

When You're Making Other Plans

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/974) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/974>.

Rating: [Teen And Up Audiences](#)
Archive Warning: [No Archive Warnings Apply](#)
Category: [M/M](#)
Fandom: [Star Trek: Alternate Original Series](#)
Relationship: [James T. Kirk \(AOS\)/Spock \(AOS\)](#)
Character: [James T. Kirk \(AOS\)](#), [Spock \(AOS\)](#), [Ensemble Cast - AOS](#)
Additional Tags: [Alternate Universe - Soulmates](#), [Soulmate-Identifying Marks](#)
Language: English
Stats: Published: 2023-09-23 Words: 12,081 Chapters: 1/1

When You're Making Other Plans

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Summary

Jim always thought the absence of a soulmark on his arm meant he didn't have a soulmate. When he and Spock team up to take down Nero, he discovers how wrong he was.

Notes

Written for reeby10 in the 2017 Space Swap exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

I love you so much. I love you-

Winona feels the collision as if it's happening to her. Pain tears through her body, growing and swelling until it's all she can think of. The pain of losing a soulmate is said to be the worst imaginable, but the sheer agony of it still shocks her. The darkness encroaching on the edges of her vision is almost a relief – at least it will be an end to the pain.

Something moves in her arms and she looks down to see her son gazing up at her. Jim. She'd almost forgotten about him, but looking at him now she feels a rush of love. He's so tiny, George's last gift to her, and she knows then that she can't leave him.

"Erosimol," she whispers, then clears her throat and repeats it louder. "Give me the erosimol."

The nurses look at each other before springing into action. The drug doesn't eliminate the pain – nothing can do that – but it dampens it enough that she's no longer in danger of dying.

The mark on her arm has already faded to grey, and tears prick in her eyes at the sight before she turns her attention to her son. Her gaze falls on his arms, and the blank, unblemished skin there.

"He doesn't have a mark," she says, running a thumb over the area where it should be.

One of the nurses steps forward. "Some babies don't," she explains. "About one in twenty are born without a mark. It should come in as he gets older."

"I hope it doesn't," Winona murmurs.

Jim wriggles in her arms, starting to cry, and she picks him up and holds him close.

"Your daddy loves you," she tells him, tears welling and threatening to overflow. "But he can't be here, so I'll just have to love you for the both of us."

Beside her she can see the nurses hovering, wanting to check him over. She knows she should let them take him, but right now he's the only thing keeping her from shattering into pieces. So instead she continues to hold him, rocking him in her arms as they both cry.

* * * * *

Jim is four when he learns what a soulmark is.

"Mommy?"

His mother looks up from where she's sitting on the couch reading. "Yes, baby? What's up?"

"Sam said I was stupid." Jim pulls his stuffed bunny closer, trying not to cry.

She sighs. "I'm sure he didn't mean it." She shifts over a little and pats the space next to her. "Why don't you come sit with me for a while?"

Jim snuffles. "Okay." He climbs up and settles in against her, one ear of the bunny finding its way into his mouth.

It's a hot day, even with the air-con, and his mother is wearing short sleeves for once. She's shifting to turn the page when he sees it; a pattern of grey stars on her arm.

He stops chewing on Bunny's ear and reaches out to touch. It doesn't feel any different, just like ordinary skin. "What's this, Mommy?"

"That's my soulmark," she says quietly. "Your daddy had one just like it."

She sounds sad, the way she always does when she talks about his daddy. "It's pretty," he says. "What's it mean?"

"It helps you find your soulmate."

Jim twists to look at her. "What's a soulmate?"

She frowns in thought. "It's someone you love, and who loves you. The one perfect person who when you meet them, the world makes sense. No matter how broken you are, they make you whole." She sounds distant, like she isn't really talking to him.

Jim studies his own arms. "I don't have a mark like that. Don't I have a soulmate?"

His mother seems to come back to herself, wrapping an arm around him and squeezing. "Of course you have a soulmate. Some people just don't get their marks until they're older. My aunt's didn't come in until she was seven."

"Oh," Jim says, tracing the stars on his mother's arm. Part of him wants to ask what happens when you *lose* your soulmate, but the rest of him knows that would be a bad idea. Besides, he thinks back to nights curling up on his mother's bed, letting her hold him as she cries, and thinks he already knows.

* * *

Jim is eleven when his brother leaves.

He knows something's up the instant Sam comes home, because he's smiling. Sam hardly ever smiles nowadays, especially when their mom's away. He hates Frank even more than Jim does.

"I found her," Sam bursts out, his eyes shining. "Oh, Jim, she's amazing."

Jim doesn't bother asking what he's talking about. His gaze drops to the mark on Sam's wrist, the swirl that he's always thought looks a little like a double helix. It's darker now, solid black instead of dark red, and Jim's seen enough marks over the years to know what that means.

"Congratulations," he mumbles, absently pulling his own sleeves down so they cover his hands.

Sam doesn't seem to be listening. "I gotta pack," he says, turning away from Jim and heading into the house.

"What do you mean, pack?" Jim asks, trailing at Sam's heels as he hurries up the stairs and into his room.

"She's just passing through," Sam explains as he grabs a bag and begins throwing stuff into it. "Her family lives in, like, Alaska or somewhere, but they said I can come with them."

"So you're leaving me here? Alone?" Jim swallows against the lump in his throat. It isn't fair. They're supposed to be a team.

"You'll be fine," Sam replies, but absently, like his mind isn't on the conversation. He disappears into the bathroom and returns with a few more items, throwing them haphazardly on top of the others before zipping up the bag and throwing it over his shoulder.

"Wait," Jim says, as Sam brushes past him. "What do I tell Mom? Or Frank?"

Sam pauses, his expression nothing less than blissful. "Tell them I found my soulmate."

Jim watches out the window as he leaves, wanting to run after him, but knowing it won't make any difference. Finally he turns away and rolls up the sleeve of his shirt, revealing the pale, untouched skin where his mark should be. He runs his fingers over his arm for a moment, then pulls his sleeve back down roughly. For the first time in his life he feels grateful that he doesn't have a soulmark.

If meeting your soulmate means abandoning the people who love you, then he doesn't want one.

* * *

Jim is twenty-two when his life changes forever.

He's just finishing his beer, mentally calculating how much more he can have without risking splattering himself all over the road as he rides home, when his attention is caught by an attractive female voice ordering enough for an entire table. A quick glance around the Braan blocking his view puts a face to the voice – an extremely hot woman wearing a Starfleet cadet's uniform. Her arms are bare to the elbows, exposing a reddish-brown mark in the shape of a musical note. No soulmate, then, at least not yet.

His night might be looking up. He's taken a lot of people home from this bar over the years, and Starfleet cadets are some of the easiest.

"That's a lot of drinks for one woman," he says, trying to get her attention.

She ignores him, her focus on the bartender. "And a shot of Jack straight up."

Seeing an opening, Jim jumps in. "Make that two, her shot's on me."

The woman rolls her eyes, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Her shot's on her," she corrects, before turning to him. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Jim shrugs off the dismissal and leans closer. "Don't you at least want to know my name before you completely reject me?" he asks. "For all you know I could be your soulmate."

She laughs. "You. My soulmate. Right." But he sees her gaze flick down to his jacket-covered arms.

Jim shrugs, grinning. "Fate works in mysterious ways." He slips off the barstool and comes over to her, trying his best to look earnest. "We could be meant for each other."

She rolls her eyes, but he can see the corners of her mouth twitch. "Go on, then," she says, holding out a hand. "Make my day."

