Switch

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Summary

The life and times of Leonard H. McCoy MD/PhD … If Leonard McCoy's life could get any fucking weirder, it would be … Jesus, he didn't even want to think what that could possibly mean, because it's already been too fucking weird to make any kind of rational sense. A Starfleet Academy story, set in the ST:XI universe.

Notes

If it's all different from the beginning of the ST:XI, why wouldn't it be different? A Starfleet Academy story, set in the ST:XI universe.
Part I

Chapter Notes

Part I covers Year 1 of the Academy, through Chapter 17. It’s ~146 pages long.

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When it first started happening, he had almost convinced himself that he was hallucinating from too much booze, or too little sleep, or both.

As time went on and it still kept happening, he’d decided that it was a sign of an incipient nervous breakdown, the rational veneer that he’d been clinging to by a freakin’ thread since his father died and his life went to total shit, sliding right the fuck off under the pressure of wanting something that he was never going to get. It was sublimated desire, refracted through an oddly chaste dream, like a memory of all the good parts of monogamy, without the really good parts, goddamnit.

But now that it’d been four nights without Jim Kirk sneaking into his bed to sleep, he was truly afraid that he was going to crack right the fuck up.

Because how the hell did it get to the point where he can’t fuckin’ sleep without Kirk, when all Kirk has ever fuckin’ done was sleep with him?

If Leonard McCoy’s life could get any fucking weirder, it would be … Jesus, he didn’t even want to think what that could possibly mean, because it’d already been too fucking weird to make any kind of rational sense. Because, really. He will not get any kind of sleep tonight again, if Jim doesn’t show up. And bitter experience -- does he have any other kind? -- has proven that a Leonard McCoy who hasn’t slept more than an hour or two out of closing in on 96 hours is a fuckin’ psychotic nightmare.

And he has the residency write-ups to back him the fuck up on that.

Chapter 1

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It wasn’t that he didn’t want to fuck Kirk, and there was none of that ‘we’ll fuck up the friendship’ bullshit about doing it, as far as he was concerned.

Well. There probably would be, but that wasn’t what was stopping him.

First up, it was him. He hadn’t exactly been in the mood for fucking around after his marriage had imploded.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t gone through his periods of raging when he was younger, although it wasn’t like he raged that hard, at least not on the Kirk Scale of Raging, which was pretty fuckin’ extreme — well, he couldn’t say that for certain, not without a test drive to give him some sort of parameters beyond his own imagination — but he had done enough to know what he liked, and what he didn’t.

And, speaking of scales, he was a doctor, and a 23rd century man, and he knew all about the Kinsey
scale and where he fit on it. He'd done his share of fooling around with girls and boys in high school, and then he'd fallen in love with Jessica, and that was a sweeter thing, a hotter thing than just rubbing up against anyone, no matter how good their body was.

So when Jessica and he had broken up — college, distance, the usual story — he'd gone through a period of serious dogging it with other men. It didn't take anyone with more than an iota of psychological training to see that he'd turned away from women while he was grieving the loss of his first love. It was just the way he was. Hell, even back when he'd played ball he'd been a switch hitter.

And it wasn't like he wasn't a citizen of the galaxy, either, because he'd had his taste of strange, and it had been hot and good, but ultimately way too complicated, too alien.

He'd fallen for Tharis when he began the PhD part of his MD/PhD, and Tharis was finishing his stint as a post-doc working in Leo’s advisor's lab. Tharis was an Andorian chan and already twice bonded. After they began, Tharis had introduced Leo to his zhen, Talea. They were both were hot for Leo to be their thaan, and he reflected on the nights they'd spent together building their bond with pure pleasure, but … he couldn't seem to make a bond to their third, the chen Teara. Couldn't really get it up for the odd little sie, either.

Besides, at the time he was all of 22 years old, and they were all focused on making babies. He understood their desire, what with needing four bodies to make a fruitful marriage and all, but as happy as he was to go on with Tharis and Talea, he couldn't see the rest of it. He was, for all of his openness, still Human, as it turned out. There was something about the pair bond that spoke to him.

And it was in that frame of mind, heartbroken from the loss of Tharis (and Talea, too), that the disaster that became his marriage began. He’d heard all the warnings about getting married in the middle of internships and residencies, but he’d also heard that no one made it out alive and healthy without a partner. And he wanted to be part of something, to be able to define himself as part of that duality of partnership. What he didn't realize until later was that the other old warning about marrying someone in the profession was a good one. Most of his friends who'd married within the field were still together, but the ones like him, the ones who'd wanted to retain contact with the non-medical world, or thought they did, were the ones who ended up divorced.

It wasn't just that, of course. What with having always been ahead in school, Leo was used to being with an older partner, or two, in the case of the Andorians. And Jocelyn fit that pattern, was a few years older than he was, and settling down meant something different to her than it did to him. He wanted the stability, the bond, the certainty of partnership while he was getting through the long preparation for his career. She wanted all the trappings of marriage, the house, the kids, the nice car.

At first, it was OK, not perfect, but OK. The long hours that he put in during his residencies had grated on her, but there was an end to that, and it was in sight. But just when he should have begun his practice, his father became suddenly, acutely ill. And then, whatever time he wasn’t spending treating patients, he was working in the lab to try and find something, anything, to make it so that he'd not lose his only living parent. David McCoy was not supposed to die, not before his own father, and his grandfather, for God’s sake. He was supposed to live to be 120 years old like Ol’ Paw, at the very least.

But he hadn't -- and Leo had fallen into despair, into drink, into guilt. What good was his vaunted genius if he couldn't use it to save his own father?

Jocelyn had tried to understand, but both of her parents were still alive, and they weren't close. She couldn't understand what he'd lost. She’d only known Leo as a grown-up, as a serious-minded
multi-disciplinary resident with a bright future in surgery and research medicine, as the only son of a
loving, single father. The Leo that he’d been, the boy who didn’t quote mortality statistics for random
accidents automatically, that boy? He had died when Leo was eight years old, when a shuttle
accident had transformed him from the light of his mother’s life and the indulgent but exasperated
older brother, into that only child of a single parent.

And the only person who knew that about him, knew the sunny, smiling boy who’d been part of a
family, was David McCoy.

He tried to explain, or at least he thought he had, but it was of no matter. In time, cracks in the
relationship became crevasses and then canyons, especially when it became clear that they’d never
have children together. 250+ years of reliable reproductive technology and there was still nothing
that medicine could do when a woman made antibodies to her husband’s sperm, natural or
synthesized from stem cells. And if that wasn’t a perfect analogy for their fucked up relationship, the
fact that she was allergic to him at his most basic, he didn't know what was.

Maybe in some alternate universe where people called him Len, they'd had a kid or two and were
happy forever.

Or maybe Joss had called him Leonard all the time, in that hard voice like she did at the end, and
they’d been able to have a kid or two, and still ended up with their marriage dissolved.

But here in this reality, where only his father had remembered and still occasionally imitated the way
his sister Joanna had called him 'Lay-o' when she was a baby, just to make him smile, he'd let
Jocelyn go, let her take all of her anger out on him, let her take it all. It meant nothing, anyway. It
was all just stuff, and all of it just reminded him of how he’d failed: first, do no harm.

He couldn't help how he’d failed Jocelyn – but his father? Maybe in that universe where Leo had
stayed married and been happy, maybe there his father had lived.

Fuck it. Whatever alternate universes there were, he was stuck in this one.

He had drifted for long days and nights when it had all gone to shit, drunken ramblings reducing his
thoughts to incoherent what ifs. Whomever he might have thought to fuck -- just for connection, just
to not be alone for a few minutes -- stayed the hell away from him once they got a good look in his
eyes. So, he signed his life away to Starfleet, and why not? At the very least, he'd have a fucking job,
a place to go every day.

There was fuck all left for him in Georgia anyway, and it beat looking at the inside of his eyelids.
Besides, the next vantage point on his scintillating life journey was the fucking gutter, only looking
up at the stars as he got stepped over. It didn't matter that he was scared shitless of going out there,
into the void, up into the black. It was better to be terrified and informed, so as to be ready.

That's what he told himself anyway. That he was prepared for all untoward surprises, and wasn't that
a fucking joke?

So. Fate sat his tired ass down on that shuttle next to the only other out of place, too-old Cadet on
that goddamned ride.

The rest of them were all too shiny, too young, too fucking uniform in their cute red outfits. Their
innocence was almost as terrifying as the mortality statistics for shuttle accidents, and he’d felt the
despair rising as he looked around the cabin, before he’d gotten up and locked himself in the
bathroom. Those cadets -- they’d never seen death, never watched bodies bleeding out on the table,
ever seen the disappointment in the eyes of someone they loved but couldn't do right by, never had
to do something against all of their basic principles because it was the right thing to do, even when it was the exact wrong thing, as it turned out.

Most of them had no fucking idea that Fate was a capricious, mean-spirited bitch.

Except for that other too old Cadet, who was still laughably young. Jim Kirk, with his face a fucking series of bruises around fever-bright blue eyes, was good-looking enough despite them that he could have been an actor, porn or otherwise.

And, oh, he was seven kinds of jackass, Kirk was, but Leo could see it in his eyes -- he was a jackass who'd seen the darkness. Most people looked at Leo and decided he was nuts, and then looked away. But not Kirk. He'd looked at Leo, really looked at him, before he commandeered his flask with a flick of those pretty eyes and then given Leo his hand in friendship, and he never looked back.

Leo had wondered what the hell Kirk had seen when he looked at him so intently, but he doubted he'd ever tell him. It wouldn't matter anyway, he was sure of it.

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They'd probably have drifted apart over the course of their re-education at the Academy, the both of them wearing those red uniforms but never letting the uniforms wear them, Leo mostly on the graduate student track, and Jim doing his long-put-off undergrad work, but it didn't work that way. They were late recruits, so it was just Kirk and McCoy who got processed together in the induction center in San Francisco. Leo was putting on the last bit of his shiny new red uniform when the penny dropped. He’d heard the fragments of conversation, but he suddenly comprehended them as he smoothed his new jacket down. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kirk's hand clenching into a fist as he stood there, half-dressed and poised for a fight, in his black Starfleet undershirt and red uniform pants, and ... Kirk, James Kirk. No fucking wonder the boy had the darkest bright blue eyes he'd ever seen.

For once, Leo didn't think, didn't calculate the odds and outcomes, just walked the few feet that separated them and dumped his gear next to Kirk’s on the bench. "I look like a right jackass, don't I?" he asked Kirk.

"You look fine," Kirk gritted out automatically, his eyes still fixed on the whisperers talking about what a fuck-up he was, compared to his father.

"Nah," Leo said, picking up Kirk’s jacket. He closed his hand over Jim’s fist and firmly unknotted it, slipping the jacket up his arm, and pushing him to shrug into the other side. He turned Jim to face him so that his back was to the whisperers, and adjusted the shoulders of the jacket with heavy hands, pressing down against the ridge of muscles to drop the boy’s shoulders out of his ears. "It's gonna take a while for this monkey suit to fit me." Kirk still had his head turned, listening, so he stared at the side of Kirk’s face while he zipped up the jacket. "But it looks good on you. It looks right."

Kirk's blue eyes tracked to his face with a snap and Leo felt the measure of Kirk’s gaze as he searched his eyes.

Kirk’s hard expression eased into something like a smirk, and he issued a puff of air, less than a snort, more than a breath. "You comin’ on to me, Bones?"

"You couldn't handle this much man, boy," Leo shot back, spinning Kirk around to tug at the back of his uniform, and then running his thumb down from the base of Kirk’s skull and pressing hard
between his shoulders to straighten him the fuck up from his coiled slouch. It turned out that he was only a shade shorter than Leo when he stood upright. "And who the fuck is Bones?"

Jim just spun around slowly and smiled that sweet jackass smile at him, and Bones felt his eyebrow rising. "All I got left is muh Bones," he drawled out, in a sickeningly poor imitation of Leo's accent.

"Jesus," Leo said. "Tell me you're not going for Communications, because your accent is for shit. I shudder to think how you'd mangle peace accords with that tin ear." He turned Kirk around and shoved him toward the inductees testing center and away from danger, slinging an arm around his shoulder to keep him moving in the right direction, and that ... was that.

Chapter 2

When Leo came out of the testing center hours later with his luggage plus a full complement of shiny red uniforms, having been forced to not only do the standard tests, but to pass some graduate level bullshit medical boards that were laughably out of date, it was full dark, he was hungry, his head was pounding and he still had to find his fucking dorm. Of course, whether they called it a barracks or a graduate level residence hall or some other shit, a dorm is what it was, and man, that was just ... he was a 28 year old divorced fucking idiot, living in a dorm. Just fuckin' great.

"Hey."

He rounded at the feel of a hand peeling the bag off his shoulder, trying to assume a defensive posture.

