy to accompany you on the away team."

Jim looks up at him then from under raised brows.

"You. *Happy*?"

"I was simply attempting to use your vernacular to convey an idea," Spock replies. But that is what it was, isn't it, the thing that briefly gleamed inside him. *Happiness.*

Jim gives him a small, private smile. It barely even touches his lips, but it sets a slight ripple along the crinkles around his eyes, and so Spock knows it is a true smile, the first real smile Jim has given him in 11.5 days. The thing, whatever it is - *happiness* - flickers inside him again. Lightness, silverings.

**

Carol Wallace. When he looks at her Spock feels something he hasn't felt since his youth, an emotion he thought he had long since schooled and mastered. It was a feeling he used to have sometimes among full Vulcans: *envy*. Over the course of the next five days as they travel to Qo'noS he watches her. Her quick hands and her quick mind, her golden skin, the dancing behind her eyes. He watches. He watches the way Jim's eyes often catch and settle upon her. He watches the genuine warmth in the smiles Jim gives to her. He watches. There is something else there too, along with the envy: suspicion. *Illogical*, he thinks, *you are allowing your own emotional weakness to interfere with your ability to reason*. And yet it will not go away.

It takes some digging, but Spock is skilled with computer systems, and he is infinite in his patience, in his resolve. And there it is. Carol Wallace is not who she claims to be. He confronts her in one of the science bays, the one where they are storing the torpedoes that the Admiral gave to them. The torpedoes intended for Harrison.

"What are you doing, Doctor?"

She smiles brightly, but her eyes send a different message entirely.

"Verifying that the torpedoes are-"
Spock cuts her off. "You misunderstand. What are you doing aboard this ship? There is no record of you being assigned to the Enterprise."

"Really? That must be some sort of mistake."

"My conclusion as well, Dr Marcus," Spock hears the note of smugness in his own voice as he uses her real name, eradicates it. This is not personal. This is not about Jim, and his eyes, and his hands, and his mouth, and what he chooses to do with those eyes, those hands, that mouth. "Except that you have lied about your identity. Wallace is the surname of your mother. I can only assume the Admiral is your father."

Carol's eyes widen. She takes a step towards him, voice low and strained.

"Mr Spock, I am aware that I have no right to ask this of you, but please, he cannot know that I am here-"

The Enterprise suddenly lurches violently beneath them, throwing them both off balance. He feels the ship slowly shudder to a halt, things grinding and clanking in her depths. Spock does not understand - they are still twenty minutes from their intended position, a shuttle-ride from Qo'noS. He stands, hurries to the bridge.

The mission to capture Harrison is going badly wrong, being forced to land their K'Normian trading ship by a random Klingon patrol that came out of nowhere - Jim is not sure how they happened to be patrolling this particular remote area at this time - it's almost as if they knew - and now he is watching from inside the shuttle as the Klingon leader threatens Uhura, his large hands tight around the delicate bones of her face. Jim feels his heart pick up, even as his hands grow steady on his phaser. He readies himself for the fight. Then there is a blinding flash of phaser fire overhead, someone else, someone not in their team, firing on the Klingons - firing on Uhura? Then he is running, shooting. He is vaguely aware of the mysterious other, the not-them-not-Klingon, also fighting, but there are too many of the enemy around him for him to think further on who the other might be.

Jim fights like dreaming. His head thrown back, his mouth open. Sucking in the air, his lungs rejoice in it, it nourishes something that has been floundering in his heart. It's going to be OK, son. He seems to draw the Klingons onto him, and every blow is some kind of redemption, their blood is like water washing him clean; their necks, their chests, against his phaser fire is a kind of tenderness.

But then he feels it coming behind him, through the dust. Kodos? Something smashes him across the cheek, then another blow right into the soft tender curl of his belly. Blue eyes from the edge of the Universe. He has been so very patient with you, but now it is your time. There is a foot on his neck, forcing the breath out. It whistles. It is all that he deserves.

Then suddenly the foot is gone and he doesn't understand how - none of his team were anywhere near him. They are hopelessly outnumbered; they were never going to win. Someone has shot his attackers - who? The door. Then Spock is there, and Uhura, and they help him up, half drag him behind a collapsed column.

Spock runs to pick up a fallen phaser, starts to fire. Jim watches him dumbly, still half caught between this world and some kind of grace. He stares, dazed, at the delicate pale swan of Spock's neck. Watching him fight Jim can suddenly see how the stiffness with which Spock holds himself is really just a stillness, a kind of watchful waiting, an almost erotic economy of movement; so that when he does move it is devastating, it devastates. It's the same when he's fucking. And even now, in the middle of all this, caught between the door and what is, Jim shivers to remember Spock's hands upon him, the dexterous twist of his limbs, his dark cock. Spock. He tries, but fails, to remember the
exact scent of Spock's hair, the stomach-crunching smell of belonging. Jim looks at him and thinks: you are more real than any of this, you are realer than everything else. Thinks how he knows Spock's shoulder-blades and his belly, his throat and his cock.

A shot narrowly misses his head and he snaps back into his own aching skin. Klingons fall all around them. And it is not Spock, it is someone else, someone else who is helping them. The mysterious other, the one who fired the first shot, someone dark and masked. Then the masked figure pulls down the cloth covering his face, and it is him, those same eyes Jim met on the day that Pike died. Harrison. Jim does not understand. Did Sulu deliver the message to him, tell him that if he resists their attempts to arrest him he will face the wrath of seventy-two torpedoes? Yet he fights.

But Harrison does not kill them, he only kills those that would kill them: the Klingons. He fights. He fights his way towards them, a whirling dervish of destruction, 'til all have fallen before him. Spock stands tall, facing him, phaser braced against his shoulder.

"Stand down."

"How many torpedoes?" Harrison asks, still advancing

"Stand down!" Spock repeats.

He shoots the weapon from Spock's hands.

"The torpedoes. The weapons you threatened me with in your message. How many are there?"

"Seventy-two."

There is a look on Harrison's face then, strange and desperate and wild. He throws down his gun as if it were nothing.

"I surrender."

Jim struggles to his feet, ignoring the bite of agony down his side from where the Klingon fighter has broken a couple of his ribs. The crunch and grind inside only matches what he feels in his heart. It's going to be OK son.

"On behalf of Christopher Pike, my friend, I accept your surrender."

He keeps his voice low and soft, but he can feel his hands flexing at his sides, the hard knobs of each knuckle. He half turns first, lets Harrison think all is well, before he spins back on his feet, using the momentum to add force to a swift upper cut to Harrison's jaw. He hits him twice more, one punch on each arched cheekbone. It is like punching a wall. Harrison's stomach is no softer, no less resilient. When Jim's fists won't work he tries his knees, driving them again and again into what should be vulnerable and yielding. Then his fists again. He feels the cartilage there tear and give, his own hands failing him. Everything failing him. His ribs are one long scream of suffering.

"Captain!" It is Uhura. He does not know how long she has been shouting.

Harrison meets his gaze, eyes still proud and mocking, skin still flawless. Spock is right, Harrison must not be made from organic matter, but from something else, something hard and ungiving. Jim feels he has been punching himself, over and over. Always jabbing and wounding, but only getting his own back. It is yourself you fight with. Only yourself. There is a ringing in his ears.
"Captain," Harrison says softly, and it is the voice one uses to a child after a tantrum.

Mine enemy’s meanest dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire.

Spock is right, this can be the only victory. Spock is right. Spock. Jim turns, slowly, trying not to wince.

"Cuff him," he tells Uhura. He walks away.

**

When Jim exits his cabin having changed back into his uniform, Spock is standing in the corridor. If Jim didn't know better he would say he is loitering. He raises one eyebrow at him as they fall into step, walking towards the turbolift on their way down to the brig.

"What?"

He notices Spock's eyes dart from his cut face to his red, swollen knuckles, adds, "And if it's gonna be yet another Vulcan aphorism about how violence is never the answer, I don't want to hear it."

"Captain, you were emotionally compromised. While your actions might not have been logical, they were certainly understandable."

"Ah, yes. I almost forgot your personal experience of totally losing your shit because you've been 'emotionally compromised'."

But he smiles at him to let him know it's OK, even though the smile tugs and pulls at the sore patch to the side of his mouth where the first Klingon hit him. Even though smiling at Spock these days always tugs and pulls.

"I can only continue to affirm my sincere contrition for my behaviour upon the day to which you refer," Spock says stiffly.

"And I'll keep saying it's fine, so stop apologising," Jim replies.

In truth, it was more than fine. It was the moment that confirmed it to Jim, the seeds that had been sewn during his mindmeld with old Spock, the seeds of The Legendary Friendship. Having Spock's hands on him like that, hard and grasping and passionate, he had known. Known. You are just like me, you are like me, you have it inside you too. The mad, hot thing, the desire. The brokenness and the wanting.

He suddenly wants to have Spock touch him so badly it feels like he's being punched again, but this time from the inside out. He realises he is staring at Spock. He can't help it. He licks his lips.

"Besides. I was asking for it." He says it slowly, deliberately. He hears the subtext, and he cannot help that either.

Touch me. Know I still want you to touch me.

Spock's pupils flare, and Jim feels his heart expand. Hope.

"You certainly did not ask for me to assault you."

And Jim thinks what a cop-out that is, because he knows Spock knows, that Spock knows what he really means, what he is actually saying. He is choosing to pretend not to understand because...
Because he has no interest in having a relationship with you. Still. Jim thinks how hope is foolish, and cruel. He forces himself to shrug, as if the entire exchange is of no matter.

Spock pauses for a beat, and then says, "What I wished to comment on is the unusual resilience Harrison displayed in response to your beating. He appeared entirely physically unaffected."

Jim rubs his fists against each other painfully, winces.

"Unfortunately the same can't be said for me."

Spock looks down at Jim's hands again, and a strange expression twists across his face.

"You are hurt."

"I'll be fine.