Still grinning, Jim reaches out and takes her hand in his.

"See," she says, after a moment. "Nothing." She drops his hand and turns back to her drinks.

Jim shrugs again. "Well, I tried. I'm Jim, by the way. Jim Kirk."

He sees her lips twitch again. "Uhura."

"First or last name?"

"Just Uhura. And as fun as this is, I have places to be, so..."

"What's the rush?" Jim asks. "Just because I'm not your soulmate doesn't mean we can't have some fun together."

She rolls her eyes again and is about to respond when they're interrupted by a voice from behind Jim. "This *townie* bothering you?"

Jim turns to see a large man in a cadet's uniform glaring at him.

"It's fine," Uhura says. "I can handle him."

"I bet you can," Jim says, wagging his eyebrows.

"Mind your manners, farm boy," the giant spits, and Jim feels the first prickings of annoyance.

"Nobody asked *you*, Cupcake."

Things go downhill from there.

Jim always has enjoyed a good bar fight, but he has to admit it's more fun before Cupcake's friends start weighing in. He falls backwards onto a table just as a piercing whistle cuts through the air and everything stops.

"Outside, all of you, *now!*" barks a voice, and the cadets instantly disperse, leaving Jim alone and bruised.

"You all right, son?"

Jim blinks up to see a man staring down at him. He's older than the cadets, wearing a different uniform. An instructor, Jim guesses, from the way they all reacted to him. A million thoughts run through his mind, but all that comes out is, "You can whistle *really loud*."

* * *

The new guy exchanges a few words with the bartender, then disappears outside, probably to discipline his wayward cadets. Meanwhile, Jim picks himself up off the table, spends a few minutes treating his bloody nose, and decides it's probably time to leave.

He hasn't even made it to the door when his path is blocked by the same instructor guy, staring at him with an oddly intent expression. "I'm Captain Pike," he says.

"Good to meet you," Jim mutters, moving to dodge around him.

"Jim," Pike says, and Jim stops. "Can I call you Jim? I'd like to talk to you."

Jim raises his hands. "Hey, man, I didn't do anything. Your cadets jumped *me*."

Pike waves his words away. "I know that," he replies. "And they'll be punished for it. But right now I'm more interested in you."

When Jim doesn't respond, he gestures to a table nearby. "Five minutes," he says. "That's all."

Jim doesn't like the way Pike is looking at him. It's the look that his teachers always gave him before they told him he 'wasn't living up to his potential'. He doesn't need another lecture, especially from someone who doesn't even know him.

And yet he can't seem to just leave.

"Fine," he says, shrugging. "Five minutes."

He slumps into a chair, watching as Pike takes the seat opposite.

"I couldn't believe it when the bartender told me who you were," Pike says seriously, and Jim barely keeps from rolling his eyes. *Yeah, we're off to a great start.*

"And who am I, Captain Pike?" he asks, leaning back in his chair and kicking his feet out.

"Your father's son," Pike replies. "And your mother's."

That gets Jim's attention. He's gotten used to people always acting like he only has one parent who matters, and for some reason it's never the one who actually raised him. "You know my mom?"

Pike shakes his head. "Not personally. I was assigned the USS *Kelvin* for my dissertation. Talked to some of the survivors. I always admired your father, but after that I admired her, too. A lot of people don't survive losing their soulmate."

Jim doesn't respond, but his estimation of Pike goes up, just a tiny bit.

"That strength, that drive to do what has to be done, it's something your father had too. And it's something we could use more of in Starfleet." He leans forward, meeting Jim's gaze intently. "You should enlist."

Jim laughs. "Me. Enlist. Right. First of all, why? And second, have you seen my record?"

"Yes," Pike says simply. "Your aptitude tests are off the charts, and frankly some of the items on your arrest record were impressive, if, unfortunately, illegal. Did you really hack a weather satellite?"

Jim shrugs. "I wanted to see what Australia looked like."

"At thirteen."

"Do you have a *point*?"

Pike shrugs. "Just that your skills could be put to better use. As for why you should join..." He pauses. "Did you know that more than half of those in Starfleet meet their soulmates in the service? Your parents were two of them."

Jim laughs again, shaking his head. "Yeah, *that's* not going to happen."

"All right," Pike says, holding up his hands in surrender. "But with your abilities you could be an officer in four years. Have your own ship in eight. You could be great, Jim, if you wanted to."

Jim sighs. "Are we done?"

Pike nods slowly. "I'm done. Shuttle for new recruits leaves tomorrow from Riverside Shipyard. 0800 sharp." He stands, then pauses, leaning over the table. "Your father was captain of a starship for twelve minutes. He saved eight hundred lives, including your mother's. And yours. I dare you to do better."

* * *

That night Jim rides over to the George Kirk Memorial Shipyard, a place he hasn't been in months – has in fact, carefully avoided. There's a ship being built there, and he allows himself to imagine being aboard it, soaring through the stars.

Maybe he *is* meant for something better.

* * *

The shuttle is just about to leave when Jim arrives. He catches sight of Uhura and gives her a grin and a wink before dropping into one of the last available seats. Thankfully Cupcake and his friends seem to be elsewhere.

He's just strapping himself in when there's a commotion behind him. "I don't need a doctor, dammit, I am a doctor!"

Jim watches with interest as a scruffy, deranged-looking man is escorted to the seat beside him, ranting loudly about flying and death and the relationship between the two. He sits down with a thud and immediately brings out a flask, taking a long drink as the intercom announces that they're cleared for take-off.

"I may throw up on you," the man says abruptly, and Jim blinks at him.

"I, uh, I think these things are pretty safe," he replies, which starts the man off ranting again. *Jeez, and I thought I was negative.*

Still, it's entertainment, of a sort, and he can't keep himself from commenting when the man finally falls silent. "Okay, so you hate space, and flying, and danger.... Why are you joining Starfleet?" He's spent most of his life avoiding Starfleet, but even he knows that's basically their *raison d'être*.

The man glowers, but Jim has the sense it's more at the situation than at him. "Got nowhere else to go. My ex-wife took the whole damn planet in the divorce."

"Divorce?" Jim's mind skips over the word. He's never known anyone who got a *divorce*. "You mean she wasn't your soulmate?"

The guy snorts. "Don't tell me you believe all that crap."

Jim shrugs, pulling up his sleeve. "Wouldn't matter if I did."

The man looks at his bare arm, then gives him a considering look. "You're what, twenty? There's still time."

Jim shrugs again, not bothering to correct him. "Maybe," he says, pulling his sleeve back down. "But I doubt it."

He can't help but glance at the man's arm, still covered by his jacket. "So, was she?" he asks.

The man shakes his head, taking another swig from his flask. "Nah. Stupid, really. We met in high school, fell in love and decided to tell destiny to go screw itself. Everyone said we were crazy, but we made it work. For almost ten years we made it work." His eyes grow wet.

"What happened?"

"She met her soulmate. And I couldn't compete."

He takes another long pull from the flask, and Jim remembers being eleven years old, watching his brother leave without a second thought.

"This soulmate thing's a load of bullshit," he says, and the man barks a laugh.

"Can't argue with you there, kid." He holds out the flask, and Jim takes it. "Name's McCoy. Leonard McCoy."

"Jim Kirk," Jim replies, and drinks.

* * *

Jim's first few weeks at the academy are a little frantic. New classes, new people, a new way of life. It takes some getting used to.

When things finally calm down a little and he's sure he's not going to either flunk out or quit in frustration, he sends a message to his mother. *Hi, Mom. So, hey, funny story...*

He gets back a reply that amounts to 'Don't you *dare* get yourself killed', only with more tears. And swearing. Still, he's sure she'll come around eventually.