"Wow," Kirk said, with a wide-eyed disbelieving expression. "We are going to have to fucking work on that." He blinked and scratched his head. "What exactly were you going to do next, give me a vigorous scolding?"

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Leo asked grouchily, “Why aren’t you back at your dorm?” He spat the last word out with scorn, and Kirk laughed.

“Been there,” he said, wrapping an arm around Leo's shoulders. “Already boring. Let’s see what you got, Bones.”

“How the fuck did you get out of there so fast?” Leo grumbled.

“One, I didn’t have to take as many tests as you, Mr. Career Change, and two, the tests I did have to take were totally bullshit easy. I didn’t even rush,” Kirk wasn’t bragging, exactly.

“That’s Dr. Career Change to you,” Leo said sullenly. “And where are we going, exactly?”

“Your dorm,” Kirk said easily, “and then we’re going to get some real food, and some real booze. Classes don’t start for three days, and I intend to enjoy myself, Bones. How ‘bout you?”

“How do you know where my dorm is?” Leo asked suspiciously. “And stop calling me Bones!”

But he never fucking did, and after a while he didn't even blink or grouse about it, because it was the way it was. Bones went to Starfleet with Jim, and mostly everybody else called him McCoy or
Leonard, and Leo just faded away, except for inside his own head.

The Academy was OK, and at least someone had the sense that God gave a turtle and didn’t give him a fucking roommate, because that would have just been intolerable, in so many different ways. Except it didn’t much matter, because Kirk had a way of just kind of appearing in his space, of being inside his room when he got home sometimes, late from a shift at the infirmary. There was no point in trying to change the code because Jim could bypass almost any system, the same way that he had hacked McCoy’s records to find out where he lived before McCoy even knew, or how he could make it look like he was in his bed on time for curfew. Because evidently, Kirk wasn’t just a jackass, he was a certified genius jackass, which seriously, so was Leo, although their aptitudes were different.

Still, that first semester, even though they’d both passed out of a bunch of requirements, they each had to do some baccalaureate level crap with the freshman, of all humiliating things. So, they saw each other in two classes. And when Kirk got tired of playing with the kiddies, which he did with regularity, they’d go off campus and drink and talk. Jim was almost five years older than most of his classmates that first semester, which he thought was a huge age difference, although Leo noticed that it didn’t stop him from fucking anything he took a liking to.

But 18 was way too young for Leo, creepy even, because even when he’d been 18, they were too young for him, after having been with Jessica. Now that he’d just recently turned 28, they made him feel older than fuck, and tired, and just so … crabby. They came into clinic and they complained about everything, and were stupid and didn’t get their shots and use the appropriate protection for their own fucking species, much less anyone else’s. They were just so shockingly spoiled that it flabbergasted him, and made him more sour.

His biggest problem was with the physical requirements, though. Not the training, per se, because he was a doctor, not an idiot. He watched his weight and he worked out and made sure that he got enough cardio and did his strength training. He needed to be sure that he had the kind of stamina and endurance that the long hours of surgery required of him. If he ever went into a battlefield or other cataclysmic situation, he’d need to be prepared to operate for hours on end, and he couldn’t depend on back-up. Besides, that was his middle name, prepared. But the hand-to-hand requirement was just fucking useless for him, and he objected in general, on principle.

Leo’d always hated fighting, the useless macho bullshit of it. It wasn’t that he didn’t fucking know how. There were still people out there with early 20th century morality, who hadn’t fucking woken up to reality -- people who thought God, of all things, imbued them somehow with a moral authority to pass judgment on boys and girls like Leo, people who liked the person, and didn’t really discriminate based on whatever parts that person happened to be born with.

When he was a teenager, young and skinny, and beginning to understand himself, he thought that more of those dumb assholes lived in Georgia than anywhere else on the goddamned planet. He’d had to fight his way out of a bad situation more than once, and first dumb luck and then an understanding of where to really hit someone and make it fucking hurt had saved him. But he’d never liked it, not really, even if it did feel good to give in to the rage that he felt because of their stupid, judgmental ways.

Jim, on the other hand, saw fighting as survival, as dominance, as a way of ensuring that he was not going to be controlled. It was a necessity, but he got off on it to some degree, or at least it appeared that way to Leo. It was hard to tell, though, because Jim liked to fucking win. He liked it more than any other person that Leo’d ever met, and he had a drive for it that Leo found hard to understand.

But by mid-term first semester, Leo was failing his hand-to-hand class, because he didn’t fucking see
the point of it. Still, it galled him to get a failing grade at anything, and he knew he'd have to do something about it, although he didn't know what.

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His first mistake had been answering the comm, when he was tired and had been on his feet for hours at the infirmary. The academic year had all sorts of rhythms, and anyone who was on the medical side of things would tell you that if it was time for midterms, there was going to be some seriously rotten infectious crap getting passed around. This time, it was a bad 'flu, bouncing from species to species with abandon and becoming, not lethal, but completely fucking annoying, and it was taking out the medical staff one by one. So far, Leo had staved it off, but he'd been pulling double shifts and studying for his tests and it was goddamned late and he was tired and he needed a good, full night's sleep and some peace and quiet.

Still, when he'd seen the incoming code, he'd taken the call, forgetting that he was still wearing his uniform, forgetting that it'd remind his grandmother of her first dead son, his namesake uncle. By the time he heard the snick of the door, he was just about done with the conversation, but knew that Jim had heard the end of it.

"I just want you to be happy," she said to him, her voice sad and sincere.

"I know," he said back to her. "I know you do."

"Sleep well, sweet Leo," she said, and then her worn face disappeared from his view, and he was staring at his own reflection, his bone-weary visage blinking at him.

"Mom?" Jim asked from where he stood in the shadows.

He shook his head, and unzipped his jacket. "She's been dead a long time, Jim," he answered tiredly. "Grandmother."

“She’s up late,” Jim said.

“Yeah,” Leo said, too tired to explain.

Kirk finally moved into the light, and Leo could see the blood on his shirt, and the crooked, open gash across his cheekbone.

"Jesus, Jim," he said. "What the hell …" He knew that Jim couldn't afford any more demerits, that there were plenty of people wanting to see him fail, to see him fuck up. Jim had lived too long on his own to accommodate easily to a system that required him to be in bed at a certain hour, to show up for classes exactly on time. Even if he did all his work well, and he did, there were still certain professors who relished marking him down, no matter that Captain Pike was on his side. From what Leo could see, academic politics were still the same pile of ridiculous dogshit even when there was a military structure overlaid on top of it.

Kirk held his hand up. "It's not like that, Bones," he said. "I was working the door down at Finnegan's," he began.

Leo sighed. He knew that Jim didn’t have any money coming from back home, and that the work/study job that he'd been offered was one of those menial bullshit ones that meant that he'd be cleaning up after his more well-heeled classmates. Leo'd been working on a job as an orderly for him when Jim had gone ahead and gotten the job at the bar. He'd started out as a bar back doing occasional security, but the first night that he'd worked the door, standing out on the sidewalk in the foggy night, the business had increased exponentially. Leo'd watched it happen with bemusement,
the mirror over the bar giving him a perfect view of Jim as he leaned against a stool and examined ID, flirting with man, woman and everything in between. Most nights, Jim left the bar with pockets full of comm numbers, not bruises.

"And Cupcake came in tonight and got a little overeager with some of the women after a few too many. Had to wrestle him out, and he did not want to go."

Jim looked as exhausted as Leo felt, and Leo sighed again. "Sit down, kid," he said, standing up. He stripped off his uniform jacket and went into the bathroom to take a piss, and wash his hands and his face, before he fixed him up. While he was doing all that, he brushed his teeth for good measure. After he finished with Jim, he was going to bed, do not pass go, do not collect 500 credits. When he came out, Jim wasn't sitting in the chair at his desk as he expected, but was perched on the edge of Leo's bed, barefoot, with shoes and jacket discarded on the floor, long legs crossed one over the other at the ankle. He was holding onto the edge of the mattress like he was teetering on a precipice, his striking fine-boned fingers white-knuckling it.

Leo sighed and dragged the chair over, and Jim pulled his legs up and made room for him to roll between them as Leo told the computer to turn the lights up. He studied Jim's face before he pressed on the orbital bones around Jim's watchful blue eyes. It looked like that fucker had gone after both of his baby blues, with the nasty gash just a potentially disfiguring bonus. “Cupcake wearing a bigass ring?” Leo asked.

Jim nodded.

"He's a total dickhead, that kid," Leo said. "I cannot believe that he still hasn't washed out of the command track. He would be a fucking nightmare with any actual authority."

Jim's flinch was subtle, and Leo wasn't sure if he'd pressed on a nerve with his fingers or his words.

"Didn't know you had any family, Bones," Jim said conversationally, changing the subject.

Words, then. "Not much anymore," Leo answered. He cleaned the cut on Jim's cheekbone, and Jim sighed and closed his eyes. "I mean, there's some cousins and aunts and uncles, but really, family is just my father's parents, and my great-grandfather."

Jim opened his eyes in surprise and raised an eyebrow. "You have a great-grandfather?"

"Yeah," Leo said slowly, his accent heavier because he was tired. "Not for much longer, though."

Jim was still under his hands, watching him with those eyes. Until he'd met Kirk, he's always thought that blue eyes were kind of cold, but Jim had the most soulful blue eyes Leo'd ever seen. They were so warm they were hot, the color like the sun on the ocean. They were far too inviting, making him want to dive right in, so he looked down instead and found the portable derm regenerator and applied it to Jim's face, breaking contact with Jim's penetrating stare.

"I'm sorry, Bones," Jim said softly.

"S'ok," Leo said gruffly. "He's almost 123. He had a good run of it." Up close, he could really see the pitting on Jim's skin, the small scars from of all things, a pox, and -- unless he missed his guess -- acne, along with a couple of old scars. He wondered why the skin was never regenerated before it scarred, wondered who in the hell took care of this boy, or fucking didn't, when he was young. Pox? Acne? They’d both been treatable for hundreds of years. As much as he didn’t approve of violence in general, sometimes when Leo looked at Jim’s scarred, beautiful face he wanted to take a shuttle to Iowa, and punch someone right in the face. Maybe someday, he’d figure out exactly who.
Leo cupped the back of Jim's head and turned his face into the light, studying his handiwork. Jim closed his eyes and seemed to sag a bit as Leo ran the regen over some of the developing contusions, still cradling Jim's skull in one hand. Jim blinked, jerked and then nodded against his hand, his whole body swaying with the tremor of exhaustion.

"How long you been without sleep, Jimmy?" Leo asked, knowing that Jim was taking an oversized class load, on top of his job, and trying to figure out how many nights Jim had been burning the candle at both ends. He steeled himself to let go of the face he found far too fascinating, before he did something really stupid.

"Long," Jim said, yawning. "S'ok, Bones."

"No, it's not," he said softly, then spoke before he could second-guess himself. "C'mon, you can bunk here. But take that bloody shirt off and wash your face first."

Jim was poking at the barely healed skin, wincing a little.

"Stop touching that!" he ordered and got out a hypo.

"Aw, Bones!" Jim whined.

"Jim," he said firmly, cutting off his protest, "he had a fucking ring on, and who knows what kind of disgusting microbial crap he had on his simian knuckles. Man up."

He jabbed Jim in the neck while he winced, pulling at the tender skin when Leo withdrew.

Jim scowled as Leo rolled away from him. "It's not about manning up," he said petulantly. "I'm allergic to a lot of shit."

"Now you tell me?" Leo asked incredulously. "Like what?"

"Binders and shit," he mumbled, as Leo groaned.

"Fucking awesome," he said, already searching through his medkit and his desk drawer to see what antihistaminergic remedies he had. Jim stood there, looking awkward and strangely abashed until Leo looked up again. "Go clean up," he ordered, pointing toward the bathroom. "And do not use my toothbrush!"

He was dozing by the time Jim came out of the bathroom, hypos loaded and within easy reach on the nightstand next to the bed. He'd heard the shower come on, so wasn't surprised to feel Jim's slightly damp skin drag against his before Jim shifted back and away in the too small bunk. Leo'd felt enough to know that Jim had thankfully put his briefs back on, because exhausted or not, that would have been just too much for him to withstand.

"Lights," he said to the computer crossly, and the room plunged into darkness. Leo rolled onto his side, facing the wall and giving Jim more room, feeling the press of the mattress as Jim mirrored his movement, but kept a distance between their bodies.

"Thanks, Bones," Jim said softly. He was silent for a long time, and Leo could feel his breath against the skin of his upper back, his neck. "I haven't done this in forever," he murmured, sounding like he was on the edge of sleep.

"What?" Leo whispered, roused enough from the sedating effects of Jim's even breaths to ask.

"Used t'sleep with my big brother," Jim said softly, mumbling. "Long time ago."
"I didn't know you have a brother," Leo said, surprised enough to open his eyes, but Jim was silent behind him. "Jim?" All he heard was the soft sough of Jim's breath, as it painted his right shoulder with humidity. "Kid?" he whispered.