Spock reaches out with one hand, lets the tips of his fingers trail lightly over the damaged flesh of Jim's knuckles. It is so unexpected it makes Jim's heart jump and flip in his chest. He moves his hand away in shock. I wanted you to touch me, and you did not, and now you are touching me.

"I didn't-" he starts, just as Spock says, "Captain, I am sorry-"

Spock's gaze meets his, dark, dark, yet somehow welcoming, and the answering pull of yearning in Jim's stomach makes him suck in a heavy breath.

The doors hiss open, and Spock's gaze abruptly snaps away from his to where McCoy is waiting for them.

"Doctor McCoy."

"Mr. Spock. I hear you've brought me back a little present."

"Indeed."

They walk to the brig.

"I anticipate you will be able to enlighten us, Doctor," Spock says. "This man, Harrison, uses a transwarp beaming device that, as far as we can ascertain, is incapable of transporting any living matter intact, and yet he appears undamaged. In addition, he appears immune to physical pain."

"Then why the hell did he surrender?" McCoy asks.

"I don’t know," Jim replies. "He also just took out a squad of Klingons single-handedly and I want to know how."

"Sounds like we have a superman on board."

"You tell me."

Harrison is pacing his cell, moving with a kind of languid irritation that reminds Jim of a caged big cat in a zoo. He emanates a coiled, lazy kind of strength, a slumbering aggression.

McCoy approaches the glass, opens up a portal.

"Put your arm through the hole," he instructs. "I’m gonna take a blood sample."
Harrison rolls up his sleeve, places his arm through the hole as if it is some kind of offering. When he speaks his voice is poised and low.

"Why aren’t we moving?" He turns his cool blue gaze to Jim. "Captain? An unexpected malfunction, perhaps, in your warp core, conveniently stranding you on the edge of Klingon space?"

"How the hell do you know that?" McCoy asks sharply.

Harrison's gaze does not falter from Jim's.

"Bones!" Jim warns.

"I think you’d find my insight valuable, Captain."

Jim holds the ice of his stare until Bones is finished with the sample, then turns to walk away.

"Ignore me and you will get everyone on this ship killed."

Harrison's voice is steely and strong, one that is used to being listened to. It lodges, sure and certain in-between Jim's shoulderblades, an arrow from a master marksman. He stops. He cannot not stop. Of all things, he hears in it echoes of Pike's voice. You almost got everyone under your command killed.

"Captain," Spock says, "I believe he will only attempt to manipulate you. I would not recommend engaging the prisoner further."

Spock's eyes are dark, there are green shadows around them. He looks tired. He looks as tired as Jim suddenly feels. And Jim feels worn out by it, worn out by his own anger. But it's still there. He only has to think of Pike, to think of that moment in the bar where Pike smiled at him like Jim was someone good, someone worthwhile, someone to be proud of, and the anger comes back, quick and lean and lancing.

"Give me a minute," Jim mutters.

He turns and walks to the plexiglass, until there are scant inches between him and Harrison.

"Let me explain what’s happening here. You are a criminal. I watched you murder innocent men and women. I was authorised to end you. And the only reason why you are still alive is because I am allowing it. So. Shut. Your. Mouth."

"Captain, are you going to punch me again over and over ‘til your arm weakens?" Harrison says. "Clearly you want to. So tell me, why did you allow me to live?"

Mine enemy’s meanest dog, / Though he had bit me, should have stood that night / Against my fire.

"We all make mistakes," Jim says.

"No." Harrison's eyes settle into him, and Jim knows there is no point being flip, that Harrison can smell falseness the way a cat can smell a mouse in the dark. "I surrendered to you, because despite your attempt to convince me otherwise, you seem to have a conscience, Mr. Kirk. If you did not, then it would be impossible for me to convince you of the truth. Two-three, one-seven, four-six, one, one. Coordinates not far from Earth. If you want to know why I did what I did, go and take a look."

"Give me one reason why I should listen to you," Jim asks, knowing even as he says it that it is too late, that he is already listening.
"I can give seventy two. And they’re on board your ship, Captain. They have been all along. I suggest you open one up."

When Jim returns with him to the brig they find Harrison sitting on the bench in his cell. His gaze is faraway, troubled. Still, Spock feels a vague sense of unease prickle along his spine. This man is not to be trusted. It is not logical, but he somehow knows.

"Why is there a man in that torpedo?" Jim asks.

Harrison raises his head slowly, as if it requires some great effort.

"There are men and women in all those torpedoes, Captain. I put them there."

Jim shoots Spock a look, blue eyes wary.

"Who the hell are you?" Jim asks.

"A remnant of a time long-past. Genetically engineered to be superior so as to lead others to peace in a world at war."

Spock sees Jim tense at the mention of eugenics, but if Harrison notices he does not seem to care.

"We were condemned as criminals. Forced into exile. For centuries we slept. Hoping when we awoke, things would be different. But as a result of the destruction of Vulcan, your StarFleet began to aggressively search distant quadrants of space. My ship was found adrift. I, alone, was revived."

"I looked up John Harrison. Until a year ago, he didn’t exist," Jim states.

"John Harrison was a fiction," Harrison snaps, standing from the bench and advancing towards Jim like the predator Spock knows he is. Spock feels every muscle in his body tense and hum with readiness. He will not allow this man - this creature - to harm Jim. He will not. "Created the moment I was awoken by your Admiral Marcus to help him advance his cause. A smoke-screen to conceal my true identity. My name is Khan."

Spock sees the knowledge settle around Jim, the knowledge of the name. He recognises it himself as well, from his study of Terran history. Khan had been one of the most notorious of the genetically-engineered Human augments who had ruled over parts of Earth in the period preceding the Eugenics Wars and World War III. Spock sees Jim absorb this knowledge, continue to meet Khan's gaze with his own, undaunted. The courageous curve of his jaw.

"Why would a StarFleet Admiral ask a three hundred year-old frozen man for help?" Jim asks.

"Because I am better." It's practically a hiss.

"At what?"

"Everything. Alexander Marcus needed to respond to an uncivilised spectre in a civilised time. And for that, he needed a warrior's mind. My mind. To design weapons and warships."

"You are suggesting the Admiral violated every regulation he vowed to uphold simply because he wanted to exploit your intellect?" Spock asks. Khan is lying. He has to be lying. Spock cannot believe that a man of Admiral Marcus's standing would behave in such a way.

"He wanted to exploit my savagery," Khan replies, and voice is like a rough caress as he moves to
stand before Spock. "Intellect alone is useless in a fight, Mr. Spock. You… You can’t even break a rule. How could you be expected to break a bone?"

He looks at Spock with something approximating disgust, their eyes locking for a long beat. His gaze is clear and bright, and it sees into the darkness of Spock's as Spock sees into his. Something inside Spock falls into shadow.

"Marcus used me to design weapons to help him realise his vision of a militarised StarFleet. He sent you to use those weapons. To fire my torpedoes on an unsuspecting planet. And then he purposely crippled your ship in enemy space, leading to one inevitable outcome. The Klingons would come searching for whomever was responsible and you would have no chance of escape. Marcus would finally have the war he talked about – the war he always wanted."

"No." Jim shakes his head, and goes to stand shoulder to shoulder with Spock. Their hands brush and Spock can feel the storm that is going on under his skin. Confusion, anger, fear. "No. I watched you open fire in a room full of unarmed StarFleet officers. You killed them in cold blood."

Khan shakes his head in consternation, turns away from them. "Marcus took my crew from me-"

"You are a murderer!" Jim shouts, his voice rich with emotion.

Khan stands rigidly, keeping his back to them. "He used my friends to control me. I tried to smuggle them to safety by concealing them in the very weapons I had designed. But I was discovered. I had no choice but to escape alone. And when I did, I had every reason to suspect that Marcus had killed every single one of the people I hold most dear."

Khan's voice has dropped to a dull whisper, so heavy with a furious sadness that it trembles under the weight of it.

"So I responded in kind."

When he turns to face them there is the shiny residue that a tear leaves on the side of his face.

"My crew is my family, Kirk. Is there anything you would not do for your family?"

The shipwide comm beeps.

"Proximity alert, Sir. There’s a ship at warp heading right towards us."

"Klingons?" Jim asks.

"At warp? No Kirk. We both know who it is," Khan's voice is low and insidious, it worms its way inside you, gnaws at your trust, feeds into your doubt. Spock feels it slinking its way past his control, winding itself sinuously against the darkness inside him.

"I don’t think so. It’s not coming at us from Qo’noS," the crewmember on the comm confirms.

Jim is looking at Khan with an almost mystified expression. Their eyes catch and hold for a long, slow beat, something passing between them that Spock does not understand, before Jim spins, takes off at a run.

"Lieutenant move Khan to medbay, post six security officers on him," he instructs.

Spock is left staring at Khan. It is like looking into a dark mirror - the insight, the control - so like his own.
"Interesting how much you feel for him," Khan says, still with that same laconic detachment. "Your Captain. I wonder what you would do for him. I wonder how much you would give up."

Spock turns and walks away. He does not answer. He does not know if he could.

There's a period of time while they're travelling back to Earth that Jim feels good about himself, for the first time in a long while. Sure, he's disobeyed a direct order from the Head of StarFleet, and is probably looking at some serious disciplinary action when they get back to San Francisco, but he did the right thing. He didn't hand over Khan or his crew to be summarily executed by Admiral Marcus. He protected the weak from the strong. He let his enemy's meanest dog stand against his fire. And he feels Spock's eyes upon him, warm and admiring, and the heady drug of Spock's respect is like nothing else, he is almost giddy with it.

He thinks of Marcus, the emptiness behind his eyes when he had asked Jim to hand over Khan. He's playing you, son. I'm not your son, Jim thinks bitterly. No man he would ever want to call father would ask him to do such a thing. Not George Kirk. Not Christopher Pike.

The good feeling is short lived. They are travelling at warp when something appears alongside them, fires on them, rips open a great gash in his girl's side. 'You almost got everyone under your command killed'. What has he done? What has he done?