Contrary to all his beliefs, Jim finds himself actually enjoying the academy. The classes are just challenging enough to be interesting, and there are plenty of cadets of all genders and species willing to fool around a little before they meet their soulmate.

For the first few months he sticks to humans – he's all for adventure, but there weren't exactly a lot of aliens in Riverside, and for all he knows the cute purple woman in his Federation History class is from a species with caustic bodily fluids or a tendency to eat their mates.

Eventually, though, he starts branching out, and a whole new world opens up to him.

The first time he gets into trouble, he's in bed with an Andorian male. Thelen strokes the inside of his arm gently, his antennae twitching with interest. "You do not have a soulmark."

"Neither do you," Jim replies, because he's seen Thelen's arms and they're bare. (As is the rest of him.)

"Yes, I do." At Jim's look of confusion, his antennae begin twisting in earnest. "You expected it to be on my arm," he says, sounding annoyed. "Why do humans always assume everything works the way they are used to?"

He sits up and pulls one foot in towards him. "*Here* are my soulmarks," he says.

Looking closer, Jim can see three sets of twisty curves crossing Thelen's foot. Thelen points to them each in turn. "My future husband, and two wives."

"Huh," Jim says, his mind assimilating this new information and making connections. "So, hypothetically, are there any species that have their marks on their ass?"

In retrospect, the only reason he didn't get thrown out for that remark was that Thelen really, *really* wanted to have sex.

* * *

After that, Jim decides he should learn more about soulmarks. The stuff he learned in school all focused on humans, as did the little research he did when he was still young enough to care why he didn't have one.

The differences between species are vast, both in where and how a soulmark manifests. As Thelen showed him, Andorians' are on their feet, appearing once they become physically mature. Tellarites are like humans, born with a mark on their arm. Klingons have them on their chest, above their hearts, and Vulcans don't seem to have them at all, although they're so secretive about everything that no one is really certain.

(Jim does find one species that has their marks on the buttocks, but they aren't the type to be hanging around Starfleet Academy.)

There isn't much data on the percentage of each species without a soulmark, but it's always very low. Jim isn't surprised – he remembers looking up the human percentages. 5 percent at birth, decreasing steadily with age, with a big drop at puberty. By eighteen, only 0.04 percent of the population is unmarked. Jim has occasionally wondered if even those numbers might be inflated – after all, people who reach adulthood

without a mark have reason to hide it.

It takes a while for his own unmarked status to start filtering out. Starfleet may stand for tolerance and diplomacy, but it doesn't stop people from being dicks. Jim ignores it at first, but after he's put on punishment detail for punching a guy who suggested his parents just didn't love him enough, he comes up with a plan.

"So you're using your mark to screw with people?" McCoy says, after Jim has stopped by his dorm room with beer and outlined his brilliant plan. There's an odd kind of friendship; he never seems especially happy to see Jim, but he also never tells him to go away.

"Yup," Jim replies, lacing his fingers behind his head and showing off his new red bird. "Found this girl who does really great fake tattoos. I just change it every few weeks and no one will know what to think."

"You do realise you could just wear a cuff, right? Plenty of people cover their marks."

Jim shrugs, grinning. "Yeah, but where's the fun in that?"

* * *

Jim is twenty-five, and he really hates Spock.

Not that he's ever actually met the guy, but he's responsible for the bane of Jim's life, the *Kobayashi Maru* test. The test that, as far as Jim can tell, no one in the history of the academy has ever been able to beat. The rumour is that it's designed to be unbeatable, to teach them how to lose.

Jim plans to win.

His first two attempts at the test teach him that there's no way to beat the scenario with the parameters set. Therefore the only option left is to change the parameters.

Getting a copy of the code for the simulation isn't easy, and involves calling in more than a few favours. The hard part, though, is figuring out how to bypass it. He'll say one thing for this Spock guy, he's damn good with computers.

It takes a month of late nights and way too much caffeine, but eventually his work pays off. All he has to do is implant his patch to the simulation code, and he'll be the first cadet in history to beat the *Kobayashi Maru*.

As plans go, it's a great success. He just never really thought about what would happen *afterwards*.

* * *

"You're an idiot," Uhura says, rounding on him the second they pass through the doors to the test room.

"What?" Jim replies. "You can't tell me that wasn't awesome. I beat the unbeatable scenario!"

"Yeah, by *cheating*," Uhura crosses her arms.

Jim stares at her. "That's a little harsh, isn't it? I like to think of it as creative thinking."

"Yeah, well, you can be sure Spock's not going to see it that way. He could have you expelled for this."

Jim feels a chill down his spine. "He's not going to get me expelled," he says with more certainty than he feels.

Uhura looks at him almost pityingly, but all she says is, "I hope you're right."

"She's right, you know," McCoy says as they watch her walk away. "You are an idiot."

"Thanks, Bones," Jim sighs.

* * *

By the time he gets back to his dorm room, there's already a message on his terminal. There's going to be a hearing, to determine the consequences for his actions.

The date is tomorrow.

* * *

Jim tries to tell himself that it's just a formality, that once he gets a chance to explain, they'll see his side. He didn't *break* the rules, after all, just bent them a little. They can't expel him for that.

Right?

"James T. Kirk, step forward."

Okay, here goes nothing.

He makes his way to the podium, trying to look confident. The members of the academic council look down on him, some he recognises, a few he doesn't. None of them look sympathetic.

"Cadet Kirk," Admiral Barnett begins, "evidence has been submitted to this council, suggesting that you violated the ethical code of conduct pursuant to Regulation 17.3 of the Starfleet Code. Is there anything you care to say before we begin?"

This part, at least, he's prepared for. "Yes, I believe I have the right to face my accuser directly." At least he'll get to see the person that's trying to ruin his life.

He turns in time to see a man in black rise from the audience. Not just any man, either. A Vulcan. A very *hot* Vulcan who would be completely Jim's type if he weren't trying to get him expelled.

"Step forward, please," Barnett orders, and Jim watches as the Vulcan takes his place at the other podium. "This is Commander Spock," Barnett continues. "He's one of our most distinguished graduates. He's programmed the *Kobayashi Maru* exam for the last four years." Nothing that Jim didn't already know, but at least now he has a face to go with the name.

"Commander?" Barnett asks, and Jim tenses as Spock turns to look at him.

"Cadet Kirk," Spock begins, managing to make his name sound distasteful. "You somehow managed to install and activate a subroutine to the programming code, thereby changing the conditions of the test."

"Your point being?"

It's Barnett that answers. "In academic vernacular, you cheated."

There's that word again. Jim bites back the instinctive protest and turns to Spock. "Let me ask you something I think we all know the answer to. The test itself is a cheat, isn't it? You programmed it to be unwinnable."

"Your argument precludes the possibility of a no-win scenario."

"I don't believe in no-win scenarios," Jim shoots back.

"Then, not only did you violate the rules, you also failed to understand the principle lesson."

What, how to get everyone killed? "Please," he says with exaggerated politeness. "*Enlighten me.*"

"You of all people should know, Cadet Kirk. A Captain cannot cheat death."

The words leave him reeling for a moment, wondering if Spock really just said that. "I of all people," he repeats carefully.

"Your father, Lieutenant George Kirk, assumed command of his vessel before being killed in action, did he not?"

White-hot anger rushes through Jim's body. How *dare* this asshole use his father as some kind of trump card. For a second he can't even speak, just grip the podium until his knuckles turn white. "I think you just don't like the fact that I beat your test."

