

pedal to the metal of your heart

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by [meriwethersays](#)

Summary

Jim realizes that, with his head tilted down like this, his mark is fully exposed to Spock. “So. I guess it looks familiar,” he says. Spock doesn’t answer. “Or you’re struck dumb because you’ve just never seen such a crummy soul-mark like that before.”

“I am already betrothed,” Spock says stiffly. “Vulcans do not place the same significance on such a marking as humans do.”

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Jim's hand goes to the back of his neck, where that empty circle lurks. "Right here," he says, and taps it. He wore his hair longer, for a while, to cover it, but it's shorn short now—the mark will be visible. "It changed," he says roughly, and tugs his own shirt over his head. "When I was a kid."

"They do that." Bones's voice is gentler, like he knows what that means, and Jim regrets mentioning it.

"It used to be a lot cooler," he says.

Chapter Notes

See endnotes for CW.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jim has always been glad that his mother's soul-mark didn't change after his father died. Some people's do, when they're widowed and they remarry. But he doesn't think he could have stood it, knowing that his mother was somehow meant to be with Frank. Her real mark just disappears, and she gets the image of it tattooed onto her hand in defiance.

He likes his mark, as a kid. It's on the back of his neck just at his hairline, and it's a wavy kind of black octogram and it has all kinds of religious significances to different cultures that he claims whenever a particular one suits him. He likes to think whoever out there matches him is going to be a real badass, someone else worthy of a mark like that—that they'll go out and wreak havoc on the galaxy. Sometimes when Frank is drunk, he says that Jim's mark is the mark of the devil and speculates darkly about what kind of disgusting alien would match a mark like that.

Then, when Jim steals Frank's car and drives it off a cliff, he gets sent to Tarsus IV—and after Tarsus, his mark changes.

The doctors told him that it wasn't unusual, when he was recovering in the hospital. Major changes in the course of a person's life can trigger a change. Now the mark is an only empty circle, bisected by a thin vertical line. He doesn't know when, exactly, it happened—when he first arrived on Tarsus? Did the universe know what was going to happen? When Kodos issued the first kill order? Sometime while he was on the run with the other kids? The first time he killed one of Kodos's men and then threw up nothing because his stomach was empty? No one was looking at it, seeing all the depth drain out of it, all the edges being ground down. What was the last straw, when he stopped being meant for that other person?

When his mother sees it, she gets very quiet and then tells him she's going to be staying planetside with him. She stays for nearly two months, coaxing him back into eating, into speaking more, into a little less persistent hypervigilance. Jim wants her not to worry, so he pretends, bags up his stash of emergency food and keeps it in the barn instead of the house, lies in bed with his eyes closed, counting the minutes, instead of roaming around at night. Eventually she hugs him hard and says, "Will you be all right if I head back out?"

"I'm fine," he says. "Go keep the galaxy safe." He thinks that if she'd been on Tarsus, she would've seen what Kodos was planning and killed him before he could do it. He wishes she would stay, but Starfleet is offering her a ship, and he knows she can only put them off for so long before they give it to someone else.

"If you need anything—"

"I'll let you know." She's already looking skyward, he knows.

She's gone the next day, and he looks across the dinner table at Frank and says, "How much longer are we gonna keep doing this?" He used to be afraid of Frank, but he thinks Frank is kind of afraid of him now.

"I told your mom I'd keep track of you," Frank says, which is very different than *take care of you* and they both know it. Sam is at parrises squares practice, or they wouldn't be so open about it. "You've got a bed, you've got three meals a day if you don't just hide them"—Frank caught Jim hiding food a couple days ago and only shook his head—"and we don't need to step on each other any more than that."

"Yeah," Jim says. "Fine." Frank mostly leaves him alone after that.

He doesn't stop hoarding food—just nonperishable stuff, emergency rations, that kind of thing, just in case. He's hungry, he's always hungry, but not so much for food anymore. His mark emptied out and it feels like maybe there's something emptied out of him. He never knows quite how to fix it—Sam is always willing to give him a bewildered kind of hug, but that's not it either. When he touches that empty circle on the back of his neck, he thinks, what kind of person has this and when did it happen to me.

The funny thing is, his real life doesn't change that much. He likes people, with the exception of Frank, and most people like him. When he gets a little older, the cops arrest him for all kinds of things—stealing and smoking cigarettes, getting into fights, going for joyrides—but they always let him go when he smiles and ducks his head a little and says, "Sorry, Officer, won't happen again." His teachers are frustrated by his

lack of effort, but they pass him anyway because he smiles and they know he's smart. The bartenders know he isn't old enough, but he smiles and they sell him a beer or two if the manager isn't looking. Everyone is charmed in spite of themselves and Jim accepts it, this ease the universe has given him with people, in trade for whatever else was lost.

And other people—oh, they like his smile, they like his mouth and his body and everything he likes to do (and he likes to do almost everything). Frank calls him a slut one night, when Frank is drunk and Jim comes in late with a ladder of hickeys marching up one side of his neck, and Jim doesn't know how he feels about that but he knows that soon he'll move out and be free of Frank forever. He dates—well, fucks—a lot of people. They all have a good time. None of them have matching marks.

Jim has never quite been sure what to make of the marks, anyway. It was cool to think that there was someone else out there, made for him, someone he was fated to be with. Cooler when he was young and not quite such a screwup. It seemed kind of special, that his parents had matched all those years ago. But now—what kind of person would the universe have designated for him, anyway? And how can the marks be so important, when they can change? What about the person who matched him before—does that person not have a soulmate anymore? Does Jim now match someone who didn't have a soulmate before, or is there someone out there whose mark changed when his did—and did that cause some kind of cascading effect?

He's not going to stay here in Iowa forever, but he hasn't quite fixed on the right escape plan yet. He drops out of school—well, stops going mostly, he doesn't officially withdraw because what's the point—because it's excruciatingly slow, painfully boring. He has genius-level aptitude, what are they going to teach him in this public school in this hick town? Sometimes he works eighteen-hour shifts at the shipyards just to give himself something to do, reads a lot of books to keep his mind distracted and smokes a lot of cigarettes and bartends at a couple of the local bars until his shift ends and he can start (keep) drinking. Pushes his luck with the cops until he gets in one too many fights and they finally do arrest him, and he spends six months in county jail. His roommates are a rotating cast of town drunks and fuckups, and he mostly spends a lot more time reading and talking to Nancy, the jail agent, who's a couple years older than him and has a lot of boyfriend problems (they don't fuck until he's out of jail, to his regret). He has an apartment, but he doesn't spend a lot of time in his own bed. You don't have to be someone's soulmate to have fun.

Jim is coming off a twelve-hour shift at the shipyard and six hours on at the bar, and he's who-knows-how-many-drinks deep, when he decides that it's a good idea to aggressively hit on a few of the dozens of good-looking Starfleet cadets flocking the bar. He's used to this too, the waves of them who show up for a last night of fun every few months before shipping out. It's a good routine for him—one or two always want a one-night stand with a townie, whether he plays a dumb one or a smart one, and everyone enjoys themselves.

Tonight, he's had maybe a few too many and he's sloppy, too aggressive. Uhura puts him off well, kinder than he deserves after the "talented tongue" innuendo. And then the other cadets decide to intervene and he realizes, this is what he was after all along—a fight, the dizzy adrenaline, the clean pain, the rapid approach of darkness. And they give it to him—oh, they give it to him, beating him into near-unconsciousness, with broad telegraphed punches that he blocks half-heartedly until he's too incapacitated to do more than flail ineffectually—

Pike comes in to stop them with a ridiculous little whistle. When Jim is cleaned up enough to sit upright, still bleeding sluggishly on his filthy shirt, Pike says all the words that you would expect—all the words designed to inspire Jim to do better. And Jim—he thinks, what the hell, Riverside is getting smaller by the day, god forbid he should wake up some morning and discover that his mark has changed again to match someone here. If the shuttle weren't leaving in four hours, maybe there would be time for him to change his mind, but instead he shows up for the shuttle in that unpleasant transition time between drunk and hungover, meets Bones, and accepts the flask from him.

Jim tries to glance surreptitiously at Bones as they disembark the shuttle, looks a little more openly when they're sent to a changing room to put on the hideous red uniforms. "Looking for a mark?" Bones asks. "Let me know if one shows up. Disappeared when I got married—should've taken that as a sign."

"My mom's disappeared, after my father died." He must still be a little drunk if he's walking around saying things like that. "It didn't change when she remarried."

"Lucky her." Bones grimaces. "It disappears, sometimes, if you ignore what it tells you for long enough." Jim wonders if that means his mom was never that committed to Frank. He should let her know that he joined Starfleet, one of these days. "Mine should be showing back up any day now, what with the divorce being final."

"It doesn't look like it has," Jim says. "Not that I can see, anyway." He's only known Bones for a drunken hour or so, but it wouldn't be the worst thing if they happened to match, he thinks.

Bones extends his own bare forearms and frowns at them for a minute before pulling on the uniform shirt. "What about you?"

Jim's hand goes to the back of his neck, where that empty circle lurks. "Right here," he says, and taps it. He wore his hair longer, for a while, to cover it, but it's shorn short now—the mark will be visible. "It changed," he says roughly, and tugs his own shirt over his head. "When I was a kid."

"They do that." Bones's voice is gentler, like he knows what that means, and Jim regrets mentioning it.

"It used to be a lot cooler," he says.

Chapter End Notes

CW: Dubcon of the mind-meld-without-permission and the pon farr varieties (though with enthusiastic participation in the latter). Significant violence between two characters who later get together (...you know who I mean). Sex-shaming. References to child abuse, Orion slavery, and to Tarsus IV massacre. Kirk/Gaila FWB, if that bugs you.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“I understand that human marks change,” Spock tells him, and Jim has the horrifying realization that he’s trying to be *comforting*. “After I am fully bonded in the Vulcan manner, it is likely that your mark will change to something else and you will find another.”

Starfleet Academy is a little better than school was, back in Iowa. The courses are faster, the students smarter, the professors more interested—Jim is still bored to tears sometimes, but he mostly goes to his classes, and he does his work and he plays chess and sometimes he walks into San Francisco itself and just wanders. It’s a different world from Riverside—maybe he would’ve come here sooner, if he’d really understood that there were places that weren’t Iowa or Tarsus or a starbase hospital. He eats and drinks his way through the neighborhoods, drags Bones along or sometimes another cadet or two. He wishes his mom had just moved them here instead of trying to hold on to the last vestiges of George Kirk in Iowa.

People still like him, and he still likes them, even more now. There’s such a wide selection, and Bones frowns when he says things like that and gives him unnecessary antibiotic hypos. Gaila is his favorite, and he likes to think he’s hers, but there are a lot of people out there. He sleeps with most of the people in his class who are interested in men, goes back for seconds with some of them. He lets them touch his mark—taboo, but it adds a kind of thrill, even if Jim never feels anything more than pressure on his skin. At a certain point his roommate says “Just *stop* bringing them back here,” and that’s what leads to Jim on his knees in a dark classroom, Gary’s cock thrusting into his mouth while Gaila works a finger inside him—

“Cadets!”

The voice is sharp and unfamiliar, but Jim can’t exactly turn his head to see who it is. Gary says, “Commander!” Jim sucks thoughtfully at the head of his cock and appreciates Gary’s strangled noise.

The voice is mildly disgusted, probably Vulcan. “Your behavior is highly inappropriate,” he says, enunciating heavily. “You have been assigned quarters, have you not?”

Gary releases his grip on the back of Jim’s neck, which allows Jim to turn on his knees a little and say, “Roommate got sick of me. Told me to do my carousing somewhere else.” His voice is a little hoarse. In the dim light, he can only see the man’s profile—from the ears, definitely Vulcan.

“You should do your *carousing* somewhere else private, Cadet.” The voice is still sharp.

“Are you just assuming we’re cadets? Or can you see our uniform pips from there?”

“From your behavior, it is a logical inference that you are cadets.”

“So—” Gary slaps a hand over Jim’s mouth and he shuts up. Gaila takes the opportunity to slide a second finger into him, which is a lot more distracting.

“We apologize, Commander,” Gary says. “We won’t do it again.”

“That would be for the best,” the Vulcan agrees, and leaves.

They do finish there, but they stop using classrooms after that. All in all, it’s not the worst thing Jim’s ever been caught doing.

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He doesn’t see the Vulcan again until he’s accused of cheating in front of the entire class of cadets. “I believe I have the right to face my accuser,” he says.

His accuser—Spock—stands and speaks, and Jim knows that voice cold, even if he never saw the man’s face. It sends a shiver down his spine, remembering what Spock caught him doing, even as it makes him angry. Maybe he should take that as a warning sign, the way his body reacts to the disdain of this Vulcan.

In the chaos that follows—the attack on Vulcan, the massacre of most of his cadet class—he forgets about it—until the moment that Spock goes to use the damn Vulcan death grip, or whatever it’s called. Spock’s fingers must brush his mark as they close on his body, and oh, oh, *this* is what it’s supposed to feel like when someone touches the mark, his mind sparks as he gets a mental hit of Spock’s rage, his body arches and stiffens on his way to unconsciousness—

Jim wakes up in a goddamn escape pod on a snowy hell planet—Class M his ass, this is like the inverse of a Class Y—every nerve in his body still firing like crazy, and he tells himself that’s because the Vulcan nerve pinch fucked with his whole body. Maybe everything he felt when Spock grabbed him, it was just because of that.

It’s a long and very fucking cold walk-and-then run to safety, where an old man who could be Spock’s grandfather puts a hand on his face and *shoves* information into his mind. He learns what’s so important about Nero. He learns that Spock is emotionally compromised. He learns how to take back the ship. If he learns anything else, well, he doesn’t believe it.

Once he gets back to the ship, it's painful to say what he must to Spock. Jim has never been that guy, the one to find vulnerable places and jab them, and he wants to do it even less to Spock. If his own mom had just died—he doesn't think he'd be able to stand, let alone try to command a starship.

When he says what he has to, Spock roars and attacks him. He punches Jim over and over, gets his hands around Jim's throat and squeezes until the world starts to go dark. Jim desperately wants him to touch the mark again, just brush it—what a way for Jim Kirk to die, choked to death by his soulmate in a fit of rage because he said Spock never loved his mother. Spock releases him eventually and the air burns in Jim's throat as he gasps it in, coughs hard, gasps in more air.

Spock storms away and Jim wants to say, Wait, come back, I'm sorry, I only needed command—but matters are too urgent. He sees Uhura—Nyota—kiss Spock goodbye before they beam to Nero's ship and that stings a little, and what a disaster this is. On the upside, they're almost certainly going to die, even though he assures Spock that isn't the case, and he won't have to worry about figuring it out.

* * * * *

They don't die. Enterprise limps back toward Earth, and everyone walks around with a stunned kind of relief. Jim finally goes to sickbay to let Bones exclaim in outrage at the collar of bruises around his neck—what comes of being choked by an angry Vulcan and then a slightly less angry Romulan. Spock comes in while Bones is working and says, "Captain—I must apologize for my earlier behavior."

"Chin down," Bones orders, and Jim obliges.

"Don't worry about it, Spock. I was trying to provoke you anyway. It was a natural reaction." Spock is deathly silent for a moment. "I'm sorry for what I said about your mother," Jim says, and Spock still doesn't react. Jim realizes that, with his head tilted down like this, his mark is fully exposed. "Bones," Jim says, his voice raspy. "Would you give us a minute?"

Bones grumbles something threatening, but he leaves.

"So. I guess it looks familiar," Jim says. Spock doesn't answer. "Or you're struck dumb because you've just never seen such a crummy soul-mark like that before."

"I am already betrothed," Spock says stiffly. "Vulcans do not place the same significance on such a marking as humans do."

"Oh." Jim has to admit that he'd never considered this possibility—meeting his theoretical soulmate just to get turned down flat. "You know, you're not married yet. Until then, we could just—" Then he stops. Jim Kirk is many things, but he's neither stupid nor masochistic enough to think it would be a good idea to bond fully with Spock in the service of great sex just to have to give him up in a year or two when he ties the knot with his Vulcan fiancée.

"I am in a—relationship with Nyota." Jim wants to turn around to see Spock's face, but everything in this moment is acutely painful. "I do not seek a different—entanglement."

"But she knows. About your fiancée."

"Of course." Spock sounds insulted. "I would not enter into such a relationship without revealing such a fundamental fact. My fiancée is also aware."

"Right," Jim says. "Obviously." Nice when people aren't jealous.

"I understand that human marks change," Spock tells him, and Jim has the horrifying realization that he's trying to be *comforting*. "After I am fully bonded in the Vulcan manner, it is likely that your mark will change to something else and you will find another."

"Yours has never changed?" Jim does turn then to find Spock staring at him. "It's always been like mine?"

"Vulcan marks do not change."

What the hell is that supposed to mean? Jim had a different soulmate before Tarsus, but what happened there made him—right for Spock? What a stupid arbitrary joke from the universe. "Can I see it?" That escapes his mouth before he can think better of it. What's the point in seeing it, when he's never going to touch it—when they're never going to seal the bond, or whatever? Apparently Jim *is* enough of a masochist to ask for this.

Spock hesitates for a long moment. "I do not see what productive purpose—"

"Please," and he hates the note of desperation in his voice.

"Very well." Spock very cautiously pulls the waistband of his uniform down just enough to reveal that empty bisected circle on the jut of his hip. Jim stares greedily at it, wants to press his fingers to it, his lips—Spock must feel some of that, because he looks acutely uncomfortable and settles his uniform back into place. "I will return to my duties now," Spock says. "I wish you a speedy recovery." Then he's gone.

Bones comes back into the room with an expression that suggests he was listening and a bottle of whiskey in one hand. He thinks Jim drinks too much, so it's a pretty grim sign when he willingly hands over liquor. "Sorry kid," he says. Bones doesn't try to soften the blow by saying something like "who'd want to be bonded to a green-blooded hobgoblin like that anyway," which Jim appreciates, just puts a hand on his shoulder and lets him drink in peace.

Jim is drunk, which is the only reason his good sense is suppressed enough that he goes to find Uhura. She's alone in the transmission lab, replaying a Klingon transmission aloud with a frown on her face, when Jim walks in and asks, "Can I talk to you?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Smelling like that? Do you think that's a good idea, Captain?"

Jim sits down a couple meters away from her and holds up his hands to indicate no threat here. “Sorry I was such an ass to you when we met.” Maybe he can just do an apology tour of the ship.

Uhura stops the transmission. “You needed to drink just to get the courage to tell me that?”

“What I’m going to say—doesn’t mean anything. For you. You should know. It’s not going to affect anything.”

She looks increasingly alarmed, which wasn’t his goal. “Captain—”

“D’you know what my soul-mark looks like?”

Obviously not where Uhura thought the conversation was going to go. “Please don’t tell me you’re about to say that we match.”

He laughs. “If only. Would you look at it? Back of my neck.” He doesn’t wait for her reply, only leans forward to press his forehead against the cool surface of the console. He hears her walk over, and then hears her sharp inhale.

“You match—”

“Mhm.” Jim draws in a long breath and then lifts his head slowly. He turns his head and he already knows the pity he’ll see on Uhura’s face.

“You know that Vulcans—”

“Oh, he told me. Very specifically, he told me. And that he’s in a relationship with you until then and doesn’t want any other entanglements.” He laughs a little hysterically. “You know what I almost offered?”