It is the Vengeance. So aptly named. And it keeps firing. He tries to outmanoeuvre Marcus, first physically, and then psychologically, using Carol, but it is no use. Marcus transports Carol from the bridge in a flickering spiral of light, turns his attention back to Jim.

"Captain Kirk, without authorisation, and in league with the fugitive, John Harrison, you went rogue in enemy territory, leaving me no choice but to hunt you down and destroy you. Lock phasers."

Jim feels that tight, desperate feeling in his chest, one he hasn't felt in years, not since that day in the stadium back on Tarsus all those years ago. Blue eyes. Eyes from the edge of the Universe. Kodos, Khan, Marcus.

"Sir, my crew was just...was just following my orders. I take full responsibility for my actions. But they were mine and they were mine, alone. If I transmit Khan's location to you now, all that I ask is that you spare them. Please, Sir. I'll do anything you want. Just let them live."

Marcus pauses, and for the briefest of moments Jim thinks it might be OK.

"That's a hell of an apology," Marcus says measuredly. "But if it's any consolation, I was never gonna spare your crew. Fire at-"

The transmission cuts.

Jim turns slowly away from the window, away from the stars, away from the darkness between them. There they are. His crew. The weight of all those eyes, all those lives. He sees their faces, all of them. Lyla, Kevin, Tommy. All the people he who loved but was not brave enough to save. Was not enough. His mother, he couldn't save her either. He wasn't enough to fix her, to save her from herself. Not enough. His crew, his family. He looks at them.

"I'm sorry."
Spock, Uhura, Sulu.

Not enough.

**

It is Scotty who saves them, having sneaked onboard the Vengeance and powered down her systems. But Jim knows he has only bought them a little time. He needs to save his crew. He needs to take the Vengeance out permanently. And there is only one person who can help him with that. 'Is there anything you would not do for your family?'

Spock follows him into the turbolift down to the medbay.

"Captain, I strongly object."

"To what? I haven’t said anything yet."

But this too is only stalling for time. Of course Spock knows what he plans to do.

"Since we cannot take the ship from the outside, the only way we can take it is from within. And as a large boarding party would be detected, it is optimal for you to take as few members of the crew as possible. You will need meet resistance, requiring personnel with advanced combat abilities and innate knowledge of that ship. This indicates you are planning to align with Khan, the very man you were sent here to destroy."

Jim keeps a brisk pace as they exit the turbolift and head towards where Khan is being held. He does not meet Spock's eyes. He can't look at him right now, can't risk feeling something that might make his resolve falter, even for a second. And Spock makes him want to falter. Spock makes him want to be selfish, and cowardly. Because Spock makes him want to live.

"I’m not aligning with him, I’m using him. The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Jim tells him levelly.

"An Arabic proverb attributed to a prince who was betrayed and decapitated by his own subjects."

"Still, it’s a hell of a quote."

"I will go with you, Captain."

No. He cannot risk that again, cannot risk Spock. He cannot.

"No! I need you on the bridge."

Spock reaches out and grasps him by the shoulder, forcing him to come to a stop.

"I cannot allow you to do this," he says, low and urgent. Jim can feel Spock's dark gaze searching for his, but he refuses to meet his eyes. If he looks at Spock right now he might change his mind, and he can't change his mind. "It is my function aboard this ship to advise you on making the wisest decisions possible, something I firmly believe you are incapable of doing in this moment."

"You’re right!" Jim finally lets himself look at Spock. Spock. His silver dark talisman. "What I’m about to do… it doesn’t make any sense: it’s not logical. It is a gut feeling. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. I only know what I can do. The Enterprise and her crew need someone in that chair who knows what he’s doing. That’s not me. It’s you, Spock."

He turns quickly, before Spock can say anything else. Keeps heading towards medbay. He glances
down at his hands, fisted by his side. They are still swollen from when he punched Khan, the rosy tightness punctuated only by the older scar tissue. Scars, that mark the pale pain of his survival. This will work, Jim thinks. It will work. He can do this. After all, Jim Kirk is damaged goods. And if life has taught him nothing else it has taught him that damaged people are dangerous. They know they can survive.

There is a moment when Jim is hurtling through space on his way to board the Vengeance that Spock thinks he might lose him. Fear. Swooping and endless. This is what he has tried to avoid. That night he lay by Jim's side, wakeful in the darkness, listening to the slow, heavy slump of Jim's heart, touching the soft, vulnerable parts of his body. He had known then that he had to distance himself from Jim, distance himself from the fear of the loss of Jim. But it had already been too late. He sees that now. It will always be too late, as far as Jim is concerned. He has taken root inside Spock's very katra, and there is nothing to be done about it. All Spock can do now is everything in his power to protect Jim, to keep him safe. Even if it means interfering with his own destiny, by speaking with his alternate self. So this is what he does. He speaks to his future self, and he comes up with a plan. He will succeed. He has to.

He had anticipated Khan would betray them, but it is still a shock when he sees Jim's broken face come into focus on the transmission screen, bruised and bleeding. Khan is holding a phaser tight to the back of his head. Spock feels his hands give an involuntary twitch. He has a brief, unbidden fantasy of squeezing on Khan's throat until his breath rattles and then fades away. He remembers Khan saying: "Interesting how much you feel for him, your Captain. I wonder what you would do for him. I wonder how much you would give up." Things inside him shake. But it is good for Khan to see this, to think this is all there is - Spock's fear, the stutter in his nerve - not to see that Spock has anticipated all of this. It is a chess game, it is only a chess game, it is just slippery cleverness, smoke and mirrors. But... Jim.

"I'm going to make this very simple for you," Khan says, addressing Spock. "Your crew for my crew."

"You betrayed us," Spock says. He lets something come out in his eyes, sees Kahn respond to it. And it is a game, but it is also feeling. It is a game with stakes, and stakes are not something he is used to. But he can adapt. He can use that to his advantage.

Khan gives a tight, sardonic smile.

"Oh you are smart, Mr. Spock."

"Spock, don't." Jim tries, and Khan hits him hard on the back of the head with the butt of his phaser. Jim drops out of view, Spock can hear the sickening crunch as his body hits the floor.

Spock thinks how fragile the human skull really is. It may seem strong but if you hit the wrong part it can be irreparably damaged. The same way you can press your fingers, moth-light, to a certain patch on a pane of glass and the whole thing will shatter. Stress concentrations. So it is with human bones. There would be places where Khan could hit and Jim would have nothing worse than a headache; but there would be a place where his skull would cave and break, or else release a dark clot of blood to start forming under the bone, waiting.

He thinks of the scar on Jim's eyebrow, how it felt under his fingers, a smooth patch under the rough hair. He thinks of what he said to Jim, that day in orbit around Niribu when Jim was lying in his
arms. "Nash-veh spo'tu. I too take care of what belongs to me. This shall not happen again." It turns out he was wrong. It turns out he did not take very good care of what belonged to him at all.

But he will. He will. Jim will not die.

He will hold his nerve. This will play out just as he anticipated it. It is only logical.

It is quick, and it is slow. This is how time is when he is full of adrenalin like this. Fast and at the same time dreamy. The shock of finding himself in the transporter room. The joy of being back on his girl. Helping Scotty carry Carol to medbay. Spock. Clever Spock with his unexpected trickery, arming the torpedoes that Khan had been so desperate to have returned to him. It is classic and fitting, hiding death inside a gift. There is a troubling, glancing moment when he thinks that Spock has killed Khan's crew, before Bones shows him them, also lying outside of time, safe in their cryotubes.

But you know him, you know his gentleness, his kind, good heart, you know he would not have done that.

The knowing is a good thing, the comfort of knowing someone like that. He needs to find Spock, he needs to tell him... But then all is shuddering and breaking. There is a long, gasping sound, almost like a sigh. The sound of his girl giving up. No! Then he is running, Scotty alongside him, running. Time. There is a horror-coloured instant when he is hanging on to a railing as his ship tosses and bucks beneath him, throwing herself this way and that, a moment when one of his crew hurtles past him, and he reaches out to grab him, but it is too late, he keeps falling, falling. All these people that he cannot save. Pike, in his head: you got everyone under your command killed. They need to fix the ship, or it will all have been in vain. Running. Running. Finally they reach the core control deck.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Scotty's voice as if from far away, even though it is frantic, desperate.

"What?"

"The housings are misaligned. There's no way we can redirect the power. The ship's dead, Sir. She's gone

But Jim can see it. The door.

"No she's not."

Turning and running, Scotty following behind him.

"Wait! Jim! If you go in there you'll die. The radiation will kill you. Will you listen to me?"

There it is. The door. Did he always know it would be like this? He types in his override code.

"What the hell are you doing?" Scotty's hands are on his shoulder, pulling him back, but Jim shrugs him off.

"I'm opening the door. I'm going in."

"That door is there to stop us from getting irradiated. We'd be dead before we made the climb."

"You're not making the climb."
He turns quickly, feels his fist connect with the soft spot by Scotty's temples, feels the answering flare of pain in his own knuckles. He props Scotty gently against the bulkhead, fastens him in place.

It will be just him. It always had to be just him. Lucky Jim.

Then he opens the door. On his hands and knees through the tunnel. It is already harder than he thought it would be, his head already feels swimmy, his arms heavy, his breath rasping in his lungs. The dusty breath of the red storm nightmares.

*It is only yourself. It is only yourself you fight against.*

He emerges into the clean silver centre of the ship's heart, climbs up her curving coils with arms that feel like they have been hewn out of rock. It is a long climb, every bit as long as that walk back from the stadium on Tarsus. His head pounds, a stinging, toxic sweat runs into his eyes 'til he can barely see. It feels like things are shredding and breaking inside his skin. But he climbs.

Then he is there, right there at the very core of her. He reaches up and grabs hold of a support beam, uses his full weight to swing his feet to kick at the misaligned housing, to force it back into place.

*Come on, my darling, come on.*

He remembers that first glimpse of her, rising from the flat Iowan soil like a dream, like the dream of a life, the dream of a future.