"Furthermore," Spock continues as if he hasn't spoken, "you have failed to divine the purpose of the test."

Jim grits his teeth. "Enlighten me again."

"The purpose is to experience fear. Fear in the face of certain death. To accept that fear, and maintain control of oneself and one's crew. This is a quality expected in every Starfleet captain."

Jim is just about to give the pointy-eared bastard a piece of his mind, expulsion or no expulsion, when he's interrupted by an aide handing something to Admiral Barnett. Barnett looks at it for a second, then stands, addressing the crowd.

"We've received a distress call from Vulcan. With our primary fleet engaged in the Laurentian system, I hereby order all cadets to report to Hangar One immediately. Dismissed."

Spock is on the move before Barnett has even finished speaking, leaving Jim staring after him in outrage. He may have hated Spock before, but that was the low-key hate of everyday annoyances like hangovers or early morning classes. This? This is *personal*.

* * *

"...Underhill, USS *Antares*, Vader, USS *Hood*. Welcome to Starfleet, Godspeed." The commander flicks his gaze over the crowd of cadets before turning away.

Jim blinks before turning to McCoy. "He didn't say my name." Without waiting for a response, he hurries forwards to catch up with the man. "Commander! Sir, you didn't call my name. Kirk, James T.?"

The commander checks his PADD and frowns. "Kirk... You're on academic suspension. That means you're grounded until the Academy board rules."

He turns away again, leaving Jim feeling like he's been punched in the stomach. The entire graduating class is going on this mission, and he'll be the only one left behind.

He wishes he'd never even heard of the *Kobayashi Maru*.

"The board'll rule in your favour," McCoy tells him. "Most likely." He glances around and adds, "Look, Jim, I gotta go."

Jim nods. McCoy, Leonard H., assigned to the *Enterprise*. "Yeah, get going," he says, forcing a smile. "Be safe."

McCoy heads off, and Jim very deliberately doesn't stare after him. Which is why he's completely blindsided when McCoy returns a few seconds later and begins dragging him towards the medical bay.

The time after McCoy injects him with the mud fleas vaccine is a little blurry. He mostly remembers feeling sick and sweaty and gross, and considering the consequences of throwing up all over McCoy's shoes. But he does remember his first glimpse of the *Enterprise*, and the utter awe that, just for a moment, blows all his symptoms away.

* * *

Jim awakens to the sound of the address system. He blinks at the ceiling for a moment, before everything comes back in a rush. The trial, the vaccine, McCoy injecting him with a sedative.... Then his mind picks up what the voice on the address system is actually saying, and he's instantly wide awake. *A lightning storm in space.*

His mother never liked to talk about the day he was born, the day his father died, but she did tell him that. *You were born in the middle of a storm.*

It's not a rescue mission.

The next few minutes are a rush of trying to get up to the bridge, to warn them all, but no one's listening to him. Pike's the captain, and Jim thinks, *yes, I can convince him*, but the pointy-eared bastard is there too and he's determined to make Jim look like an idiot *again*, and *there isn't time*.

But then Uhura backs him up, and Spock agrees, and Pike listens, and Jim thinks that maybe things might be okay.

And then they arrive at Vulcan.

The first images on screen are of a massacre. Jim was expecting an attack, a battle, but not this. Six Federation ships blasted to pieces, and one massive enemy ship with barely a scratch.

Jim thinks of the friends and classmates who were on those ships, and then tries not to think at all.

The enemy ship seems determined to take them down, too, but the final blow never comes. Instead Uhura reports they're being hailed.

* * *

Destroying the drill would be easier if they still had the explosives, but they make it work. He and Sulu make a good team, Jim thinks, right before something flies past them, falling straight down into the planet.

Shit. Whatever that is, it can't be good. Jim claws at his wrist comm. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. They just launched something at the planet, through the hole they just drilled. Do you copy, *Enterprise*?"

"Yes, sir," comes the response, followed by the sounds of frantic discussion.

Jim waits patiently for all of twenty seconds, then raises the comm again. "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Beam us outta here!"

"Locking on your signal, standby."

It's at that moment that the drill begins to move. Jim barely keeps his feet, but Sulu isn't as lucky. "Kirk!"

"Sulu!" Without stopping to think, Jim launches himself off the platform. Sulu saved his life, the least he can do is return the favour. Besides, they've already lost too many people today.

And for a while it's all falling and screaming and the ground coming up way too fast, and then they're slamming down on the transporter platform and he has never been so glad to be on solid ground.

"Thanks," Sulu tells him. Jim sees one hand go to his wrist and wonders if there's a black mark underneath the material, someone back home waiting for him to return.

"Clear the pad, I'm beaming to the surface," a voice orders, and Jim looks up to see Spock fastening a phaser to his belt.

"The surface of what?" Jim asks as he and Sulu climb painfully to their feet. "You mean you're going down there? Are you nuts?"

Spock ignores him, mounting the transporter platform and ordering, "Energise."

* * *

Jim may not like the guy, but the expression on Spock's face when he beams up from Vulcan, arm outstretched towards someone who isn't there, is something he'll never forget.

They wait until the very last moment, save as many as they can, but they can't save the planet. Vulcan crumbles, and the *Enterprise* warps away from the wreckage.

* * *

In retrospect, Jim thinks, if he'd known arguing with Spock would end up with him waking up in an escape pod, he might have done things

differently. Still, it's too late now. "Computer, where am I?"

"Location: Delta Vega. Class-M planet. Unsafe. There is a Starfleet outpost fourteen kilometres to the north-west. Remain in your pod until the authorities have been summoned."

"Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me."

Ignoring the order to stay where he is, Jim cracks open the escape pod and climbs out. All around him is white; ice and snow as far as the eye can see. *Damn that pointy-eared bastard!*

With nothing better to do, he uses his communicator to find north-west and starts walking. After a few minutes, to take his mind off the cold, he begins to make up a makeshift log. "Stardate 2258.42... 4... whatever. *Acting Captain* Spock has marooned me on Delta Vega, which I believe to be a violation of security protocol 49.09, covering the treatment of prisoners aboard a starship."

It's at this point that his rant is interrupted by a growl, and he turns to see a furry beast with massive teeth heading straight for him. "Aaagh!" Terror rushes through him, and he drops the communicator and runs.

He sprints flat out, but he's sure the beast is gaining on him. He chances a glance over his shoulder in time to see it attacked and thrown aside by a much bigger creature. Which then proceeds to chase him. *Seriously, how is this my life?*

He tumbles down a hill with the new creature still in quick pursuit. There's a cave at the bottom and he heads for it, hoping against hope that the creature won't fit, or that there'll at least be something inside he can use to defend himself.

His hope is in vain. He barely makes it into the cave before the creature grabs him by an ankle, yanking him towards it. "Yaaargh!" Of all the ways he expected to die, 'eaten by a monster' wasn't even in the top ten.

He's hit with a wave of foetid breath and a vision of way too many teeth before he's suddenly dropped to the ground. He scrambles backwards as a human-shaped being in a fur coat comes into view, waving a flaming torch at the monster.

There's a very brief battle, mostly involving the brandishing of naked flames, before the creature turns and runs. Jim's rescuer watches it go, then turns to him, revealing himself to be an elderly male Vulcan. Definitely not what he expected to find here, and Jim's heart aches a little as he wonders if the Vulcan is aware of what happened to the rest of his species.

The Vulcan studies him for a long moment, then says in a tone of almost wonder, "James T. Kirk."