There’s something like horror dawning on her face. “You’re not that stupid.”

“What, to take whatever I can get for as long as I can get it and know I’ll be wrecked when it ends?” Jim shakes his head slowly. “Moot point. He isn’t.”

“Are you asking me to end things with him?” Uhura’s voice is careful, but he hears the suspicion in it.

Jim shakes his head again. “Nnnnnno. Wouldn’t matter and I’m not that guy—not if it won’t happen for real, anyway. I just—had to tell someone who likes him. Bones is trying to be sympathetic, but—”

Uhura pats his shoulder too. “You’re drunk,” she tells him. “Go lie down in your quarters before you do something you’ll regret.”

He goes to his quarters and thinks about comming his mom, but that feels too pathetic. What’s she going to say? “Sorry to hear it, your dad was my soulmate and I only got four years with him”? They haven’t talked as much since he went to Frank’s funeral wasted and brought along a very nice girl that Frank would’ve called a floozy. Jim should tell her what Frank was really like, maybe, but it would only make her feel bad.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"An Earth game? Monopoly, that's a great one. My mom had an antique set up in the attic, half the pieces were missing."

Spock frowns slightly. "What—pieces would be involved in seeking capitalistic good fortune?"

"Well, there's a little shoe, and a thimble, and a dog," Jim says. He's enjoying the look on Spock's face. "Sam always liked to play as the top hat."

"And these are of economic significance?"

Starfleet gives him Enterprise, gives him his crew. He only hesitates for a moment before asking Spock to be his first officer.

"You wish to have me continue as your first officer." Spock's voice betrays only the slightest hint of surprise. They never talk about—it, but Jim is sure that's why he's hesitant.

"You're the best, Spock, and I need the best." And he finds that the thought of Spock on another ship makes his throat close a little, like he's having an allergic reaction. It's not that Jim can't do this without him—he knows he'll *have* to do this without him someday—but he doesn't want to.

"You are—aware that T'Pring did not perish on Vulcan?"

Jim's whole body feels numb. He thinks he prefers not talking about it. "Yes. I'm happy for you. I wouldn't have expected anything to change if she had," he says, and his tongue feels thick but he hopes his voice sounds normal. "I mean, I would've been sorry for you. You told me, not the same significance. No big—" He can't quite make himself say *no big deal*. Jim clears his throat. "Anyway, I want you to be my first officer. As long as you promise not to strangle me again," and what an unfortunate time for a certain *thrum* to go through his body at the idea of Spock's hands on him again. "Besides, if you don't, it'll just be me and Chekov in the chess club together, and that's pretty pathetic."

"Very well," Spock says gravely. "I assure you that your person is safe from me."

Yeah, that was never really in doubt.

* * * * *

The first few months of the mission are great, fantastic even—the crew is happy to be out exploring, no one tries to shoot at them, they make first contact on three different beach planets and everyone gets to have shore leave. Jim has sex with five different people, six if you count the Corvian, but Jim isn't entirely sure if that was sex or just a ceremonial dance. They're fascinated by the human marks—every species seems to have them, or some version of them, Jim discovers. Some consider them sacred and treat soulmate pairs like some higher form of life (when Jim discovers this, he sends down negotiators who are fully bonded); others see them as little more than just another physical attribute and are stunned by the human obsession with them. Some have more than one mark, naturally-occurring—triads and quadrangles of soulmates. Some tattoo their marks on their foreheads or cheeks when they find their soulmates so that everyone will know.

Spock always pretends to be impassive during these discussions, but sometimes Jim thinks he can feel Spock looking, can feel Spock's eyes on the back of his neck. His mark is unobtrusive because of the emptiness of the circle, easy to overlook—the old one was large and dark and fully filled, and Jim looks at every mark he's shown to see if maybe one of them matches who he used to be. He doesn't tell Spock this. Vulcan marks don't change, so why would Spock wonder about things like this?

Jim had kind of been joking about the three-dimensional chess club, but when he realizes that there's an awful lot of downtime in space, he goes ahead and establishes it, announces it via a shipwide comm and invites other crew members to create their own clubs. Even with 400-plus crew, he's a little surprised at how many are started. There's the chess club, four different book clubs, a host of clubs devoted to archaic arts and crafts from a variety of cultures (Jim politely declines an invitation to the Tellarite quilting club), language clubs—

"I suspect that some of the enthusiasm will not last," Spock says from across the table. It's Jim's move, but he keeps getting distracted when new requests ping in on his padd. "Captain, if you do not move in the next ten seconds—"

"What?" Jim grabs a pawn and moves it, apparently at random. He's been planning this move, but he knows it will look hasty, careless, to Spock. "Did you ever play speed chess?"

Spock raises an eyebrow and takes Jim's pawn. "I am unfamiliar with the game. Check."

"What?" Jim stares at the board again. He needs Spock to take the bait once more. "I played it, as a kid—with my mom, when she was earthside. You each have a clock counting down—you start the clock when it's your turn and stop it as soon as you've moved, and if your time runs out you lose. But it was just two-dimensional chess. A lot less to keep in your head." He moves another pawn. It'll look like a frantic last gasp.

"And did you win frequently?" Spock moves—yes, his bishop, perfect. "Check."

"Maybe one out of three," Jim says. "I got distracted too easily. Checkmate."

That startles Spock. “What?”

Jim can feel the grin spreading across his face, and he doesn't fight it. “Checkmate. See, I have your king—”

“I am familiar with the term,” Spock says. There is actual surprise on his face. “Your strategy must have been very unorthodox. I admit, I did not see the danger.”

“Oh, you can say it, you underestimated me.” Jim is gloating a little because he's so right. “You're too used to playing Vulcans.”

Spock considers. “I am—more accustomed to a logical style of play. You appeared distressed and confused at several points in our game.”

“Chess is a lot like poker that way,” Jim says. “You have to know your opponent, play off the signals they give you. And I happen to know you think much higher of your own intellect than any Human's.”

“That is inaccurate,” Spock protests, though you wouldn't know it from his voice. “Statistically, Vulcans are more adept at games of logic and strategy.”

“We can trade off playing chess and kal-toh,” Jim offers. “I never quite got the hang of it.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “I suspect you are attempting to—hustle me, Jim.”

“It's only hustling if money changes hands,” he says, and is that humor in Spock's eyes? He thinks it is. “An Earth game? Monopoly, that's a great one. My mom had an antique set up in the attic, half the pieces were missing.”

“What—pieces would be involved in seeking capitalistic good fortune?”

“Well, there's a little shoe, and a thimble, and a dog,” Jim says. He's enjoying the look on Spock's face. “Sam always liked to play as the top hat.”

“And these are of economic significance?”

Jim finally loses it and cracks up. “It's a board game. It's just named after the economic gaming. You buy fake real estate using fake money and you have to pay rent to people if you land on real estate that they own.”

Spock frowns. “This does not sound like a game of logic.”

“Sure it is, the same kind of logic I used to win the chess game. If you watch someone and see how they react to you, you can figure out how they'll react to other stuff. I knew Sam really liked to own all four railroads, so I would sell them to him for inflated prices, but anyone else wouldn't have done it.” He suspects that about half of what he's saying sounds incomprehensible to Spock. “People logic.”

“I see. Perhaps—” Spock is clearly unwilling to even pretend that he'd like to play Monopoly.

“Relax, Spock.” Jim laughs. “Kal-toh next time. Or just another round of chess. I don't want to play Monopoly with you.”

“I am certain that after reviewing the rules—”

If they were friends—a different kind of friends, at least—Jim would nudge his ankle affectionately under the table. Whatever they are, he doesn't think they're there. “I bet Scotty knows all kinds of weird traditional games that neither of us has ever heard of.”

“You have quite the penchant for novelty, Captain.”

Jim shifts a little in his chair. “I'm just kidding, Spock. It's a chess club, we'll play chess. Why don't we play another game now?” He begins to re-set the pieces, careful not to let his fingertips brush Spock's.

Spock re-sets them as well. “You appear unsettled by my statement.”

“Oh, no.” Jim stretches. He tends to hunch when he plays and squint at the board. “I guess—I like new problems. Once I figure something out, it's not as interesting. Like a mathematical proof, you know?”

“An intriguing way to describe it. I suppose the same could be applied to a person—once you 'figure them out,' they are less interesting.”

“What?” Jim didn't mean it that way. “No, the more you figure out about a person, the more you realize there's left to figure out. A proof is—complete. Whole. Finished. People are messy and never quite make sense.” He smiles. “That's what makes people so fun. Mostly.”

“If you say so, Captain.” Spock places the final piece. “Which color would you prefer?”

“You choose,” Jim says. “I won last time.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “Are you attempting to—discern information about me?”

Jim grins with all his teeth. “Yes.”

Spock beats him soundly in the next three games.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Jim takes a long, slow breath. “I didn’t realize you were going to go for the throat.” That idiom seems to be universal, because Spock doesn’t look confused. He knows he’s revealing too much, telling Spock that what he said hit tender places, but they have to work together after this and he can’t—“Were you being honest?” Spock hesitates for too long, and that alone is a gut punch. “Okay,” Jim says, just to say something. “Okay.”

“Captain—I do not hold you in low regard,” Spock clarifies. “It is factually accurate that you did not complete your secondary education, that you are the son of a famous Starfleet officer, that you were accused of cheating while at the Academy, and that you obtained your captaincy under extremely unusual circumstances.”

“Wow, Spock, tell me how you really feel.” It’s actually worse to hear it this time, with Spock saying it all so calmly. “And that I’ll bend over for just about anyone, huh?”

Five months in, Uhura and Spock end their relationship. They’re not showy about it—but then, they never were, and Jim doesn’t even notice it. Bones is the one to tell him. “Guess Uhura got tired of him,” Bones says, as he applies restorative skin gel to Jim’s face. Somehow Jim had thought his first burn on Enterprise would come from a daring rescue or an emergency situation, not falling asleep on the beach on a planet with high solar radiation levels. It’s a little embarrassing.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jim says automatically. He’s in a good mood right now, pleasantly tired and a little sore from a long night with the ambassador’s attaché who’d sucked at the mark and scraped it with his teeth while he fucked Jim. There’s a slight bruise there, but Jim hasn’t mentioned it to Bones because he doesn’t want it healed. “Look, I don’t want to talk about it. Everyone had a good time on the planet, okay?”

Bones looks heavenward. “I’m going to give you a few extra prophylactic hypos too, just in case.”

Jim is insulted—he’s always very careful—but it’s better not to argue with Bones when he has a hypospray in hand.

Later that day, he’s in the captain’s chair, head bent over a stack of reports about the particulars of the trade deals they nailed down yesterday. He hears Spock walk onto the bridge and approach his usual spot, standing just behind Jim. Spock has a distinctive gait, or at least Jim can always tell when he’s approaching, and Jim can also tell when Spock abruptly stops breathing for a few seconds. That’s always a very bad sign. Jim jerks in his chair, lets the padds fall to the side reflexively and braces himself for whatever’s out there, but there’s only the mesmerizing patterns of warp rushing past. He says, “What’s wrong, Spock?” at the same time that Spock asks, “Captain, may I speak with you? Privately.”

The bridge falls dead silent until Jim manages to say, “Mr. Sulu, you have the conn,” and lead Spock to his ready room. When the doors slide shut behind them, Spock actually grabs Jim by the front of his shirt and pushes him against the wall hard. The part of Jim’s brain that’s a glutton for emotional punishment says *Yes, please*. The part that controls his mouth says, “Spock, what are you doing?”

In a very un-Spock-like way, Spock grips Jim’s chin and turns his head to the side—to look at the bruise distorting his mark, Jim realizes, and a very particular kind of heat shoots through him. “Your behavior is highly inappropriate,” Spock says. Another wave of heat—does Spock remember saying that to him, back at the Academy? Does Spock even know that was him with Gary and Gaila, in that room?

“What, because I let someone get a little sloppy and forgot to ask Bones to fix it?” Jim eases away, out from between Spock and the wall, and puts a few feet of space between them.

“*Let*,” Spock begins, and then visibly restrains himself. “You have a responsibility to this crew.”

“What, to remain celibate?” He laughs. “Come on, Spock, relax. It’s a hickey. Half the crew came back from the beach messed up *some* kind of way, and nobody’s mad about it.”

“You should not allow someone to touch you—” Spock starts again, and then stops. “I am told that for Humans—”

Oh. That’s what this is about. Jim is suddenly angry. “I shouldn’t let someone else mess up my mark, the one that doesn’t mean much?”

“It means something to *Humans!*” Spock steps forward as he says it, and visibly works to calm himself.

“Yeah,” Jim says, “but not to you. So you can’t be angry about it.” He touches the back of his neck, presses the bruise and lets himself arch his back a little, the way he would if he wanted Spock to be jealous.

“I am not angry,” Spock visibly lies. “As the captain, you set the standard for the crew. It could damage crew morale to see your—flagrant disregard of Human norms regarding sexuality.”

“I thought we were talking about the soul-mark, not sex.” He thinks about Spock’s lips forming the words *flagrant disregard*. “I believe you’ve made your point, Mr. Spock.” When Spock starts to speak again, Kirk adds, “You know, the last person to call me a slut was my stepfather. I kind of thought I wouldn’t have to hear it again once I moved out of his house.”

Spock presses his lips together tightly. “I apologize, Captain. I did not intend to prompt painful memories. I simply—” He stops. “I apologize,” he says again, and leaves.

Well, fuck.

* * * * *

He and Spock work great together as captain and first officer—but he’s careful not to let himself touch Spock and Spock is equally careful not to touch him. They play kal-toh for three weeks straight until Spock frowns and says, “This game is less satisfying than I recalled.”

“Figured out my play style?” Jim asks. “We could play solo and race instead. Or go back to chess.” Spock has been pouting because Jim managed to beat him four times straight, never mind that Spock routinely has much longer win streaks. “Or I’ll get the computer to replicate Monopoly.” It’s his recurring threat, and like every time, it succeeds. They play speed kal-toh and Jim gets distracted watching Spock’s graceful fingers and fumbles his rods. No deeper meaning there, no sirree.

The next two months are full of planets that do not have cheery locals in revealing clothing who are warp-capable, which means he doesn’t exactly have opportunities to socialize that way. Things go badly wrong on what should’ve been an easy away mission. He and Spock go down with a couple security officers to meet the Genii delegation and then, in rapid succession, one of the security officers is gunned down, Jim gets shot in the leg with an honest-to-god metal bullet, and they’re all carted off to an underground prison facility. As they’re being tossed into the cell, one of the Genii clocks that Jim is the captain and clubs him in the head with the butt of his own phaser for good measure.

The surviving security officer, Thompson, tourniquets Jim’s leg while Spock says, “Captain, stay awake.” There’s nowhere in the cell to huddle and formulate a plan—it’s metal bars on three sides, a guard stationed outside. Anything they say will be overheard.

“I’m awake,” Jim says. It’s sort of true. The world is kind of out of focus and he feels like he’s just done about ten shots and then spun in circles. “I’m fine.”

The world is fading in and out a little. He feels Spock press one hand to his face, hears him say something and then swear—Vulcans have curse words, who knew—and then Spock is cupping the back of his head very carefully with one hand, the other still on his face. Spock repeats whatever he said before and presses with both hands, and—

Spock is in his mind. It’s a loud, crowded place where Jim doesn’t like to spend a lot of time, and Spock looks pained for the slightest instant before he says, *Thompson managed to hide her comm badge. She will signal the ship, but we must provide a diversion.*

What kind of diversion? In here, he isn’t fuzzy; everything makes sense. *Are we going to pretend to fight?*

Will you be able to speak?

Might not make much sense.

Does it ever? He catches a hint of amusement from Spock and then, horrifyingly, some of the feelings he keeps tamped down start to bubble up, affection beyond fondness or camaraderie, and he *shoves* Spock out of his mind.

“You are an ineffectual captain!” Spock shouts at him. The shouting helps wake him up a little.

“Ineffectual? What kind of pathetic Vulcan insult is that? You were a useless captain, a total failure!”

“And for that I’m sentenced to serve under you—a high-school dropout who cheated his way through the Academy on his father’s name and took advantage of circumstances to get a ship, whose only use as a diplomat is to keep everyone distracted imagining what they’ll do with you, and you think you deserve even more than that—”

That *hits*, in a way that Jim didn’t think they were trying to do to each other, and he’s not proud of his reaction but he punches Spock in the face. He pulls it a little at the last minute, remembers that he doesn’t want to hurt Spock—not now, anyway, and it turns theatrical, Spock reacting the right way. There’s something painful in his lungs from what Spock has said—he feels like he should be coughing up blood. “Fuck you,” is all that his brain can supply, and it grates out of his throat. “Fuck you, why are you here if you feel that way, go to New Vulcan and marry your fucking—”

The familiar light of the transporter beam surrounds him and he has only a brief moment of consciousness on the transporter pad before he hears Spock say, “The captain has a serious head injury, he needs medical attention immediately.”

“Fuck you, I don’t,” Jim tries to say, and finds that he’s unconscious.

He wakes up in sickbay and he wakes up *angry*. His heart rate must spike, because Bones hurries out of his office and says, “Calm down, Jim. You’re still healing.”

Jim takes a deep breath and works on tamping down the knot of rage and hurt inside himself until his heart rate has evened out. “I feel fine,” he lies. His head is pounding.

“You’re a bad liar.” Bones scans him with a medical tricorder. “I bet you’ve got a hell of a headache.”

Jim cautiously feels his head—there’s a swollen knot on one side. “Not too bad.”

Bones looks unimpressed and gives him a hypo. Coolness spreads through his head, and the relief is probably obvious on his face. “I don’t want to see you out of this bed for at least another five hours.”

“Five—!” Jim isn’t very good at sitting still, let alone lying still for hours.

“Five hours, Jim,” Bones repeats. “You had a damn brain bleed, another hour and you would’ve been dead.”

Probably from Spock shoving his way into Jim's mind. "Fine. Get Spock down here."

Bones is uneasy. "You're supposed to be resting. What do you want to talk to him for?"

"Oh, you know, thank him for the rescue," Jim says. "Do it, Bones, or I'm walking out of here."

"I'd like to see you try to walk," Bones mutters. Jim eyes the medical boot on his leg and raises an eyebrow in challenge, and Bones throws up his hands and comms Spock.

It only takes Spock a minute to appear—he must've been doing something nearby. "Bones," Jim says.

"He needs *rest*, Commander," Bones reminds Spock, and then heads to his office in a half-assed kind of gesture toward giving them privacy.

There's a slight green bruise on Spock's pale skin where Jim punched him. "Captain. You appear to be recovering."

The anger is surging back through Jim, and the damn heart monitor betrays it. "What the hell was that, Spock?"

"I will need greater specificity," Spock says. His dark eyes are fixed on Jim.

"What you said. In the jail cell. That was—"

Spock raises an eyebrow. "We were creating a diversion."

"Yeah, but—" Jim rubs one hand over his face and grimaces. "I didn't realize we were going to—"

"It was my goal to make you angry," Spock says carefully. "I believe that I succeeded. As you have done in the past."

Jim takes a long, slow breath. "I didn't realize you were going to go for the throat." That idiom seems to be universal, because Spock doesn't look confused. He knows he's revealing too much, telling Spock that what he said hit tender places, but they have to work together after this and he can't—"Were you being honest?" Spock hesitates for too long, and that alone is a gut punch. "Okay," Jim says, just to say something. "Okay."