*How long I have loved you. How long. Please.*

She gives a mighty buck, throwing him backwards as she blazes back into life under his touch. Dimly he feels his spine crack hard against one of the coils as he falls to the deck, but the pain is secondary to the deep leaden ache that has gnawed its way right into his bones.

Somehow he manages to stand up. He is footless, staggering, amazed. Dazed by the brilliance in his eyes. There is a noise - like water flowing from far away. He raises astounded fingers to the vomit on his chest. *The door.* He finds his knees, his hands. Hands, knees, hands, knees, handsknees. So much brightness. A series of heaves and clenches in his stomach. He has to... He has... *Spock.*

There. He sees the door. He has to... But it is so far away. There is a singing now, in his head. Not a whistling, a singing. He has to...

_______________________________________________________

Spock is rarely surprised, but there is something like amazement that rises inside him as the Enterprise suddenly jerks back into life under Sulu's hands, ending her cartwheeling plummet towards Earth. The warp core comes back online, the thrusters respond, the shields are restored, the power returns. She rises, proudly, calmly, so smooth it makes the frenzied somersaults of only moments ago seem unreal.

"It’s a miracle!" the relief navigator announces reverently.

"There are no such things," Spock replies.

Something slow and thumping starts up in the back of his head. He thinks of other things in the
Universe that still have the capacity to surprise him, to surprise him with their sheer unexpectedness, their bounty, their fluke. There are no such things as miracles, but there is such a thing as James T. Kirk.

His Comm beeps. Scotty.

"Engineering to bridge. Mr. Spock. Sir. You’d better get down here. Better hurry."

And suddenly he knows what has been done. He remembers the conversation with his older self, his response when Spock had asked how Khan had been defeated. The only way to defeat him is to show how much you are prepared to lose, to make the ultimate sacrifice. He remembers what Khan said to him in the brig earlier: "Your Captain. I wonder what you would do for him. I wonder how much you would give up. And he knows what Jim would have decided, when faced with the choice they have so often discussed - the needs of the many over the needs of the few. He knows what Jim would have decided; bright, brave, beautiful Jim. "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." NO!

Spock runs. Runs and runs until he is deep in engineering's thrumming heart, runs until he is face to face with Scotty. Scotty's face is clenched tight with emotion, and when Spock tries to meet his eyes, he shakes his head, looks away.

Spock sees the door.

"Open it."

"The decontamination process is not complete. You’d flood the whole compartment. The door’s locked, Sir," Scotty replies, voice shattered and uneven.

The door is made of plexiglass, so Spock can see what is inside.

Jim. Jim laughing in the Nirbian sunshine. His head thrown back, the strong lines of his throat. Jim's eyes when he is angry, flashing blue, a summer storm rolling in from the mountains. Jim's damp body underneath him, around him, the cornucopia of smells that rise from his skin, the twist of his back as he orgasms, rainbow bright, arching with promise. Jim, always so vibrant and humming, fizzing with energy, with movement, with muchness. Jim furious with him, Jim hating him, Jim sending him away, Jim's eyes turning cold and hard, yes, even that, but not this, never this. Not lying broken on the floor, damaged beyond fixing. Jim!

Spock sinks to his knees, touches his hand lightly to the glass of the door, look at me.

Jim's face is flushed, swollen, damp with sweat.

He raises his eyes to Spock's, slowly, as if it is a great effort. Even their brilliance is dulled, the evening sky coming on, the darkness at the edges.

"How’s our ship?" Jim manages. It is barely a whisper.

"Out of danger. You saved the crew."

Jim tries to smile. "You used what he wanted against him. That was a nice move."

"It is what you would have done."

"And this. This is what you would have done. It was only logical."
Spock knows that this is true, and yet it cannot be true. *It cannot.* "I'll show you the door, Spock... Not going to die. Always a way."

Jim's eyes open to him, huge, and fearful. His lips quiver.

"I'm scared, Spock. Help me not be. How do you choose not to feel?"

There is an impossible tightness in his chest, a wetness on his face. It is like something is bleeding out of him, something so precious and rare, and he cannot stem it, it runs through him and away, like the sands of the Sas-a-Shar through his fingers.

"I do not know. Right now, I am failing."

Jim's eyes, growing paler, more silvery as the dusk falls inside them.

"I want you to know why I couldn't let you die. Why I went back for you."

Spock swallows heavily.

"Because you are my friend."

He goes to say more, to say finally what is in his heart, but Jim shudders, his eyes growing distant. He raises his hand to the glass, fingers splayed as if to give Spock the ozh'esta. Spock presses his own hand to the glass, fitting it over Jim's. It is all he can do. He parts his lips, but it is like his mouth is filled with desert sand.

Jim stares at where their hands are not-quite-touching. Always and never touching and touched. Then he pulls his gaze back to Spock's.

"I lo-" he starts, but his voice fails him, gets caught somewhere in his throat.

*Jim.*

Spock keeps his fingers pressed to the glass, hand to hand with his Captain. It is all he can do. "*I could have found her. I could have held her hand.*" This is what he should have said to Jim, then, when Jim had told him about Lyla: It would have hurt her worse if you had been there. It would have killed her a thousand times to see you die too. If she loved you. If she loved you, that would be the most terrifying thing of all, to have you hold her hand. She would want you to live. Live, *live.*

**

*Spock*

Vulcans do not dream. It has been something that has been endlessly studied by both Terran and Vulcan neuroscientists. What this difference between our two species may tell us about the transfer of data from short-term to long-term memory, about threat-simulation theory, about evolutionary psychology.

I did not dream. In this, as in most things, I was fully Vulcan.

Last night, Jim and I were sitting in his cabin, playing chess. I told him about my mother, about how I never told her that I loved her. About regret.

"So what's the valuable life lesson to be learned from that, then?" Jim asked. The strange,
pinched, hopeful look on his face.

"That I should articulate to those I value what they mean to me."

"Exactly," Jim said, looking almost expectant.

And I knew what he wanted from me, and that it was wanted. I knew what he wanted, and I could give it. And it was such a little thing, the giving, such a little thing, even though it had illogically appeared as though it were the biggest thing of all.

And when I said it his face was glowing, glowing, and his arms went around me, and the chess board fell to the floor, and he was pressed against me, and he was vibrant and alive, and there was nothing like it, there was nothing like that love. That muchness. In my arms. Love. Jim.

My heart's own darling.

And then I awoke, face burrowed into the crook of my arm, an alien dampness on my cheeks.

I did not used to dream. I did not used to cry.

But this, as all things are wont to do, has changed.
The Door In The Sky

Chapter Summary

Sad times all round. Then slashy/slushy goodness. Unashamedly nauseatingly romantic happy!ending is happy.

Chapter Notes

**Rating:** NC-17 for sexual content, adult themes  
**Pairing:** K/S all the way!  
**Warnings:** Some violence (as per movie). General woe for a while. Dubious medical ethics.  
**Author's notes:** Thank you SO much to everyone who had read and/or commented on this, I've hugely appreciated it, especially as a newbie to the Fandom. I actually can't believe I've written a novel length *Trek* fic! A massive thanks to my wonderful beta, Amanda Warrington.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Part Six: The Door In The Sky

*He had a word, too. Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that any more than for pride or fear...*  
- William Faulkner, 'As I Lay Dying'

**Jim**

Bad harvests. A childhood of bad harvests. I ask my dad, I say: "Dad, what's at the end of the Universe?" And he says, "Your chair, that's at the end. You're ready for your chair." Mom says, "Are you sneaking food out to that girl again, Jimmy? Jim? Answer me. Jim!" Lyla. "Tell me about your girl, Captain". She smells like apples. "You're getting luckier all the time". Dad's there, in the bar, or maybe it's Pike: "I believe in you." Sam's letting me ride his bike. "You'll do OK, Jimbo". I was in this play once, at school... It was Shakespeare wasn't it?  
**Puns.** Pain, like a living thing, separate from me, pulsing and ravenous, all over me. I want it to stop. *He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer.* There is no fear anymore, only a desire to make it stop. Make it stop. Make this feeling stop. "What's so important about feelings?" "Shh, shh now, T'hy'la. I know, I know you. T'hy'la". There's a scar on my eyebrow where Frank's wedding ring caught it, one time. Frank; his fists. "You'll never amount to anything". "You think you’re infallible. You think you can’t make a mistake". Then the pain lifts off me, raises its great shaggy head, unlocks its claws from my chest, and is gone. I want it to come back. I know what it means now. "I'm dying". Green ribs in the white moonlight. T'hy'la. Come back. *Star light, star bright. I wish I may, I*
wish I might. There was someone once who traced their finger along it, that scar. The gentlest touch I've ever known. "Is this the result of an altercation in a drinking establishment?"
"You're just jealous, because you have ridiculous eyebrows." It was Spock. There was a door once, but now I don't know how to find it. No, there was never a door. There is no door. I wanted to live, I wanted the door, I wanted. I want. Spock. Spock. Spock.

Jim dies.

Jim dies and it's the worst thing. It's almost stunning, Spock thinks, the pain of it. Part of him is coldly, detachedly curious at this sudden and unexpected ability to feel something so brightly, so sharp and brilliant in its intensity. A tiny part of him. The rest of him feels like one, giant, endless scream. Jim.

Nyota comes to him.

"Spock. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Tushah nash-veh k'dular." She rests one warm hand on his shoulder, squeezes. "We all loved him you know." Then she sees his face. "But not like you. But not like you."

The anger is good because it is the only thing which brings relief from the tight, white agony of the pain. The hopelessness of the pain.

It is the anger which carries him to the bridge, which enables him to instruct Sulu to scan the Vengeance, now smashed into the San Francisco bay, for signs of life. It is the anger which takes him to the transporter pad, which flows through him like liquid fire as he scans the panicked crowds for Khan. It is the anger which finds him. It is the anger which sends him racing after him. It is the anger which means he does not feel the pain, not when Khan stamps down viciously on his wrist to make him drop his phaser, and not when Khan throws him bodily against the side of the transport ship they have climbed onto. It does not matter what Khan does to him, Spock will win.

I will win, he thinks. I will kill you, because I do not care if I live or die.