"Bones," Jim said foggily, and curled one hand over Leo's hip, thumb rubbing against the skin on his back. Leo felt the brush of Jim's hair against his neck, as if he'd curled closer to him, but Jim said nothing more, just slept on, his hand heavy and claiming.

Leo struggled to stay awake, to catalogue all the sensations so that he'd remember them in minute detail, but he was too tired, and the sound of Jim's breathing, the smell of his clean body, and the incredible heat that he put out was a soporific that pulled him under like a wave, lulling him into a dreamless sleep.

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**Chapter 3**

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He'd slept only a couple of hours when the sound of Jim scratching at his own skin roused him. He turned over, pushing Jim to lay on his back and groggily ordered the lights to 50%, pulling the covers away from Jim's bare chest. Jim had a few hives, but they were neither that prominent nor that acute-looking. Still, they dotted his arms and chest, disappearing below his briefs, and as Leo pulled down the covers to look at Jim's legs, he could discern a few here and there, even all the way down to his feet. He swallowed hard looking at Jim's body, the fair skin stretched over well-defined musculature. He really was incredibly beautiful. Leo pointedly did not allow himself to look at Jim's groin. He still had hours to sleep with him in this too small bed.

"Cold," the object of his admiration complained, throwing an arm up over his eyes.

"Itchy, too, from the looks of it," Leo said, and leaned up and over Jim to get at the hypos on the bedside table.

"B'nes?" Jim asked, cracking one eye from under his bicep. His hand had come up toward Leo, and although at first Leo thought it was to block the light, he realized that Jim had stopped himself from making a defensive move.

"Yeah, Sleepin' Beauty," Leo drawled, finding the hypo he needed.

Jim yawned and shifted underneath him so that his body turned a bit toward Leo, even though he remained on his back. He flopped the arm he'd raised to defend himself over Leo's shoulder casually, his fingers brushing up against Leo's neck and the base of his head, as if they were out drunk in a bar somewhere and he was at that stage where he was leaning on Leo, as if they weren't half naked in Leo's bed. Leo gritted his teeth, and Jim looked up at him drowsily, lashes fluttering over his sleepy blue eyes. "What?" Jim whispered.

"When's your first test tomorrow?" Leo asked, completely ignoring his question.

Jim scratched at his chest. "10:00?" he said.

"You sure?" Leo said.

"Yeah," Jim said. "Why?"

"'Cause this is going to make you sleepy," Leo said, jabbing him in the neck after he'd adjusted the
dosage.

"Fuck, Bones!" Jim groused. "Could you fucking warn me next time?" He glared up at Leo, but he took the hand that had been laying on the back of Leo's neck like it was no big thing off him to rub at his own neck.

"Sure thing, Jimmy," Leo said sarcastically. "Roll over on your other side, you bed hog."

"Why?" Jim asked petulantly.

"Because my left hip hurts," Leo lied. Really, he was thinking that if he had Jim in front of him, then Jim wouldn't be able to touch him like he was his big brother, as Leo sure as hell wasn't having particularly fraternal feelings about his current circumstance.

"Oh, all right, old man," Jim said grumpily, kicking at the covers ineffectively to pull them back up as he turned over. "Lights?"

"One second," Leo said, recalibrating the hypo in case a second dose was necessary. A glance at Jim's back revealed that he had hives on the smooth skin there, too. He reached over Jim carefully, trying not to make contact again, but couldn't stop himself from looking down and noticing the curve of Jim's lashes atop his healing cheekbone as he lay there, itching. "Stop scratching them -- it only makes them worse," Leo ordered, pulling up the covers over them both. "Lights off."

In the flash before the lights turned off, he realized that the skin on Jim's back was not as smooth as it first appeared. He'd caught just a glimpse of a scar accentuated by the stretching from one of the urticaria, a thin line that traveled across Jim's back at an angle from his side in toward his spine. He couldn't swear to it, but he thought that wasn't the only thin line that the hives had revealed.

Before he fell into a troubled sleep this time, restraining his fingers from tracing the skin on Jim's back, his mind trying to assimilate what he'd seen, he felt the sole of one of Jim's feet pressing against his calf, like Jim was grounding himself with that one point of contact.

+ 

Too many years of being expected to be up and at 'em first thing in the day meant that Leo's internal clock woke him, no matter what, just after daybreak. If he'd drunk enough, or was exhausted enough, he could make himself go back to sleep, but he startled awake at the realization that he had wrapped himself around Jim, a fact that his dick was both aware of and quite pleased by. He was sharing Jim's pillow, with his arm underneath it and both of their heads. His mouth was pressed against Jim's warm skin, on the curve where Jim's neck met his shoulder, his nose against Jim's neck. Everywhere, except for the one place he wanted to feel it most, he had miles of Jim's skin right up against his own. Most tellingly, his left arm was wrapped tightly around Jim's torso holding him in place, Leo's hand splayed flat over Jim's heart, and the fine examples of pectoralis major that shielded it.

He had to let go of Jim in increments, not because he was forcing himself to do so, surely, but because when he'd made a sudden move upon realizing his position, Jim had startled and seemed to rouse, which was definitely not what Leo wanted. The fewer witnesses he had to this situation, the better. He tried to move away from Jim in tiny degrees, first moving his pelvis away, and then slowly the rest of him, as the room lightened around them. The problem was that Jim kept moving with him, shifting back to get as much contact between their bodies as possible, and Leo bit back a groan when he felt the wall against his back, effectively trapping him as Jim pushed his ass back against Leo's erection. Leo shifted to his back, pushing Jim away, and Jim grumbled in his sleep but begrudgingly allowed Leo more room, even as he pressed his backside against Leo's hip. Leo waited a few
minutes, tensely, his entire body throbbing in time with the pounding blood in his groin. He forced himself to breathe evenly, and when Jim was no longer stirring, and seemed to have dropped into a deeper sleep, only then did he sit up and move down to the end of the bed.

Jim roused when he moved, rolling over to where his body had been minutes before. "Bones?" he said.

"Just going to the head," he answered gruffly. "Go back to sleep."

To his surprise, Jim did just that, turning over onto his stomach and stuffing his hands up under the pillow that Leo'd been using when he'd first gone to sleep, so Leo got up out of the bed. It was bright enough in the room now that he had a clear view of Jim's back, which was exposed almost to his waist. Leo stood and rubbed at his eyes, making sure that Jim was unaware of his movements, then bent over and looked carefully at the expanse of skin. The flush of hives had faded, but there was still enough redness there that it highlighted exactly what he'd thought he'd seen the night before: a collection of thin, criss-crossing scars that were old, and showed some evidence of regeneration, but not enough to remove them completely from sight. They were so faint that if not for Jim's allergic response last night, he wondered how long it would have taken for him to notice them, but the sight of them now was enough to render him wide awake. He'd never seen such scarring in person, but he was in the midst of a section on recognizing signs of abusive treatment of political dissidents or prisoners of war, and he recognized what he was seeing, even as his mind could not truly comprehend it: sometime in the past, someone had taken a whip to Jim Kirk's back. Over his ribs, Leo could see the remnant of a deeper cut where the lash had torn into the flesh, curling around the curve of Jim's body. Leo felt suddenly abjectly ill and blindly murderous. Who in the name of fuck had done this?

Jim stirred under his scrutiny, and Leo turned away and crossed the short distance to the bathroom, hiding in the shower until his breathing and his heart rate returned to normal. Whatever arousal he'd felt upon waking up and finding himself holding Jim had been subsumed by what he'd seen. There was only one thought left in his head: he was going to figure out who had fucking done this to Jim, so help him.

Leo was sitting at his desk wearing clean uniform pants and a white t-shirt, lips pursed in his usual frown of concentration, when he became aware that Jim was awake. He'd replicated a cup of coffee and had purposefully focused on his work, not allowing himself to stare at the pretty picture that Jim made in his bed, sleeping with his face relaxed, that mouth of his that wised off too much and was always far too tempting, slack and slightly open as he breathed in and out. Jim had turned his head in Leo's direction when he'd come out of the bathroom after his shower, and there'd been an instant when Leo was sure that Jim was watching him while he dressed, but when he'd looked, there been no flash of color from those unmistakably blue eyes. Now, however, Jim's lashes were opening and closing slowly as he woke, arms still curled up under his head. It'd been the longest time he'd ever spent with Jim without the man saying a word.

"How're you feeling?" Bones asked, breaking the silence.

Jim stretched and yawned, picking up his head to look down at his chest. "Good," he said after a minute, rolling over and running his hands through his messy hair. "What time is it?" His voice was raspy with sleep.

"Oh-seven-thirty-five," Leo said, making the final notes on the comm that he was going to send to Commander Yu, whose hand-to-hand class he was currently failing. He'd met Yu before, when he'd come to the infirmary, and liked the man. He hoped he'd see reason, see that Leo's role in Starfleet
was not to fight, but to deal with the inevitable aftermath. He'd made a small notation on another PADD that just said 'JK: All ?Binder prot.', which was a reminder to use adding the allergy notation to Jim's record so that he could see his full medical history. The temptation to use his access to the medical records system from his console was almost all-consuming, but he would not do it here, not when he'd found Jim at his console more than once, working on something. It's not that he didn't trust Jim, exactly, just that he'd rather compromise the man's privacy someplace where it would be more difficult for him to figure out that Leo'd breached his trust. "How'd you sleep?"

Jim yawned hugely, and Leo sipped his coffee. "Good," Jim said, and he sounded surprised. "I don't usually sleep that much."

Leo nodded. "I told you the antihistamines would make you sleepy," he reminded him.

Jim rolled over onto his side and bunched the pillows up under his head, looking at Leo with that inscrutable blue stare of his. He looked entirely too comfortable in Leo's bed. "What're you working on that's already got you scowling?"

'Just trying to figure out the mystery that is you, Jim,' Leo thought, but he said, "I'm writing a comm to Commander Yu."

"Hand-to-hand Yu?" Jim asked.

Leo nodded.

"Why're you failing the class, Bones?" Jim asked, and Leo rolled his eyes, knowing then for sure that his decision not to upload or search from his console had been a good one. The boy probably knew what Leo's grade point average was for all of his classes.

"I'm a doctor, not a fighter, Jim," Leo said tensely.

"I know you know how," Jim said pointedly, and Leo looked up sharply. "But you're out of practice, and you weren't trained right." Leo's eyebrows raised to his hairline.

"And you were?"

"Yes," Jim said simply, sitting up. "What're you asking Yu?"

"To waive me," Leo said. He was not going to fight with Jim over this. It was an absolutely unnecessary and dubious 'skill' for a doctor.

"He won't do that," Jim said surely, swinging his legs over the side of Leo's bed and crossing them over each other at the ankle. His posture was a mirror of what it had been a few hours ago, but without the tension and exhaustion in his muscles. He raised his ankles off the floor, then levered his body up by his hands, as if he was working on a balance beam. He pressed his weight up and down a few times, then hung there holding all of his body weight upright on arms that weren't even straining for a full thirty seconds, his hands curled around on the edge of Leo's bed, before he lowered himself to the mattress and began to stand.

Leo looked down, hoping that he wasn't gaping at Jim's display of dexterity and strength, and tried to focus on the list of arguments he had on his PADD, mostly so he wouldn't see the bunched up covers fall away from Jim's groin. He had a feeling the sight of Jim's morning wood would haunt his dreams otherwise. He was better not knowing anything for sure -- his imagination was bad enough. Instead, he hit send on the comm requesting the appointment and only looked up when Jim was safely at the bathroom door, where he could only see the long line of his back ending in his white briefs, and the tops of his thighs.
"I'm telling you, Bones, he won't," Jim said. He opened the door and turned so that his body was in profile, backlit by the overhead in the bathroom. "You're going to have to figure something else out." He could see the bulge of Jim's cock as it rose up from his body, high and tight against his abdomen, and felt the answering shift of his own, thankfully hidden by the desk.

"We'll see," Leo gritted out, forcing speech up and over the knot of hopeless want that was working its way up his throat.

Jim tilted his head and went into the bathroom as Leo searched for a suitably upsetting news story that he could use to tamp down the raging desire that he felt. He reminded himself that in no way had Jim ever acted anything other than fraternal toward him, and that for a creature as sexual as Jim, that was a statement as loud as a spoken rejection. This was his problem, and his alone. And he was just going to have to fucking deal.

Leo had hopes of carrying his case with Commander Yu despite Jim’s discouragement, at least at the beginning of their late in the day appointment. His only other interaction with Harrison Yu had been professional, when Yu had come to take his statement and impressions in regard to a potential crime. The particular patient had been a young girl, just 18 and away from home for the first time. She’d been raped, and brutally, by an upperclass Cadet. Yu had been charged with determining whether or not her alleged rapist should be turned over to civilian authorities -- typically, the alleged rapist was denying that there had been a crime.