"Captain—I do not hold you in low regard," Spock clarifies. "It is factually accurate that you did not complete your secondary education, that you are the son of a famous Starfleet officer, that you were accused of cheating while at the Academy, and that you obtained your captaincy under extremely unusual circumstances."

"Wow, Spock, tell me how you really feel." It's actually worse to hear it this time, with Spock saying it all so calmly. "And that I'll bend over for just about anyone, huh?"

Spock looks momentarily wrong-footed. "That was—an exaggeration. I am not describing *feelings*, Captain, merely facts. It would not have been productive for me to state my high opinion of your performance as captain during the Narada attack, nor afterward. I do not regret serving as your first officer. To the extent that I indicated otherwise, it was hyperbole necessary to ensure the verisimilitude of the argument." He frowns the tiniest bit. "You also made statements that denigrated my performance as captain."

"Don't tell me you think what I said was on the same level," Jim says. "And that I think I deserve even more than that? What *fact* was that?" Now Spock looks acutely uncomfortable, and Jim realizes exactly what he meant. "You're the one who touched my soul-mark and went into my brain," he says, and he hates how his voice has gone raspy. "Whatever you saw—that's your own fault."

"I told you that I could not fulfill your—Human desires toward the mark," Spock says. "Yet you persist in wishing to do so. *And* I was not the first person to have melded with you."

Jim stares at him. "Are you fucking kidding me." His heart rate monitor beeps alarmingly.

"All right, that's enough!" Bones intercedes then, and Jim thinks it's only that that keeps him from escalating things further. "Spock, get out, now." Spock turns and nearly stomps out, and it's the only little bit of satisfaction that Jim gets from the entire conversation, the idea that maybe he made Spock a little bit emotional. "I'm giving you a sedative," Bones announces, as Jim hears the hiss of the hypospray. "Before you give yourself an aneurysm."

* * * * *

When he's finally free of Bones, he comms Uhura to his ready room. "Oh, no," she says when she walks in and sees his face. "I am not going to be your—your *relationship counselor* with Spock."

"Did he ever just—say all the worst things, the things he knew would be worst for you to hear, and then act like he was just being *factual*?" When Uhura just stares at him, he adds, "Bones hates him and Sulu and Chekov are afraid of him. You're the only person I know who ever liked him."

"...No," she says, and for a minute he's not sure whether she's saying no to answering or actually answering his question. "But he and I were—different. There was no threat to—the entire way that he thinks of the world." Uhura sighs at Jim's expression. "He told you that Vulcans see the whole soulmates question differently than Humans. It's something outside the realm of logic. To be guided by the soul-mark would be very Human. To continue with the Vulcan betrothal despite the mark is—well, Vulcan. You're very Human, Captain."

He is, isn't he. Messy and emotional, one of the more id-based people that he knows. "Yeah, he made that pretty clear when he yelled at me in sickbay because he'd *gone into my mind* and saw that I still want the matching soul-marks to mean something when he told me they wouldn't."

Uhura looks stunned. "He shouldn't have done that."

“No shit.” The worst part is that Jim remembers the particular feeling of it as the meld started, the *zing* when Spock touched his mark to hold the connection steady. “You know what? He had the gall to be pissed that someone else had already been in my mind, too. It’s all the worst parts of being in a relationship, all the jealousy with none of the sex.” He assumes.

“No, I mean—that’s not normal,” Uhura says. “To meld with someone without express permission—something must be wrong.”

“It’s not that,” Jim says. “We had to communicate privately, I guess my brain was the only place to do it. The—other Vulcan, he did it that way too, to dump information into my brain. I’m just mad at what Spock *did* with it.”

Uhura is looking increasingly distressed. “Something is *very* wrong,” she says. She starts to leave, then turns and adds, “I don’t think you should have contact with Spock for a few days. And I think you should prepare to turn the ship around and head for New Vulcan.”

That’s the last thing in the world that Jim wants to do, but she looks so worried that he just nods.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“My friend—does not understand,” Spock says in Vulcan. “He does not know. I will do what I must, T’Pau, but not with him—please—”

“It is said your Vulcan blood is thin, Spock. Have you chosen to reject your Vulcan nature?”

Spock’s words are somehow desperate and formal at the same time. “I burn, T’Pau. My blood is thick and it burns even now. But—you have the power, T’Pau. In the name of my fathers, I beg you, forbid it! T’Pau, I beg you—”

“Keep your peace,” T’Pau says sharply. “You have chosen our custom. You will be bound by it.”

It’s somehow suddenly hard to avoid Spock. Their paths wouldn’t usually cross much except on the bridge and in the mess hall, so he just skips out on chess club and eats dinner in his quarters and thinks it’ll be fine. But Spock seems to be everywhere that Jim is, until finally they’re in the turbolift together and Jim snaps, “Are you following me?”

Spock’s eyes are a little wild, and he stands too close to Jim. “I am not attempting to,” he says, and each word is short and sharp. He grasps the front of Jim’s uniform in one hand, backs him up against the wall, and plants his other hand flat on the wall next to Jim’s head. “You appear to be—in my path. At all times.”

“I’m not just—suddenly all right with everything that happened in sickbay,” Jim says. Spock’s face is very close to his own. “Vulcans aren’t supposed to just—invalidate someone’s mind like that.”

“No,” Spock says. It sounds like he’s struggling with his words. “No, I should not have—I apologize.”

“For entering my mind, or for—doing what you did, with what you found there?”

“Both,” Spock breathes against Jim’s ear. “I want to see it again. Can I see it?”

“My mind?” Jim is dizzy with the heat of Spock’s body pressed against his.

“My mark on you.”

Jim can’t help bucking against him a little as he says it, and god of course Jim is hard now, he’s been walking around angry at Spock for days and Spock is taking him apart with a few words. He’s such a sucker. “Yes,” he manages to say, and then has the limited presence of mind to add, “Computer, halt turbolift.” He starts to turn his head just enough for Spock to see, but Spock takes him by the hips and turns him around so that he’s facing the wall. Then he steps between Jim’s legs and slides one hand into his hair.

Spock breathes hot across the mark and it’s burning, Jim is hard and desperate and he says, “You can touch it, just don’t go in my mind again,” and tips his head forward just a little more. Spock doesn’t move, just keeps breathing, and Jim hears himself say “Please,” and press his hips back against Spock’s. Spock’s hand slides from Jim’s hair to his cheek and Jim opens his mouth, catches two of Spock’s fingers and sucks at them.

Spock’s breath catches sharply in his throat and then Spock’s mouth is on the mark and Jim is shaking with how good it feels—he thrusts forward reflexively, into empty air, and Spock moves his other hand to hold Jim back, firm on his groin just above Jim’s cock so that he can’t do anything, can only move helplessly against Spock. There’s something whispering in his head, not like the meld, but more of a mindless *take/want/take* running on a loop, and he knows it isn’t him, knows he’s hearing Spock, but that feeling is surging through him too—

He’s desperate for whatever Spock will give him, focuses hard on a single thought in case Spock can hear anything from him, and Spock must hear it because he *bites* at the back of Jim’s neck and pulls his fingers from Jim’s mouth. Jim is scrabbling at his own pants, jerking them down far enough for Spock to press those two wet fingers against his hole, and it’s too much like this but he says, “God, Spock,” and pushes back against his fingers anyway. There’s no sound but their harsh breathing and these little moans that Jim can’t seem to stop.

Then Spock drags his fingers out and there’s the slick hot head of his cock sliding against Jim’s hole. He works his way in in short shallow thrusts, and his cock is much slicker than a human’s would be, some kind of moisture coating it with every movement, the thrusts turning into a smooth glide. He feels huge when he’s all the way inside Jim, and Jim has only a second to appreciate it before Spock pulls most of the way out and thrusts back in, hard and fast. It punches a noise out of Jim and he wants to reach back and grab Spock’s hip, where he knows Spock’s mark is lurking, as Spock fucks him—but instead he braces himself against the wall and spreads his legs a little wider and says “Come on,” and Spock—loses his mind a little. His hands clamp onto Jim’s hips with almost bruising force. He fucks in deep, over and over, and all the while Jim is swimming in that *want/want/want* emanating from Spock, pleasure suffusing him, until Spock thrusts in one last time and comes. Jim feels it where he’s clenched tight around Spock, and Spock leans down to suck at his mark again—

Jim shudders and comes with a gasp.

Spock pulls out of him abruptly, and by the time Jim turns around, his entire body throbbing, Spock is as far across the turbolift as he can get. He stares at Jim in horror. “Captain,” he says. “I must go to New Vulcan immediately.”

“Computer, resume turbolift,” Jim says, because it’s the only thing he can think to say, because Spock has never even kissed him but just

fucked him in a turbolift and doesn't appear to find it worth mentioning. It is an extremely uncomfortable and thankfully extremely short walk from the turbolift through the bridge to his ready room, where he can at least clean himself up and put on new underwear—fresh pants too, for good measure—before returning to the bridge.

“Sulu, set course for New Vulcan, as fast as we can go,” he says. “I just got an urgent message from Starfleet and we're needed there immediately.” He can sense Spock very tense behind him. He thinks his voice sounds normal but Uhura gives him a sharp look. He runs a self-conscious hand through his hair to straighten it, but it doesn't make her expression disappear. His mark is throbbing. He decides not to sit down.

* * * * *

“We'll be at New Vulcan in one hour, sir,” Sulu says.

“Commander Spock, Lieutenant Uhura, to my ready room,” Jim tells them. He comms Bones too, for good measure. With two other people in the room, he and Spock are unlikely to—lose control again. When they're all gathered, he looks directly at Spock and says, “Why are we here, Commander?”

“I thought—” Bones says, and then glares at Spock.

“I apologize for the captain's deception,” Spock says. “I am in a time of—urgent medical need and can only be treated on New Vulcan. I asked for his assistance.”

“What's so urgent—” Bones starts, and then stops again. “Let me guess. Pon farr?”

Spock flushes green. “It is not discussed among outsiders. But—” He looks at Jim for a long moment. “Yes. I must marry T'Pring immediately so that the need can be—satisfied.”

There's a strange roaring in Jim's ears and for a second, it feels like they've lost artificial gravity. He's known—Spock has made it painfully clear—that Spock intends to follow through with his planned marriage. But he'd assumed, stupidly, that it was further in the future, a sort of hazy time, and then what just happened had hardly suggested—no, though, of course, pon farr, Vulcans lose control of themselves, have only two primary drives. He supposes he should be glad that Spock opted for fucking rather than killing in the turbolift. “Good,” he thinks he hears himself say. “Congratulations. Good.” His mark will change, Spock has assured him. Or at least it will probably disappear. “We should—alert them.”

“I'll contact T'Pau so that T'Pring can be located,” Uhura says. Bones says nothing.

“Jim,” Spock says. “I will be permitted—a friend's attendance. If you are willing.”

“Are you out of your goddamn mind!” Bones leaps up from his chair. “You want him to—witness your marriage? Of all the cruel things to ask—”

“All right.” Jim is still numb. Maybe this will help—speed things along. Make a clean break. The back of his neck throbs again. He hopes Spock didn't draw blood.

“You as well, Dr. McCoy. If you are willing.”

Jim sees Bones begin to refuse and thinks, please, Bones, don't make me stand there alone for this. Neither of them is telepathic, but Bones must understand it, because he says shortly, “Fine.”

They beam down onto a planet with a very red sky. Jim has been to New Vulcan before, twice, but it seems harsher and more alien now than any alien world he's ever visited. They're on a wide flat plain, the ground cracked with lack of water, and Spock says, “If Vulcan still existed, we would go to the place of Koon-ut-kal-if-fee, the challenge. It has not been rebuilt.” Here there is only a wide circle on the ground and a gong set out, with a modular home maybe fifteen meters away. He walks to the gong without saying anything more and strikes it.

The Vulcan party emerges from the modular home and Spock strikes the gong again. Two men lead the party, shaking sticks with bells on them, and T'Pau follows, head held high. Jim can only imagine how many marriage ceremonies she saw before, on Vulcan, and how pale an imitation this must all seem to her. Behind her is a beautiful Vulcan woman, her hair braided through with bells and ribbons, and she must be T'Pring. The heat isn't helping with the way that Jim's body is still throbbing, even though it's been hours now since the turbolift.

The procession stops. T'Pau peers at Jim and it feels like she's examining him beneath the skin, centimeter by centimeter, inspecting his mind, before she moves on to Bones and does the same thing. “You are known to us, Captain James Kirk, Dr. McCoy. Spock, our ceremonies are not for—study by outsiders, now less than ever.”

“I am permitted friends,” Spock says stiffly. He usually speaks Federation Standard, but his words are in Vulcan and they sound like a struggle even so. “I—pledge their behavior with my life.”

T'Pau takes a deep breath. “What happens today comes down from the time of the beginning, without change. This is the Vulcan heart. This is the Vulcan soul. This is our way. *Kah-if-farr.*”

Spock goes to strike the gong again, but before he can, T'Pring cries, “*Kal-if-fee!*” Spock freezes.

“What?” Jim looks to T'Pau. “What happened?”

“I make the challenge.” T'Pring's voice rings out clearly. “Spock has no claim upon me. What was made in childhood should have been cast aside long ago. If he wishes to marry me, he must fight.”

Jim looks to Spock. He still remembers the feeling of Spock's hands on him, his tongue, his teeth. His heart is pounding. "Spock?"

T'Pol shakes her head. "He is in the blood fever now," she says, and Jim can see the way that the green blood has flushed his body. "He will not be able to speak to you again until he has passed through the challenge." She looks to Spock. "Do you accept the challenge according to our laws and customs?"

"What happens if he doesn't?" Jim can't help asking. "They don't get married?"

T'Pol meets his eyes, and her gaze is knowing, painful. "He will accept the challenge, James Kirk."

"I accept," Spock says, before she's even finished.

"T'Pol, choose your champion."

T'Pol looks carefully at each of them before she steps forward. "As it was in the dawn of our days, as it is today, I make my choice. This one." When she points to Jim, it feels like the most obvious thing in the world, and for the briefest second, a chance. Jim will be her champion—if he wins, she'll be free of the marriage, and Spock will—

"James Kirk?" T'Pol is still looking at him. "T'Pol is within her rights, but our laws and customs are not binding on you."

"T'Pol," Spock grits out.

She turns her sharp gaze on him. "You speak, Spock?"

"My friend—does not understand," Spock says in Vulcan. "He does not know. I will do what I must, T'Pol, but not with him—please—"

"It is said your Vulcan blood is thin, Spock. Have you chosen to reject your Vulcan nature?"

Spock's words are somehow desperate and formal at the same time. "I burn, T'Pol. My blood is thick and it burns even now. But—you have the power, T'Pol. In the name of my fathers, I beg you, forbid it! T'Pol, I beg you—"

"Keep your peace," T'Pol says sharply. "You have chosen our custom. You will be bound by it. James Kirk, do you accept?"

"What happens if I decline? Can I just—act as T'Pol's representative and arrange an end to this?"

There's no sympathy in T'Pol's eyes. "Another champion will be selected to fight Spock if you decline."

"Jim—" Bones hisses, and grabs his arm. "Jim, think about this—you're not used to this climate, this air—he'll kill you—"

"I accept," Jim says, because how could it be any other way? He'll disarm Spock somehow, knock him out, and that'll satisfy everyone. Anyone else will just try to kill Spock. He looks at T'Pol and can't help but ask, "Why?"

Her eyes are cold. "The old ways died with Vulcan, Captain Kirk. I will not honor an arrangement made on a dead planet, and I will not become the property of a man who chooses me out of a childhood obligation, with no affection between us—a man who has a bond with another." And that—no, Jim can't think about it now, has to put it away for later.

"Enough!" T'Pol says. "The challenge must begin." She gestures toward the men. "Here begins the combat for possession of the woman T'Pol," she recites. "As it was in the beginning of time, so it is now. Bring forth the lirpa." Spock takes the weapon from one of the men, his eyes almost unseeing. Jim isn't sure that he would respond to his name if Jim called to him. "If both survive the lirpa—"

"What do you mean, if both survive?" Behind him, Jim hears Bones's noises of outrage. "I thought Vulcan had moved past combat to the death—"

"In all ways but this. The blood fever will not be satisfied without a death." T'Pol looks almost angry for the first time. "Our customs are not unknown to the Federation, James Kirk. The challenge was given lawfully and accepted lawfully. It begins now."

Jim would say something more, but Spock charges at him with a roar, sweeping the blade of the lirpa toward him, and Jim stumbles back and tries frantically to block him. The blade cuts deep into his chest before he can shove it away, and he manages to hook his own lirpa through Spock's somehow and yank the blade away. "Wait a minute!" Bones yells. "Now wait just a minute!"

"*Kroykah!*" T'Pol cries, and whatever that means, it makes Spock stop. Jim sees no recognition in his eyes. "Dr. McCoy—"

"This isn't a fair fight—Jim isn't used to breathing this air!" Bones holds up a hypo. "Let me give him something to compensate for the atmosphere, at least."

"You may," T'Pol says. "This will be the only interruption."

Jim goes to Bones. "What is it?" he asks.

Bones applies the hypospray. "A...tri-ox compound," he says, and Jim knows what that means. Bones wouldn't bother with a real one, not when Spock has the obvious advantage. No, it's something else, the obvious solution to combat to the death. He probably has a minute, maybe two, before the neural paralytic in the hypo drops him cold. He just has to keep Spock from carving him up before then.

"All right," he says, and returns to the circle. He tosses the lirpa away. "Let's finish it like we started, Spock."

"Begin!" T'Pol cries, and Jim charges at Spock barehanded. Thank god Spock comes at him without a weapon too—he could still snap Jim's neck easily, but at least Jim might be able to hold him off until the paralytic kicks in. They trade punches—Spock throws all his weight behind

his and it knocks Jim to the ground, gasping for breath. He's pretty sure it broke at least one rib. In a different kind of fight, Spock would kick him in the head and then end it, but this is honorable ritual combat and so instead Spock hauls him back up off the ground in a chokehold.

He can't get air into his lungs—shit, maybe Spock is going to kill him before this drug ever hits him—and he scrabbles at Spock's arm, trying to dig his fingernails in, throws an elbow back and must hit something because Spock's arm loosens enough to let him gasp in a breath. Spock throws him to the ground and punches him in the face—once, twice for good measure, and there's blood clogging his nose—and then Spock wraps his hands around Jim's throat. He hopes the encroaching darkness is the paralytic and not death, but he struggles to gasp out, "It's okay, Spock."

Spock releases him and stumbles back a few steps and then everything falls away into blackness.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“Did it cross your mind at all?” Jim asks, and he feels the twinge as he says it, the twinge that means the answer is going to hurt. “Bonding with me instead, I mean. Once T’Pring challenged you.”

“No,” Spock says. It doesn’t really matter whether he’s telling the truth.

Kirk wakes up in sickbay, reflexively gasping in huge breaths of air and coughing it all out so hard that he gags. Bones is there, helping him sit up. “Breathe, Jim,” he says. “You know, the idea was to *not* let him kill you.”

“Still alive,” Jim points out, and his throat hurts like hell. “You didn’t bother to fix me up?”

Bones looks like *he’s* about to have an aneurysm. “You know, Jim, I was a little busy with the orbital socket fracture, the broken nose, the broken ribs, the chest wound, *and* the tracheal damage. Your body needs a little time to catch up before I start on your basic comfort.” His face goes dark, and Jim follows his line of sight to Spock, looming uncomfortably in the entrance to sickbay.