If Jim didn't currently hurt in about six different places, he'd really think he was dreaming. "Excuse me?" he asks, just as the Vulcan adds, "How did you find me?"

"How do you know my name?" Jim counters. One of *many* questions he wants to ask, but it'll do for now.

The Vulcan holds up one hand in a salute. "I have been, and always shall be, your friend."

He says it like it's supposed to mean something. Jim kind of hates to let him down, but all he feels is confusion. "What? Look, I'm sorry, but *I don't know you.*"

"I am Spock," the Vulcan says.

And, yep, this is officially the most surreal experience of his life. "Bullshit."

* * *

The old Vulcan – Future Spock, apparently – leads him back to a campfire he's built in the cave. Jim can't help wondering if he hit his head at some point and this is just a really realistic hallucination.

Especially when the Vulcan looks at him with soft eyes that, Jim guesses, do look a little like Spock's and says, "It is remarkably pleasing to see you again, old friend. Especially after the events of today."

He looks at Jim like he knows him, which is weird because his words say the exact opposite. "Look, I appreciate what you did for me, but if you *were* Spock you would know we're not friends. At all. You *hate* me. You marooned me here for mutiny."

Spock blinks owlishly at him. "Mutiny? You are not the captain?"

And see, this *keeps getting weirder*. "No," Jim replies slowly, "*you're* the captain. Pike was taken hostage."

"By Nero."

The name sends a chill down Jim's spine. "What do you know about him?"

"He is a particularly troubled Romulan." Spock stands and moves over to him. "Please, allow me. It will be easier."

He reaches for Jim's face and Jim moves away instinctively, remembering what happened the last time he let a Vulcan touch him. "What are you doing?"

"Our minds. One and together." Which doesn't mean anything to Jim, but as long as he's not going to get knocked out again he doesn't really care. He stands still and lets Spock place his fingers on his face and then...

It's like an explosion in his mind, and he nearly staggers under the onslaught of emotion. Images begin to fly by, creating a story. How Spock

really is from the future. Romulus in danger and something called red matter, and how angry Nero was when he failed. Both him and Nero pulled back in time through a wormhole, Nero waiting twenty-five years for him to arrive, marooning him on this rock and destroying Vulcan because he wanted Spock to feel his pain. Pain and grief like he's never known, and guilt, so much guilt for not being fast enough to save them. *Billions of lives lost because of me, Jim. Because I failed.*

And then it's over. Jim jerks away, gasping as tears spill down his face. He's never felt anything like that, and for a moment he can't even breathe. *Is this how Spock feels?*

"Forgive me," Spock says. "Emotional transference is an effect of the mind meld."

Mind meld. Is that what you call it? Jim glances back at him, wiping his eyes. "So you do feel."

"Yes."

Jim takes a breath and straightens up. "Going back in time, you changed all our lives." That was one of the emotions that came through clearly – the sense that things were supposed to be different.

Spock doesn't answer him. "Jim, we must go," he says. "There is a Starfleet outpost not far from here."

"Wait," Jim says. "That other world. The one you came from." He pauses, trying to sort through the millions of questions in his mind. 'Did I have a soulmate?' leaps to mind, but he learned a long time ago not to ask questions unless he's sure he wants to know the answer. Instead, he goes with his second choice, "Did I know my father?"

"Yes," Spock says. "You often spoke of him as being your inspiration for joining Starfleet. He proudly lived to see you become captain of the *Enterprise*."

"Captain? Of the *Enterprise*?"

The idea is kind of laughable, but Spock just nods. "A ship we must return you to as soon as possible." He raises his hood and adds, "If you are ready, I suggest we leave at once."

* * *

It hurts to leave behind the version of Spock that actually likes him, but Jim hopes they'll meet again someday. Right now, though, it's the other Spock he has to worry about.

Despite his fears, he and Scotty make back it to the *Enterprise* in one piece, though Scotty narrowly avoids being minced by a water turbine. It doesn't take long for security to catch up to them, and then they're on their way to the bridge. *Showtime*.

He still isn't quite sure how he's going to emotionally compromise Spock, but he's always been the kind of person who can piss someone off just by saying hello, so he figures he'll try anger.

Spock the Younger is, of course, waiting for them when they reach the bridge, and he doesn't look pleased. Jim studies him, looking for signs of the pain and desolation he felt from the other Spock. He's willing to believe it's there, but it certainly isn't obvious.

"Who are you?" Spock asks Scotty.

"I'm with him." Scotty replies, gesturing at Jim.

"He's with me." Jim agrees.

Spock glares at both of them. "We're travelling at warp speed. How did you manage to beam aboard this ship?"

Jim shrugs. "You're the genius, you figure it out."

"As Acting Captain of this vessel, I order you to answer the question."

"Well I'm not telling, *Acting Captain*." Spock stiffens minutely, and Jim decides to press his advantage. "What, now, that doesn't frustrate you, does it? My lack of cooperation. That doesn't make you angry."

Spock narrows his eyes before abruptly turning to Scotty. "Are you a member of Starfleet?"

"I.. um.. yes," Scotty stammers, still dripping water all over the bridge. "Can I get a towel, please?"

Spock ignores the question. "Under penalty of court martial, I order you to explain to me how you were able to beam aboard this ship while moving at warp."

Scotty takes a breath. "Well..."

"Don't answer him," Jim interrupts.

"You will answer me," Spock counters.

Scotty glances between them, looking nervous. "I'd rather not take sides."

"What is it with you, Spock?" Jim asks loudly, trying to get Spock's attention back on him. "Your planet was just destroyed, your mother murdered, and you're not even upset."

"If you're presuming that these experiences in any way impede my ability to command this ship, you are mistaken," Spock tells him.

"And yet you were the one who said fear was necessary for command," Jim points out. "Did you see his ship? Do you see what he did?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"So, are you afraid or aren't you?"

He swears he sees a twitch in Spock's eye. "I will not allow you to lecture me about the merits of emotion."

"Then why don't you stop me?" Jim asks, encroaching on Spock's physical space until their faces are inches apart.

"Step away from me, Mister-"

Jim interrupts him, deciding to go for the jugular. "What is it like not to feel anger or heartbreak or the need to stop at nothing to avenge the death of the woman who gave birth to you?"

Spock takes a sharp breath. "Back away from me..."

"You feel nothing!" Jim all-but-spits. "It must not even compute for you! You *never* loved her!"

Spock *snaps*. With a cry of rage, he charges forward and clobbers Jim. Jim tries to fight back, but it's like hitting iron. Spock smacks him around a few times before throwing him down onto the navigation console and attempting to choke the life out of him.

Also not a way I expected to die... As Spock's fingers wrap around his neck, Jim feels an odd rush of warmth flow through him, like the sun coming out on a cloudy day. Suddenly the bridge seems brighter, the colours sharper, as though he's seeing them for the first time.

He doesn't have a chance to process the feeling, however, before Spock releases him and stumbles backwards, the anger in his eyes replaced with shock, then guilt.

"You..." he whispers, looking from Jim to his hand and back. "What have I done?"

Jim wants to ask what he means, but Spock turns away before he can. "I am no longer fit for duty," he says quietly. "I hereby relinquish my command, based on the fact that I have been emotionally compromised. Please note the time and date in the ship's log."

He leaves the bridge without looking back.

"I like this ship!" Scotty says, into the silence that follows. "You know, it's exciting."

Jim picks himself up, rubbing at the bruises on his throat and trying to keep from picturing the devastation in Spock's eyes. The weird feeling from before is gone, but he still feels kind of off-balance, and the colours of the bridge still feel too bright.