He realises that, before when he thought he didn't care, he in fact did. Deep in the belly of the Niribian volcano, when he thought he had let go of caring, he hadn't, not really. No, this is what actually not caring feels like. He does not matter. His life does not matter. Nothing matters. Nothing matters except destroying the man who has taken everything, who has turned all to nothing.

You have taken from me everything that could possibly be taken from me, Spock thinks, as he smashes his fist into Khan's face. You have taken all I had left. K'hat'n'dlawa. Half of my heart, half of my soul.

He had struggled to master the pain in his katra when his home was destroyed, but this is worse. Because now he knows Jim was his true home. Everything else was just geography. Jim, his home. Gone.

He remembers Jim, on the bridge, the day his mother died: 'What is it like not to feel anger or heartbreak or the need to stop at nothing to avenge her death?'

What he would say to him now: Jim, I feel all these things. Anger. Heartbreak. Vengeance. I will
He remembers holding Jim in his arms, saying to him 'If you were to die...' He remembers not knowing how to complete that sentence. Now he knows. It turns out the answer is: I would die. It turns out there is a hierarchy of grief. There was the loss of T'Pring, his mother, his home. Things to be borne, things to be lived through. And then there is the loss of Jim. The worst thing. A thing which cannot be endured.

There is a brief moment when he thinks on Surak, who says: Nam-tor ri’el nazh-tor s’rasahkos-dve lan hi tiyian nesh-kur. But then he recalls how dull Jim's eyes went as he died, like the light falling out of the sky, and it is like another dark lance shocking through his heart. Khan's hands are pressed tight against Spock's skull as he tries to break Spock's neck. It will be to no avail. Spock will win.

He raises his hand to Khan's psi points, lets the anger flow through him. Eshack. It is not something that is talked of. The killing gift. He has never had cause to use it, has never even been trained in how to use it. But it comes easily, as if it has always been just waiting to be summoned. It comes like a dark flood in his brain, he feels it reverberate through his psi points in a rattle of agony. It feels like ripping, but it wants Khan dead, and so the ripping is sweet.

Khan senses it, the black maw that is heading for the delicate pink tendrils of his brain, and for the first time Spock sees him look afraid. He feels his mind wash over Khan's, destroying, ruining, ending.

With a groan of pure exertion Khan manages to wrench himself free, to break the meld. He is away in an instant, on the run now, scared. He leaps from the transport ship they are on, landing on another one, but Spock follows him. There is no fear. There is nothing. There is a fierce pleasure in feeling Khan's fists upon him, because it shows he is scared, that he knows. He knows Spock will kill him. He knows there will be no other ending to this. Even when Khan has him on the floor of the ship, is trying to twist at his neck once more, there is never a shred of doubt inside Spock's mind, not even a chink in his certainty.

Khan suddenly releases him, rises to his feet. Spock sees Nyota appear on the deck, phaser raised and ready as she fires on Khan again and again. He staggers, stunned. Spock wrenches a metal crank from the side of the ship as he, too, gets to his feet. He smashes it into Khan's face, feels the wet gristly give of something crunching in on itself. He seizes Khan's arm, bends it over his own shoulder for leverage until he hears the wet snap of Khan's humerus breaking.

"You can’t even break a rule. How could you be expected to break a bone?"

Khan didn't expect that. Spock feels the sudden bolt of Khan's crimson pain flowing through the place where their skin touches. There will be more of that, Spock thinks. Much more. I will break every bone in your body upon the rack of my grief. Spock can feel that Khan is surprised at the intensity of the pain, unused to it. His surprise flows into the sore spot in Spock's head where their minds briefly touched. Yes, thinks Spock, after I have broken your body I will break your mind. He feels the gift ripple inside him again, ferocious and untamed. It is a savage thing, wild and uncontrollable, and he cannot master it adequately, but it does not matter. It does not matter if using it kills him too. That is irrelevant. He drives his fist into Khan's face again and again and again. You will break, you will break, and then you will be broken, broken like I am.

Nyota is crouched down on her knees in front of him, shouting something, but he can barely hear her over the roaring in his head.

"Spock, stop! Spock, he’s our only chance to save Kirk!"
Jim. What she is saying makes no sense. Jim is dead, Spock knows it. His heart knows it, his katra knows it. Still. Still. He hesitates, meets her eyes, huge and trembling. Sees the truth in them. He stops. He stops.

**

He carries Khan's unconscious body to medbay himself, lays him down on one of the beds. He turns to McCoy.

"Doctor, you cannot do this."

"You don't even know what I'm gonna do!"

"You are intending to use Khan's blood to restore Jim's irradiated cells."

"Damn right I am," McCoy's jaw is set firm, his eyes flashing, defiant. "And neither you nor anyone else is going to stop me."

"The Federation has a zero tolerance policy with regards to genetic engineering. You could lose your licence to practice medicine. You could be court martialed."

"Like I care about any of that garbage. Jim's my friend, goddammit. My best friend. Hell, after Jo that kid's the nearest thing to family I've got. I would risk anything for him. Just because you don't understand the meaning of sacrificing everything for someone you care about."

"Do not talk to me about what I would and would not sacrifice for the Captain." Spock's voice is ragged with rage, a spiky barbed thing he can hardly believe has come from his own throat.

McCoy regards him in silence, both of them breathing heavily.

"Look, I'm not exactly over the moon about it either, but it's our only hope."

Spock takes a deep breath, attempts to slow the frantic skittering of his heat.

"You know how Jim feels about eugenics," he says, softer. "After Tarsus, after what Kodos did-"

"I know damn well, thank you," McCoy snaps, cutting him off. "I don't need you to tell me his feelings on anything. I also know how Jim feels about being alive."

They look at each other again.

"That is what you want too, isn't it, Spock? For Jim to be alive."

Yes. The want is a great force inside him, many coloured and multifaceted and all consuming.

"You must consider this logically, Doctor. What either of us wish is of no consequence. You have no guarantee that your intervention will work. You have no data on what it could do to Jim, even if he were to survive. On what it might make him. Recall what happened to your own Doctor Arik Soong. He, too, believed he could cure illness via the use of eugenics. He too used the DNA profile of the original Augments, those like Khan. And the ones he created were no less violent, no less despotic."

McCoy looks haggard, haunted.

"I know that Spock. But I can't not try. I have to try."
"Federation officials will find out," Spock says. "They will arrest you, arrest Jim. If he survives. They may decide... They may decide to terminate him."

"No one's gonna find out, Spock," McCoy assures him. "It's a clusterfuck down there. A full-on warship crashed into StarFleet HQ and took out half of downtown San Francisco, and the Admiral turned out to be some batshit crazy warmongering traitor to the Federation. They've got more important things to worry about than how I'm treating a case of radiation poisoning in one of my crew members. That's why I wanted Khan back. They might notice if one of the other Augments is missing, or has been unfrozen and had samples taken. They sure as hell won't notice what we do to Khan. Not with the state you've left him in. I've put the whole ship on quarantine for two weeks. No one out, no one in until I give the all clear. Perfectly reasonable considering we've suffered a major hull breach that's let God knows what kind of space 'flu into the ventilation systems, not to mention the fact we've got radiation floating around everywhere. We're just gonna sit tight here docked in the central port, and no one will be any the wiser."

Spock looks down at the floor. He feels hollowed out, empty. The rage has left him, and in its wake there is only a gnawing kind of numbness. He wonders if this is what Kolinahr feels like.

"It is decided then. You will use Khan parasitically. You will harvest his cells without his consent and synthesize them with Jim's. Without his consent either."

"Look, I know it's against practically every medical rule in the book. I know. But yes. That is what I will do."

"It is not about rules, Doctor. It is about ethics. It is about principles," Spock says.

"Would you have me not do it?" McCoy asks.

Spock is silent for a long beat.

Then, quietly: "No. I would not have you not do it. For Jim; there is nothing I would not have you do."

**

When he dresses for bed that night he notices that there are bruises all over him from his fight with Khan, chartreuse around their edges, darkening in their centres to shades of sage, viridian, olive. It takes a lot for him to bruise, and he is unused to seeing so many of them, clustered upon the pale cream of his skin. He thinks of Jim's skin, how easy it was to suck or squeeze dark pink hues onto its surface. The warm willingness of his blood. How breakable Jim was, how tender. He thinks on how much that used to scare him. But the fragility is part of the beauty. He sees that now. Every love story is a potential grief story. That's the whole point.

**

Doctor McCoy performs the procedure. He exits the medbay some hours later, his face drawn and grim.

"It was... He's very weak. His vitals... aren't good. He's in a coma."

"Will he come out of it?" Spock asks.

McCoy scrubs a hand over his face.

"I don't know. I just don't know."
So Spock waits. He finds that time is different, it can become both longer and shorter than it really is. It is far from the constant he learned in Physics. Instead it accommodates your need to go deeper into it. It is elastic, it can take anything you give it, and then it snaps back, forces you into the slow, swift, day to day of your lived existence.

A day. Two days. Three, four. He assumes command of the Enterprise as she rests, Earthbound in port, sets about de-radiating the engine rooms, effecting basic repairs. But it feels like he is watching someone else do these things. Some other version of himself that he does not recognise.

"It doesn't look good," McCoy says. "There's no improvement. I think it might be time... We might have to face the fact that... He's not gonna make it."

Spock remembers what he said to Jim at their first Book Club meeting. *We have differences. May we, together, become greater than the sum of both of us.* They were, together, greater than the sum of both of them. Now Spock feels that what has been taken is greater than the sum of what was. And that is not mathematically possible, and yet it is possible. And yet it is.

The pain is back, low and desperate in his guts, the pain of losing Jim. He is no longer surprised that it hurts so much. It hurts exactly as much as Jim is worth. Jim was beyond value, and so the pain is beyond bearing. Spock thinks how he would smile at that, if Spock were to tell Jim that he missed him mathematically, that he was mathematically sad. Spock thinks about Jim's smile. About the crinkles around his eyes. *Those mortal lines.* He had always known Jim would be taken from him.