“May I speak with the captain?”

“I’ve got a phaser in my office,” Bones warns him, but retreats into his office.

Spock approaches Jim’s bed. His eyes flit from Jim’s hands to his throat to the wall behind, never quite meeting Jim’s eyes. “I imagine that you grow weary of me apologizing to you in sickbay.”

“You sound cured,” Jim says. “A little death did the trick?”

Spock flinches. “Yes. Dr. McCoy maintained the pretense for—quite some time. To be certain, he said. I was—relieved to discover that I had not ended your life.” There’s something different in his tone when he says *relieved*.

“I didn’t realize you’d be able to stop yourself, at the end,” Jim admits.

“No.” Spock still won’t meet his eyes. “No, it should not have been possible. It is—unheard-of.” He finally does look Jim full in the face and his eyes are tormented. “Jim—” His hands clench into fists for a second and then he flattens them against his legs. “Captain. You should not have put yourself in such a situation.”

“In my defense,” Jim says, “I didn’t realize I was signing up to die. I thought I just had to win.”

“You are—too valuable to risk yourself in such a manner.”

“Well, again, in my defense, someone else really would’ve tried to kill you. It was hard enough to get you as my first officer in the first place.” He feels a little disconnected from his body—did Bones give him some kind of drugs? “I thought arranged marriages could just be—unarranged.”

Spock glances down at Jim’s neck, then away again. “In a different circumstance, yes. A betrothal can be terminated and another formed, to be consummated when necessary. But if one is—too deep into the pon farr, when the blood fever begins, there must be mating or death.”

“Well, we could’ve,” Jim starts, and then stops. “T’Pring wasn’t in danger, though—she hadn’t started pon farr, right? If you’d agreed to call off the marriage and—mated with someone else, she would’ve been fine.” The silence that follows is very tense. “I’m only asking,” Jim says, “because if she would have been, it means that you chose to kill me, or try to, instead of just giving in and going along with this whole stupid human soulmate thing. And that would be pretty fucked up, Spock, especially considering what happened in the turbolift earlier.”

“I did not kill you,” Spock says quietly.

“No, but you didn’t fucking know that, did you. You were so committed to your Vulcan future wife who didn’t even want you—and how was that a surprise, when we got to Vulcan? You hadn’t even talked to her in that long?”

“I spoke with T’Pring shortly after confirming that she had survived the loss of Vulcan,” Spock says. “And I advised her when I discovered that you share my mark. You persist in treating my refusal to break my commitment—”

“Did it cross your mind at all?” Jim asks, and he feels the twinge as he says it, the twinge that means the answer is going to hurt. “Bonding with me instead, I mean. Once T’Pring challenged you.”

“No,” Spock says. It doesn’t really matter whether he’s telling the truth.

“Good enough to fuck in a turbolift but not bring home to mom, story of my life.” It’s the post-strangulation damage that’s making Jim’s throat feel like it’s full of glass when he swallows. “Shouldn’t surprise me,” Jim says. “Not like you ever made a secret of it.”

“My actions were—”

“If you say inappropriate, I’m going to punch you in the face, Spock.”

"I was not entirely in control, but that is no excuse." Spock takes a breath and Jim knows instinctively that things are about to get worse. "I would not have expected you to assign such significance to the act, given the frequency with which you engage in it."

Cool. Great. "Great apology, Spock. Anytime I feel too good about myself, I'll just come talk to you." Jim closes his eyes. "Let's go back to the part where you apologize for trying to kill me and I say no big deal, Spock, all in a day's work as a captain."

* * * * *

Chess club a few days later is very awkward. Jim is unwilling to let Spock know exactly how terrible he feels, and Spock is apparently determined to pretend that everything is normal. Jim plays Chekov first, and the poor kid is squirming by the time they've all been there for five minutes. He loses way too quickly—Jim suspects it was on purpose—and flees.

"Perhaps we might play—Monopoly," Spock offers.

Jim squints at him. "I don't think I did anything to cause you brain damage," he says. "I barely landed a hit."

"My mental faculties remain unharmed."

"So you think that *I* have brain damage?"

Spock purses his lips. "You have repeatedly indicated a desire to play your childhood game. I am—open to the new experience. I suspect it will be much easier than chess or kal-toh."

Why the hell not. Jim goes to the replicator. "Monopoly board game, Earth classic." The long flat box materializes and Jim takes it back to the table, where he unfolds the board in front of Spock. "You can run the bank," he offers. Spock gingerly accepts the stack of pastel-colored paper bills.

Thirty minutes later, Spock asks, "At what point do we engage in exchanges of property for currency?"

"If you've got an offer to make, Spock, I'll hear it."

Spock examines his properties. "I will exchange Pennsylvania Railroad and Water Works for Park Place."

Jim laughs. "Nice try. You've got Boardwalk, I'm not giving you a monopoly in exchange for one railroad and *Water Works*." He runs his thumb along the stiff edge of the Park Place card. The cards at home were so worn down that their edges were soft. "When I made a bad deal, my mom used to warn me not to turn on the waterworks. It means cry," he adds.

"Then I would not want to give you the waterworks," Spock says, voice slow.

* * * * *

"Uhura—"

"*No*," she says. "Next time, we don't leave spacedock without the ship's counselor."

"They had Andorian shingles," Jim tells her automatically. He's explained this to about fifteen different people, many of whom proceeded to use him as their replacement counselor instead. He kind of understands why Uhura doesn't want to talk to him. "Uhura—I just need to know if this is a soulmate thing or if I'm actually this fucked in the head—"

"You want Dr. Quinn for that. He's a lovely young man, two levels down in the anthropology department. He wrote his dissertation on symptoms of delayed and failed bonding." She must see the way he winces. "Captain—"

"I just want to know why I *still* want him," Jim says. Uhura grimaces instead of sticking her fingers in her ears, which he takes as a sign to proceed. "He was ready to *kill me* instead of having to—bond with me. He's one of about four people I've ever met who genuinely didn't like me—don't worry, I'm counting you as another."

"Gaila," Uhura says desperately. "Go talk to Gaila, she'll be sympathetic."

"I try not to talk to her about—soulmate things," Jim admits. Gaila's traumatic experience with soul-marks was one of the things that brought them together, and then rapidly was something that Jim learned was too deep for him to understand.

"She'll tell you if she wants you to stop talking about it." Uhura picks up her headset and puts it over her ears, pointedly turning her back on Jim. All right, he can read a signal like that.

Gaila smiles cautiously at Jim when he sets his tray down across from her in the mess hall. "Ji—Captain. It's been a while."

"I know. I'm sorry about that," and he genuinely is. Gaila is one of his favorite people and it's been strange getting used to the idea of being in charge of her. Jim points to the nearly-faded bruises around his neck. "I've been spending a lot of time getting the shit kicked out of me."

Her smile widens at that. "Nothing new, then." Then she raises an eyebrow. "I'm guessing you've got a reason for suddenly re-connecting, though."

Jim considers. Notwithstanding Uhura's suggestion, he'd feel kind of shitty just ambushing Gaila here with questions about soulmates. He doesn't know everything about her past, but he knows that she escaped; that she has a scar under her chin, just where Orion slavers insert chemical implants that can mimic the effect of a soulmate's touch; that she has the faint outlines of an obliterated tattoo where buyers like to brand their slaves with their own marks. "I could use your advice," he says.

“Boy troubles?”

“If that’s all right.” In the old days he and Gaila routinely asked each other for advice, often while they were in bed together, but it’s been a while.

“Jim.” She beams. “What disaster have you gotten yourself into?”

Jim glances around. The mess hall is virtually empty. He lowers his voice and leans closer. “Let’s say, hypothetically, that I had mind-blowing sex with someone in the turbolift.” Gaila looks delighted and leans in closer too. “Which he initiated, I’d like to point out.”

“You sound weirdly less than thrilled.”

“Let’s say, hypothetically, that he also thinks I’m an idiot who lied or cheated my way into everything I’ve ever gotten and that I’ll fall into bed with just about anyone for any reason, and he would literally rather kill me than have any kind of—deeper connection to me. Even after I saved his life.”

Gaila winces. “That doesn’t sound great, but maybe he’s not the worst person you’ve ever—” She hesitates. “No, that’s terrible.”

“Why do I still want him, then?” Jim knows that he sounds pathetic. At Gaila’s expression, he adds, “You know exactly who I’m talking about, don’t you.”

“Well,” she says gently. “There aren’t that many people who aren’t charmed by you. And there’s really only one person on the ship who’s tried to kill you. Twice.”

Jim groans and lets his head fall against the table. It’s sticky, but it’s better than having to look around. “What do I do?” he mumbles against the table.

Gaila strokes her fingers through his hair, just barely avoiding his mark. “And he’s your—”

He flinches. Shit. Bones also hadn’t gotten around to the mess that Spock made of the back of his neck, and even a week later it’s pretty obvious. “We don’t need to talk about part.”

She drags her fingernails gently through his hair this time, and it prompts the pleasant shiver that it always has. “So you tried talking to him like an adult and you tried throwing yourself at him, and neither of those worked.”

“And having sex with a lot of other people, don’t forget that.”

“A tried-and-true method,” Gaila agrees.

“It’s awful.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have awful sex,” she says, and Jim laughs miserably against the table. “You remember how we used to come up with all our best advice for each other?”

Jim sits up slowly. “Yeah.” He stifles his grin. “I didn’t come to you for—”

“Half the engineering department is afraid that I’m going to ensnare them with my pheromones and the other half *wants* me to,” Gaila says. “You and I could do a little—rehabilitating of each other’s images.”

“Second year all over again?” They’d only maintained the pretense of dating for a month then. “We’d need to make it longer.”

Gaila’s smile is bright. “I think we can manage that.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“You have been spending a great deal of time with Lieutenant Gaila,” Spock says, and Jim stiffens.

“I have.” It’s safest to keep his answers short, he thinks. Force Spock to say whatever insane things he’s about to say.

“You are—aware that human men are highly susceptible to the pheromones of Orion women.”

“I am.” Jim has to clench his jaw not to say more than that. Poor Gaila.

“Are you—” Spock starts, and then stops. “I am concerned that your behavior has been—affected.”

It’s easy to be in a relationship with Gaila, especially since it’s not real—though he’s not sure how a person could call this relationship not real. He remembers falling half-in love with her when they first met, thinking she was like a female version of him, hoping for the briefest moment that they would match, until the one day he’d said, “Can I see your soul-mark?” and her face had gone dark and closed and he’d never asked again.

But now, they know each other’s tender spots and how to avoid them (the emotional ones) or hit them just right (the physical ones). Gaila is free with her smiles, with her joy, and it’s impossible not to smile with her when they eat dinner together and she tells him about the latest improvement she’s come up with to Enterprise’s computer systems; she tiptoes not-so-subtly down the command hallway to his room to meet him there, and the sex is as good as he remembers. They’re both game for just about everything and sometimes it’s fun and sometimes it’s disastrous, and some nights Jim looks in the mirror after she’s left—she likes to sleep in her own bed—and hopes that his soul-mark will have disappeared. Time passes so easily that he doesn’t realize it’s already been six weeks.

Lying in bed one night, he says, “I think I love you.”

Gaila pokes him in the side. “Wow, that is so weird,” she says, and laughs. “Of course you love me. I love you too. Don’t get weird ideas.”

“Don’t worry, I know.” Gaila has always been very clear about her limits. “At least now Spock glares at me a lot,” Jim says. “That’s progress. And he might have almost smiled at chess club the other night. How’s engineering?”

She gives him a sloppy kiss and rolls out of bed, groping for her uniform. “A lot more normal,” she says. “Except for the ones who think I’m using my wiles on the captain, but I think that’s inevitable.”

“Excuse me, I have wiles of my own.” Jim stands up too to display them, and then fumbles his way into sleep pants so he can walk her to the door. She rolls her eyes as he does, but allows it.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says, and kisses him goodbye as the door hisses open. “Oh!”

Spock was clearly reaching for the doorbell, but he snatches his hand back. “Lieutenant,” he says stiffly.

“Commander.” Gaila shoots a look at Jim and flees.

Jim is very conscious of the fact that he’s shirtless and that the worn-out waistband of his sleep pants is fighting valiantly to keep them on his hips. “Spock,” he says.

“May I come in?”

Jim steps back from the door and gestures. When Spock walks in, the door hisses shut behind him. “Is something wrong?” He can’t think why else Spock would be here.

Spock is blushing faintly green as he looks Jim up and down. Jim feels himself blush in response. “I felt that I should—speak with you. Privately.”

That’s ominous. “About what?” He doesn’t know if he should walk further back into his quarters to give Spock more space, or just keep standing here like an idiot.

“You have been spending a great deal of time with Lieutenant Gaila,” Spock says, and Jim stiffens.

“I have.” It’s safest to keep his answers short, he thinks. Force Spock to say whatever insane things he’s about to say.

“You are—aware that human men are highly susceptible to the pheromones of Orion women.”

“I am.” Jim has to clench his jaw not to say more than that. Poor Gaila.

“Are you—” Spock starts, and then stops. “I am concerned that your behavior has been—affected.”

“You think Gaila is using her pheromones to force me into a relationship with her?” Jim does walk away then, back to the messy bed, and sits down. “Why?” He doesn’t bother to pull on a shirt.

"I have observed that your behavior is—different with Lieutenant Gaila than with previous sexual partners. You have spent substantially more time socializing on an ongoing basis—"

"And your answer to that—rather than, say, that I enjoy Gaila's company, or that I could have a romantic relationship like anyone else—is that a Starfleet officer is violating not only her oath but Federation law to sexually coerce her captain?" Sometimes he thinks he gets irrationally angry at Spock, and other times Spock says offensive shit like this. "Which of those is more likely, logically speaking?"

Spock falls silent. Finally, he says, "I was merely noting a change—"

"You weren't, Spock. You came in here to accuse her. I don't want to hear anything like that, ever again. Gaila has enough people constantly wondering if she's *doing* something to them. If *you*, Mr. Logic himself, starts encouraging rumors like that—" How is he even going to explain Spock's late-night appearance to Gaila? Stopped by for a little chess and accusations? "Shouldn't you be glad anyway?" Jim asks it before he thinks better of it, before he remembers that they're not talking about this again, but it's too late.

"Glad," Spock repeats, the way he does when he wants to emphasize that he finds the human's word choice curious. "I do not understand."

"You said my mark might change after you married T'Pring. Maybe yours will change if Gaila and I—"

"Vulcan marks do not change," Spock snaps, and there, Jim's hit on something there.

"But you're half-Human, aren't you. Did your mother and father match?" It's a grossly invasive question, but Spock has invaded his mind and his bedroom and Jim doesn't care.

Spock freezes. "Vulcans do not place the same significance—" he starts, and then stops. "Yes." The word comes unwillingly from his mouth. "They do—did." When Jim doesn't say anything more, he adds, "It is irrelevant."

Jim closes his eyes. "Okay, Spock." His face is hot. "You've said what you came to say. Is there anything else?"

"Captain, I apologize if I have overstepped—" Spock begins.

Jim really can't handle another fucking apology from him. He opens his eyes. "I'm on alpha shift," he says. "Computer, lights."

The lights abruptly turn off. Jim sees the gleam of Spock's eyes in the darkness and then Spock says, "Of course. Good night, Captain."

* * * * *

"What did Spock want?" Gaila asks him.

Jim frowns down into his coffee. "To declare that he's madly jealous and in love with me."

"Jim."

He doesn't want to answer. "I think we should have a party," he says. "We're coming up on nine months. The ship should have a celebration."

"Nine months is the human gestational period."

"Well, unless someone's been pregnant since we left spacedock, it'll just have to be a celebration of surviving nine months of our mission." Jim finishes his coffee.

Gaila gives him a long look. "If you say so. I have to get to Engineering." She leans forward, kisses his cheek, and leaves.

On the bridge, Jim repeats, "I think we should have a shipwide party to celebrate nine months in space."

"Nine months is traditional milestone?" Chekov looks uncertain. "I thought—"

"Commander Spock, is there some kind of—social club that could be tasked with organizing it?" Jim could look at the extensive list of them on his padd, but he'd rather annoy Spock with it.

"There are three social activity clubs," Spock says evenly. "I believe two are defunct, but the third has ample membership."

"Send me the name of the club—president." Jim assumes that's the appropriate title.

"Of course, Captain."

He meets with Re'sana over lunch. She's a steely security officer who also happens to be Risan. "I'm thinking food, music, alcohol—maybe in one of the shuttle bays so that we have enough room for everyone?"

"An evening party, then," she says, and taps at her padd. "Mandatory attendance?"

"Oh god no." Then Jim thinks it through further. "Well, for command crew, obviously. But not for anyone else."

Re'sana tilts her head. "Have you organized something like this before, Captain?"

Jim considers the parties that he threw at the Academy. "Not—exactly."

"There are many logistics to be organized. Have you designated a morale officer for Enterprise yet?"

He remembers seeing the slot on the list of officer roles and assuming it was a joke. “No, is that who would usually do this kind of thing?”

She nods. “On long missions like this, morale is crucial. The morale officer’s role is to—monitor the situation, manage shore leave rosters, organize events, and implement broader strategies for high morale.”

“You make it sound very complicated,” Jim says carefully. He doesn’t want to make it sound like a morale officer is a silly role, but...

“There are more than four hundred people aboard this ship, Captain, largely unattached. There are *towns* smaller than that. It’s admirable that you’ve attempted to handle some of those tasks yourself, but there’s no need.”

He winces at that and wonders how much of a mess he made of the shore leave rotations. He’s coming to realize that he’s very good at some parts of being a captain and has absolutely no idea how to do others. There must be a handbook somewhere. “Well, I don’t want to presume, but would you like to be morale officer?”

Re’sana smiles patiently. “Yes, that is why I brought it up.”

“Awesome,” Jim says. “I’ll trust you, then.” He starts to leave and then adds, “No—fire-dancers or anything.” He’s been to Risa. “Save it for the talent shows.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Jim carries his tray into sickbay. “Bones,” he says pathetically. “People seem to be angry at me and I don’t know why.”

Nurse Chapel sweeps a curtain aside. “It’s because you cheated on Gaila by giving Commander Spock a helping hand in the corridor last night. Or a blowjob, the rumors are mixed.”

“Jesus,” he says, and nearly drops his coffee. “No I did not.”

Re’sana surpasses even his expectations. The party is—raucous but tasteful, the music danceable with a melody, and dark enough to lower inhibitions without becoming seedy. There are long tables piled high with food, some of which he barely recognizes, and Gaila is already pressing a glass of something in his hand that’s smoking faintly.

“What is it?” he asks, accepting both the glass and a quick kiss.

“I don’t know, but it’s delicious,” she says, and Jim figures, what the hell, and downs it. It sends a delicious wave of warmth through his entire body, leaves his nipples tight and his cock thickening just a little, and he pulls Gaila a little closer.

“Hell of a drink,” he says.

She tugs him a little further into the shadows and then gives him a longer kiss, her tongue chasing the flavor of the drink. “I don’t think you were supposed to drink it so quickly,” she says, but he can see its effect on her too, knows that his pupils must be dilating the same way. Then she beams. “Let’s go dance!”