"Well, congratulations, Jim," McCoy says sarcastically. "Now we've got no captain and no Goddamn first officer to replace him."

"Yeah, we do," Jim corrects.

"What?" McCoy asks, as Jim crosses to the captain's chair and sits down.

Sulu gestures with a shoulder. "Pike made *him* first officer."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Thanks for the support," Jim mutters. *Seriously, old man, I hope you're right about this.*

"I sure hope you know what you're doing, *Captain*," Uhura tells him, before returning to her station in a huff.

"So do I," Jim sighs as he toggles the intercom. "Attention crew of the *Enterprise*, this is James Kirk. Mister Spock has resigned commission and advanced me to Acting Captain. I know you were all expecting to regroup with fleet, but I'm ordering a pursuit course of the enemy ship to Earth. I want all departments at battle stations and ready in ten minutes. Either we're going down, or they are. Kirk out."

* * *

Jim listens to the crew argue over strategy, occasionally jumping in with a comment of his own, but part of his mind keeps going back to Spock. So much so that when Spock appears back on the bridge just as Chekov is outlining a plan to hide out behind one of Saturn's moons, Jim has a brief moment of paranoia that he somehow summoned him.

"Mister Chekov is correct," Spock says. "I can confirm his telemetry." He seems completely calm and composed, but his eyes still hold faint hints of guilt. "If Mister Sulu is able to manoeuvre us into position, I can beam aboard Nero's ship, steal back the device, and if possible, bring back Captain Pike."

Jim frowns. "I won't allow you to do that, Mister Spock." There've been too many Vulcans lost today, and he isn't about to let Spock be one of them.

"Romulans and Vulcans share a common ancestry," Spock tells him. "Our cultural similarities will make it easier for me to access the ship's computer to locate the device." He pauses, then adds quietly, "Also, my mother was human, which makes Earth the only home I have left."

The words make Jim's heart ache. He knows he's doing the right thing, but he can't help but wish there'd been a better way to get here. He's

never been the kind of guy to kick a man when he's down. It doesn't feel right.

"Fine," he says. "But I'm coming with you."

Spock nods resignedly. "I would cite regulation, but I know that you will simply ignore it."

"See, we are getting to know each other," Jim says, clapping him on the shoulder. For a second the bridge looks too bright again, and he drops his hand and shakes his head before heading off to get ready.

* * *

A short while later, they're in position above Titan and ready to beam over to the enemy ship. Uhura steps forwards and hugs Spock, and Jim blinks in amazement when Spock reacts by hugging her back instead of pushing her away.

"I will be back," Spock tells her quietly.

"You better be," she replies, before releasing him. "I'll be monitoring your frequency."

"Thank you, Nyota."

Huh, Jim thinks. Well, that explains why she's been looking at him like he kicked her favourite puppy. He didn't know they even knew each other, much less that they were... friends. He finds himself staring at Spock as she steps back, wondering if they're soulmates. Do Vulcans even have soulmates?

"Okey-dokey then," Scotty says, pulling Jim's thoughts back to the task at hand. "If there's any common sense in the design of the enemy ship, I should be putting you somewhere in the cargo bay. There shouldn't be a soul in sight."

Jim nods, readying himself. "Energise."

The good news is they do end up in the cargo bay. The bad news is it isn't empty. The Romulans notice them at once, and he and Spock quickly take cover from the barrage of phaser fire before firing back.

One of the Romulans falls to the ground nearby, and Jim sees Spock glance over at him. "Go ahead," he says. "I'll cover you."

"Are you certain?" Spock asks.

"Yeah, I got this."

Jim bobs up over their makeshift shelter and continues firing as Spock approaches the Romulan. After a moment he ducks down again and sees Spock pulling his hand back from the Romulan's face. "Do you know where the device is?" he asks.

Spock nods. "And Captain Pike." He readies his phaser and nods to the right. "Follow me."

They make a good team, Jim thinks, as Spock leads them through the corridors to the shuttle bay, where a small ship is docked. Jim recognises it as the one from Old Spock's memories.

"I foresee a complication," Spock says as they step inside. "The design of this ship is far more advanced than I anticipated."

At his voice, the console whirs to life. "Voice print and face recognition analysis enabled. Welcome back, Ambassador Spock."

"Wow, that's weird," Jim says, trying to keep a straight face.

Spock glances sidelong at him before asking, "Computer, what is your manufacturing origin?"

"Stardate 2387.274. Commissioned by the Vulcan Science Academy."

"It appears that you have been keeping important information from me," Spock says.

Yeah, blame the other you, Jim thinks. "You'll be able to fly this thing, right?" he says out loud.

"Something tells me I already have."

"Good luck," Jim tells him, and turns to leave.

"Jim," Spock says, and Jim turns back. "The statistical likelihood that our plan will succeed is less than four-point-three percent."

"It'll work," Jim says.

Spock straightens, meeting his eyes squarely. "In case I do not return, I believe I should inform you-"

Jim cuts him off. "Spock. *It'll work.*"

Spock closes his mouth and nods, and Jim gives him a quick smile before leaving to find Pike.

* * *

By the time he and Spock reach the bridge of the *Enterprise*, the *Narada* is already in its death throes.

"Captain," Chekov reports, "the enemy ship is losing power. Their shields are down, sir."

"Hail them now," Jim orders.

He steps forward as Nero appears on the viewscreen.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the USS *Enterprise*. Your ship is compromised. Your too close to the singularity to provide assistance, which we *will* provide."

He can hear murmurs around the bridge, and even Spock takes a step closer to him and asks in an undertone, "Captain, what are you doing?"

"Showing them compassion may be the only way to earn peace with Romulus," Jim tells him, then grins. "It's logic, Spock. I thought you'd like that."

"No, not really," Spock replies, a hint of the old anger in his eyes. "Not this time."

It proves to be a moot point. "I would rather suffer the end of Romulus a thousand times," Nero spits. "I would rather die in agony than accept assistance from *you*."

Well, I tried. "You got it," Jim tells him, before turning to Sulu. "Arm phasers, fire everything we got."

He sees a grim smile cross Sulu's face. "Yes, sir."

Jim tries not to be vindictive, but seeing the *Narada* disappear into the black hole is immensely satisfying. *That's for Vulcan, and Spock's mom, and everyone else Nero killed. And Dad, I don't know if you're out there, but that was for you too.*

* * *

Of course, it isn't that simple. They have to jettison the warp core to get away, which means it'll be three weeks before they reach the nearest starbase, and entire months before they're even in the vicinity of home.

With Pike still in sickbay and Spock busy assisting the Vulcan refugees, Jim finds himself rushed off his feet. Between repairs, communications with Starfleet and the rest of the fleet, and attempting to organise several hundred people into some semblance of order, he barely has time to sleep. Despite his good intentions, his plans of tracking Spock down and apologising for what he said end up falling by the wayside.

In fact it's Spock that ends up tracking *him* down. Jim has just gotten off another twelve-hour shift, intending to stuff down a ration pack and go straight to bed, when Spock shows up at his door.

"Captain," he says, inclining his head in greeting. "May I come in?"

Despite his exhaustion, something uncurls in Jim at the sight. "Yeah, sure," he says, gesturing in the general direction of his quarters. "You know you don't have to call me that, right?"

Spock nods slowly as he steps inside, letting the door slide closed behind him. "Jim," he says. "I have come to apologise."

Jim waves him off. "If you mean the bridge thing, forget it. I provoked you. I'm the one who should be sorry." He hesitates, then adds, "You know I didn't really mean any of that stuff I said, right?"