Leo had not minced words detailing the violence that Cadet Federova had suffered. After taking Leo’s statement, Yu had asked him to compare collected DNA from Cadet Federova with a sample from the purported rapist, and Leo’d been happy to oblige. The rapist had been less than happy to surrender his DNA, and had protested vigorously, despite the fact that the law had been on Yu’s side on this issue for hundreds of years. When the rapist saw that he wasn’t going to win the battle, he’d struggled against the two ensigns that were holding him, and started in on the whole despicable routine that men like him always used: the victim had been the initiator, it was consensual, she liked it rough. Leo, who’d seen firsthand the damage to the unconscious girl’s body, had not objected one iota when Yu signaled the ensigns to let the rapist go, and then knocked him right the fuck out so that Leo could get his samples.

That had been the last time he’d seen Yu, and he had hopes that the shared experience and the fact that they were more peers in age, at least, would overcome the rank imposed by the command structure. After all, when Leo’d been asked by the rapist’s lawyer if he recalled the rapist being knocked out by Yu, Leo’d conveniently had amnesia on the topic.

However, Yu remained entirely, impassively unmoved by Leo’s assertion that as a doctor, his role would be taking care of patients, not actively fighting. Yu was a couple of inches taller than Leo and all muscle, with close-cropped black hair bristling out from his skull. After listening to Leo’s arguments, he uncrossed his well-defined arms from across his chest and shot him down with absolutely no compunction, adding, “In point of fact, I think you’d be better served by a change of section leaders, as Cadet Gaines suggested in her notes.”

Leo raised his eyebrows. “Gaines suggested I swap sections?”

Yu brought up a screen on his console. “She did. She said that she felt that you needed more remedial instruction to account for ‘an extreme deficit in basic training and technique’ and suggested that you be swapped to the section that meets at 1000 hours on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.”

Leo’s jaw was so tight that he could hear his teeth grinding, because unless he missed his fucking
guess, and he knew that he hadn’t, that was the section that Kirk was in. That little fucker had hacked his records, and Gaines’ account to boot. The fact that the section time fit into his schedule without him having to adjust his shifts at the infirmary and everywhere else was just another little galling sidenote.

“And who, exactly, is the section leader for that section?”

Yu looked puzzled but answered his question, “Cadet Hanlon,” he answered.

Leo goggled. “Cupcake?” Oh, Kirk was treachery personified, but he was as bright as he was manipulative.

“Huh?” Yu said.

“God Almighty,” Leo swore. “I’m not going to mince words here, Commander, and I am speaking to you now in my official capacity as a doctor, not as a Cadet.” He paused, and Yu nodded. “The first time you and I ever interacted, it was in a situation that proved that the psych evals for Starfleet are by no means infallible.”

Yu was very still in his chair, listening to Leo with all of his attention. “Go on.”

“Vesting any authority in Cadet Hanlon, especially over a section that includes students who require remedial instruction, is an absolute mistake,” Leo said. “He is a short-tempered bully. I’ve seen the results of his handiwork more than once, and in my professional opinion, he is unsuited for any kind of command.”

Yu was studying Leo’s face. “I’ve seen no such charges in Hanlon’s record.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t always get Cadets, especially the underclassmen, to proffer charges when they’re appropriate, and farther than that I cannot go without breaching confidentiality which I’ve sworn to uphold,” Leo argued. “But I will tell you, on my word as a doctor, that what I’m asserting here is true, and I’ll ask you this: how high is the injury rate in his section, compared to the others?”

Leo knew that he’d struck a blow by the subtle shift in Yu’s face.

Yu’s expression was now implacable. “Doctor McCoy,” he said, “I expect that you’ll attend the 1000 section tomorrow morning.” He held up a hand to forestall any argument from Leo. “Your arguments have convinced me that it is entirely appropriate that you be shifted to this section, as you are uniquely qualified to render a judgment I now find myself in need of. I expect that you will report any observations that you feel support or refute the arguments that you’ve recently made to me, immediately, and without fail.” He paused. “That’s an order.”

Fuck.

“Yes, sir,” Leo said, just managing to keep the anger out of his voice as he saluted and left the office.

Goddamn Jim Kirk. Sometimes it was really no wonder that people wanted to punch him in the face all the time.

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**Chapter 4**

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Leo was practically staggering with exhaustion by the time he got back to his room. It was well after
midnight, and long after his shift at the infirmary was supposed to have ended. He entered the passcode for his room and dumped the bag that held his uniform into the laundry chute, punching in the code for biomedical controls with more than his usual vehemence. He didn't even flinch at the smell of sick that rose from his fouled pants in the interval that the chute was open. There had been so much puke throughout the past few hours that he was smelling it all the time, and was almost insensible to the stench, although he had left his supposedly now clean shoes outside the door.

He ordered the lights to 25% and moved immediately to the bathroom, stripping off the scrubs that he'd worn home as he did so.

Goddamn fucking Starfleet. They'd gone balls out on their recruitment drive, the one that had bagged him and Kirk, taking advantage of the galactic economy being in the crapper. He had no fucking doubt whatsoever that the severity of the 'flu raging through the campus was the direct outcome of the resulting overcrowding. A typical class had about 1200 recruits in it -- the class of '58 had more than 1600, with the overage not only in older students like himself, but in fucking kids. Literally. One of the kids he'd treated tonight had looked like he was 12, although his medical records listed him as 15. Starfleet had jammed 'em in every which way, creating awesome germ vectors at every turn. They'd declared rooms designed for two ‘suites’ putting in bunk beds – hell, Jim's room had been a single, but they'd jammed two beds in there, putting the desks underneath their elevated platforms.

Morons. He had a mind to write a scathing letter to … somebody, especially after tonight's fiasco. He washed, even inside his nostrils, trying to get the pervasive stench out of his head, then toweled himself off roughly, wincing as he hit the hypo bruise on his neck. Maybe Kirk had a point about his heavy hand, but he'd needed to give himself a goddamned immuno-booster with all the shit floating around the infirmary. He still could not believe that O'Brien had fucking puked all over his pants and shoes. That left five attendings to cover all the shifts, and with the nurses going down like flies, it would be a wonder if they’d all survive through next week. As it was, they’d had to stow O'Brien and two of the nurses in the on-call room for the time being. Hopefully, they'd be ambulatory enough in the next couple of days that there'd be someplace to bunk during all the extra shifts he'd have to cover.

He stomped over to his console to check one last time, but only confirmed what he suspected. Jim Kirk, troublemaker extraordinaire, was still mysteriously unavailable and not answering his comms. Fucker.

He glanced over at his bed, willing himself not to see the image of Jim waking up there, his face nestled in Leo's pillows, all that skin pressed to Leo’s sheets.

He ordered the lights off before he was even under the covers, letting out a tired groan as he became blissfully supine and began to relax, and just before it hit him that he could smell Jim everywhere in his bed. He turned his head into the pillow, and there it was, the same scent that he’d woken up to this morning, the clean smell of Jim's skin and the hair at the base of his skull. He felt his tired body stir with arousal, but he pushed it away, turning over and burying his face in the scent.

Jim.

He slept, ignoring the empty ache in his arms.

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At 0950, Leo stood watching his new hand-to-hand section fall in, watched Cupcake at the front of the room, flirting with some of the prettier girls, and talking shit with the bigger guys. Sourly, he
ruminated that putting a hothead third year in charge of a section was probably also a result of the overcrowding that was currently causing so much misery. He yawned expansively. He'd been up since 0500, had already done his rounds and assessed all of his patients. He had a Xenobiology midterm right after this bullshit section, and then he was back on at the infirmary until God knew when. O'Brien was still flat on his ass, and there were so many Cadets on inpatient status that they were going to have to start stacking them in the hallways soon. At least no one was dead, just sick as fucking dogs.

He studied the room as he waited for Kirk to show up, noting that in the back of the room there was a huddle of little kids. Over on the other side of the room were a number of grad student recruits, some of them even older than he was. A couple of them looked like they hadn't willingly undertaken any form of exercise since they'd left high school, and he idly wondered if he had enough of the right meds in his kit to take care of someone if they had a cardiac episode. Christ. He glanced in the mirror at himself – he might not be a trained fighter, but at least he was in fucking shape.

At 0957, Kirk bounced into the room, all sunshine and good cheer, but with an element of seriousness underneath his usual bravado that immediately made Leo wary. He nodded at Leo from afar, but moved into the middle of the room, standing slightly off-center from where the instructor would stand. Leo narrowed his eyes, trying to figure out just what the fuck he was doing, but Cupcake blew a whistle and ordered them to fall in.

The mirrored wall opposite them allowed Leo to keep an eye on Jim while Cupcake was yammering about some shit at the head of the group. Kirk was stretching out slowly but surely, muscle group by muscle group. Where he'd chosen to stand, he was easily discernible by the littlest of the Cadets, some of whom looked liked they'd barely entered puberty. They were still clustered at the back of the class in a fruitless effort to make themselves invisible.

With a shock, Leo realized that Jim was passively instructing the kids. A number of them were echoing his movements, adjusting their feet to stand like him as he lifted his feet deliberately, shifting their posture and mimicking his movements. As Leo watched, Jim's eyes tracked the kids who were focused on him and repeated movements as necessary until most of them were doing it correctly. He also used the mirror to make eye contact with the kids who weren't paying attention to him, and damned if many of them didn't start following what he was doing, based on a simple look from Jim. He noted with surprise that they weren't the only ones. Many of the older students in the section were also following Jim's movements in the mirror and running through the warm-up.

Cupcake finally stopped talking and ran the class through some sparring postures for today's skill, then went on to demonstrate a fight routine with one of the more experienced members of the class. As he got closer to the end of the run through, Leo could feel the tension in the class as it rose, and understood why when Cupcake began surveying the littlest kids in the class, ready for the next part of the demonstration. As Cupcake moved to the back of the class, Leo noticed with horror that Federova was among the kids who were hiding. Although she was older than most of them, she was petite and fine-boned enough to look way too fragile to withstand any abuse. Without even looking, he knew that Jim was going to do something to stop Cupcake from picking Federova or any of the other small kids; knowing Jim, whatever he'd planned to do would end up with Leo patching him up for the second time in three days. Without forethought, he struck first.

"Cadet Hanlon," Leo said, using the voice that had cowed idiot interns in Mississippi and Georgia, and in just a few weeks had begun to make the incompetents at the Starfleet Infirmary cringe.

"Yes?" Hanlon said snidely. "You want to volunteer, Cadet?"

"It's Dr. McCoy," Leo said with no hint of humor in his voice whatsoever. "And I'm exercising my
authority in these matters to tell you to choose a more weight appropriate Cadet to spar with. Now."

"For what reason?"

"When you get your medical degree, you can question my reasoning," Leo snapped. "Until then, you will adhere to regulation and cede to a doctor's orders."

"I don't think you have the authority to do that," Cupcake said.

"He does," a voice piped up from the front of the class, and McCoy turned to see the overweight guy he'd been worrying about moving toward him.

"And who're you?" Cupcake said.

"Phillips," he answered. "JAG. The Doctor has precedence." He pinned Hanlon with a surprisingly hard stare, not backing down, and McCoy reassessed his original opinion. Phillips might be flabby, but he had balls.

"Hey," Kirk said suddenly from right next to Leo's elbow, and his head pivoted toward him in surprise. Jim put an arm around his shoulders and subtly moved Leo out of the way. Well, well -- he guessed it wasn't only the little kids that Jim was interested in protecting. "We're wasting time, so … I'll do the demo with you, Hanlon."

"Fine," Hanlon said tightly, and went on to 'demonstrate' by trying to piledrive Jim into the floor.

Leo felt his jaw clench as he watched them fighting. Oh, he was going to have a lot to say to Yu.

+ Jim wasn't at the door when he got to Finnegan's later that night, and the bar was half empty in a way not typical for a Friday. But between midterms, the 'flu and the fact that there was only an hour until last call, it wasn't really that surprising.

He scanned the room, looking for Jim but not seeing him. He wasn't disappointed. His Jim-sense was telling him that he was here, somewhere. Leo signaled the bartender and got a beer and a shot, retreating to one of the booths in the back that gave him a good perspective of the room, and dug in his pocket for his comm PADD. The infirmary schedule had been in the middle of being re-set when he'd finally left, and he was hoping that there was going to be some room for him to study between shifts. Not all of his classes were guts, and his work ethic was too firmly engrained for him not to be prepared.

His shot was gone and he was halfway through his first beer and an interesting article about a new surgical nerve grafting technique when a fresh shot and a beer was plopped down in front of him, its twin hitting the table next to him where Jim Kirk was sliding into the booth.

"So," Kirk said. "How pissed are you, Bones?"