It takes about five minutes for Jim to look around and congratulate himself on what a great idea this was. Take four hundred people, mostly unmarried and under the age of 30—well, he expects things to get increasingly messy, but isn’t that what being young is about? When they’re all still alive, when they’ve survived the worst—why shouldn’t they celebrate like this?

And god, Gaila’s body under his hands—he should stay out here, celebrate with his crew, and he’s about a minute away from heading for the door with her, so he beckons over Chekov and Sulu and Uhura, changes the dance from something a little filthy into goofy, fun. Chekov is an awkward dancer, waving his arms around so enthusiastically that he almost hits Sulu in the face, and Uhura is less graceful than he would have expected (she would punch him in the arm for saying that), so there’s a lot of dancing in a circle, catching each other’s hands and spinning. He tries to beckon Spock over too, but Spock is in a corner nursing a drink and he studiously avoids Jim’s eyes.

Jim dances his way across the floor, pretending to waltz with Thompson, lifting and spinning Scotty, who squawks in outrage, until it’s a blur, one person’s hands to the next, and this, this unrestrained glee, this is what he’s missed. There’s a part of him, deep down, that wants to go to Spock too, try to pull him into a dance. But Jim doesn’t have the courage to do that and he knows it would stop the momentum, so he lets it carry him onward. He has another drink—not to get sloppy, only because everything feels so good in this moment and, as his brain likes to tell him, if one drink is good, two must be better.

At the bar, though, he bumps into Spock, who is finishing off a large glass of what looks like hot chocolate. “Spock!” he says. “You should come dance!”

Spock’s pupils are—too big, for a sober person of any species. “Jim,” he insists. “I must speak with you.”

Jim looks around the shuttle bay, breathing hard. He feels a little bad for the gamma shift crew on duty now, but the party’ll still be going by the time alpha shift comes on duty. Bones has the sobering hypos all ready to go. “I’m listening.”

Spock puts a hand on Jim’s wrist, as though to pull him somewhere more private, and Jim’s breath catches. He looks to Gaila, who smiles and mouths *Go*, and then follows Spock.

The first two rooms they enter are very emphatically occupied, so they keep walking down the hallway. “What is it, Spock?”

Spock draws him to the side of the hallway and bends his head close to Jim’s. In the dim light, he looks miserable. “Jim. I am—unhappy.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Spock hasn’t released his wrist. “I have behaved very poorly toward you.” Jim isn’t inclined to argue with that. “With regard to the—mark.”

“Vulcans don’t assign much significance to them,” Jim repeats. It’s a refrain that’s echoed through his head enough times.

“I am—yes. But I would like to know—” Spock stops, braces himself, and then says, “What it feels like.”

The bottom drops out of Jim’s stomach. “What do you mean?”

“I have touched your mark several times. You have not—” Spock frowns. “You have not asked for it, but if you are willing—”

Jim closes his eyes. There’s a right answer and a wrong answer to this question, and the right answer is to run screaming. “Don’t go in my mind again,” he says, instead.

“No.” Spock shakes his head earnestly. “No, I will not.” He releases Jim’s hand and then shows Jim the mark again, sliding the waistband of his uniform just low enough to reveal it.

The shape of it on Spock’s skin is hypnotic. “Don’t yell at me later,” Jim says.

“I will not,” Spock repeats.

It’s impossible not to reach out and stroke his fingers along the pale skin just above the mark, just below it, especially not when Spock inhales sharply and his hips twitch in reaction. Then, because Jim is drunk and Spock is here and—for no good reason, Jim crouches down and brushes his lips over the mark—lightly, doesn’t even let himself lick it the way he wants to—and Spock cries out. Jim stands again, covers Spock’s mouth to stop the noise, and strokes the pads of his fingers softly back and forth across the mark. It sets off sparks in the back of his brain, a shiver through his entire body, and Spock’s head is thrown back—Jim watches the pale line of his neck and wants to kiss it, but he doesn’t. He hears noise, people approaching, and ducks his head a little.

When he lifts his hand from Spock’s mouth, he can’t help but trace the line of Spock’s lower lip with his thumb and remember what it was like to suck Spock’s fingers into his mouth. Slowly, he takes his hand away from the mark. Spock’s eyes are wide and he’s panting a little. “That was—most informative,” he says. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” Jim says reflexively.

* * * * *

In the mess hall the next morning, four different engineering crew members give him dead-eyed stares and then turn their backs and walk away. He goes to sit with Gaila and discovers that she’s with Uhura and two ensigns he didn’t recognize. Gaila shakes her head when he tries to approach and mouths, *Sorry*. The others glare.

Well, shit. He looks around the mess hall and sees Spock eating alone. Spock looks up, but as Jim starts to walk over, someone else in the hall loudly say, “*Ugh*,” and Jim decides to eat elsewhere.

He carries his tray into sickbay. “Bones,” he says pathetically. “People seem to be angry at me and I don’t know why.”

Nurse Chapel sweeps a curtain aside. “It’s because you cheated on Gaila by giving Commander Spock a helping hand in the corridor last night. Or a blowjob, the rumors are mixed.”

“Jesus,” he says, and nearly drops his coffee. “*No* I did not.”

Bones pokes his head out of his office. “That’s what the rumor is. Some pretty good imitations going around of Spock’s noises. I nearly had to induce temporary deafness in myself.”

“I—I wouldn’t do that to Gaila!” She’d given him the nod anyway. “He just wanted—”

Bones emerges fully from his office. “Wanted what?”

Jim looks pointedly at Nurse Chapel, who *hmpfs* and walks away. “He just wanted me to touch his soul-mark,” Jim says. “It’s on his hip.” In retrospect, he can understand how someone could’ve seen the situation and—mistaken it for something else, especially when Jim was crouched down.

“Why did he want you to touch it?” Bones looks suspicious.

“Well. He’s touched my soul-mark a couple times. He said he wanted to know what it felt like when I touched his.”

Bones stares at him. “Jim, I want you to replace ‘soul-mark’ with ‘penis’ in that sentence, remember what happens to you when he touches yours, and think about it again.”

Shit. “What am I supposed to tell people? Gaila told me it was fine to go with him, but I can’t exactly walk around talking about the nature of my relationship with her—or the fact that Spock and I are—soulmates.”

“Let Gaila break it off,” Bones says immediately.

“But—” Jim doesn’t want to end things with Gaila. *She* doesn’t mind, and they both feel better about themselves when they’re together. And if he’s trying to look like less of a—less promiscuous to Spock, breaking up with Gaila isn’t going to help.

Bones looks unimpressed. “Let her break it off, you go do something dumb and heroic, everyone will forgive you.”

He does specialize in doing dumb things, many of which people later call heroic. An opportunity will undoubtedly present itself soon. He drinks his coffee glumly. “I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known how people would react,” he says, and he knows he’s lying, tries to imagine Spock looking at him with those dark eyes and asking him to touch the mark and him saying “Oh, no, sorry.”

Gaila finds him in an appropriately semi-public area—they’ve staged this before, they know the routine—and says, “Jim, were you really—with Commander Spock?”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he says, cringing internally. He’d hoped to get through this without an actual mention of Spock.

“I just—I can’t do this.” Her voice wobbles, but he sees the amusement in her eyes. She thinks he was very dumb, and he can’t disagree. “I can’t be with someone I can’t trust.”

“I understand. I’m so sorry,” he recites, making sure to throw some emotion into it. “I never wanted to hurt you.” From the corner of his eye, he can see Spock watching. Fuck. “Whatever you need—”

“I just need space,” Gaila tells him. “We can be friends again, but I need a little space.”

Plenty of that out here, he wants to joke, but he doesn’t think that fits with this performance. He just nods, hangdog, and lets Gaila walk away.

When the observing crowd has dissipated, Spock approaches him. “Captain,” he says gravely, and he sounds disappointed. “I had understood you to be committed to Lieutenant Gaila. Your choice to be unfaithful is baffling.”

Jim gapes at him. “Are you—joking? This is a very weird time to develop a sense of humor, Spock.”

“I am not attempting to inject levity into this situation.” Spock frowns. “Am I incorrect in my appraisal of the situation?”

“Incorrect—Spock, people think I cheated because they saw me touch your mark and thought I was sucking you off!” He’s intentionally cruder than usual.

Spock turns paler, which Jim wouldn’t have thought was possible. “They believe that I allowed you to engage in fellatio in the *corridor*?”

“Is the location really the worst part of it?” Jim looks pointedly at the turbolift at the end of the hallway.

Color rises high on Spock’s cheeks. “That would be extremely inappropriate,” he says. “I did not realize that the crew’s opinion of me was such that they would credit such a rumor.”

“Yeah,” Jim says. “I can’t believe anyone thinks you would do that either.” Though he also hadn’t realized the crew would assume he would blow his first officer in the hallway, so that hurts too. “Bones says we just have to wait it out and then do something heroic and everyone will forgive us.”

Spock looks horrified. “Is the doctor also under the impression that—”

“No. He knows the truth.” He’s not sure if that’s better or worse.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Jim can't help laughing a little, with no humor in it. "I didn't need the Kobayashi Maru to act in the knowledge of certain death." It's too hard to think about the rest of what Spock has said. "You said maybe my mark would change when I got married—did I ever tell you about the first time it changed?"

"You have not," Spock says. "I can hypothesize."

The opportunity to do something stupid and heroic comes along pretty quickly, but it turns out that Jim isn't very grateful for it. He and Spock take a landing party down to meet another alien race, and he sees two of the alien guards aiming some kind of device at the entire landing party. He yells "Spock!" and they charge the two guards even as Jim hits his comm and says "Beam the landing party up—"

The device discharges an energy bolt that leaves Jim immobile and in agonizing pain. He thinks Spock got hit too, but at least the landing party appears to have escaped. One of the aliens—who looks human, but with a strange forehead tattoo—frowns down at Jim and discharges the device again. Jim's body stiffens and he's glad when he loses consciousness.

"Captain." He jerks awake to Spock's voice and discovers immediately that they're in a very small dark space—cargo hold, maybe?

"What's the situation?"

"I believe we have been transferred from one ship to another—possibly to a third."

Jim nods in the darkness. "To hide the warp trails. Have they said anything?"

"They have not spoken to me," Spock says. "But I believe that either you or I was the target, based on what I have overheard from their conversations. I heard several references to obtaining 'him.' I think it likely that our crew would have been disposed of in some fashion, had you not intervened."

"That better count for something with the crew," Jim says. His neck is killing him. "How long have I been out?"

"Roughly twenty hours," Spock says, and Jim recoils. "You do not recall? You were—less than cooperative when we were transferred to what I believe is the third ship. They fired their device at you a second time, and you collapsed."

"Great." That's a long damn time to be flying in different ships away from his crew. He crawls forward on his knees and bangs on the door with one fist. "Hey! Hey, somebody! I need to pee!"

The hatch opens abruptly, so that Jim almost falls forward into the gun pointed at him. "You'll get the chance when we land," one of the aliens—Jim is going to call him Tall Alien, which is descriptive if not creative—says.

"How long is that going to be, exactly?"

Tall Alien glances over his shoulder at another alien and then turns back to Jim. "Very shortly."

"Could I get a timeline in minutes or someth—" Tall Alien shuts the hatch in his face. "Rude."

"Do you have a plan, Captain? I take it you do not need to urinate urgently."

Well, he didn't until he told Tall Alien. "Get more information," he says. "We'll see something when they transfer us, at least. We'll go from there. Unless they just hand us control of their ship, of course."

The aliens do not. In fact, they march Jim and Spock directly onto what looks like a transporter pad, shove a canteen into Jim's hands, and transport them—

—into a cell with no doors. It's a concrete room, with iron bars for a ceiling and a single cutout in the wall that's too narrow to get a hand through. There are two thin pallets folded in one corner and a covered hole in another corner that Jim assumes is supposed to be their toilet. "Guess we should be glad it's roomy," Jim says, and his voice sounds thin in the empty space. He jumps up and gets his hands on the ceiling bars, pulls himself up and presses his face against them—nothing. He lowers himself slowly, then lets go. "I was hoping for a little more information, I admit."

Spock is crouched down, rubbing his fingers across the floor, which looks like ordinary dirt. "I am unfamiliar with this soil," Spock says.

"Too bad they didn't leave our tricorders." Jim had put the canteen down before jumping, but he opens it now and sniffs it. "Smells like water. Did they leave you with anything useful?"

"That depends on your definition of useful," Spock says. "They do not appear to have performed an—extensive search, but I no longer have my tricorder or my phaser." He takes off his jacket and begins to empty the internal pockets, producing a short length of plastic—it looks like a piece of trash that he picked it up intending to throw it away—and a single ration bar. Jim winces. His own jacket contained a padd—gone now, of course—and two days' worth of emergency rations, which are still there. He pulls them out carefully and sets them on their small pile.

“Well. There aren’t skeletons in here, so they’ll probably come for us eventually.” Jim’s voice isn’t as cheerful as he’d meant it to be.

They split the ration bar; Spock drinks some of the water, because his system will metabolize most drugs better than Jim’s will. Then Jim picks up the piece of plastic and pokes at the ground, discovers that he can leave a pretty good impression. “Hey,” he says. “We could draw a chess board. Even a tri-dimensional board, if you want.”

“You expect to be here for some time?”

“It doesn’t take me that long to beat you,” Jim says. “And I like to keep busy when I’m in prison.”

Spock raises an eyebrow as he begins to draw out the first of the boards. “I was not aware that you had significant experience in prison, beyond our occasional brief bouts of captivity.”

“Oh, yeah, when I was a teenager. I never told you?”

“I will assume that is a rhetorical question.”

Jim smiles a little. “Yeah, when I was 17, I got in a fight with the wrong guy. Ended up spending six months in county lockup.” He rubs out a crooked line on the board and re-draws it.

“It must have been a significant fight,” Spock says.

“We were both drunk. I—got carried away.” Why the hell not tell Spock. “I moved out of my—mom’s husband’s house and took some stuff he thought belonged to him. I went to the shipyard—I was working there—and climbed up on a pylon and had a couple drinks. He came after me to get it back—I can still see him standing down there on the ground, screaming at me to come down and face him. It was one of those really humid summer nights—you’ve probably never been in one, but there’s just this *energy* in the air—” Jim stops himself. “Anyway, I went down to face him, and we beat the shit out of each other.”

“I was under the impression that mutual combat was not typically grounds for prosecution,” Spock says carefully.

Jim shrugs. “Yeah, well. Everyone knew I was a hooligan. So they stuck me in Riverside County Jail. The jail agent brought me books to keep me from going insane.”

“A young and attractive jail agent, I take it.”

“She had a boyfriend,” Jim says, though Spock isn’t wrong. He’s not about to tell Spock that after Nancy broke up with her boyfriend, if there was no one else in the jail, he would tell her exactly how much he was looking forward to getting out of there, and sometimes she’d describe in vivid detail exactly what she was planning to do with him— “And different guys came through in the holding cells, local drunks and guys I knew from high school. Anyone who did anything really serious got sent upstate.” Most people would consider what he and Frank did to each other pretty serious, but medical technology was a miraculous thing these days. “But there wasn’t anything to do but read and talk to Nancy and talk to them.”

Spock levels a thoughtful gaze at him. “You do not like to be—unoccupied. In your own mind.”

“No,” Jim says automatically. “My mind is a noisy place.”

“If we are to be here for any significant period of time, I will teach you to meditate,” Spock says. “I doubt that I will be able to entertain you at all hours”—damnit, Jim, wrong time—“and it is a useful skill.”

There’s a certain unhappy itch between Jim’s shoulder blades at the thought of it, but he can’t come up with a good reason to refuse.

The hours pass slowly. They play endless rounds of chess and Jim begins to contemplate how he might disassemble one of their jackets to make playing pieces, because scratching letters into the squares to represent pieces is tedious. Spock teaches Jim to breathe properly and after five minutes Jim leaps up and does twenty pull-ups on the ceiling bars to push all thought out of his brain.

* * * * *

“Jim,” Spock says, “I wish to—explain myself to you. If you will listen.”

“I’m a great listener,” Jim says. His stomach aches in a way that it hasn’t in ten years. He wonders if Spock can see the way he’s starting to panic.

“As a child, I was—reminded, in a manner intended to cause pain, that my mother was an emotional Human and thus deficient. I had an older brother who had rejected the teachings of logic entirely. I took great comfort in the fact that, although my mother was Human, my father had made a logical choice in marrying her, as our representative to Earth. That is what my father told me, over the years.” Spock leans his head back against the stone wall. Their captors are nowhere to be seen. Jim fights back the stab of fear at the idea that they will be left here to starve. “I opted to pursue the same course of action. T’Pring’s family betrothed us despite my deficiency because I made clear my intention to follow the path of logic. Only rarely did I allow emotion to sway me—once, most significantly, when I chose to reject my admission to the Vulcan Science Academy and join Starfleet instead.” There’s emotion in his dark eyes now, emotion that Jim sees even through the haze of hunger.

“You could justify that as a logical choice too,” Jim says. “Starfleet would allow you to bridge Humans and Vulcans, the way that your parents did.”

“A post-hoc justification,” Spock says dismissively. “The choice was made out of emotion.” He looks down at his hands. His knuckles have scabbed over, the broken skin paler green over the blood. “I re-committed myself to the way of logic as a member of Starfleet. It was not

difficult. And then I met—you.”

Jim stiffens. “At the disciplinary hearing?”

“No,” Spock admits. “No.” Jim’s face turns hot, and he sees the faint green blush on Spock’s face. “Sexual mores are—very different on Vulcan. During the betrothal period, one might have—a single sexual relationship, in rare cases two. It is private. There is nothing like—”

“Yeah,” Jim says miserably. “Guess there’s no town bicycle.” At Spock’s expression, Jim explains, “You know, everyone’s been for a ride? It’s an Earth saying.”

Spock’s lip curls a little. “I found that I had a strong reaction to the sight of you with other people. It was illogical. I wished to see you again, in different circumstances, and had no logical reason for it.”

“There were plenty of variations,” Jim says, because he can’t help it, can’t help poking at Spock’s distaste for his behavior. He doesn’t regret it, but he hates that Spock does.

Spock ignores that. “I observed your attempts at the Kobayashi Maru simulation. It became clear to me, after the first, that you were not attempting to succeed in that moment, but—probing for weaknesses. Identifying flaws in the program that you might be able to exploit.” Jim remembers those attempts, over and over, trying every variation of actions to see where he could make one little alteration and win the program. “I wanted to be present for your moment of triumph. It was illogical to wish to do so for any reason but to catch you in the act of cheating.”

Jim cringes a little, remembering his showboating—eating the apple, acting like none of the rest of it mattered because he knew he’d be able to get the shields down. “I should’ve been more careful about it,” he admits. “If I’d been gloating less, maybe—”

“Oh, no,” Spock says. “I wanted to see you. How you would react, when you were accused. When I spoke of your father to you, of feeling fear, of acting in the knowledge of certain death. I have always wanted to see how you react, to know you better. And that too was illogical, to be so fascinated by one cadet among many. You are dangerous—you occupy too great a space in my mind, and have done since long before I knew of your—soul-mark.”

Jim can’t help laughing a little, with no humor in it. “I didn’t need the Kobayashi Maru to act in the knowledge of certain death.” It’s too hard to think about the rest of what Spock has said. “You said maybe my mark would change when I got married—did I ever tell you about the first time it changed?”

“You have not,” Spock says. “I can hypothesize.”