He thinks on the line in *King John*, the opening play in the copy of the *Collected Works of Shakespeare* that Jim had lent him. *We cannot hold mortality’s strong hand.* He knows this. He always knew this. But how he wishes... How he wants...

He remembers Jim's hopeful eyes over chess. "What's the valuable life lesson to be learned from that, then?" *We had almost no time together,* Spock thinks. *I did not know. I did not know, and now..."

**

On the fifth night he stands on the observation deck, looking out over the river that borders the port, looking past the San Francisco skyscape, looking up at the stars. Nyota finds him, stands beside him for a while in the purple silence.

"I am lost," he says.

She looks at him. Her beautiful eyes, so endlessly giving.

"I do not know who I am, what I have become. Nyota, I allowed Doctor McCoy... I allowed him to do something which goes against everything I know to be right, to be logical. To be moral."

"Spock." It is just his name but it carries with it a wealth of comfort.

"And worse... I would have killed Khan. And not just with my fists, I... I would have killed him with my mind. I would have... What I would have done, it is zadik. It is something we have not practiced since the time of The Awakening. It is an ancient way, an illogical way. An evil way. A way that leads only to destruction, and death. But I cared not. In that moment... In that moment I hated him. I hated him so profoundly that I ceased to be myself."

"Spock," she says again, gently. Then: "Don't be so harsh on yourself. When you open the door to love you open the door to hate as well. Surely Surak talks about that? The balance?"

Spock tilts his head in acquiescence.
"Yes. He says: Rik’mu’fel’es, ri yi’ken-tor etek ha’gel."

"Without the darkness, we would not understand the light," Nyota translates. She looks at him appraisingly, dark eyes both cool and warm. "For what it's worth, I think it's a reasonable trade."

Spock looks into the inky Terran night.

"This simple feeling."

"Yes."

She rests her head lightly on his shoulder. She is warm.

"I am glad you had him, Spock. There were things in you... I wanted you to show them to me, I wanted to nurture them, but I couldn't draw them out. He touched things in you I never could. The way you used to look at him..."

He thinks of the things she offered him, the things he could not, then, accept. He starts: "I am sorry-

But she cuts him off; "I am glad."

They look at the stars.

**

He spends that night on the observation deck, surrounded by the stars, the stars that Jim so loved. He watches the first rosy glimmers of the dawn grow into a bright, clear Spring day. The sky on Earth this morning is very blue. Spock looks at it for a long time, standing on the observation deck. He has never thought much on the colour of the sky. On Vulcan, here on Earth, on any of the countless planets he has visited. The sky is the sky. The colour of it depends on the chemical makeup of the atmosphere, and the scattering, and the angle of the planet's rotation, and the surface temperature of the nearest star. It is simply the colour of the void and the fire. It has no further meaning. But the sky this morning is the exact same blue as Jim's eyes.

_Now every time I see the Terran sky I will feel heartbreak, Spock thinks. I will feel this sadness inside me, almost overwhelming. It will no longer ever just be the sky, it will be Jim, Jim's eyes. Ha'pla-kur._

He looks at the sky for several more long minutes, as the breaking feeling unfurls and shatters and then closes back in on itself in his side.

All those days by Jim's side, all that fear and shame he experienced at the new and unexpected emotions Jim awakened in him, all that time spent trying to suppress them. And it was for nothing. The realisation comes to him then, slowly and with a sense of dislocated surprise, that he has been wrong all along. For even now, even now with the _heartbreak_ he finds he is gladder than he has ever been to look upon the sky. Everything, everything that happened, even if Jim is lost to him forever, is worth it, because of the colour of the sky. Now it will always mean something to him. Always. And he finds he would not have it any other way.

**

A week passes. Ten days. Spock wanders the hallways of the ship, listless, supervising the crew as they undertake repairs of the Enterprise, of her damaged skin and bones. McCoy's two week quarantine finishes, and Jim is moved to a StarFleet medical centre on the edge of the city.
Spock divides his time between the ongoing repair work to the Enterprise and sitting by Jim's bed. "You could try talking to him, reading to him," McCoy suggests.

"And what purpose would that serve, Doctor?"

"It's meant to help."

"And this is your medical opinion?"

"Well, it can't do any harm. And it would certainly help me. Constantly finding you sitting here in morbid silence is beginning to creep me out."

He finds that he misses Jim not just physically, intellectually, socially, but also morally. But loving Jim was always about seriousness and truth. How could it not have been? Spock sees that now. Loving Jim was the most logical action in the Universe, because it made him better. It is since Jim has died that he has behaved in a way that shames him. What he visited on Khan, his fists. What he allows McCoy to do now. When Jim was alive he only wanted to be better.

It does not matter anymore whether this means a better Vulcan, a better person, a better Commander... He has always strived for excellence, but it was as if having Jim in the Universe allowed him to be the best possible version of himself. And now he has not only lost Jim, he has lost himself, the better part of himself.

He could have undertaken Kolinahr and lost Jim that way. But he would have still known that somewhere James Kirk was alive and in the Universe, and so he would want to be better.

It is grief, grief and regret and frustration, that has made Spock selfish and small, curved in on himself, violent and isolated, in a way that love never did. He tries to meditate but it does not help. All that time spent facing in, but to be truly facing in suddenly seems to be facing nothing at all. Everything he does is imprinted with Jim's fingerprints; Jim has touched every part of his katra; there is nothing left of him but that which has been remade through Jim. He could undertake the Kolinahr, purge all emotion, and for what? What would be left without Jim? Maybe there would be a serenity, but it would still be a life without Jim, and Spock sees now what a life without Jim is. This.

There is a line from a book, a book he first read nestled on his belly down by the cool curve of the creek, in one of those endless days of summer, the endless haze of the summers of his childhood. Chin propped in his hands, and the sound of water running, as if from far away. Hot days. Diving into the cool depth of the creek afterwards. Then shaking himself like a dog. The smell of summer. The smell of home. There is a line from a book and it goes like this: At first he only dipped below the surface of sleep, and skimmed along like a salmon in shallow water, so close to the surface that he fancied himself in air. He thought himself awake when he was already asleep.

And so it is. He thinks himself alive when he is already dead. Surely? Or is it that he dreamt he was dead when he was always alive, alive all along? He hovers between the two, skimming between life and death like a salmon in shallow water, feeling the boundaries break over him. The water is lovely, dark and deep. He is swimming fast, upstream, and it is exhausting, it is... It would be such a relief to plunge down, let it cover over him forever. But there is something inside him that still delights in the challenge, that still gleams and twists and wants.
He hears his mother's voice, his father's. He was loved, loved. He feels fingers upon his brow, upon his hair. "I would not have you any different."

Then there is a voice that comes through louder than the others, rippling through the cool touch upon his forehead.

"He lives. If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt."

Spock. It is Spock. Memories of Spock come crashing around him, in a warm frenzy. Spock. Except... Jim furrows his brow. Thinks: Are you quoting... Lear? You don't even like Lear.

There is a hint of that delicious chocolate warmth that he so well remembers in the voice when it sounds again inside his head. Amusement.

-Well, it is better than REM

Then the voice fades away into quietness, and Jim sleeps again, but this time he knows it will only be sleeping. He has made his choice. However hard it is, he will live.

**

The next time he awakes, sudden and gasping, Bones is there, looking down at him with a happy kind of concern.

"Oh don't be so melodramatic – you were barely dead." He runs a scanner over Jim's face. "It was the transfusion that really took its toll. You were out cold for two weeks."

"Transfusion?" Jim asks.

Bones looks a little chagrined.

"The cells were heavily irradiated – I had no choice."

Jim frowns, briefly confused before it dawns on him what Bones is saying.

"Khan?"

"Once we caught him I synthesised a serum from his 'superblood'. Tell me, are you feeling homicidal? Power mad? Despotic?"

"No more than usual. How did you catch him?"

"I didn't."

Bones steps to the side, and Jim sees Spock standing at the back of the room, impeccable as ever in his grey dress uniform. His eyes are very dark, very solemn. He steps towards the bed. Jim smiles, remembering suddenly the Lear Spock had quoted inside his head. He lives. If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt.

"You saved my life."

"Uhura and I had something to do with it too, you know," McCoy interjects.

"You saved my life, Captain, and the lives of—" Spock starts gravely.

"Spock, just... Thank you."
"You are welcome, Jim," Spock says, and it's the first time Jim's ever heard him use his name like that in front of someone else, fond and informal, and it makes something bloom open inside his chest, a flower unfurling itself to the unexpected sun.

___________________________________

"Did you read to me?" Jim asks, when Spock comes to visit him in the medical centre the day after he wakes. "When I was dead, or in my eugenically induced coma, or whatever it was."

"I did."

"What did you read?"

"'The Once And Future King'. You had said it was a boyhood favourite."

Jim grins at him.

"I must've heard it. I was dreaming about it. That line about the salmon."

Jim looks at him for a long time, still smiling.

Then he seems to shake himself.

"So, Kobayashi Maru. How did I do?"

"You passed. With airborne chromatic dispersions."

Jim's wide, easy smile. The crinkles around his eyes.

"You know that's not even where the metaphor comes from, right?"

"You are aware I find metaphor both obfuscating and illogical. As such I am not familiar with many of their origins."

"And you don't want to be enlightened?"

"On occasion it is preferable to remain unenlightened so as to better enjoy the dark," Spock replies.

Jim's smile widens still further.

"You've gone weird since I died and came back to life again. I like it. You should surprise me more often." He pauses for a second. "Although you were pretty surprising before I died as well. The trick with Khan and the torpedoes. You cheated!"

"Well. I learned from the best."

Jim's hand finds his where it is resting on the blanket. He places his warm skin on top of Spock's coolness, lets their fingers tangle.

Ah, this, Spock thinks.

"I...I want...." Jim starts. He sounds almost shy. "I missed this. I want us... Do you...?"

"Yes," Spock says simply.
"Are you sure, because I know before that you-

Spock interrupts him.