"I know that now," Spock replies, which doesn't exactly make him feel better. "And I am aware that your purpose was to anger me, but that does not excuse what I did to you. To injure one's soulmate is nigh unforgivable."

Jim's brain stutters to a halt. "Uh," he says uneasily, "I appreciate the thought, but I think you've made a mistake. I'm not your soulmate."

"I am not mistaken," Spock tells him, a faint line appearing between his eyes. "I felt it when we... touched."

At another time Spock's awkwardness might be amusing, but right now Jim's still trying to get his brain to work. "What about Uhura?" he asks, remembering the scene in the transporter room. "Isn't she your soulmate?"

Spock looks confused. "Nyota and I are friends, nothing more. She is destined for another." He moves forwards, reaching out a hand. "Jim, I realise this may be difficult to accept, but—"

"No, you don't understand," Jim interrupts. "I *can't* be your soulmate. I don't have a mark."

"Neither do I," Spock says simply. "Neither did my mother. Vulcans do not require physical symbols to find our mates."

Jim stares at him, feeling like his world has just tilted on its side. Suddenly it's hard to breathe, as if the room is too small. "I can't do this," he says. "You need to leave."

"Jim?"

Jim clenches his hands into fists. "Please, Spock."

Spock looks for a moment as if he's going to argue, but all he says is, "Very well."

Once he's gone, Jim grips the back of a chair and tries to slow his breathing before jerking up his left sleeve. He stopped using the fakes months ago, but he put one on the day of the *Kobayashi Maru*, for old times' sake, and the red heart on his arm seems almost to be mocking

him.

Grimacing, he turns and heads into the bathroom. A few minutes of vigorous scrubbing later, his skin is red and raw, but the fake is gone and his arm is as bare as it's always been. *A soulmate. Me.*

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Unbidden, Jim's mind goes to the other Spock. The meld convinced him that what he said about them being friends was true, but soulmates? That's on a whole other level. Besides, he doesn't feel any different. Shouldn't he feel it, if he has a soulmate?

Couldn't Spock be wrong? But he seemed so certain...

He leaves the bathroom and crosses to the computer, where he drops into a seat and begins searching for information on Vulcan soulmates. There isn't much – most of the information he finds doesn't seem certain they even exist. And the stuff about human soulmates mostly talk about the marks, and the changes they go through when the soulmates first touch. Or they talk about some vague feeling of rightness, which Jim figures must be undefinable because no one bothers to actually describe it.

Although, it hits him then, he *did* feel something when he and Spock first touched. That strange warmth that he thought was a side effect of being choked. Could that be the feeling they're going on about?

He taps his fingers on the desk for a moment, then switches over to the comm system and types in a code. There's a pause before the call connects and a familiar face appears. "Jim? Is that you? Thank God you're okay."

Jim smiles tiredly. "Hey, Mom."

She's still in her uniform, greying hair tied back in a ponytail, and Jim feels a pang of longing for the days when he could crawl into her lap and have her make everything okay.

He has to reassure her about four times that, 'yes, I'm fine, no, you don't have to worry', before he can get to the reason for his call. "Mom, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she replies. "What's up?"

"What did it feel like when you met Dad?"

A familiar look of pain crosses her face, and he blurts, "You don't have to answer."

"No," she says. "I want to." She seems to gather her thoughts, before adding, "You know, the first time I saw him, I didn't think he was anything special. Just another face in the crowd. But when we touched... it was like the sun came out. Like I'd been living in darkness all my life and finally stepped out into the light. I knew, even before I saw his mark, that he was the one." She smiles wanly. "Does that help?"

"Uh," Jim says. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good," she replies, then, "Jim, is there a reason you're asking about this?" Her eyes widen. "Did you find your soulmate?"

"No!" Jim blurts, then grimaces. "Maybe. It's complicated."

"Love always is," she tells him. "But it's worth it." She studies him for a moment, then adds, "Something else is bothering you. I can tell."

Jim bites his lip, glancing down at the desk. "If you could go back, make it so you never met Dad, would you do it?"

"No," she says instantly.

"But it'd save you so much pain."

"Yes, but I wouldn't have you. Or your brother." She sighs. "Jim, look at me." He does so reluctantly. "I'm not going to lie to you. Losing your father nearly killed me. Even now there are days when I can barely breathe from missing him. But if I could do it all over again, even knowing how it would end, I'd make exactly the same choices."

"Really?"

"In a heartbeat." She clenches her hands together. "Look, Jim, I can't tell you what to do, but if this person is your soulmate, you shouldn't give up on that because it might hurt."

"I guess," Jim mumbles. "Thanks, Mom."

She smiles. "That's what I'm here for."

* * *

The next day Jim is still trying to figure out what to do about The Spock Situation, as he's christened it in his mind, when he enters the mess hall for a late breakfast to see Uhura sitting at a table in the corner, reading a PADD.

Without really thinking about it, he dials up toast and coffee at the synthesiser, then heads over, dropping down in the seat opposite. "You and Spock are friends, right?"

"Good morning, Kirk," Uhura says pointedly, laying down her PADD. "And yes, we are. For about a year now."

"What kind of person is he?"

"Spock?" Her expression softens slightly. "He's great. Smart, disciplined, kind... I mean, maybe not to *you*, but that's to be expected given you pretty much stomped all over his sore spots."

The words make Jim's stomach twist. "I didn't enjoy it, you know," he says quietly, tearing his toast into pieces.

"I know," she says, and there's something close to understanding in her eyes. "I'm just saying that he isn't usually like that. He's one of the most good-hearted and non-violent people I know. What he did to you really shook him."

"Yeah," Jim says. "He told me." He eats a few scraps of toast while he tries to figure out how to word his next question. "Did you and he ever..."

"What? Date? Screw?" He winces at the bluntness in her tone. "No. He was waiting for his soulmate, which I'm obviously not."

Jim blinks at her. "Obviously?"

She rolls her eyes. "Look, *I know*, all right? Spock told me the the two of you are soulmates, so you can drop this whole innocent routine."

"He did?"

She shrugs. "Like you said, we're friends. I think he just wanted to talk to someone about it." She studies him for a moment. "He said you didn't react well. Told him to go away."

"He surprised me! This wasn't really something I planned for." Jim reaches for his cup of coffee.

"Having a Vulcan soulmate or having a soulmate at all?"

Jim pauses with the cup halfway to his mouth, suddenly very glad that he didn't have the chance to take a sip. "What- you- *how*?"

Uhura's gaze is far too knowing. "I did the research. Vulcans don't have soulmarks, so it stands to reason their soulmates wouldn't either. And I remember back at the academy no one could agree on what your mark was, almost like it kept changing. Like it *wasn't real*."

"Huh," Jim says after a moment. "Remind me never to play poker with you."

He takes a few sips of coffee while Uhura spears bits of fruit with her fork. "Were you surprised?" he asks. "I mean, when he told you?"

She shrugs. "At first I was, but the more I thought about it the more it made sense. He was always kind of fascinated by you, even back when you were just the brat who cheated on his test." She pops a piece of fruit into her mouth, chews, and swallows. "And frankly the speed with which he went from wanting to kill you to willing to risk his life on your insane plan makes a *lot* more sense this way."

She finishes the last of her fruit and checks the time. "I'd love to talk more, but I'm on shift in five minutes." She stands, then pauses for a moment, looking at him. "Look, you think this is a shock to you, but consider how Spock feels. He's just lost *everything*. I've tried to be there for him, and I'll continue to be, but you're his soulmate. He needs *you*."