“I had a cool mark, as a kid,” Jim says. “I always looked forward to meeting whoever was going to match it—I thought they’d be like me and we’d go off and have adventures together.”

“Understandable, for a child.”

Jim nods again. It’s cold in here—not cold enough to die of exposure, but cold nonetheless. “Then my stepfather sent me to the colony on Tarsus IV. Do you know what happened there?”

“It is a well-documented event in Federation history,” Spock says carefully.

“I don’t even know exactly when the mark changed. I’ve thought about it, tried to remember when I might have felt it, but I was trying so hard to be—disconnected from my body, from the hunger. I ran away from Kodos’s home, after he issued the kill order. I found some other kids, tried to keep us all safe. I killed people to do it—not many, but some. Once we were rescued, once I saw the new mark, I kept thinking that there was somebody out there who’d been meant for me, and now they wouldn’t have a soulmate anymore because of Tarsus.” Spock suddenly grips his arm—in comfort?—and it’s a welcome modicum of warmth. “Did you know that people can die, if they’ve been starving and you just let them have food? Bones told me about it. That’s why so many of the survivors of the Tarsus massacre died after we were rescued. Starfleet beamed down replicators and there weren’t enough doctors to enforce the right *refeeding protocols*.”

Very carefully, Spock slides his arm around Jim and pulls him close, so that Jim can rest his head against Spock’s shoulder. “I was not aware,” Spock says. “Perhaps your previous soulmate was too frivolous for you, after such an experience.”

“Yeah,” Jim says, and he’s treading on dangerous territory but fuck it, they’re four days into captivity with no hope of escape or rescue, he can say whatever he wants. “So, instead the universe decided to tell me, fuck you, be hungry for the rest of your life.”

Spock’s arm tightens almost convulsively, but his sleeve doesn’t brush Jim’s mark. “That need not be so.”

Jim presses a little closer, until he can touch his forehead to the bare skin of Spock’s throat. “Don’t be an asshole, Spock.”

Spock turns his head a little, so that Jim has to lift his own, and then kisses Jim, his lips warm and his mouth even hotter. Jim grips the front of Spock’s filthy uniform in one hand and rises up into the kiss, Spock’s arm heavy around him. Jim is dizzy with hunger for so many things, and this—this is filling one of those empty hungry places inside him, especially when Spock pulls him closer until Jim is straddling him, kissing Spock the way he’s been desperate to for the last year. He gets his hands into Spock’s short hair, kisses his mouth, his neck, slides his thumb from Spock’s earlobe to the tip of his ear and feels Spock gasp beneath him. Jim breaks away and says, “Please,” and Spock’s hand slides to the back of his neck, grips firmly with two fingers pressed against the mark.

Jim’s breath catches as the sensation sweeps through him and he tries to push his body even closer to Spock’s, pull Spock closer to him—his fingers itch to touch Spock’s mark, but even through this haze, Jim knows it would be a violation, an end to any trust between them. “*Jim*,” Spock groans into his mouth. “You are—”

“You sure know how to distract a guy,” he breathes against the tip of Spock’s ear and Spock makes a kind of choking noise and thrusts up against Jim. Jim eases up just a little, just enough that he can get a hand between them and work Spock’s cock out of his pants. It’s already hard, slippery beneath Jim’s fingers, and he shifts back and forth, enough to get his pants lower on his hips so he can slide his own cock against Spock’s. He gets one hand partway around them both and Spock almost *growls* and cups his free hand the rest of the way, his fingertips resting against Jim’s wrist. The other is still at the back of Jim’s neck and Jim’s vision is going blurry with how good it feels, with the mind-searing intensity, and it doesn’t surprise him when they come together, messy and reckless.

Spock is still hard, and Jim can’t help it—he scrambles back just enough that he can bend forward and suck Spock’s cock into his mouth, all the way down until the head is bumping against the back of his throat. Spock makes a wounded sound and he tightens his grip across Jim’s mark and holds him there as he thrusts up once, twice, and comes again down Jim’s throat. Jim’s throat tightens as he swallows and Spock releases him, eyes wide. Jim pulls off slowly, sucking gently, until he lets Spock slip from his mouth. “Jim—”

He realizes that his hand on Spock’s hip is dangerously close to the mark. “Sorry,” he says, and starts to move his hand away.

“Am I correct in understanding that if we do not touch the marks simultaneously, it will not—complete the bonding?”

Trust Spock to be able to use that many words after coming twice. “Yeah,” Jim says, and he knows his voice is a little rough from, you know, the cocksucking.

“In that case,” Spock says, “I would—enjoy it if you touched my mark.”

Jesus. Jesus fucking Christ, Spock. “Yeah,” Jim says again, because it’s about the only word he can manage right now. Spock probably meant touch it with his fingers, but Jim *goes* for it, lips and tongue and teeth, leaving the meanest hickey he’s ever let himself, repayment for the turbolift. The contact is like an electric shock through Jim’s body and it just keeps going.

Spock is shifting beneath him and whining and breathing, “Jim, Jim,” his hand clenched in Jim’s short hair like he doesn’t know what to do. Jim slowly gentles his touch, letting his tongue trace lightly over the swollen shape of the mark, brushing his lips across it, until he finally sits up and half-falls, half-rolls out of Spock’s lap. He winces a little as he tucks himself back into his pants—not the most forgiving, these pants—and then chances a look at Spock. He looks absolutely wrecked, gasping in huge breaths, eyes hectic, and the mark is livid against his pale skin.

“You should—” Jim gestures, and Spock looks blank. “Unless you want to be hanging out there when they come back.”

“That was—I do not have the words,” Spock says as he fumbles with his pants. “I have never—”

Jim considers saying something about how he’s had a lot of practice and decides it’s not the right time for that. “Pass me some water,” he says, and Spock hands him the dwindling canteen. “Well, if we die, at least I got to do that.”

Spock’s eyes are still wide. “We will not die,” he says. “I wish to—repeat that, and it consumes too much energy to do frequently without food.”

It occurs to Jim that this is exactly what he’d decided not to offer before, that they could fuck around until Spock married a Vulcan bride, because he knows it’ll destroy him. So much for that. Horses, barn door. “You’ve got a daring plan?” he asks. Fuck, now he’s hungry again. There were mice in the empty storehouses on Tarsus. “I’d eat a mouse,” he says.

Spock peers at him. “Perhaps you have expended too much energy already. You should drink more water, Jim.”

“So you don’t have a plan.”

“The plan is to wait for the excellent crew you have assembled to execute a well-planned rescue,” Spock says. “And remain alive until then.”

Jim looks around their cell. He’s not usually the downer in this circumstance. He’s usually the one full of belief, or at least the one loudly professing that belief to others. “Who do you think it’ll be?” he asks. “Scotty is always a pretty safe bet.”

“Lieutenant Uhura may hear and understand some sort of transmission that will help the crew to locate us,” Spock says quietly. There are no guards around, but it would still be dumb to shout about what their crew might do. “Ensign Chekov might be able to trace the warp trails, despite the attempts to mask them.”

“Maybe Gaila can come down and attack them with her pheromones,” Jim says, and feels Spock’s quick inhale, but Spock doesn’t say anything. Good. “Sulu’s pretty good with his sword.”

“You should sleep,” Spock says. “I will maintain watch.”

Jim crawls over the one of the two ragged pallets they’ve been provided. At least it helps to keep the floor from leaching the heat out of his body. “Wake me up if anything happens.”

He drifts in and out of consciousness. It’s hard for him to truly sleep, even with the wall at his back and Spock keeping watch—the gnawing hunger reminds him too much of Tarsus, of never having enough to eat and giving most of whatever he could get to the kids.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“The first thousand, they died in the antimatter chamber, but they never went willingly.” Jim says. His guard is giving him a little more leeway. “The rest of them—you were so little, but you must remember *something*. They ran, don’t you remember? Your mom shoved you at me when she ran—I guess she thought I had some kind of pull with Kodos and I could save you. You don’t remember me, Laura?”

“Her name is *Lenore*,” Kodos snaps. “Tarsus was a crucible for you, Jim. You won yourself command of a starship at a far younger age than most because of the strength you learned. Who would you be, if not for the time you spent under my care? The time you spent learning to survive?”

Jim wakes to the disorienting sensation of a transporter, and he reaches for the place where his phaser should be before he remembers. Spock is just at his elbow, a comforting warmth. They’re back on a ship, on the bridge; two guards have weapons trained on him and Spock. But they’re far from the only people in the room. There are seven other huddled figures, each similarly guarded, and his eyes skip from one to the next as his heart stutters.

Kevin Riley is closest to him, face bloodied. Thomas Leighton is on his other side, holding himself as still as possible. Donnie—Eliana—Shannon—Rochelle—Fatima—each of their faces as familiar to Jim as they were in the hospital after Tarsus. Jim knows what he’ll see when he lifts his eyes to the dais, knows *who* he’ll see, but it’s still hard to breathe when he looks up to see him—see Kodos the Executioner, alive and well. “You’re dead,” he says, and he doesn’t recognize his own voice. “You were in the residence when I set it on fire.”

Kodos smiles, and Jim *remembers* that smile, remembers being introduced the very first time to the governor of Tarsus IV, who was going to make sure he didn’t get into too much trouble. “I was in the residence,” he agrees. “As you can see, I am not dead.”

“They found your body.” Jim had worked so hard to convince himself, afterward, that Kodos really was dead. He had to be able to recite it convincingly to his mom before she would leave. “They said it was you.” Jim is having a lot of trouble breathing steadily.

“No. That was one of my guards. You should have used a different accelerant, Jimmy. The DNA profile was corrupted by the chemicals—no one told you that, did you?”

No, they wouldn’t have. “What do you want?”

Kodos gestures at the room. “A reunion, of sorts. To—clear the air.”

For the first time, Jim sees the teenage girl sitting next to him. “Who—” he starts, and then he doesn’t want the answer to that question, but Kodos is happy to answer anyway.

“My daughter, Lenore. Sweetheart, this is Jimmy Kirk—he’s the captain of the Enterprise.”

Lenore regards him suspiciously. Twelve years ago—twelve years ago she would’ve been a toddler. Little enough to believe it when Kodos claimed her. “That’s how you got out, isn’t it. Pretended she was your daughter.” He thinks Lenore is Laura, and he used to have to carry her piggyback sometimes when she couldn’t keep up with them. “He’s not your father,” Jim says.

Her hand tightens on Kodos’s arm. “He adopted me,” she says, and the way her lower lip juts out—god, it’s like a knife, he remembers that expression. “He took care of me.”

“Did he tell you what he did?” Jim has a nasty suspicion about where the ninth survivor is. Matthew would’ve died fighting the guards rather than be taken prisoner. “Did he tell you about all the people he killed? Did he tell you how we kept you alive, all those weeks, while he was murdering people?”

“He took decisive action,” Lenore recites, like she’s reading from a perverse history textbook. “Loss of life was inevitable. The deaths were painless.”

Jim staggers a little at the lie of that—the lie he’s heard before, but it’s worse from her lips—and Spock grips his arm tightly. “Painless,” he repeats.

“Instantaneous,” she says, looking to Kodos, who nods approvingly. “They went willingly into the antimatter chamber to save the other half of the colonists.”

“That’s all a lie!” Kevin shouts, and one of the guards hits him across the face with a disruptor.

“The first thousand, they died in the antimatter chamber, but they never went willingly.” Jim says. His guard is giving him a little more leeway. “The rest of them—you were so little, but you must remember *something*. They ran, don’t you remember? Your mom shoved you at me when she ran—I guess she thought I had some kind of pull with Kodos and I could save you. You don’t remember me, Laura?”

“Her name is Lenore,” Kodos snaps. “Tarsus was a crucible for you, Jim. You won yourself command of a starship at a far younger age than most because of the strength you learned. Who would you be, if not for the time you spent under my care? The time you spent learning to survive?”

Jim wants to kill him—kill him again. If there weren't so many guards here, he could do it with the rest of them, tear Kodos apart with their bare hands. He's weak from the lack of food—he thinks they all must be—but together they could do it. With nearly twenty guards, though—“You don't remember the shooting, Laura?”

She won't meet his eyes. “There was no shooting. They died instantaneously. Painlessly.”

“There was shooting for *weeks* after. His guards came after every one of the four thousand marked for death. Shot them all, along with whoever got in the way. Piled up the bodies, didn't bother to bury them.” The nightmares he used to have, that they all had—he would wake up screaming, until he learned to stay quiet because someone had to be strong. “You were little, but I think you remember.”

Lenore looks increasingly uncomfortable. “No.” There's no strength in her voice.

Jim can see his phaser, holstered on Kodos's belt. How he hates this man, beyond words, beyond reason. Spock's fingers brush the bare skin of his wrist and then stiffen—Jim wonders if his hatred is that palpable. “Why did he bring us all here, then, if everything was so right? Why isn't Matthew here—you remember Matthew, don't you? He used to sing, some nights, when there were no soldiers nearby. You would try to cover his mouth because you didn't like his singing voice and he would pretend to bite your fingers.”

“No.” Lenore's voice is shaking. Jim sees her eyes dart toward the phaser.

“You can't trick her, Jimmy,” Kodos says. “I did the right thing. I saved the other four thousand colonists from slow death.”

“If you were so right, what are you doing hiding out here? Why didn't the Federation give you some kind of posthumous medal—why aren't you called Kodos the Great, Kodos the Savior, instead of Kodos the Executioner?” The guards don't like what he's saying, he can tell. They're hired hands, not true believers, and they want him to shut up so that whatever's supposed to happen can just happen already.

Kodos ignores that. “I will give you a choice, Jimmy. You believe that you saved these people, once.” There's bile rising in the back of Jim's throat. “You need only acknowledge before them that I saved the colonists by taking the action that I did, and they will survive.”

“What,” Jim starts, and just like that, Kodos nods to the guard next to Donnie and the guard shoots him. “No!” Jim shouts, and the others shout with him. “No, don't!” He hates Kodos with every fiber of his being, but he can't let these people die. “No, you were right,” he says, and the words burn in his throat. “You were right, you saved everyone.”

Kodos narrows his eyes. “Once more with a little more feeling,” he says, and the guard shoots Thomas. The sound of his body hitting the floor is deafening.

“Fuck—you were right, Kodos! Governor Kodos, you made the right choice, everyone would have died—”

“It was instantaneous and painless,” Kodos says. “They sacrificed themselves for the greater good.” The guard next to Eliana begins to aim his disruptor.

“Fuck—it was instant, painless, everyone did it because it had to be done.” Jim almost chokes on the words and he *hates* Kodos, when this is over he's going to get a knife and he's going to cut Kodos into small pieces and then leave him to die—“No one suffered,” he says, like that'll make it true. “There was—there was no shooting.” Lenore's glance darts to him and then to the phaser and he doesn't want her to have to do it, doesn't want to make a killer out of little Laura, but Donnie and Thomas are already dead and he doesn't think any of them are going to get out alive no matter what he says. “No shooting,” he repeats. “They died all at once.”

“Yes.” Kodos looks very somber, like he's playacting the role of a great man burdened with purpose, and then there's a flash of movement and the unmistakable noise of a phaser and Kodos topples to the ground.

Jim doesn't wait to see what the guards will do, just launches himself at the nearest guard's disrupter and bellows “Down!” and starts shooting. He can feel Spock moving next to him, covering him as he stands and fires with total disregard for the risk. When it's over, when all the guards are lying dead, the only noise that remains is Lenore—Laura—sobbing over Kodos's body. He drops the disruptor and it clatters to the floor. He checks Thomas for a pulse—nothing—and sees Eliana shake her head over Donnie's body.

“Laur—Lenore,” he says. “Can you give me my phaser back?”

She shakes her head and clutches it close like a teddy bear. “Not yet.”

His brain screams at him, but he makes himself nod. “Okay, kiddo. Just let me know when you're ready.” Shannon and Fatima go to stand with her and try to comfort her.

“I have sealed the bridge from the rest of the ship,” Spock says, and if ever Jim was grateful to have a Vulcan first officer, divorced from these messy emotions, it's now. “As a precaution. Shall I attempt to contact Starfleet?”

“Yes,” Jim says. He wants to tell Spock to vent the rest of the ship, but he's just killed about fifteen people and he doesn't feel great about the idea of killing more. “Kevin—help Commander Spock. Figure out where the hell we are and set course for the nearest starbase, until we hear differently.” Kevin has been glancing back at Kodos's body every few seconds like it might start moving again, and Jim closes his eyes momentarily. “Spock—can you—”

“Affirmative, Jim.” Spock touches a few of the controls and the bodies of Kodos and his guards vanish. “I have transported them into a cargo hold for identification.”

“Good.” Jim isn't sure he needed to know that, but it was probably the right choice. His head is spinning a little, and Donnie and Thomas are still lying there dead. “Can you help—”

He's never been more thankful that Spock can anticipate his thoughts. "I will attempt to provide a more—dignified resting place for the time being."

Jim fuzzes out for a moment, until he hears, "Unidentified ship, this is the U.S.S. Enterprise. Lower your shields and prepare to be boarded." It's Chekov, and something about that is unutterably funny to Jim. He tilts his head back and laughs as he lowers the shields and barely remembers to tell Chekov to send the boarding party to the bridge.

A good captain—a great captain—would have kept his shit together for the entire evacuation of the survivors, the retrieval of the body of Kodos, the decisions about what should be done with the dead guards and the personnel on Kodos's ship and the eerie doorless prison. Jim isn't that captain. He says, very honestly, "Spock, I'm emotionally compromised," and then looks at Bones and says, "Give us all the strongest sedative you can medically justify," and passes out.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

“The funny thing is, I’d really convinced myself that he was dead,” Jim says. Spock doesn’t say anything. “I felt bad about it, too—I set fire to the governor’s residence, and I knew there might be other guards inside, but I couldn’t think of any other way to get to him and I thought it would stop the killing if he died.”

“You do not have to justify your actions,” Spock says. Jim can almost feel the vibration of his vocal cords. “You survived in extraordinary circumstances.”

Jim closes his eyes. “I thought it was over.”

Bones takes him seriously. Jim wakes up in sickbay with the other survivors nearly forty-eight hours later. “I’ve given you all nutritional supplements,” Bones says. “You’ll need to return at least twice a day for the next week so that I can make sure you’re all properly rehydrated and fed. I think Spock organized quarters for everyone.”

There’s a part of Jim, the scared thirteen-year-old boy, that wants to say no, they’ll all sleep together in a huddle like they used to, arms and legs tangled and faces mashed against dirty hair—but they’re not kids anymore, not even Laura. “Okay,” he says. “I should go find him.”

“I can comm him—” Bones starts, but Jim has to stand up, has to get out of sickbay. He’s already out of bed, and he’s in a hospital gown with a nutrient pack taped onto his side but fuck if he’s staying here another second.

Out in the corridor, he says, “Computer, locate Commander Spock.”

“Commander Spock is in Science Lab Three.”

He thinks about it, thinks about walking down the corridor to the turbolift, taking it four levels down, walking down another corridor past two other science labs, only to arrive and see Spock and—what? Saying thanks for joining me in reliving my personal hell? Jim closes his eyes and does something he’s promised himself never to do. “Computer, site-to-site transport to Captain Kirk’s quarters.”

“Command authorization required,” the computer says suspiciously, because site-to-site transport is supposed to be for medical emergencies and cowardice isn’t a medical emergency.

“Authorization Kirk-delta-vega.” A dumb in-joke. The corridor dissolves around him and he’s standing just inside the doorway of his own quarters.