"Yes. I am sure. I am sure that I want you in any manner that you will have me."

"OK, you're gonna have to ease up on the whole surprising me thing, I'm still in a delicate state," Jim interjects. "You want something? I thought Vulcans did not want."

Spock strokes his fingers steadily against Jim's.

"Well," he says. It is not an explanation, it is not even a sentence, but he finds himself unable to care.

They stay like that, hand in hand, for some time.

The second night in the medical centre he has a panic attack.

Bones is there almost instantly, checking Jim's vitals in a flurry of activity, then, when he realises what is happening, being still and quiet, holding Jim's hand and rubbing his chest 'til he starts breathing normally again.

"I was dead, Bones," Jim says, when he can talk. "I was dead."

"And now you're not."

"No. No, but I..." He pauses, bites his lip. "How do you know I'm not dying? That I'm not still dying?"

"I've checked your vitals time and time again, and you're as fit as a goddamn fiddle. Trust me. That's some pretty potent blood our Augment friend has there."

"Yeah, about that. I... I'm not exactly...." He struggles to find the words.

"Jim," Bones says, eyes deep and serious. "I knew you wouldn't be happy. I accept this is something you'll struggle with, and I accept that you may well blame me. But I... Call me selfish if you like, but I couldn't let you die. I had to at least try. Even the hobgoblin agreed with me in the end."

"Spock? Spock agreed that you should inject me with Khan's blood?"

"Sure. He banged on for a while about medical ethics, and risks, and how much you hate eugenics, but, yeah. He agreed."

Jim lies still for a while, digesting this.

"Look, I... I'll never blame you for this Bones. I would have made the same decision. For myself, and for you. You know that."


And despite Jim's protests he insists on spending the rest of the night sleeping in the chair beside
Jim's bed.

**

Bones finally lets him out of the medical centre the following day, and Jim heads straight back to the Enterprise, trying not to wince at the amount of damage still visible across her battered hull.

He itches to get involved with her repairs, but Bones has refused to sign him back on to duty for another week, and, besides, there is something else he needs to attend to first. He heads to Spock's cabin.

"Hi," he says when Spock buzzes him in.

"Hello."

Spock rises from where he was sitting at his desk, and Jim goes to move towards him, but then hesitates. He feels almost shy again, like he did that first time he had come to Spock's cabin, the time they first had sex. *Ridiculous.* He takes another step, but again, falters.

But then it doesn't matter, because Spock is striding towards him, and taking him in his arms, and his body is flush against Jim's, and his mouth is like the cool water of the creek on a hot day in Riverside, and it's like coming home, and it's like the rain breaking at the end of a dusty summer, and it's like the cool side of the pillow in the middle of a long, sultry, lowan night. They kiss for a little while, and then in mutual unspoken agreement they both lie down on the bed. Jim rests his head against Spock's chest, listens to distant race of his heart.

"So," he says after a while. "Uhura tells me you went ape-shit on Khan?"

"It was necessary to subdue him before we could take him back to the Enterprise."

"Uh huh. That's not how she tells it. She says you *broke his arm*? Like, stone cold style."

"It is not something of which I am proud," Spock says levelly.

"She sounded impressed. And she's *never* impressed. So *I'm* impressed."

"He had taken something from me which is beyond value," Spock says.

Jim rolls over, props himself up on his elbows.

"You were emotionally compromised, huh?"

"I was."

Spock's eyes are endless. Lovely, dark and deep, Jim thinks.

"Because you... care about me?"

"Jim. Spock looks so solemn, almost childlike in his sincerity. "I care about you... I care about you more than I ever believed was possible. There is nothing I would not do if I deduced it would benefit you, even if only in some small way."

"Including beating up superhuman psychopaths."
"Including beating up superhuman psychopaths," Spock confirms.

Jim scrunches his face up, feeling awkward again.

"Just so's you know, I'm not really that good at depending on people. No one's ever... Well, I guess my brother once... But not for the longest time..."

"You can always depend on me," Spock says. "I will always be there for you. For the longest time."

Jim shrugs. "I mean, thanks, but I've gotten pretty used to it being James T Kirk versus the Universe, so..."

"Jim. You have many people in your life who care for you. Your entire crew was devastated by your apparent death. Nyota, Mr. Scott, Mr. Sulu. I have never seen Doctor McCoy so distressed. There are a great number of people who are more than prepared to take on the Universe, if required, on your behalf."

"Yeah, I know that, but I mean with this," Jim gestures between himself and Spock. "With, you know, romantic stuff, I know I'm not... I mean, I know I'll probably fuck it up. I did last time. I'll let you down, and I'll... I'll... I mean you should also know that after we broke up - or whatever - the last time, that I met these girls and we-

"Jim. I do not require the details. Suffice to say that whatever you did, it is forgiven."

"Maybe this time, but you won't be able to forgive me every time. And there will be other times that I'll do something to hurt you. It's just what I do. Because I'm not a good person. I'm selfish, and I'm... I know you know it, it's what you saw that time we melded and you freaked out, isn't it?"

"I will admit to being somewhat bewildered, Jim. To which occasion do you refer? I do not recall ever being 'freaked out' by the experience of any of our mind melds. Contrary to what I may have stated at the time, I have always found them to be a positive experience. As for your assertion that you are selfish, that you are 'not a good person', I will remind you of the event sixteen days ago where you sacrificed your life to save those of your crew. Sacrificed without hesitation."

"Yeah, well. What I'm trying to say is that I know I'm not good enough for you. I know I'm not-

"Illogical."

Spock presses a gentle kiss to the delicate hollow of his temple.

"You can't just say that and make everything alright... I know what I am Spock, and I don't deserve-"

"Illogical."

He kisses the other one, just as reverently.

"Spock."

"Jim." Spock pushes the hair back from Jim's brow, and then he says, "Istau nash-veh tu-gluvau lu du sa'awek il svi'mu'gel'es, tauraun ha'ge-tu hasu."

"Surak?"

"Yes. He says: I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in the darkness, the astonishing light of your own being."
"Hm. Ok, that's nice. I'll shut up now."

Jim leans down and kisses him, and Spock responds enthusiastically at first, tongue seeking out the soft skin inside Jim's mouth, but when Jim runs one bold, acquisitive hand down between their stomachs towards Spock's growing hard-on Spock gently pushes him away.

"Jim. You have undergone a great deal of physical trauma. It would be highly inadvisable for us to engage in any activities which are overly vigorous."

"Hey, I've got eugenically engineered superblood in my veins now. I could go on all night." Jim raises one eyebrow, licks his lips with deliberate lasciviousness. "You can wear yourself out on me."

"Hm." Spock makes a tiny, pleased, animal sound low in his throat.

Jim smiles at him, leans down again to tongue a long, wet stripe up the pale column of Spock's throat.

"You can just... hammer it to me, you know? And I'll just take it, and take it, and take it. And you'll be all breathless and exhausted." Jim tries his best Khan impression, all cut glass British vowels. "And I'll say 'Oh Commander, is that the best you can do?'"

Spock gives an almost growl then, flips Jim over onto his back as if his weight were nothing, sets about divesting him of his clothes. But he is still almost unbearably gentle with him, fingers soft and reverent, peppering his touches with quiet Vulcan words, words Jim hasn't heard him use before. Ashal-veh, taluhk, petakov, ashayam.


"I am articulating what you are to me, Jim, as you have requested I do on previous occasions."

"And what's that?"

Spock meets his eyes very solemnly.

"They are not words I have used, even in my thoughts, since I was very young, when I used to think them about my mother."

"About your mother? Spock, please tell me they aren't sexy words?"

"Negative. They are merely words which express the depth of my regard for you, that you are the most precious."

Jim can't help his smirk, even though it earns him a slightly disapproving eyebrow lift.

"I am pretty precious."

"Did I say precious? I am in error. I meant precocious brat."

Jim feels his smirk soften into a smile, tries to bite it back. He still feels raw and unsure with it, letting Spock see all this feeling. It's like something inside him has been stripped back. And it's a good thing, but strange, like the acoustic version of a song you're used to hearing in surround sound with full production values. But Spock smiles back, the little half-smile-not-quite-a-smile Jim'd first fallen in love with, natural and guileless, a smile that has no intention to charm. It makes Jim's throat ache. Gold, gold, gold from straw. Spock kisses him then, and Jim loses himself in the sensations, Spock's
eyes and his hair and his skin. The feel of Spock's long fingers, working him open, wet and twisting inside him, every now and then grazing lightly against his prostate until Jim is reduced to an inarticulate melt of wanting.

"Come on, fuck, Spock, please. I want you inside me so much. Do you want to be inside me?"

"Yes," Spock says simply.

"Say it."

"I want to be inside you."

Oh, God, just hearing Spock say that word makes Jim's cock jump and pulse with blood.

"Say it again."

"I want to be inside you, Jim."

"Yeah, you do," Jim says roughly, "Yeah, you do."

He cants his hips back on the bed, pulls at Spock's shoulders.

"Come on. Please. I'll beg if I have to. Please."

Then he feels the blunt head of Spock's cock pushing against the slackened muscle of his hole, and he sighs at the rightness of it. Spock seats himself in a long, slow glide, and Jim feels his back arching with the sting and the pleasure.

"Do you want me to tell you how good you feel?" Jim asks.

"Yes. I want you to tell me how good I feel."

Jim half laughs, somewhat breathlessly.

"Fuck. You're really getting the hang of this."

"Of intercourse?"

"No you, uh, you, huh - oh - always had the hang of that. I mean, the talking thing. You know the... Oh, fuck."

"Ah. You mean to say we both appreciate hearing the other articulate their pleasure during the act of mating."

"God, it's hot when you call it that."

Spock dips his head to swipe his rough tongue along the edge of Jim's ear. He braces himself on one leanly muscled, lightly furred arm, his other hand reaching between them to stroke and twist along Jim's aching cock.

"Shit, yeah. That's good. That's good. Just... I'm not going to last much longer if you..."

"I want you to ejaculate, Jim. I want to observe you orgasming."