Leo narrowed his eyes at him. "If you were going to fucking hack something, kid," he growled, "why didn't you just waive me out of the class? I don't appreciate you making me your …" he choked on the words 'whip hand', which had almost slipped out.

"What?" Jim asked, nudging a strong thigh against him as a prompt.

"You shoulda just waived me out of the class, Jim."
"No, Bones," Jim said simply, like Leo was a stubborn child, which only made him angrier.

He snorted and Jim pressed his point, along with his thigh against Leo’s as he spoke. "It’s important, Bones," he said succinctly.

"Not for me, it isn't," Leo insisted. "I'm a doctor, Jim, not a warrior. I've sworn oaths not to harm others, and I meant them."

Jim was listening, but just like Yu, he seemed impervious to Leo's arguments. "This is Starfleet, Bones," he said.

"I fucking know it's Starfleet, Jim! But they didn't want me to join up so that I could fight for them!" He held his hands up. "They wanted these! They wanted me because I'm a surgeon, and a damned good one -- why the hell would I ruin my best instruments by punching people with them?"

Jim listened to him rant, twirling Leo's empty shot glass and watching him with those fathomless blue eyes, then said, "So what are you going to do if you're on a ship somewhere, and it gets overtaken? How're you going to protect yourself if you beam down into the middle of a hostile situation?"

"I'll hypo 'em!"

Jim laughed and rubbed his neck where Leo'd stuck him. "Yeah, fast draw, but …" His smile slipped, and that serious Jim, the one that had been teaching those little kids today, was looking right at him. "Shit happens, Bones, and you've got to be fucking ready. You've got to drill until your body knows what to do, and maybe you'll never have to throw that punch, but if you have to, it’ll just flow." He downed his shot.

And there was something in the way that he said, 'Shit happens' that made Leo's heart break a little, a certainty behind the words that left him cold.

"Yeah," Leo said gruffly, downing his shot. "Shit happens." He paused. "But you’re doing a good thing with the little kids in the section. Protecting them."

"No, I'm fucking not, Bones!"

Jim's sudden vehemence took Leo by surprise. He wasn't surprised to miss the press of Jim's leg against his.

"I'm not fucking helping them at all," he said hotly. "Nobody is, because they have to know how to take care of themselves, and they're not fucking getting taught how to do that. They don't even fucking know how to stand right, how to assess their own strengths, nothing." Jim fiddled with the empty shot glasses, making a small pyramid out of the three of them, before he knocked them down with one flick of his finger. "They're setting those kids up to be cannon fodder," he said gloomily. "They're not learning anything, and what they are learning is shit."

"What're they learning, Jim?" Leo asked quietly, honestly amazed by Jim's passionate statements.

Jim sat there for such a long time that Leo was afraid that he wouldn't answer at all, just clench his jaw and let his ticking facial muscles speak for him, but then he took a big hit of his beer, moving as if he was going to stand up before he stopped himself. "They're learning that 'might equals right', that the biggest bully wins," he said tightly. He drained the rest of his beer, and cracked the empty glass against the table. “And I fucking refuse to accept that.” This time, he did stand up.

"I've got to finish up in the back," he said. "See you later, Bones." Kirk walked away without looking back.
Leo liked to think that he was a pretty good prognosticator. It was part of a class of skills that allowed him to be a good diagnostician and a good doctor, and because of that, he was pretty sure he knew how Monday's Hand-to-Hand section was going to go.

Cupcake was clearly pissed from the get-go, and it was entirely predictable that he was going to reassert his 'authority' by teaching someone a lesson. By Leo's reckoning that meant that Cupcake was either going to pick Phillips or himself for the demo. Leo’s money was on himself, and although he worried that the still overloaded infirmary couldn't lose one more attending for the hours it would take to patch him up, he was rooting for Cupcake to pick him, since Yu had silently slipped in the side door.

The one thing that Leo hadn’t counted on, in so many ways, was the Jim Kirk Principle, which in this case meant that Kirk did everything he possibly could, taunting Cupcake, and egging him on, to make it so that Cupcake had to fight him, and not Leo. As the demonstration wore on, and Cupcake couldn’t get a hand on Kirk, he got more and more angry.

And Kirk? Kirk just got more calm, but more mouthy at the same time, until the instant that he pinned Cupcake definitively, signaling the end of the demonstration. Except, of course, that Cupcake had other ideas, so after Kirk walked off the mat, Cupcake stood up and gave Kirk a heavy shot right to the kidneys. Unfortunately for Cupcake, that earned him an elbow to the face as Jim spun, pulling Cupcake's head down before he threw an uppercut that felled the bigger man like a fucking tree.

Up until that moment, Leo had not realized just how very much Jim was holding himself back. He got out his medkit to make sure that Cupcake wasn't dead, but positioned himself so that he could see what happened next.

The long moment of silence was broken when Kirk swung back around to face the group. “OK,” Kirk said, voice raspy, “what’d I do wrong there?” He wasn’t even breathing that heavily.

“Um …” one of the littlest kids in the back said, “You turned your back on him, sir.”

Leo quirked an eyebrow at the kid's tone, but Jim was still calm and serious-faced.

“It’s Kirk,” Jim said, “or Jim. And you’re right …” he looked at the kid quizzically.

“Balasubramanian,” the kid piped up.

“Good answer, Subie,” Jim said breezily, while Balasubramanian beamed. “Why was turning my back wrong?”

There was another long pause.

“Because he fights dirty?” Another kid said, as if he wasn’t sure.

“Listen up,” Jim said, very seriously. “Everybody fucking fights dirty. Everybody. Because fighting, when it's real, is about survival, about one of two basic instincts: fight or flight.” He counted off the two instincts on his long fingers, and let that statement sink in, while Leo stared at him, wondering who the hell Jim Kirk really was. "And if you're going to survive out there in the black, you damned well better know how to do both."

Jim clapped his hands and rubbed them together, then began pairing a bunch of students on the mats, reserving the least in shape and littlest kids for a second group. He ran the first group through a basic drill, put one them in charge of calling out the forms. He pushed Bones into that formation, and then
he went back to the group of young kids and started working with them on posture and balance. He
got teeterboards out for some of the kids, and made them work on them. Leo glanced over his
shoulder at Yu, who was no longer hiding his presence in the room, but had made no motion to stop
Kirk, and was watching with an assessing expression on his face.

When section was over, Yu walked directly over to Kirk, who didn't flinch and wasn't exactly
defiant, but wasn't backing down, either. "I guess you think you should be teaching this section," Yu
said.

"I think someone should be teaching this section," Jim said plainly. "And actually teaching
something of value."

Yu's answer was to strip off his black commander's tunic and to take off his shoes, and Leo felt his
throat go dry at the sight of Yu's muscle-bound physique under his t-shirt. Christ Almighty, but
somebody was going to get hurt, and he wasn't going to stand around and watch. He ordered
Cupcake to go to the infirmary, re-packed his medkit and walked out the door of the gym, only
catching a glimpse of Jim's focused expression as he and Yu began their battle.

Two hours later, just after he began his shift, Yu and Jim came into the Infirmary, leaning on each
other and laughing. Jim's face was beat to hell, and he was favoring his left side. Unless Leo missed
his guess, his left shoulder was out of the socket and his ribs had taken a pounding. Yu was limping
and his face was covered with blood from his clearly broken nose.

Leo rolled his eyes and ordered them both to the one area not filled with 'flu patients, and began the
laborious process of patching them up. Because he was pissed, he took care of Yu first.

Yu squinted at him through swollen eyes and announced, "Your friend has just become the first ever,
first-year section leader."

"Imagine my surprise," Leo said sarcastically. "And stop fucking moving unless you'd like me to
leave your nose at that angle."

Yu quieted down and only talked to Kirk about lesson plans and expectations when Leo'd moved on
to his leg. He left after ordering Kirk to appear at his office at 0800 the next day, clapping Leo on the
back while he was assessing Jim with his tricorder.

Jim was silent while Leo stepped toward him, but shifted to the edge of the bed and spread his legs
so that Leo could stand between them. Leo'd never had a patient that so aggressively wanted the
doctor to invade his personal space. "I'm going to make a lesson plan for you, too, Bones," he said
quietly. His color was still high from fighting, and Leo could practically hear the adrenaline zinging
through his system.

"That a fact?" Leo drawled, lining up hypos on the tray with some satisfaction.

"Yep," Jim said, and Leo started at the feeling of Kirk's hand wrapping itself around his hip the way
it had the other night, and he looked up, straight into Jim's bloodshot blue eyes. "Going to make sure
that you're capable of disarming an enemy, teach you to use whatever weapons you have at hand to
defend yourself and sickbay."

Leo picked up one of the hypo sprays menacingly, and he heard Jim chuckle, then felt his long
fingers flex on his hip, his thumb rubbing against the ridge of his external obliques. Jim was
watching him, his eyes twinkling with amusement and something that looked a lot like affection,
before he closed his eyes and lifted his chin, exposing the long line of his neck. "Go ahead, Bones,"
he said quietly. "I'm all yours."
Chapter 5

Of course, he wasn't, really. All Leo's, that was.

In fact, in the weeks that followed Jim's rise to section leader status, Leo saw less of him than he had at any time since they'd met. Jim had held firm on his promise of making up a lesson plan for Leo's training, and they pursued that, although they often sparred alone in the gym later in the evenings, when typically they'd have been drinking. Truth was, Jim used a drink after sparring as bait, and Leo wasn't that averse to either offer. Jim was a surprisingly good teacher, but stubborn as all get out, refusing to let Leo pull punches and meticulously analyzing the way Leo fought so that he could teach Leo skills that he would need, and how to avoid traps that his shortfalls would lead him into. Jim was mysterious about where he'd learned all of these skills, brushing Leo off with his juvenile delinquent past, and some crap about learning how to fight in the county system gym. While Leo was sure there was an element of truth in that, he was also sure that wasn't all there was to it by a long shot. But Kirk, the man full of a thousand boasts and bullshit stories, was uncharacteristically closed mouthed on the subject, wanting Leo to focus on the work and chiding him 'to stop fucking around, Bones, we're working here'.

Leo would have liked to believe that only he was getting such special treatment, but the fact was that first thing in the morning, on his way to the infirmary, he would often see Jim running through the quad to the track facility, with streams of kids and some of the older students following him, huffing and puffing at first, but getting steadily stronger as the weeks rolled on. And that was only one of the activities that Jim had organized for his section: he'd taken them rockclimbing (Leo had passed); hoverboarding (ditto); surfing in the ocean in the surprisingly hot late fall (tritto) and cross-country running on the hills in Golden Gate Park. That last one Leo had attended, and the scenery really had been beautiful. Leo had noticed it, while he lay there attempting not to pass out, after they finally got up to the top of an incredibly high hill. Jim had just laughed and flopped down next to him, close enough that Leo could feel Jim's heart beating against his elbow, and then began pointing out figures that he could see in clouds until the rest of the section lay down, joined in and began calling out their own delusions.

Jim was an enthusiastic and positive section leader, and distinctly hands on. He'd never been one to shy away from physical contact, and more often than not, he would place a hand on the shoulder of a person he was correcting, adjusting their limbs to make them get into position, or tapping muscle groups that they weren't using but should be. Such behavior was so pervasive that it took Leo a while to notice that Jim never touched Federova, and a couple of the other kids, not once. Instead, when he demonstrated forms to her or those others, he stood alongside them and directed their attention to the mirror, patting the part of his own body that they needed to adjust. The thing was, Leo didn't think that Jim actually knew in any definitive way what had happened to Federova, but there was something about the way she held herself, something about the way the other kids held themselves, that Jim had zeroed in on, the same way that Leo knew when a patient was guarding an injury or not telling him the whole story. It was not a skill that Leo would have thought that Jim had, because it indicated that Jim had a level of understanding of body language that was pretty sophisticated.

It made the situation that they were in that much more confounding, frankly. Jim was a walking contradiction. He was … Jim Kirk.
One of the skills that Jim was adamant that the littler kids had to master was disabling a larger opponent to get them down to a level where a knockout blow could be administered. Fedorova, in particular, had been having a hard time with the kicks meant to take out an assailant’s knee, but Jim kept after her, trying to get her to do it to him. He didn’t use any of the bullshit tearing down language that Cupcake or Leo's old section leader had used, just kept telling her that she had to do it, that she had to make it hurt to make it work. He adjusted his guards and stood opposite the girl, encouraging her to kick him, to use the core of strength that women had in their lower bodies to deal the necessary blow. He assured her that he could take it, pointing to Leo, who’d stopped doing anything other than watching and had moved to less than three meters from them and said, "Even if you break my knee, my friend Bones here will fix me right up. He’s a doctor, you know."

He smiled at Federova, all charm and seriousness somehow intermingled, and then said in a low voice, “Do it. I know you can do it.”

And goddamnit, if that girl hadn’t lashed out and kicked him with all her might. Leo held his breath as the monitor light on the guard blinked and then flashed red, signaling a direct hit.