“Computer, set all windows to maximum transparency, lights to three-quarters.” He wants to see the stars, wants to see the familiar shapes in his quarters. He’s not entirely sure what to do next, until his door chimes. “Come in,” he says, even though there’s exactly no one that he wants to see right now.

“Jim. Dr. McCoy informed me that you were no longer in sickbay.” Spock is wearing a clean blue uniform, no sign of where he knelt on the dirty floor to play chess, no blood on his skin, and there’s a certain amount of cognitive dissonance happening in Jim’s brain. Spock looks like it never happened. “Are you well?”

Laughter isn’t the right response to that, so Jim doesn’t answer. “I need a shower,” he says instead.

“I will assist you,” Spock says gravely, and shepherds Jim into the bathroom before he can protest. Spock unfastens the hospital gown and hangs it off the wall hook. “Dr. McCoy informed me that you should not remove the nutrient pack until it was fully depleted.”

“Cool.” This is the most naked he’s ever been around Spock, but he can’t quite bring himself to care. “You coming in with me?”

Spock turns on the shower. “Do you wish me to?”

“No,” Jim says, because it’s easier than thinking about it. He steps into the spray and it’s hot, hotter than he would usually turn it—but Spock is Vulcan, of course he thinks a higher temperature is comfortable. The shower dispenses soap and he scrubs the grime from his body, runs his soapy fingers through his hair and then stands dumbly in the shower, staring at the wall.

Spock turns the shower off abruptly and offers him a towel. “You should dry yourself.”

“Jeez, okay, I know how to take a shower,” Jim says. “You can leave.” Spock frowns, but he walks out. When the bathroom door hisses shut behind him, Jim presses his face to the wall and stifles the panic that’s bubbling up inside of him. He emerges from the bathroom in clean underwear, skin a little raw from the hot water, and—“Did you *turn down the bed* for me?”

Spock smooths the sheet. “It seemed likely that you would wish to lie in bed.”

“I thought you were going to leave.”

“I assumed that you meant the bathroom.” Spock’s voice is a little stubborn. “I do not believe that you should be alone at the moment.”

Jim laughs a little. “What, you don’t think I want a little time to myself after spending every single minute of the last four days with you in a

cell?" Give or take the time in sickbay.

Spock meets his eyes. "No," he says. "I do not."

Fuck. Jim gets into bed. The sheets are strangely slippery, after sleeping in his clothes on a dirty pallet for days. "You might as well lie down too, if you're going to stay here," Jim says roughly, and he tries to make it sound casual, like he doesn't care, but he's sure Spock can hear the plea in his voice.

"Yes, I believe that would be best." Spock takes off his clothes down to undershirt and briefs, folds it all neatly and sets it on Jim's dresser, and the sight of him like that—the expanse of bare skin marred only by the empty circle on his hip—goes a long way toward re-connecting Jim to his own body.

When Spock climbs into the bed, Jim is carefully not to let their skin touch. He lies on his back and stares up at the ceiling. "Computer, lights to half." It's as dark as he's willing to go, for now. "The funny thing is, I'd really convinced myself that he was dead." Spock doesn't say anything. "I felt bad about it, too—I set fire to the governor's residence, and I knew there might be other guards inside, but I couldn't think of any other way to get to him and I thought it would stop the killing if he died."

"You do not have to justify your actions," Spock says. Jim can almost feel the vibration of his vocal cords. "You survived in extraordinary circumstances."

Jim closes his eyes. "I thought it was over. I thought I'd saved us all."

"You saved everyone that you could." Things must be very bad for Spock to be saying things like that, instead of making cold factual statements.

"Not Thomas, and not Donnie." He feels Spock roll onto his side and press closer. Very carefully, Spock settles one hand over Jim's heart. The noise that comes out of Jim's mouth isn't a laugh. "I think I killed more people on that ship than I have in the rest of the expedition so far."

Spock touches his forehead to the side of Jim's head, and his voice is warm against Jim's ear. "You saved the lives of at least eight people."

Another wounded noise. "I persuaded a little kid that I tried to save to murder her dad."

Spock's hand presses harder over Jim's heart. "I felt what you felt, Jim. You said things that violated everything you knew to be true, despite your hatred for that man, to save the others."

Jim is having trouble breathing again and he doesn't think it's the pressure of Spock's hand. He rolls over too, pressing his forehead to Spock's, and Spock's hand slides to his back and pulls him close. "He's really dead this time, right?"

"I transported only bodies without vital signs," Spock says. "He was among them. Dr. McCoy has verified independently."

Jim releases his breath and lets his own hand find its way to the broad expanse of Spock's back. "I'm glad you stayed," he says.

Spock tightens his hand on Jim's back. "I am as well. You may sleep, Jim. The others are safe. We will leave the lights as they are and I will not allow anything to happen to you." He slides his hand up to Jim's neck and presses his forefinger gently to Jim's mark.

An overwhelming sense of warmth/safety/comfort sweeps through Jim. "I'm holding you to that," Jim mumbles, and he sleeps.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

“Tell me now that it’ll be fine to pull you into my head when we bond.”

Spock hesitates. “Another human would not share your mind as I will.”

“There’s some fucking irony for you,” Jim says. At Spock’s raised eyebrow, he explains, “The thing that made us soulmates is the thing that’s gonna make it too painful for us to actually complete it.”

Spock is still there when Jim wakes up, Jim’s head pillowed on his chest. “You know, I’ve never actually slept face-to-face with someone,” Jim says. “It always seemed really uncomfortable.” He eases back so that their eyes are level.

“It appears to have provided you with emotional comfort.” Spock seems like he’s been awake for hours. “Jim, I have a—proposition that I would ask you to consider.”

“A *proposition*?” Jim is feeling well enough to throw some innuendo onto the word.

“Yes.” Spock’s hand finds its way to Jim’s cheek. “I am aware that I have been—resistant to the idea of being influenced by our respective markings.” Jim does not point out what an outrageous understatement this is. “I have told you of the concerns that motivated my behavior.”

“Yeah,” Jim says roughly, and Spock strokes his thumb across Jim’s lips.

“I was in error. Upon further acquaintance with you and—greater understanding of myself, I have come to recognize a certain kinship that does indeed exist.”

“A certain kinship,” Jim repeats against his thumb. That’s one way to put it.

“If you—” Spock stops himself. “I would like to complete the bond. With you.”

Spock’s hand is nowhere near Jim’s mark, but he still feels the shivery thrill that Spock’s touch to it always prompts. “You wanna be my soulmate, Spock?”

Spock purses his lips. “I wish to—yes.”

Jim can’t help his grin. “Go on, say it.”

He sighs. “I wish to be your soulmate, Jim.” The word sounds foreign in his mouth, but there’s some kind of affection to the way he says it nonetheless.

Jim wriggles a little closer. “Quick, let’s do it before you come to your senses.”

Spock must hear the uncertainty in his voice. “I have arrived at this conclusion after significant reflection. I am in full possession of my senses.” He frowns a little. “On Vulcan, the physical completion of the bond is typically a part of the marriage ceremony. I believe—” He raises an eyebrow and presses his hips against Spock’s. “Ah,” Spock says.

“After everything that’s happened when we touch each other’s marks, you want to *complete the bond* in front of a bunch of Vulcans?” Jim slides his hand between them and lets his knuckles brush the shape of Spock’s cock through his clothing.

Spock exhales sharply. “Your logic is—sound,” he says. “Privately, then. You know what is required?”

“We just touch each other’s marks at the same time and the universe does the rest.” Jim shifts a little and pulls his hand out from between their bodies. “Do you need to do some kind of—mental prep first? I know my mind’s not the most pleasant place.”

“It is my hope that the meditation techniques I taught you recently will make the mental component easier for both of us,” Spock says.

Jim winces. “Is there a way for you to—check? I don’t want this to be traumatic.” He hesitates. “You know how much I want this, but—” He doesn’t want to poison it, doesn’t want Spock to see all the worst parts of Jim as they—join.

“If you consent, yes, I can meld with you in a preliminary fashion,” Spock says. “But Jim—”

“Do it.” Jim drags in a long breath and braces himself as Spock splays one hand on the side of his head.

“My mind to your mind,” Spock recites. “My thoughts to your—”

“Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society,” Kodos says. The people gathered in the square are getting restless. They know something’s wrong. They’re looking around, noticing the soldiers, wondering why there are so many armed men for the unveiling of the new antimatter reactor. “Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony.” Jim’s body is going numb as he stands to the side, as he realizes what’s going to happen an instant before Kodos declares, “I have no alternative but to sentence you to—” That’s when the screaming starts.

“No!” Jim barely realizes what he’s doing until he’s already shoved Spock away. “No,” he repeats.

Spock tries to hide it, but Jim sees the way he winces, the way he’s breathing a little faster than normal. “Recent events have brought—your more traumatic memories to the front of your mind,” Spock says. He sits up in bed.

Jim sits up too, careful not to touch him. “You felt it too.” The panic—the *relief* that Jim wasn’t one of those people, that he was outside the contracting line of soldiers—

“I believe that I experienced a pale shadow of what you did.”

“Tell me now that it’ll be fine to pull you into my head when we bond.”

Spock hesitates. “Another human would not share your mind as I will.”

“There’s some fucking irony for you,” Jim says. At Spock’s raised eyebrow, he explains, “The thing that made us soulmates is the thing that’s gonna make it too painful for us to actually complete it.”

“The fact that your mind is currently in a great deal of pain does not preclude a completed bond,” Spock says, and he reaches out and grips Jim’s forearm before Jim can flinch back. His hand is warm and anchoring. “We have done…several things that did not trigger those memories,” and it takes Jim a minute longer than it should to realize that Spock is referring to sex, “and in time, with effort, your mind will heal sufficiently.” Spock strokes his fingers up to the crook of Jim’s elbow, up over the cloth of his shirt, and up his neck to his pulse point. “Slow your breathing, Jim, and your heartbeat will slow. It will help to calm you.”

“Or we could calm me down another way,” Jim says. “By wearing me out.” He feels the slightest tremor in Spock’s fingers. “You remember the turbolift, right? When you held me down and fucked me? The cell? When you fucked my throat? Those were great.”

Spock is close enough that Jim can see his pupils dilate a little as a green flush rises in his cheeks. “Your descriptions are—”

“You remember the hallway, when everyone thought I was sucking you off because of the noises you made when I got on my knees for you to lick your mark?”

“Jim.” Spock’s voice is very rough. “I believe that you are attempting to distract from—”

“Your ears are especially sensitive, aren’t they.” He’s not going to touch Spock first, only keep talking until Spock decides to shut him up in some way—

“Yes,” Spock says helplessly, and he threads his fingers into Jim’s hair and kisses him, mouth eager, searching, as though he can find some secret in Jim.

Jim drops his hand to Spock’s cock, already hard and distorting the shape of his briefs. He guides it through the opening of the briefs and Spock half-sighs, half-moans into his mouth. His cock is already slick, and that’s a neat trick, Jim can think of all kinds of really filthy uses for it—he pumps his hand experimentally a few times and Spock gasps, his hips thrusting up. Jim breaks away from his mouth but keeps his hand going, long slow strokes, and sucks experimentally at the tip of Spock’s ear. Spock makes another kind of helpless noise and tries to fuck into Jim’s hand faster, but Jim only slows further, adds a lazy sweep of his thumb over the head every few strokes, and god but Spock is *messy* now, Jim can’t think about it all at once or he’ll get too close to coming, and he wants to drag this out. He drags his teeth across the tip of Spock’s ear, then kisses his way along the shell of it, catches Spock’s earlobe between his teeth for a second, and Spock wraps a tight hand around Jim’s own. When he tries to speed Jim up, Jim breathes “Nope” into his ear and then bites high on his neck.

Spock pulls his hair, hard, and slides his hand to the back of Jim’s neck. When he presses his fingers to Jim’s mark and sends a surge of arousal, Jim’s hand must tighten reflexively on his cock because Spock makes a choked noise and says “Jim—please—”

“You know,” Jim says, “last time you fucked me, you really rushed through it.”

“I was in the early stage—early stage of pon farr,” Spock protests.

“Sure.” Jim wants to see more of Spock’s skin again. “Take your shirt off.” He leans back enough that Spock can yank off his undershirt. “I’m thinking you should spend a little more time really opening me up.” He speeds his hand up just a little, just to see Spock’s eyes get a little wild. “And then I want to ride your cock.”

“Do you have appropriate lubricant?” Spock asks, and Jim must be really gone for him if a question like that sounds hot.

“Seems like you make your own.” Jim squeezes his cock a little to make the point. “But if you want something else, yeah, in the drawer.”

“Take off your clothing,” Spock says, and he half-crawls to the bedside table while Jim scrambles his way out of his clothes and slides down on the bed, canting his hips up. Spock looks him over from head to toe, eyes lingering on Jim’s cock, and then says, “No. On your knees,” and Jim had assumed Spock would prefer it this way but he’s happy enough to roll over and get up on his knees, spread his legs wide. There’s a long moment where Spock doesn’t touch him, when Jim’s entire body feels like it’s on fire, and then he feels—fuck, the tips of Spock’s fingers on either side of his hole, just barely tugging at his rim, like Spock is just *looking* at him. Then Spock begins to rub one slick fingertip back and forth across Jim’s hole, barely pressing inside, and Jim whines.

“You can go a *little* faster,” he says, and tries to push back onto Spock’s finger, only for Spock to take his hands away entirely.

“I do not wish to rush you,” Spock says, and Jim hears the humor in his voice. What a fucking great time for Spock to develop a sense of humor. Then Spock resumes rubbing back and forth, and Jim has to clench his hands in the sheets to keep from thrusting back like he’s desperate. It feels like an eternity before Spock slides his finger all the way in, like Jim is a fucking virgin, and he wants to tell Spock that it’s

enough, that Jim wants to ride his cock now, but he knows Spock would only stop touching him. He bites his lip almost bloody when Spock withdraws his finger and then resumes sweeping his finger—fingers—back and forth across Jim’s hole. “You are impatient,” Spock says.

“Not at all,” Jim says, and is this how Spock felt in the middle of pon farr, like he would die if he didn’t fuck someone or something? “No, I’m good.”

“Very well.” Spock slides two fingers inside and moves them in a lazy circle.

“Hey Spock,” Jim says, “remember when we first met?” Spock’s fingers still for a moment. “In the classroom—Gaila was opening me up just like this while I sucked Gary’s cock.”

“I recall.” Spock’s voice is tight, but Jim doesn’t think it’s unhappiness—Jim thinks Spock is desperately trying to restrain himself.

“We finished after you left,” he says. “Gary fucked my ass while I ate Gaila out—I was such a mess when it was over. I was thinking about your voice when I came, though, the way you sounded when you said it was inappropriate—”

Spock spreads his fingers a little, stretching Jim’s rim. “You are attempting to encourage me to hurry by telling me this. You will not accomplish your goal.” His fingers hit Jim just right and a shudder rolls through Jim’s body. Then Spock withdraws his fingers and Jim’s attempt backfires when Spock begins the agonizingly slow addition of a third finger. Jim is breathing in huge lungfuls of air now, all awareness narrowed to the feeling of Spock’s fingers pushing inside him. When Spock finally gets all three fingers all the way inside, he pumps them in and out slowly, just missing the right spot, and Jim is blindingly hard now, his balls tight, and he’s going to come as soon as he gets Spock’s cock inside him, he’s a few thrusts away from coming on Spock’s fingers—

When Spock pulls his fingers out at last, Jim starts to roll over so he can get on top, but Spock puts a firm hand on his spine and fuck fuck fuck that’s a fourth finger and the stretch is so good, the way it fills him up—he can only imagine what it looks like, Spock holding him there and opening him up. “Please,” he pants. “Fuck—just let me—” Spock presses all four fingers in and grips Jim’s balls firmly, tugs a little, and Jim isn’t proud of the noise he makes. “Just let me ride your cock,” he begs, “I just want to see your face while I do it, when I come—”

Spock growls a little and in what feels like a single movement, rolls them so that he’s on his back and Jim is kneeling over him. Jim sinks down on his cock and it’s even better than he remembers, the way Spock fills him up. “Go on,” Spock says.

It takes only a second for Jim to find the rhythm, his own cock bobbing obscenely as he rides Spock. He reaches down to touch Spock’s mark as he does it, pours everything he’s feeling into it. Spock stiffens, grabs him by the hips and holds him in place as Spock thrusts upward desperately, and he’s hitting Jim just right, over and over. Jim cries out and comes on Spock’s chest and Spock keeps going, pulls out just long enough to roll them over and then hooks Jim’s legs over his shoulders and shoves back in. Jim is pinned like this, spread wide, and he doesn’t know how Spock is keeping it together because his face is wild, his fingernails digging into Jim’s skin. Then he grabs the back of Jim’s neck, drags his fingernails across the mark, and comes, pumping into Jim’s ass.

Spock releases his neck quickly, to ensure that they don’t touch the marks at the same time, but he keeps his cock inside Jim longer. “You are extraordinary,” he says.

“That was fucking extraordinary,” Jim says, because he can’t let himself say anything feelings-related to Spock right now. “I think I’m going to pass out.” Spock pulls out of him slowly, then pushes two fingers back into Jim. “Be my guest,” Jim says, and the shiver is already creeping up his spine.

“If I could, I most certainly would.” Spock twists his fingers and finds the right spot, and fuck, Jim is half-hard again, Spock’s fingers working him up higher and higher until he shudders and comes on himself and it’s blinding, the way Spock keeps going until there’s nothing left in Jim, until he’s incoherent. Spock finally releases him and collapses on his side next to Jim. He’s sweating, some distant part of Jim’s brain notices. He didn’t realize that Vulcans could sweat.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Gaila snorts. “They all say that. ‘You’ll get better.’ ‘Time will help.’”

“At he’s still willing to have mind-blowing sex,” Jim says glumly. “You don’t think I’ll ever be able to complete it, do you.”

Gaila leans in and puts her hands on his cheeks. “I want you to,” she says. “I hope that you will. For me it would be—anathema. But so would the desire.” She pats his cheek. “See, look at that. I got through a conversation about soulmates without having to go be alone somewhere dark and quiet. There’s hope for us yet.”

Jim’s done a lot of different things in his life, but he doesn’t think he’s ever felt so thoroughly debauched. After he’s confirmed where all the other survivors are—he’s diverted their route to the nearest starbase to pick up a ship’s counselor—he goes to see Gaila in Engineering. This has the added benefit of putting him near Kevin, who Scotty has decided to more or less turn into his protégé.

Gaila is in one of the engineering computer labs, and when he walks in, she whistles and gives him a lascivious grin. “You’re looking a lot better than I would’ve expected,” she says. “You did the deed?”

“Even better than the turbolift,” Jim says. “But we didn’t—”

“Complete the bond? Why not?” Gaila narrows her eyes. “Don’t tell me he’s still being stupid and Vulcan about it.”

“No.” Jim chooses his next words carefully. “I’d like to talk about it with you, but you have to tell me if it starts to get rough for you, okay? I know it’s not always the greatest thing to talk about.”

Gaila nods. “I’ve gotten better about soulmate talk,” she says, “but don’t worry, I’ll let you know if we start coming too close to something that hurts.”

“We were going to complete it.” Jim looks out the window into space. “But with a Vulcan, there’s a—mental component.”

“A mind meld.”