She leaves before Jim can think up a response. He stares at his plate, his coffee growing cold as he thinks about her words. Spock *needs* him. No one has ever needed him before.

"The person who makes you whole," he murmurs, before grabbing his tray and heading over to the recycler. He has to talk to Spock.

* * *

It doesn't take long to find Spock. He's in the same place he's been for the past few days – watching over their Vulcan passengers in sickbay. When Jim finds him he's in the process of melding with a young Vulcan boy, his eyes closed and an expression of deep concentration on his face.

Jim feels an odd rush of emotion at the sight and is surprised when Spock's eyes open suddenly, looking right at him. He meets Jim's eyes for a long moment, then turns away, his hand dropping from the boy's face as they exchange a few words in Vulcan. Jim doesn't know what they're saying, but the boy's answers must satisfy Spock, as he leaves his side and comes over to Jim.

"What was that about?" Jim asks, watching as the boy climbs down from the bed and crosses to a group of children clustered around a Vulcan man who appears to be reading them a story.

"The loss of personal and global bonds has taken a toll on all Vulcans," Spock explains. "Adults are able to shield against the worst of the pain, but many of the children do not have sufficient strength or knowledge, so we must assist them."

"Oh," Jim says. Then, "Isn't that draining?"

"Yes," Spock says simply. "But we do what we must."

Jim takes a moment to study him, really study him, and feels his heart clench. Spock looks completely and utterly exhausted. "When's the last time you slept?" he asks. "Or ate?"

Spock blinks. "I ingested a ration pack yesterday evening. As for sleep..." A line appears between his eyebrows. "I am not certain."

The words give Jim a rush of exasperated affection, accompanied by the disturbing thought that this must be what it feels like to be McCoy. "Come on," he says, taking Spock's arm gently. "You need to rest."

Spock glances around at the sickbay. "But-

"It's not going to do anyone any good if you collapse from exhaustion." Yep, definitely McCoy. He needs to get out of here.

Still holding Spock's arm, he manoeuvres them both out of sickbay and down the corridor to the turbolift. Once he's sure Spock's actually going to accompany him, he lets go, but stays at his side the whole way to Spock's quarters.

Spock seems mildly confused when Jim follows him into his quarters, but he doesn't actually object. It's pretty basic, as cabins go, with no pictures or anything, and a lot of stuff still in boxes, but then Jim supposes he hasn't exactly had a lot of time to decorate.

"I withdrew my complaint regarding the *Kobayashi Maru*," Spock says abruptly, and Jim turns to look at him. "If it matters, you are officially no longer on academic probation."

"Oh." He'd almost forgotten. "Yeah, I guess that'd be some kind of conflict of interest now, right? What with us being soulmates and all."

Spock stiffens. "That is not why I-

Jim raises a hand, cutting him off. "No, I know. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"In actual fact," Spock tells him, "I decided that while your solution may have been unorthodox, your comments were not entirely without merit."

"Really?"

Spock nods. "If anyone were capable of beating a real life no-win scenario, I feel certain it would be you."

Jim smiles. "Thanks, Spock. Now get some rest before I sic McCoy on you."

Spock's gaze travels to the bed, and for a moment he seems to hesitate.

"Something wrong?"

Spock turns away, busying himself with pulling sleep clothes out of a drawer. "Sleep has become... difficult of late."

Jim swallows, remembering Uhura's words. *He needs you*. "Would it... would it help if I stayed?"

Spock turns to look at him, a bundle of clothing in his arms. "You would do that?"

"Yeah," Jim says. "I mean, I have stuff to do so I can't promise to stay the whole time, but I can stay until you fall asleep. I mean, if it'd help."

Spock stares at him a moment longer, then says, "Yes, I believe it would."

Jim nods. "Okay, then."

He waits while Spock disappears into the bathroom, only to return dressed in black sleep pants and a black t-shirt. Jim catches himself staring at the way it outlines Spock's chest and quickly looks away, his cheeks warm. "So, how do you want to do this?"

He pulls a chair up to the side of the bed as Spock climbs under the covers. "Is this okay, or...?"

Spock's voice is barely audible as he says, "Perhaps if you were to touch me."

Jim reaches out and gently lays a hand on his head. "Like this?"

"Hmm."

Spock's hair is warm and soft, and Jim finds himself beginning to stroke his fingers through it. It's strange, they're barely touching and yet somehow it feels more intimate than any sex he's ever had.

He can tell when Spock finally falls asleep, but he stays there stroking his hair for long minutes, enjoying the feeling of being able to help someone. His soulmate.

He still isn't sure he's willing to accept the word, but right now it doesn't matter. It's enough just to be here.

He gives Spock's hair a final comb, before reluctantly leaving to continue his duties.

* * *

He takes a shift on the bridge and then gets dragged into a discussion with Scotty about the engines, so it's well into Gamma shift by the time he returns to his quarters. He stares at the door for a long moment, then turns and heads down the corridor to another, different door.

He's afraid Spock will be out or asleep or something, but the door slides open almost immediately. Spock is dressed back in his uniform, looking much better than the last time Jim saw him. "Jim," he greets warmly.

"Spock," Jim replies. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Nothing that cannot wait. I was merely completing some paperwork." Spock moves aside so that Jim can enter. "Please, come in."

Jim does so. "How're you feeling?" he asks.

"Better," Spock replies. "Your assistance was appreciated."

"Any time," Jim says, and means it. "So, uh, I feel like we should talk."

"Indeed," Spock says.

Jim scratches the back of his head. "Except, well, I'm not really all that good at talking, so instead I'm gonna do this." And before he can talk himself out of it he takes a few quick steps forwards and kisses Spock.

It takes a second, but then Spock kisses back, his hands coming to rest on Jim's sides. Jim has kissed a lot of people over the years, but this still blows them all away.

It isn't long before the clothes start coming off, and Jim can't help but wonder if soulmate sex is better than regular sex. Which would be fine if it didn't then lead to other thoughts about soulmates and pain and death, causing him to abruptly lose momentum just as he's about to get Spock's pants off.

"We do not have to do this if you do not want to," Spock says, and Jim sighs.

"I do want to," he says. "I don't think I've wanted anything more."

"And that frightens you."

Jim huffs a laugh. "It terrifies me."

"Why?"

"Because. What if this doesn't work out? Or worse, what if it does and something happens and I spend the rest of my life trying to get over you? I've seen what losing a soulmate can do to someone. My mom did her best, but it's like when my dad died he took a piece of her with him. I don't want that to happen to me."

"Statistically speaking, you would be far more likely to die before I do," Spock tells him.

"Yeah, well, I don't want it to happen to you either."

"Neither do I," Spock admits. "I do understand your concerns, Jim. However, in this matter I believe the benefits outweigh the costs." He finds Jim's hands, taking them in his own. "My father told me that, as painful as it was to lose my mother, it would have been immeasurably worse never to have had her."

Jim manages a smile. "My mom said the same thing."

"Then the question becomes whether we trust our parents."

"In general, or about this?" Jim takes in a shaky breath, resting his forehead on Spock's shoulder. He can feel the warmth and affection and need coming through Spock's touch and it makes him ache.

"Okay," he says, pulling back enough to meet Spock's eyes. "Let's do this thing."

Spock stares at him. "You are certain?"

"Yeah." He grins and adds, "Leaping into things without looking always worked for me before. Why stop now?"

"That is faulty logic," Spock tells him, but there's a faint smile on his face.

"Probably," Jim agrees, and kisses him.

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