Jim laughs again, hearing it turn into a gasp as Spock's long fingers flutter over the sticky opening at the tip of his cock.
"Just hearing you say 'want' and 'Jim' is not going to get old anytime soon."


"Oh... Christ."

Jim feels everything pulling up tight and tense inside of him, feels himself clenching hard around the thrusting length of Spock's prick, feels the air catch and hold in his throat. There is a needling feeling in his fingertips, hot and prickling, and it speeds up his arms, across his chest, down into his belly, to the tip of his weeping dick, and then he is coming, coming with a hoarse shout, feeling the warm jets of his semen land across his chest, his stomach, his mouth open in jubilation against the side of Spock's neck.

He lies still, panting and boneless, feeling Spock pull gently out of him before manoeuvring him around on to his hands and knees, pushing smoothly back inside.

"Mphm," Jim manages. It is almost too much, everything almost too sensitive, but it is Spock, and Spock is inside him, and Jim feels like he might burst with light.

Spock thrusts into him hard, one hand clenched around his hip, the other splayed across his chest, right over his heart. It is possessive and intense and Jim delights in it.

"Ah, Jim," Spock hisses, voice low and rough with need. "Wufik. Fal. Masupik. You are a delight. You are...so pleasing."

His hips stutter as he drops his head to bite, hard, into Jim's shoulder.

"T'nash-veh," he growls, and then Jim can feel a hot spurting inside of him, feels his spent cock give an answering flutter of arousal.

Jim exhales heavily, breathes out a laugh as Spock pulls out. He flops, giddy and breathless onto his back, let's Spock wipe him gently clean.

He smiles lazily up at him.

"Hey."

Spock looks somehow sad, almost as if he is in pain.

"Hey, what's wrong? 'Cause I thought... I thought that was pretty, uh, amazing."

He puts his hand lightly on the side of Spock's face, trying to guide Spock's gaze to his. Spock smacks his own hand over Jim's almost violently, pressing Jim's hand into the lines of his skull, the stubborn jut of his chin, the delicate arch of his cheekbones, the butt of his nose. He turns his face, presses his lips against the base of Jim's palm. His eyes are clenched shut, and he is exhaling heavily.

"Spock?" Jim asks, hesitant.

"I cannot... speak. Do not... ask me to."

"Whatever you need baby, whatever you need."

"After all this, and still I cannot..." Spock fades off, his eyes still screwed shut, his face half hidden, still buried in the cup of Jim's hand. "Still I cannot say..."

"I know," Jim says. He runs his free hand soothingly up the cool silk of Spock's spine. "I know, I
know. I know you. Th'yl'a."

"Ah..." Spock's voice is small, choked. "You know what that word means?"

"Sure I do, it's what we are. Friends. Lovers. Brothers. Everything."

Spock opens his eyes.

"You," he says after a while. "You."

He releases Jim's hand, and Jim gently flips them so he can rest his head against Spock's clavicle, hear the distant stampede of his heart, fast and dangerous, beloved. He feels Spock's cool fingers thread their way through the damp hair at the nape of his neck, arches himself into the touch.

"Jim - I should say, considering you have been so candid with me. I will... continue to anticipate an ending. I doubt I can ever be as immediate as you would wish me to be. It is, perhaps, as hard for me to imagine a future for us as it is for you. For different reasons. Everything is temporal, it is only logical to... To... Prepare oneself. To..."

"I won't leave you, Spock," Jim says. "I might fuck this up, I probably will, but I won't leave you. I promise. To be honest, I don't think I even could."

Then, after a while, he adds: "I love you."

Spock's fingers are gentle on his head.

"I know you do. I do not need you to tell me. I can feel it."

"But I like to tell you."

Silence.

Jim tries to marshal the disappointment he feels sinking low in his belly. He expects too much. Spock has never been anything less than honest with him about what he is capable of.

Spock says, slowly "Would you like to feel it?"

"Feel what?"

It is unlike Spock to be so vague, so imprecise.

"How I feel about you?"

"I do feel it. I know you don't like saying it. I know it's hard for you, I know you can't really love like me, so you don't want to pretend. It's fine. It's enough. I know I'm yours and you're mine. That's all I need."

"But would you like to feel it?"

Jim says nothing, unsure.

"The meld - it works the other way too."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can see inside my head, what I am thinking."
"I know what you think, Spock, I can hear you thinking. We've had whole conversations in our heads."

"Yes, but I have not... I... I have never let you in. You have never seen who I am. Not as I have with you. It is difficult to express it in Standard. You will see. Here."

He puts his hand to Jim's meld points, but then with his other hand he takes Jim's fingers and places them to the where the pulse point trembles beneath his own temple.

"Why do you look nervous?" Jim asks, concerned. "This won't hurt you will it?"

"No," Spock says slowly. "It is just.... It is my own foolishness. And I see now that it is foolishness. There is something Surak says of those who are kindred, something I would do well to remember. "Yeht'es katra-vehong katra-torong ka-tala'es, tu saudau-veh, veh saudau-tu, etwel svi'il-vath.""

Then he says the words.

\[Jim\]

I am everywhere. Everywhere inside him.

Sweeping silver sands, great black rocks. For a moment I am stunned by him, by his beauty, by his fierce intelligence, by his surprising passion. And most of all by the feeling he has of me; great, rich, purple clots of it, layering around me as warm and fragrant as a summer's dusk, humming with delicious dark promise. *I will keep you safe Jim, I will keep you safe through any night.* Smells like spices, all around me the gorgeous inky velvet of Spock's love. How could I ever have doubted his love? It is staggering. I feel in awe.

More and more of Spock's inner vista is opening up to me now, in a rush that makes me feel dizzy, but still that comforting softness all around me, shielding me. There is the structure, and the perfection, the order of that first glimpse, but there are surprising areas of mess as well. There is this great, spiky maw of a thing, dark and treacly, which I see is the place where he melded with Khan, so spoiled and rotten it makes my heart hammer in my throat. *I will stop at nothing.* And I see blisters of pain around it, and they are singing of me, of Spock's loss of me. I feel flutterings around me, like wings, both slow and frantic. *Heartbreak. This is my heart breaking.* I experiment with thinking back: *Here I am, I am here, you haven't lost me.* Gentle pale wings now, stroking downy through the velvet around me. *Yes. Yes, k'hat'n'dlawa. Here. You.*

There are the places he did not want me to see. Grey rivulets of fear. *This will not be enough for him, my love will not be enough.* Faint, yellowish bruise places: *It is shameful to love him this much. It is weakness.* Mean-faced children, their dark eyes and pinching tongues. Green spaces, wild green spaces that are thorny and huddled in on themselves. Broken walls rubbled around them. *My mind will disgust him, like it disgusted her.* I pull them all to me, delight in the imperfection as much as the beauty, hope he can somehow sense that.

There is a worrying amount of space dedicated to my ass. Several peachy looking versions of myself, posed in all manner of ways. Spock has been very generous in his, uh, interpretation of my body, particularly with certain aspects of my anatomy. *You are beautiful. This is how I see*
you. Here the sands are shifting waves of Demerara, everything smelling of sugaring and spice. You are my banquet, I wish to eat and eat. A familiar smell, that of uncooked bread dough left to prove; and then I can taste it on my tongue. Never go without. You will never go without again, T’hy’la, I will make it so

I am aware there is a great rent somewhere, pulsing dull and red, a hole where Vulcan used to be, an aching graze of grief. Home. Kelek. But then there's me again, my presence almost blinding, a golden corona that he has set around his heart. You are my home. You are my home, Jim.

It is all beautiful. It is all Spock. It is all love.

Then I see a younger version of myself, well not quite, it's Spock's take on me, five, maybe six years old, but I recognise him anyway. And Spock's made him a place at the end of the Universe, where the wall is, and the wall is glowing in the late afternoon sun, warm and rich as marmalade, and there's a door, with the paint peeling away, just so. And the little me is always reaching up for the door, and the door is always opening. Opening, and opening, and there is no end. There will always be a door for you Jim. Always. I swear. And for the first time in my life, I really know it to be true.

Spock is my way out of all things. Spock is the chink of blue sky that will never go away, Spock is the hope in my heart. Spock is the door in the wall at the end of the Universe. Spock. My door.

**

Thank you SO much to everyone who had read and/or commented on this, I've hugely appreciated it, especially as a newbie to the Fandom. I actually can't believe I've written a novel length Trek fic! A massive thanks to my wonderful beta, Amanda Warrington.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so so the 'span' hover command doesn't seem to be working :-/. I'll see if I can fix it, but in the meantime here are Surak’s untranslated sayings from the story (excuse my rubbish Vulcan I cobbled together from various websites!)

makau klon-tu heh mahr-tor hertak-tor - Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment

Ki’ tranush, wak-bolau tvimesau-kes-krus bosh-shetau - Never run out of patience, for time is needed for the crescent moon to become full

Ri vath kau eh ri vath rok nam-tor na’etek hi etek kau-tor - There is no other wisdom and no other hope for us but that we grow wise

Lu palikau aitlun, to’ovau u’zul-kunel, pupuv-tor bai’nekwitaya t’zherka, abi’sposh-tor
k’dayalar vashauk... hi la fa-wak tar-tor nash-veh ta kuv tash-tor veh aitlun, fa-wak zahal-tor kunli’es - When desire starts, it grows like a volcano, swollen by the forces of emotion, until it erupts with destructive effects... Here I shall say that if one controls desire, contentment will follow

Goh’rom-halan na’eifa ashau k’ bezhun. Fai’ei na’eifa ashau k’khaf-spolong k’katraong inam-fam dahshaya - Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Because for those who love with heart and soul there is no such thing as separation

Nam-tor ri’el nazh-tor s’rasahkos-dve lan hi tviyan nesh-kur - There is nothing to be gained from ill-will but a black heart

Yeht’es katra-vehong katra-torong ka-tala’es, tu saudau-veh, veh saudau-tu, etwel svi’til-vath - In fact, my soul and yours are the same. You appear in me, I in you, we hide in each other

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