“More than that, I think,” Jim says. “A lot more. I have—some pretty terrible shit in my head. You know.” She does. “I was worried it’d hurt him, and I didn’t want to ruin it like that, so I asked him to—check first. Go into my mind just a little, to see what it would be like.”

Gaila’s shoulders form a tight line. “I wouldn’t have let someone into my mind. Not willingly, anyway.”

“Yeah, well,” Jim says. “He’d just seen me shoot about fifteen guards and trick Laura into killing the man she thought was her father, *and* tell Kodos that everything he did was right, so I guess I figured it wouldn’t be worse than that.” He laughs bitterly. “Dropped straight into the beginning of everything, the second he entered my mind. I don’t even know if it was me that shoved him out of my brain or if he basically ran screaming. He said that ‘in time, your mind may heal sufficiently’ for us to do the whole soulmate commitment thing.”

Gaila snorts. “They all say that. ‘You’ll get better.’ ‘Time will help.’”

“At he’s still willing to have mind-blowing sex,” Jim says glumly. “You don’t think I’ll ever be able to complete it, do you.”

Gaila leans in and puts her hands on his cheeks. “I want you to,” she says. “I hope that you will. For me it would be—anathema. But so would the desire.” She pats his cheek. “See, look at that. I got through a conversation about soulmates without having to go be alone somewhere dark and quiet. There’s hope for us yet.”

Jim turns his head enough to kiss her palm and then sits back. “I’m getting a ship’s counselor when we stop at the starbase.” At her expression, he adds, “I know how you feel about them, but people keep coming to *me* for advice, and Uhura didn’t like it when I asked her for advice about Spock, and—” He takes a deep breath. “And I don’t know how to help myself, or the other—survivors.”

“They’re staying on the ship?”

Jim shrugs. “Laura doesn’t have any family anywhere. I don’t know about the others.” They haven’t talked much since coming back to Enterprise. “Kevin’s assigned to another ship, I’ll have him transferred here unless he tells me not to.”

“Be careful, Jim,” she says. “You can’t save them all.”

No. Jim remembers Donnie’s body, Thomas sprawled on the floor of the ship. He’d gotten married, Jim recalls. Mary? Martha. He’d been excited and Jim had thought to himself, how are any of us old enough to get married? “Of course I can,” Jim says, and he grins. “Haven’t you heard? I’m James T. Kirk, hero of the Federation.”

She rolls her eyes. “Get out of here. Some of us have work to do.”

He finds Laura in the mess hall, staring at a tray with a piece of chocolate cake on it—must be Bones’s influence, it’s his daughter’s favorite. “Can I sit here?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Laura mutters. She’s very carefully poking her fork into the frosting, leaving rows of tiny indentations. “You’re the captain.”

“Yeah,” Jim says.

“I don’t remember you. Any of you. You all know each other, but—” She jabs her fork with a little more force. “You said my mom gave me to you. Do you know what happened to her?”

Is there a nice way to say *she died with the other four thousand*? “Would it be more comforting if I said that she died right away or that she made it a couple weeks more?” Shit, Laura’s eyes tear up. “I don’t know. I only know she wasn’t one of the people who survived.”

She frowns and shakes her head. “Everything is—mixed up in my head. I remember growing up with—him. Him teaching me to read, to understand schematics. I was going to ask him for permission to go to Starfleet.”

Jim winces. What’s he supposed to say? *He was a monster, but maybe a better dad than Frank*? “People are complicated,” he says finally, a platitude if ever he’s heard one. He looks across the mess hall and finds Spock eating placidly alone.

“Who’s he?” Laura follows his gaze. “He wasn’t on Tarsus. He’s—weird.”

“Spock, my—first officer.” Jim rubs at the back of his neck. “He’s Vulcan. You ever meet a Vulcan?”

Laura sneers a little. “We didn’t associate with *aliens*.”

Well, that’s awkward. “You would’ve, in Starfleet.”

She shrugs. “Father made it sound like—” She stops herself and swallows hard. Then she takes a bite of the chocolate cake.

“How is it?” Jim waves at Spock, beckons him over. Spock looks mildly displeased, but he approaches anyway and sits down next to Jim. “Laura, this is Commander Spock.”

* * * * *

The starbase has a counselor—a trauma specialist—ready to go when they arrive. A Betazoid, even, which means Starfleet must’ve thought they were all extra fucked-up, to need someone who could read their emotions. Her appointment roster fills up quickly, but Jim makes sure that Laura and the rest of the survivors get in for weekly appointments. Eliana and Shannon leave, but the rest of them stay—maybe because they can tell how much Jim wants them nearby, where he can keep an eye on them, or maybe because they just have nowhere else to go.

Scotty keeps Kevin occupied at almost all hours, which Kevin seems to find useful as a coping method. Jim goes to see him in Engineering once, finds him with his hands deep in the guts of a wall panel, and says, “You let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Kevin withdraws enough to look at Jim. “Yeah, sure. Thanks for the transfer, Captain.” Then he dives back into whatever he’s doing with the panel and Jim considers that adequate.

“The thing is,” he explains to the counselor, “I don’t need to be their friends. I don’t need them to be open with me. I just need to know they’re okay.”

Counselor Despina nods. “And they’re okay?”

“Well, they’ve all got stuff to do, and they all see you, and they have each other,” Jim says. Fatima also has a terrible crush on Chekov, but he’s not about to reveal that. “It’s weird to see them all at this age, you know? I never imagined what they’d look like ten years later. I didn’t know if we’d make it another month.”

She meets his eyes. “And you? Are you okay?”

Jim considers. It’s been nearly a month now, meeting with her—he hadn’t been planning on it, but she’d taken him aside when she first came on board and informed him that she had particular orders to meet with him regularly. “Due to the high rate of burnout and traumatic experiences that Starfleet captains face,” she’d said, and Jim didn’t really believe that, but he couldn’t think of a way to say, “I’m too messed up for you to fix.”

“Gaila basically adopted Laura,” he says instead. “So Laura has someone else. That’s good.”

“And the thought exercises?” she prompts. “Have you been working on them?”

Jim winces. “Sometimes.” The problem is that all of her therapy involves him actually *thinking* about everything that happened, and all he really wants is for it to be out of his head so he can bond with Spock already.

“You’ve told me why it’s so important,” Despina says. “Even if your relationship with Commander Spock wasn’t affected, it would still be important, but…”

“Yeah.” Jim thinks of Spock’s face last night, when Jim had—Despina is blushing slightly. “Crap, sorry.”

“It’s all right, Jim. Intimacy of all kinds is valuable. Don’t be embarrassed.” Her chronometer beeps softly. “I’m afraid it’s time for my next appointment. I’d encourage you to perform the thought exercises frequently, as frequently as you can. The more control you have over your mind, the safer that Commander Spock’s mind will be.”

Jim roams the hallways that night. He does it not infrequently, when his shift ends and he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He likes to wander through the ship, to check the sound of her on every deck, to see the people going about their lives and reassure himself that everything

is as it should be. Sometimes people invite him to join whatever leisure activity they're doing, or want to show off some new discovery or project, and at least once or twice there's a different kind of invitation that Jim has to decline. Tonight, he ends up outside Spock's quarters and presses the door chime.

"You may enter," Spock says. He's sitting on the floor, legs crossed, two candles burning in front of him. "Jim. I was beginning meditation. Do you intend to join me?"

"I was thinking." There's nervous energy all through Jim's body. "We could move in together."

Spock looks alarmed. "You wish to share quarters?"

"I mean." He wasn't expecting this to be difficult, except maybe in the back of his mind. "We would, wouldn't we? If we were—officially together. Wouldn't we?"

"I had not considered it," Spock says, and ouch. "Yes, I suppose that is standard."

"I mean—you spend a lot of nights with me anyway. It's not outrageous, right? I could move in here, I know you've got it set up the way you like it."

"That would be illogical. The captain is assigned substantially larger quarters. The logical choice would be for me to transfer my belongings to your quarters."

Transfer my belongings to your quarters. Only Spock. "Is it a problem?"

Spock looks a little unsettled. "No. A change, but not an unwelcome one. Do you wish to do so now?"

Funny, Jim spends so much trying to hurry Spock along, trying to act on every decision as fast as possible so that Spock can't take it back, and it's nice when Spock is willing to go along with it. "Do you need to finish meditating first?" Spock is very protective of his meditation time.

"I will complete my meditation when I have transferred my possessions," Spock says. "It should take only a brief period of time to assemble them. Perhaps you might take that time to"—he grimaces—"make a little room for me?"

Jim thinks of his quarters. "Yeah," he says, and the energy is humming through his body. "Yeah, I can do that."

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“I believe it is a common practice to—mark the occasion of shared habitation with some sort of celebration,” Spock says. “I would not wish to deviate.”

“Oh, we’ll *deviate*,” Jim promises. “I’m always happy to be a little deviant.”

In his quarters, he sweeps the top of the dresser clear of the random stuff that always seems to accumulate there, the non-regulation clothes that he doesn’t replicate regularly, and shoves stuff into a drawer. He doesn’t actually have that many personal possessions, but they seem to scatter themselves all around the room when he’s not looking. He’s barely finished rearranging things when Spock arrives with two large boxes in his arms and sets them down. “Jim,” Spock says, and Jim kisses him. Spock hums into his mouth, pulls him close and turns them so that Spock is pressing him against the wall, and Jim melts into him. When Spock steps back, there’s humor beneath his stern expression. “I must unpack my possessions so that I may complete my meditation, Jim.”

“Totally,” Jim says. “Go for it.” He makes himself sit on the bed and watch as Spock unwraps and sets Vulcan sculptures on the shelves and transfers his clothing into the dresser drawers. Then Spock lights his meditation candles. “I can leave you alone.”

Spock raises an eyebrow. “I thought that the purpose of sharing quarters was not to be alone.”

Well. That’s a way to put it. “I mean, I mostly thought of it as—coming home to you—but I can stick around for stuff like this.”

“It would provide you with an opportunity to engage in some of the mental strategies that the counselor has given you.”

Jim tells Spock about the sessions sometimes, to assure Spock that he’s going to be—better, for whatever value of better. He grimaces now, but sits cross-legged across from Spock. “Let me know if I’m disturbing you.”

Spock leans forward and puts on hand on Jim’s knee. “You will not.” Then he sits back and closes his eyes.

Jim watches him with some envy as he goes—wherever he goes, when he meditates. Jim’s version of meditation is less pleasant, in his opinion. He’s supposed to be practicing compartmentalization, taking a memory out and examining it and then putting it back away, somewhere safe, where it can’t leap out at him. Today he remembers the minutes after Kodos made his announcement—when Laura’s mother shoved her into his arms, when he darted forward and grabbed a gun and then ran, when he saw the others starting to run toward where he knew soldiers were waiting and then shouted, “This way!” and they’d turned and followed him. The feelings threaten to swamp him—the panic, the desperation, the sick guilt for not believing what Kodos was going to do—and Jim takes them, catches them and bundles them carefully with the memories. Then he puts them away, into the carefully guarded part of his brain, and reminds himself that he’s safe, that it was ten years ago, that he saved as many as he could.

When he opens his eyes, he finds Spock watching him. “Your mental control is improving,” Spock says, and there’s a hint of eagerness in his voice. “I am not looking into your mind, I promise. But the distress that comes from you is—less.”

“Oh yeah?” Jim knows he’s right, but it’s nice to hear Spock say it. “You done already?”

“I believe it is a common practice to—mark the occasion of shared habitation with some sort of celebration,” Spock says. “I would not wish to deviate.”

“Oh, we’ll *deviate*,” Jim promises. “I’m always happy to be a little deviant.”

Spock raises one eyebrow. “An excellent pun, Jim,” he says, and Jim wants to mess him up, wants to take him apart piece by piece.

“One of us should’ve carried the other one over the threshold, if we’d just gotten married,” Jim says. “C’mere.” He gets to his feet and pulls Spock up too, then pushes him up against the wall right next to the door. “Just be careful.” They’re always careful—mostly—about the marks, but sometimes it feels like playing with fire, like one of these days they won’t coordinate right and they’ll bond without meaning to—

Spock goes willingly, lets Jim undo his pants and pull them just low enough to free his cock. Spock is half-hard when Jim pulls his cock out, thickening rapidly, and Jim loves the shape of his cock in Jim’s mouth, the weight of it. When he gets on his knees, Spock exhales sharply and says, “Jim—”

Jim sucks Spock’s cock into his mouth before he’s fully hard. He likes this, feeling Spock get harder in his mouth, the way Spock starts to fill it, the way it stretches Jim’s lips a little—the way the head of his cock just barely bumps the back of Jim’s throat, the heaviness on Jim’s tongue. He loves the noises that Spock makes when he does it, the disbelieving way that Spock touches his cheek, his hair.

Usually he would use one hand on Spock’s cock and suck the rest of it in his mouth, but they’re celebrating Spock moving it, and so he bobs his head up and down, all the way down to the root on every downstroke, and Spock is already shifting his hips a little, trying to be polite, trying not to thrust. Jim strokes his balls with one hand, plays with them one at a time, and then locks his hand around the base of Spock’s cock—so that he can’t come—and speeds up. Spock is moaning, and Jim grabs his wrist, takes two of Spock’s fingers and slides them into Jim’s mouth along with his cock. His mouth is stretched and full and slick and Spock cries out and grips Jim’s hair. He’s not touching Jim’s mark, so Jim can put his own fingers on Spock’s mark and encourage him on, urge him to thrust into Jim’s throat. His throat closes on the head of Spock’s cock, his eyes watering, but it’s so good feeling Spock fall apart, knowing that Spock still won’t be able to come until Jim releases

his cock. He presses hard on the mark and releases his hand around Spock and swallows hard just as Spock thrusts in, and Spock almost *wails* as he comes down Jim's throat, as Jim swallows around him.

Spock pulls his fingers out of Jim's mouth, pushes Jim away by the shoulders, and says, "Get on the bed." His voice is strained.

"Okay," Jim says, and he knows what it does to Spock, the way that his voice is a little hoarse from Spock fucking his throat. He's hard, straining against his pants, and it's a relief to unfasten them and pull his cock out, stroke it once or twice before Spock grabs both of his wrists in one hand.

"No," Spock says. He tugs Jim's pants down further, then off, so that he can spread Jim's knees wide before he gets his mouth on Jim's cock. Jim has barely registered the hot wet warmth before Spock pushes two slick fingers into his hole without warning and his fingers feel huge like this, opening Jim up as he sucks Jim's cock. Jim has barely had time to adjust before Spock is adding a third finger and it's overwhelming, Spock inside him and around him, he thinks he could break apart like this. Spock isn't even going to fuck him—he likes to do this, sucks Jim's cock while he ruins him, finds the right spot and works his fingers there until Jim comes—and then he *keeps going*, inexorable, until Jim starts to harden again, until he comes again, jerking hard, and even then Spock doesn't stop. He's ruthless, and Jim doesn't tell him to stop because he loves this, wants Spock to drag out every last bit of him, wants everything Spock will give him—will take from him—until Spock wrings one last orgasm out of Jim. A weak one, because Jim is probably about to die. Died Happy, the Starfleet report will read, Doing What He Loved.

"Jim," Spock says.

"Nnngh."

"I am going to use our shower," Spock tells him.

"Cool," Jim thinks he says. "I'm going to pass out here."

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Spock narrows his eyes. “Jim, did you time this revelation as an opportunity to win a chess game?”

“Side benefit,” Jim says, and he grins. “I was going to beat you anyway.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It’s another two months before he’s willing to say, “Hey, Spock,” in the middle of their chess game.

“Yes, Jim?” When no one else signs up for chess club, they hold it in their quarters instead.

“I think I might be ready.”

Spock’s eyes jerk up from the rook he’s just used to take Jim’s bishop. “To—complete the—soulmate bond?” He must be feeling particularly emotional, because Jim knows that he’s very uncomfortable with the word ‘soulmate.’ “Your mental control is—sufficient?”

“You can check,” Jim offers. “But yeah.” He moves a piece. “Check.”

“I trust you,” Spock says. Then he looks at the board. “Oh. I see.”

“It’s mate in three,” Jim tells him. “But we can finish the game if you want.”

Spock narrows his eyes. “Jim, did you time this revelation as an opportunity to win a chess game?”

“Side benefit,” Jim says, and he grins. “I was going to beat you anyway.”

Spock examines the boards and sighs. “Yes, you were. Very well.” He stands and faces Jim, and Jim mirrors his position. “If either of us experiences difficulties, we will—postpone.”

“Take a deep breath,” Jim says.

“I believe that is my line.” Spock puts his hand on the back of Jim’s neck just below the mark, warm and steady in a way that Jim has come to depend on.

“Sorry.” Jim lays his hand on Spock’s hip, fingertips just barely dipping into the waistband of his pants. “Ready?”

“I am.” Slowly, they touch each other’s marks.

The physical contact is nothing compared to the mental wave that rushes through Jim, like the tide coming in all at once—and that’s Spock’s memory, shivering on the beach in San Francisco just after arriving, the cold water sweeping over his feet. *Wanna see something?* Jim asks.

If you wish to show me.

They’re very suddenly in a building full of shelves—*Is this a Human library?*

Video rental store, Jim says. *On Earth, they used to keep holovids on physical discs, and people could pay money to rent them for a few days.* He gestures at the shelves, which are labeled with stardates. *It’s how I’ve—organized the memories.*

You have contained them in physical forms, to access only when you wish to, Spock says. *Fascinating.*

Jim grins at him and lets the image of the video rental store slip away. The rest of the bond sweeps through them, the safe memories passed back and forth—Winona Kirk swearing during a game of Monopoly, the warmth of Amanda Grayson’s arm, Spock’s fierce determination to prove himself, the way that Jim counts all the crew of Enterprise as *family* now—and underneath it all, their minds knitting together. Outside their minds, Jim knows, they’re pressed close together, removing clothing as best they can without breaking the contact, and he’s looking forward to it, but for now he’s content to stay here, in the strange landscape of their minds, sharing thoughts. Finally, he thinks, *There are some other things I want to do*, and they’re suddenly back in their physical bodies. Everything feels slow, syrupy, as they touch, as they find each other’s bare skin as though it’s never happened before.

Eventually, after they’ve collapsed on the bed and Jim has flung an arm across Spock’s chest—it’s too warm but he doesn’t care—Spock says, “I can tell that something is amusing you.”

Jim cracks up. “I can tell that you think it’s going to be inappropriate, which, considering what we just did, is amazing.” He can feel Spock’s wry amusement. “Just imagining having to stand in front of T’Pau wearing ceremonial robes while we did that—” There’s a surge of horror and then grudging humor from Spock. “But you know if we do go have a ceremony on New Vulcan, I’m taking you back to the house in Iowa to meet my mom. She’ll have to transport in special for the occasion.” He knows Spock can feel the particular sensitivity around the edges of those thoughts, the lurking ghosts. “I’ll try not to get too emotional about it.”

“Jim,” Spock says, “I look forward to spending the rest of my life with your emotions,” and the crazy thing about it is that Jim can feel that he means it.

Chapter End Notes

Name from [Complex](#), by Xana. Depiction of Tarsus drawn heavily from Waldorff's [\(When I Grow Up I'll\) Be A Monster](#).

This was supposed to be about 3K and completely blew up. If there's one thing I've learned writing this series, it's that Vulcans are *vehemently* opposed to having their lives controlled by soul-marks.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!