Jim smiled, huge and happy. "See?" He bowed to Fedorova, and then held out his fists at waist height in front of her. "I knew you had it in you. I knew it!" He crowed.

And Fedorova? She leaned forward and bumped her closed fists on Jim's, lightly, her eyes shining, and a huge smile on her pretty face.

Leo felt a lump in his throat at the sight of her, at witnessing the restoration of some of her physical confidence. And that right there, that Jim Kirk, pushy bastard extraordinaire, that he could do that, could motivate her to learn and to take even the smallest piece of what had been stolen from her back, that was the moment that Leo knew, he knew that Jim Kirk was going to be a great Captain.

Jim pulled back, pointing a finger at Fedorova. "You're the woman, Fedorova! See that, you guys?" he bellowed at the section, giddy with success. "That's how you do it!" The warning bell sounded, so he raised his voice. "Next section, we're going to work on sweeping the feet out from under a disabled opponent! Do your drills!"

He pointed at Fedorova one more time as the section began to disperse and she waved, turning to run after her classmates. Then he turned to Leo, arms raised above his head, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Good j-“ whatever he might have said was lost when Jim bounded over to him and caught him up in a huge hug, lifting Leo completely off the ground in his exuberance, before planting him back down. He grabbed Leo's head with both hands.

"Goddamnit, Bones!" he announced, smacking a stinging kiss against Leo's cheek. "I am good!" He ran across the gym, hooting, doing a cartwheel that ended in a flip, then walked on his hands for a while, while Leo stood there astonished, watching him and laughing.

"Hey – help me clean up all this crap, all right?" upside-down Jim said, blue eyes blazing at Leo from across the way.

He flipped back upright with a bounce and Leo shook his head, trying to clear it. "Didja spend some time in circus that you forget to mention there, Jim?" The kid was like a hurricane, wild and elemental, but thrilling.

"Well … " Jim began, going over to an equipment locker with an armload of stuff, and Leo rolled his eyes. "I did know a girl who was in the circus. Well, she was mostly a girl, but you know, gender is
a speciesist notion, so … I can hear you rolling your eyes, Bones," he intoned, "You really need to expand your horizons and branch out a little – actually, maybe you should just get laid in the first place, but I'm telling you right now, despite your skepticism: it was hot."

Leo sighed, and stacked some mats.

+ Of course, every day was not sunshine and rainbows, because Cupcake had friends, and unsurprisingly, friends of dickheads tended to be dickheads.

Leo lost count of how many times Jim came to the Infirmary, or slid in his door late at night so that Leo could patch up his broken knuckles or bruised ribs. For a while there, Jim looked as if he hadn't slept in a week, since there was only so much that the regen could do to repair the constantly rupturing blood vessels under his blue eyes. Jim was adamant that he wasn't bringing Yu into the matter, and absolutely forebade Leo to intervene. In fact, the night that he'd argued with Leo the loudest on the subject, Jim had insisted that they'd get tired of picking on him after a while, because not only did he give as good as he got, he was better at fighting than they were. Besides, he'd lived through worse before, he said, then promptly clammed up when Leo pressed for details as to what the fuck he was talking about, shaking his head and going in to take a shower before he climbed in bed with Leo.

And that? Leo only had himself to blame for Jim's continued presence in his bed, although it didn't happen all that often.

Still, when it was the middle of the night, and Jim was exhausted and beaten to shit, he never said no when Leo offered to let him sleep over. The weird part was that as sexually frustrated as Leo was by the mixed signals that he was getting from Jim, he always slept really well with Jim next to him, sometimes needed to imagine the phantom weight of Jim's hand curled over his hip, the heat of him all alongside his back, to fall asleep on the nights that he wasn't there.

It was not normal, by any stretch of the imagination. It was fucking codependent and kind of pathetic, really, and Leo tried not to dwell on it too much.

+ Kirk had been right, of course, and after a while, Cupcake's asshole friends had stopped picking on him. Instead, they began picking on the littlest kids in the section, not beating them up or anything, but just being demeaning and generally insufferable. One of their favorite games was to leapfrog over Balasubramanian, who although tiny, really wasn't short enough to be gotten over without getting his head clonked by some dirtbag's junk. Leo had ranted and raved to Jim about the potential for spinal injuries and stress fractures from a 113 kg asshole pressing his full weight down on a 57 kg kid, but Jim had just gritted out that he'd take care of it.

Leo wasn't on the quad the day that Balasubramanian dropped into a roll when Griffin, all 200 cm of him, tried to leapfrog over him again and got dumped on his fat head by the 150 cm (if that) Cadet, but he smiled real brightly when Griffin was brought into the infirmary on a litter. He might have been stroking his hypospray menacingly, just a little. He'd already heard the story from the medics that had been dispatched to assess Griffin, and enjoyed hearing the reports about Griffin's moaning. He was a doctor, yes, but if anyone deserved a good compression head injury, it was Cupcake and all of his fucking miserable friends.

Leo had hoped that the cameras that dotted the quad here and there for security reasons had gotten a good angle on the whole humiliating situation but for once, reality surpassed his wildest dreams. By
dinner that night, it seemed like every Cadet on campus had seen the footage, and even though the upload link had to keep being shifted so that the administration wouldn't get their hands on it, Leo got a chance to savor it himself that night in his room with a nice glass of bourbon or three, and Jim leaning against him as they watched the footage over and over, wiping away tears of laughter.

"Tell me again how you jabbed him with the hypo," Jim said drunkenly from where he sat, balanced on the arm of Leo's desk chair.

Leo demonstrated with a flourish that set them off into fits of laughter again, Jim almost upending Leo's chair and the both of them.

"I fuckin' love these kids," Jim said expansively. "All of 'em. Even that one that smells." He paused. "Shields!" Then, "You're a doctor, Bones."

"I am," he agreed genially.

"Can't you tell Shields to use deodorant, or something? He is just rank," Jim was staring at him, and then began counting down. "5, 4, 3, 2, 1 … liftoff!" He threw his hands in the air, coming perilously close to flinging bourbon out of his glass.

Leo just stared back at him, eyebrows raised.

"I fucking love it when you do the eyebrow thing," Jim said. "But I still think you should give Shields the hygiene talk."

"Coward," Leo said.

"Am not," Jim scoffed. "As fuckin' if. Anyway, I'm going to have a party for these kids at Thanksgiving." he belched expansively and Leo waved his hand in front of his face. His eyes were watering again.

"Speaking of hygiene," he muttered. "Why Thanksgiving?"

"The bar'll be closed," Jim said. "And I talked Liam into letting me use it, for the kids. Ooh, eyebrow!"

"A bar, Jim?" Leo said incredulously. "Some of those kids are 15."

Jim shrugged. "I was drinking at 15," he said succinctly, "and so were you," he added grouchily, "so don't get all high and mighty with me, you boozebag. 'sides, Liam said no booze and I promised."

"You promised?"

"I did," Jim said huffily. "And that means you too, Bones."

"Who said I'm coming then?"

Jim cuffed him on the back of the head. "You are too."

Leo rolled his eyes.

"Run it again," Jim said, and they watched Griffin fall down and go boom, laughing even harder.

"I can't decide what I like more," Leo said, wiping his streaming eyes on the sleeve of his white undershirt. "The expression on his face when he realizes he's goin' down, or the one on his friend's faces when they realize that they've all been caught on video."
"I like Subie's face the best," Jim said, "that look he gives the camera just before he drops — he's a hot shit, that kid," Jim said. "He knew that Griffin was going to get him again today, so he had his friends waiting with their comms and they all filmed it."

"That explains all the different angles," Leo said with inebriated admiration. "And I have to say that their editing and sound effects are just superb." He might just have been slurring a little. "Those boys are a loss to the holovid industry, I'll tell you what."

"To Starfleet's gain," Jim said, and raised his glass in a toast, which Leo accepted, and they both threw back their drinks.

Jim shook off the bourbon burn and said, "Subie says it was all Sen and that other kid, you know …" Jim paused, and tried to compose himself, waveri, teetering precariously on the arm of Leo's chair, "Rajphan- Rajpha'-thon, fuck it, that's a hard fucking name, Bones. Raji. That kid, you know, the really teeny one." Jim made a drunken motion with his index finger and thumb that indicated that the kid was practically microscopic.

That time, they did end up on the floor, before they crawled to Leo's bed and passed out. But it was fucking worth the bruises, and the hangover.

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Chapter 6  

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Leo had always loved Thanksgiving, and this year hadn’t changed that fact, which was kind of strange. Thanksgiving was all about counting your blessings, being thankful for what you had, and when he looked back at the wreckage of his recent life, he had the sense that he should be more dissatisfied with where he was. After all, he'd worked for years and years to gain an education and professional standing, only to see it all come to nothing.

But as the holiday approached, he found himself oddly thankful. He'd been given an opportunity to — not exactly to start over — but something like it. He was still a doctor, and despite the grind of classwork again, when he'd sworn that he was all done with that, thank you very much, he found himself re-engaged intellectually, and challenged in other ways.

By Kirk, of course. Jim was a huge part of the reason his days were brighter, if he was honest with himself. He hadn't laughed this much in years, and despite the hunger for more that being around Jim created in him, the fact that he had an appetite for something after the long months filled with nothing but despair was a reason to be thankful.

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He was also grateful that the physical assaults on Jim, and the attempts at humiliating the littler kids in the section, seemed to have dissipated in the wake of the video of that had circulated around campus. He’d heard that a high-speed edit of the incident had ended up being broadcast in a survey class that all third years were required to take, just before the instructor walked in the room. Leo had his suspicions about how that had been accomplished, considering Kirk’s hacking abilities, but he kept his opinions to himself. If what he overheard at the infirmary and in his own classes was any indication, however, campus opinion was on the side of the ‘geeks’, an old-fashioned word that was back in vogue again. It had almost made Leo exhale his coffee through his nose the first time it was used in front of him — not that he didn’t identify as a geek, really. It was just that it had been a goddamned long time since he was in high school, and honestly, he hadn’t fucking missed it. At all.
His feelings on that matter were only solidified one afternoon when he heard whispering behind him.

“‘Yes?’” he said testily to the interns.

“Um, there’s something written on the back of your white coat, Dr. McCoy,” he was told.

“What is it?” Leo attempted fruitlessly to peer over his own shoulder.

“KFF,” the other intern piped up nervously, wetting his lips when Leo squinted at him quizzically. “I didn’t realize that you were KFF.”

“Huh?” Leo growled. He really did not have the fucking time for this juvenile shit.

“Kirk’s hand-to-hand section,” the second intern said. “The … the other guys, they call you KFF.”

“And what, exactly, does that mean?” Leo gritted out. He wasn’t really all that surprised when they told him. It should be a law of science or something, like Newton’s Third, except involving predictability, morons and lack of progress.

+  

“So …” Kirk said the next morning in section, looking at the group, most of whom had KFF stamped on one article of their clothing. Some kids had it on their backsides, some down the legs of their regulation sweats. It was across the crotch of Philips’ sweats, but he’d lost so much weight in the past few weeks that the letters were accordioned in on themselves. The KFF on Jim’s black t-shirt, however, was stretched tautly over his pecs, and he didn’t seem the least perturbed by its presence. Behind Jim, Leo saw Yu slip quietly in a side door. “You have to admit, the whole hacking the laundry thing is pretty genius, plus the fact that the stencil doesn’t show up until your body heat activates it,” he said, smiling as he shook his head. “It’s pretty sweet.”

The section stared at him gloomily as a unit, for once not responding to the Jim Kirk Sunshine Show.

Jim pursed his lips as he looked at the group. “So, I guess KFF doesn’t stand for Kickass Fighting Force? Or Killer Fighting Form?”

The group shifted uncomfortably and Leo was about ready to start hollering when Sen piped up. “It stands for Kirk’s Fighting Faggots,” he said.

Jim’s expression didn’t change one iota. “And we’re supposed to find that insulting, right?”

“Um, yeah,” another kid said, his voice cracking.

Kirk shrugged. “Boring,” he said, then continued as the younger Cadets made expressions of disbelief. “I mean, come on – you’ve gotta feel sorry for a bunch of guys who are so sexually insecure that this was the best insult they could come up with.”

He looked around the room. “This is the 23rd century, people! Are we still getting hung up on that kind of labeling bullshit? Or does anybody in this room really believe that being queer makes you weak, or unmanly … or unwomanly, or whatever … but you get my point.”

Some of the younger members of the class were stirring uncomfortably, but many of them were listening. “Seriously – I feel bad for them because they don’t appreciate the possibilities of IDIC because you know, basically as long as everyone involved is capable of consenting, it’s all good as far as I’m concerned: men, women, everything in between, tentacles – it’s all awesome, am I right?” Some nervous laughter had broken out, and Kirk pointed into the crowd. “Listen, do not knock
tentacles until you’ve tried them, is my point. If you don’t want to, that’s cool, because it should be about everybody having fun, and what’s wrong with that? And, you know what, if this is the worst insult that they can come up with, so fuckin’ what?”

Jim paused and looked around the room. “This is only happening because you’re all so totally fabulous that you’re starting to make people jealous,” he smirked at Leo, whose own t-shirt said KFF across the front. “They don’t know whether to punch you or to kiss you. So, that gives you the advantage, right? Because you are Kickass Fierce Fighters, and you will use any advantage you’re given. Insulting the enemy is a common tactic to get you off your game and make you lose focus during a fight, but how your opponent has sized you up – the ways that they choose to insult you, can give you valuable insight into their own weaknesses. Be smart.” He tapped his temple. “Don’t lose the fight up here first.” He paused. “All right. We’re going to take two steps back to previous fight postures, but we’re going to add trash talk.”

A hand waved from the group.

"Insult, Raji," Kirk said. "Think about your opponent and try to break their focus by being a total bastard. Let's work on it!" Kirk rubbed his hands together, and moved the class into forms.

Leo stopped when he felt a hand on his arm. “You got any more of those t-shirts?” Yu asked him.

“I’m pretty sure most of my t-shirts say KFF,” Leo asked. “Why?”

“Get me as many as you can spare,” Yu said, and his expression was thunderous.

Leo looked him in the eye, and saw the very real, personal anger lurking there and nodded. “I think my t-shirts will be a little small for you, Commander.”

Yu smiled, but there was something menacing about it. “All the better,” he said, and then moved on to speak to Jim.

+ 

Leo was surprised by the how crowded the campus was on Thanksgiving Day. Classes were canceled for both Thursday and Friday in celebration of the former American holiday, which had been adopted planetwide a hundred years earlier. Despite the fact that there had been many changes made to the celebration over the course of the past 600 years, roasted turkey (or a meat substitute for the vegetarians) was still the centerpiece course in the massive mess hall, which had been festively decorated in the harvest colors traditionally associated with the holiday. Despite this fact, the San Francisco weather still persisted in being far more warm than it would have been in Georgia. He felt a moderate amount of guilt at not making an effort to return there, but he’d used the twin excuses of having to work and his well-known dislike of shuttle travel to get out of having to go back. With his father gone, and Jocelyn … it would have just been a bad idea, in general. Besides, exams would start in ten days, and he had plenty to do here at the Academy. Not to mention that he was more than a little curious to see what, exactly, Jim had in mind for his party this evening.

He scanned the incredibly full room looking for Kirk, noticing that like him, almost all of the Cadets had opted for civilian wear. It changed the tenor of the room somewhat, contributing to a celebratory air and the volume of noise in the room, which was appreciably louder than a typical Thursday lunch.

"Bones!" he heard, above the din, and turned to see Jim standing up from one of the center tables, surrounded by some of their sectionmates from hand-to-hand, a couple of whom were waving. His lips curled up into a slightly sardonic smile. He should have known that Kirk would plant himself
right in the middle of the room. Jim hadn't dressed – in fact, he was wearing a tight white t-shirt and jeans, pretty much his standard civilian dress, unlike Leo, who'd put a black sport coat over a forest green button-down and a pair of black dress slacks.

He carried his tray full of sides over to the tables, which were adorned with carved platters of turkey and all the trimmings.

"Look at you!" Jim said appreciatively. "You clean up nice!"

"He does," said the woman sitting next to him, her red hair oddly complementing her bright green skin. She was wearing a one-shouldered blue silk dress the shade of Jim's eyes, and was altogether a riotous blast of color in the room. She was looking at Leo very assessingly, in the way that Orion women always seemed to. "Hello," she said sweetly. "I am Gaila."

She extended her hand, and then made a noise somewhat like a purr when Leo bent forward and pressed a kiss to it.

"Leonard McCoy," he said simply, as Jim leaned over Gaila and squeezed his shoulder with a smile. Leo greeted Philips across the table and was introduced to his wife, and exchanged hellos with the others from section that he recognized.

"Bones," Jim said to Gaila, who had yet to take her eyes off Leo after he sat down next to her on the crowded bench, the tight confines forcing him to notice that her dress was slit along the length of her toned green thigh. Even by the standard of Orion women, Gaila was lush and curvy, which only added to her sensual air.

"Oh," she said knowingly, and unless he missed his guess, she smelled him. "You are Jim's doctor."

"On occasion," Leo drawled, feeling slightly lost in the burst of her powerful pheromones. "And you are …"

"Gaila," she said again. She drew a finger down the back of his hand. "You are very pretty," she said serenely, in a quiet voice.

Leo smiled. "Not as pretty as Jim," he said, leaning close to her ear.

She pondered this for a moment. "There are many kinds of pretty to enjoy," she said, then turned to Jim. "Your doctor has dressed up," she said accusatorily, and Jim rolled his eyes as he passed Leo the platter of turkey. "It is a celebration," she stated, "so I dressed up."

She paused, and Leo, recognizing a cue when he was given one, said, "And we are all very grateful for that. You look lovely."

Gaila preened, then declined to take turkey, whispering to Leo. "It smells too strange to me," she said. "I never wish to eat in a place with so many beings – the food smells interfere with so much information. I like your smell," she continued conversationally, "I recognize it from when Jim smells like you."

Leo raised both eyebrows in surprise, and glanced across the table but Phillips and his wife were engrossed in a conversation with another Cadet who was standing in the aisle.

"Although, he never smells like sex when he smells like you. I do not understand this," she said plaintively.

Leo felt sweat break out on his lower back, and watched Gaila's nostrils flair. He was glad that her
voice was low, and that Kirk seemed to be involved in a conversation with Balasubramanian and Sen. "Because we don't have sex," Leo said simply, tamping down the response that he wanted to give, which was more along the lines of 'Get in line'.

Gaila's expression was shrewd as she weighed his answer. "Do you need a third partner?" she asked. "Because I would be happy to join you. In fact, I would be happy to simply watch, and achieve pleasure that way," she paused. "This is not an offer I make typically."

Leo nodded. "And, I'm honored by your offer, but ... I think that we're fine for now." He stopped, brain whirring. "Uh, thank you."

Gaila watched him for a moment longer. "I do not withdraw my offer," she said. "So you may change your mind."

Leo smiled anemically, but luckily, Gaila's attention was drawn away by new people arriving at nearby tables. He turned and looked at Jim over her head, unsure of how much Jim had overheard, but Jim just shrugged with a mischievous smile, eyes dancing.

"Gaila is Uhura's roommate," he said.

"Ah," Leo answered, having heard quite a great deal about Jim's fruitless quest of the elusive Uhura over the months. He couldn't exactly blame him. She was a strikingly beautiful young woman, but Leo doubted that she would ever give Jim a tumble.

"Yes," Gaila said, "and she offered to take me home again this year with her, but I had already done that." She paused, looking around the room with bright eyes before her eyes lit on Leo again, and then to Jim on her other side. "I like doing new things," she said pointedly.

Leo nodded, as Jim grinned. "What are you studying here at the Academy, Gaila?" Leo asked, changing the subject and tucking into his surprisingly good meal.

"Everything," Gaila said, "but I particularly enjoy the computational sciences and the applied physics involved in the mechanics of warp theory." Her voice still had that same serene cadence.

"So, you'd be going for Engineering when you go back up into the black?" Leonard said.

"Yes," she said. "I'm very much interested in that. Oh," her blue eyes widened and her mouth held the 'o' shape as she looked over Leo's shoulder.

He turned to see what she was looking at, and noticed Commander Yu walking slowly but purposefully over to their table. Like Leo, he'd opted for a black sport jacket, but his was cropped at the waist and fitted, tailored over his taut arms and tapered to show off his toned abdomen. He was wearing black jeans that looked like they'd been similarly tailored, and like Jim, he was wearing a t-shirt, although Yu's was a black Starfleet standard issue t-shirt. In fact, Leo was pretty sure that it was one of his t-shirts, from the way the letters KFF were rippling over Yu's incredibly sculpted chest.

Leo had to admit that Yu was a damned fine looking man, as was the man walking behind him, carrying two trays and wearing a red hooded sweatshirt over a white KFF t-shirt and a pair of tight blue jeans. With surprise, Leo recognized Paul Barresi, who was an attending and an instructor at the medical school. He'd known that Paul was married, but up until now, he'd not realized that he was married to Harrison Yu.

"Cadet Kirk," Yu said in his command voice, and Jim snapped up from the table.

"Commander Yu," he said, with a small smile.
"I just came to wish you and some of my favorite fighters a Happy Thanksgiving," he said. Yu had not changed the level of his speaking voice at all, but he sounded louder as the room had quieted around him.

Jim nodded, "Thank you, sir." He looked around the table at the assembled members of the KFF, many of whom were agog. "On behalf of the KFF, I'd like to wish you and Lieutenant Commander Barresi the same."

"Thank you, Kirk," Yu said, "Enjoy your holiday, everyone. I’m sure that I’ll be seeing some of you later." As he turned away, the noise in the room rose back up. Yu and Barresi made their way over to the Officers' Table, which was set up on risers at the head of the room. A number of the officers had opted to join in the common festivity and not eat in the Officers' Mess, although most were junior officers. Still, Leo was surprised to note that one or two of them were also wearing KFF t-shirts.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," he said aloud.

"It's a long way from 'don't ask, don't tell', eh, McCoy," Phillips said, eyes twinkling. "Good for him. That fuckhead – "

"Bill!" his wife said.

"Hanlon," he continued, "is behind you, and he looks like he wants to sink down through the floor."

"Yeah, well," Jim said, crowding Gaila up against Leo. "That's the problem with flailing in a fight, right there." He smirked at Leo, "You never know who you're going to hit."

Leo looked at Gaila, who seemed to be pouting. "Are you all right?"

"I do not understand Terrans," she said. "He –" she pointed up at the high table. "did not even look at me."

"Honey, he's gay," Leo said gently.

"I know," she said sternly. "I just do not understand such unilateral behavior. It is very frustrating!"

"Ah," Leo said. "Not for him. He is happy with his husband."

"Monogamy," Gaila said darkly, as if it were the nastiest thing she'd ever heard of.

"Yes," Leo said.

"It's unnatural," Gaila said surely.

Over her shoulder, Jim Kirk laughed.

Leo would have thought that Jim would be on a high after Yu’s display in the Mess Hall, but Jim’s mood seemed to have darkened by the end of the meal. Of course, Gaila had also disappeared, so Leo assumed that he’d been thinking of continuing the celebration in other ways.

"Hey," he said, nudging Jim with his shoulder. Jim was leaning against the table, scowling down at his empty plate. "Why don’t you just comm her?"

"Huh?" Jim looked puzzled.
"Gaila?" Leo said, waving a hand in the air.

"Nah," Jim said, “I’m sure she’s having fun.” He indicated Leo’s clean plate with his chin. “You done?”

“I think I ate quite enough,” Leo said drolly. “You?”

Jim had consumed more than his typical astonishing amount of food, but there wasn’t so much as a crumb on his plate. That wasn’t too surprising -- Jim probably burned twice as many calories than most in a day, just by the way he bounced through it.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jim said.

“What do you want to do?” Leo asked. “There’s football on the quad.”

“Watching or playing?”

“Both, I’m pretty sure,” Leo answered, and Jim contemplated this with a wrinkled brow, but Leo could tell he had little enthusiasm for either. He couldn’t quite get a handle on Jim’s mood, but decided not to push.

They walked the long way to the graduate student dorms, strolling in the warm afternoon sunshine, not talking much. Jim’s contemplative mood continued, and they ended up filling Leo’s flask with bourbon ‘as a digestive aid’ and flopping on the smaller, quieter quad in front of Leo’s dorm. After a few sips, Jim wanted to hear stories about Thanksgiving in Georgia, and surprisingly, Leo was willing to oblige, telling Jim stories of four generations of McCoys eating at tables jammed into every room in the house, and of the year that it was so cold that the teenagers, who were routinely exiled to the veranda in an effort to contain their voluminous energy, had gotten stinking drunk and pilfered all the coats from the upstairs bedroom to use as blankets. Unfortunately, before the plan could be put into motion, Leo’s cousin Tim had barfed all over the stack of them, which set off a chain reaction of barfing the likes of which Leo hoped never to see again, as long as he lived.

“Man, that was ugly,” Leo finished as they wound down from laughing, wiping his eyes and dropping his head back on the ground and accepting the flask from Jim. He was laying on his back, one arm up under his head, probably straining the shoulder seams of his jacket beyond their capacity. Working out and sparring with Jim had built his shoulders up more than they used to be. “You ever have holidays like that?” Leo asked casually.

Jim was laying on his stomach right next to Leo, plucking pieces of grass from the lawn and sucking on them, fruitlessly looking for sweet grass. “No, there was never that many of us to start with,” Jim said, “and my mother wasn’t around all that much.” He paused, and Leo wondered if he’d expound on the subject at all. “When we were little, we used to go to my Grandma Kirk’s,” he said, and smiled a little. “She was cool. She didn’t even get that mad at me when I set the turkeys free.”

“Jim, you didn’t!” Leo asked casually.

“I was maybe four,” Jim said, defensively. “And very concerned about where the meat was coming from. Did you guys pick a turkey to kill and eat that you'd fed for weeks before?”

“No,” Leo said, slowly, “and that does seem a little barbaric, now that you mention it.”

“Well …” Jim said, “I wouldn’t go that far, but I was little, and I couldn’t believe that we were going to kill Joe the turkey.”

“Aw …” Leo said, teasingly. “you named him, baby Jim.”
Jim nodded ruefully, and pointed at Leo. “Four,” he said. “But that was the Thanksgiving I learned that really don’t like just vegetables for dinner. The end.” He lay down on his stomach, eyes twinkling.

“It’s better for you, though,” Leo pointed out, passing the flask back.

“Blah, blah, blah,” Jim mumbled. Jim's lids were shuttering in that way that they did when he was fighting sleep, and Leo figured that between the bourbon and the huge meal, it wasn’t long until he followed him into unconsciousness.

He accepted the flask back from Jim and closed it, propping it against his hip as he closed his eyes and basked in the sun. Leo'd settled into a light doze that was disturbed when he felt the press of Jim’s body up against his side. He opened his eyes, but Jim appeared to be fast asleep. As Leo watched, he could see Jim’s eyes moving under his lids, and feel Jim shiver. He shifted closer to Leo, and Leo eased up and away gently, peeling off his suit jacket.

Before he could spread it over Jim, he turned onto his side, creeping closer to Leo and curling in on himself. Leo draped the jacket over Jim before he lay back down, putting his arms under his head and looking up at the blue sky with a yawn. To his surprise, he felt one of Jim’s hands spreading out over the curve of his side, right over where his heart beat, a little faster now. He forced himself to breathe down and to lower his heart rate, but Jim never noticed, just slept on, with a slight curve bowing his mouth.

Leo watched him until his eyes could no longer stay open.

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Whatever the mood was that Jim had been in earlier, Leo was seeing no evidence of it at 2030 hours at Finnegan's. The chairs and tables had been pushed out of the way, and the sound system was cranking away at ear damaging decibels while Jim danced with the KFF, bouncing from group to group like he was made out of springs. Leo couldn't help but smile as he watched him, laughing and talking with all the kids and the older Cadets that had shown up. Jim was proud of himself, and he had a right to be.

Next to him, behind the bar where they were guarding the alcohol, or at least insuring that none of the genius kids figured out how to disable the force field, Paul Barresi gave him a nudge.

"He's pretty damned gorgeous," he said of Jim, giving Leo a look.

"That he is," Leo agreed. He couldn't believe that he was having this conversation for the second time in one day, and bluntly added. "He's the best friend I've made in forever."

Paul looked at him searchingly, and Leo sighed. God, he needed a drink, but he'd promised Jim to hold off until the kiddies were gone home to meet curfew.

"I just got divorced three months ago, Paul," he said.

Paul reached a hand out and squeezed his shoulder with a sympathetic look in his eye. "I'm sorry, Leonard," he said. "I knew that you were divorced, but I had no idea it was so recent. I'll just shut up over here."

Leo smiled sardonically and changed the subject. "Where'd the hell did Yu get the money to make the shirts?" he asked. Finnegan's was currently full of folks wearing t-shirts that looked like they belonged to a baseball league, with KFF across the chest and a name and a number, or something, on the back.
"He took it from the third year discretionary fund," Paul said, sucking on an ice cube.

"You are shittin' me!" said Leo.

"Nope," Paul said. "Harry doesn't play around. They'll be no year end party for them."

"Wow," Leo said. "Still, nice touch with the backs of the shirts."

"That was all Kirk's doing," Paul said. "He was going to make the shirts up himself, and had sketched out who got what."

Leo was already laughing, "I should have known," he said. Balasubramanian's shirt said 'Subie' and had a mu on the back of it, Sen's had a digamma and Raji an omega. "I'm pretty sure that if you put those five or so guys together, that you'll either get the formula for basic rocket fuel, or a very dirty word."

Now Paul was laughing.

"One of the two."

"What's with Bones?" Paul asked, nodding at Leo's t-shirt.

"That's just Jim being an ass," Leo said.

Paul looked at him quizzically, and he sighed. "It's a nickname he gave me almost the minute he met me," Leo said. "He persists in using it to irritate me."

"You really think so?" Paul asked disbelievingly.

Leo shrugged, feeling the wood of the shelf behind the bar bite into his knee where his oldest jeans had worn through. He figured that he'd better not dress up, not knowing what Jim had planned.

"Who knows?" he asked.

"You're number 1, I noticed," Paul continued.

"Yeah, and your husband is 99," Leo said as Yu crossed the room and came behind the bar to join them. "And Jim is the infinity symbol. I'm sure there's some deeper logic behind that, too, but I'm not sure we should try and figure it out."

Yu and Paul spoke quietly for a moment, and Leo searched out Jim, who had bounced over to Federova and was dancing with her and her friends. He sucked in a breath as Jim reached out a hand to the girl and then spun her after she placed hers in it. Then, he spun all of her friends, dipping the last one.

"Um …" Yu said, next to Leo's ear. "Did you ever tell him?"

"I'm a doctor," Leo said sternly, "not a gossip. No. I've never said a word, but he's always been really careful with her."

"I just think it would be a bad idea," Yu said uneasily.

"I don't think that Jim would cross the line with anyone that he's instructing," Leo said stiffly, and Yu searched his eyes. "But if it will make you feel better, I'll find out what his intentions are."

The tension in Yu's shoulders eased off a little. "I trust your judgment," he said. "Can you cover for a few minutes?"
Leo nodded and Yu pulled his husband out onto the dance floor.

"Hey," Jim said from across the bar. "Are you having any fun at all?"

"Yes," Leo said, filling him up a glass of ice water and handing it off. "Although I'm not sure whose bright idea it was to put me next to all the booze when I can't have any of it." He eyebrowed Jim, who grinned as he drained the glass of water. "Are you having fun?"

Jim nodded.

"The shirts are great, Jim," Leo said.

"Yu did 'em," he said, and Leo shook his head at his prevarication.

"Yu paid for 'em," he corrected, "but you did 'em."

Jim shrugged, and tilted his head, looking out over the crowd.

"By the way," he said. "Yu paid for them, and tonight, by using the third year's party fund."

"Sweet!" Jim said enthusiastically, before his face fell.

"Yes, Jim," Leo said. "It had occurred to me that those fuckheads are going to be trying to kick your ass, again."

"Well," he said, "at least you'll get more doctorin' time."

"Yeah, because that's the kind of doctorin' time I live for, Jimmy," Leo said. "Now tell me, what's up with you and Federova?"

Jim turned to look at Leo with an incredulous expression on his face and said flatly, "Nothin'."

"It didn't look like nothin' a few minutes ago," Leo said.

"That was just dancing," Jim insisted. "I want her to have fun."

"Jim," Leo said, "she's been through …"

Jim cut him off before he could say anything else. "I know she's lived through something bad, Bones," he said, holding up a hand. "But the point is that she lived through it, whatever it was. She's here. She should have fun."

"What kind of fun we talkin' about though, Jim?" Leo asked, arms crossed over his chest. "Because Jim Kirk and girls and fun, well … my mind starts trending in a typical direction."

"No," Jim said firmly, and he was starting to look pretty fucking irritated. "Aside from the whole she's in my section thing, Bones, everything about the way she looks at me lets me know that I'm too big, and I'm too loud and I'm too scary. And that is fucking fine," he said. "Because it's supposed to be fun, and that wouldn't be fun for her." He was staring at Leo, his eyes dark but vividly blue in the dim lights.

"Well, you know, Jim," Leo said. "A lot of people think that it should be sacred, and she might be one of them."

Jim shook his head, and looked down at the bar. He shook the ice out of his glass and into his mouth, crunching it fiercely before he looked back up at Leo, leveling his blue stare on him. "Well, I think
that fun is sacred," he said, "because it's a lot more rare than it should be. I also think that more people should try and understand that." He stared at Leo for another fraught moment, then turned away abruptly when a new song came on. "I love this song!" he said, and bounded back amidst the Cadets.

Yu nudged Leo out of the way of a stack of napkins and used them to blot his brow, laughing at the exuberant way that Jim was dancing as the song, nearly three hundred years old, filled the barroom.

"Is this the original?" Yu asked,
Leo nodded, his eyes glued to Jim, who was singing as he swayed his hips.

*I was born in a cross-fire hurricane
And I howled at my ma in the driving rain

Leo could feel the gooseflesh raising on his arms as Jim duck walked and then moved his mouth to the words. Behind his eyes, he could see his imaginings of the day of Jim's birth, of an impossible lightning storm in space.

"Jumpin' Jack Flash," Yu said, "perfect."

*I was raised by a toothless bearded hag,
I was schooled with a strap right across my back

"You know, no matter how many times this song has been re-made, this is still the best version," Yu said.

"The original usually is," Leo said, more by way of making conversation than anything else.

*But it's all right now, in fact, it's a gas!
But it's all right, I'm Jumpin' Jack Flash
It's a gas, gas, gas!

"You think so?" Yu said. "That closes the door on improvement."

In the middle of the dance floor, Jim danced around in a circle, bouncing up and down with his arms over his head.

*I was drowned, I was washed up and left for dead.
I fell down to my feet and I saw they bled.

"But the innovation has to come first," Leo said, eyes still glued to Jim. "Without the original, there's nothing to build on." He strained to remember the last words of the song as Jim continued to dance.

*I frowned at the crumbs of a crust of bread.
Yeah, yeah, yeah
I was crowned with a spike right thru my head.

Leo's breath caught in his throat as Jim turned around and pointed at him behind the bar, then motioned for him to come out to the floor while he continued mouthing the words being sung by a long dead rock 'n' roller.

*But its all right now, in fact, its a gas!
But it's all right, I'm jumpin jack flash,
It's a gas! gas! gas!
Jim Kirk turned in the strobing light, jumping like he could defeat gravity, just by trying.

Chapter 7

Five days before the Christmas break, and with two tests left to go, Leo got the comm that he’d been dreading. He found himself on a shuttle back to Georgia less than 36 hours later, having made arrangements to take his final test during the winter break. He’d commed Jim to tell him what had happened, but hadn’t heard a peep out of him before he left. He wasn’t all that surprised. Aside from his oversized course load, Jim had convinced his advisor to let him prove that he knew the material in some of the survey courses in second year by taking the finals. If Jim achieved scores in the 90th percentile, he’d be able to continue on his accelerated class schedule.

So, Leo wasn’t surprised not to hear from Jim, but he had to admit that it would have been nice to hear a familiar voice before he left on the shuttle. He was never going to be easy on the infernal things, and Jim had distracted him after he’d run out of things to rant about on the way out to San Francisco. He doubted he’d find such an amenable seat companion this go-round -- he never had before. To make things worse, he knew that he could no longer rely on getting himself blind drunk like he’d done the last time, not while he was in uniform. Instead, he’d hypoed himself with a mild dose of anti-anxiety drugs, reflecting with grim amusement that now if he blew up or boiled in his chair, he’d find it so much less upsetting.

The Starfleet Shuttle service was less than half-full of uniformed personnel and civilian employees who transferred from the shuttle bay in Atlanta to the transporter station in a quiet and orderly fashion. It was odd how conspicuous Leo felt, especially in light of the fact that he’d been at the Academy and wearing his Cadet reds for months now, but it was easier to fit in San Francisco, where the sight of Cadets and other uniformed personnel was just a part of the scenery. Here, he could feel the stares of passersby, and was even more startled to receive an occasional nod, or salute. The whole experience felt alien, and not just because of his reds – he felt like he was seeing Atlanta itself, the city that had been his home as a married man, the one that he’d grown up on the outskirts of, with new eyes.

He knew, of course, that Atlanta had a history of being a city of constant change, one that adapted and evolved, a trend that had begun nearly 400 years before when Sherman had burned it to the ground. But the city had willingly overwritten its own landscape in the name of progress after that, long before it had been completely destroyed by the devastation of WWII. That had been more than 200 years ago, and yet in many ways, it felt like the city had been being rebuilt Leo’s whole life. Of course, San Francisco had been mostly destroyed as well, but the redevelopment there had been more referential to what had been. Here in Atlanta, there was an emphasis on the new, the best, that suddenly seemed vulgar to Leo. It left him adrift without landmarks of his own past, a thought that occurred to him as he passed by the site of the first apartment complex he’d lived in with Jocelyn before they married. It was an empty lot now, with a sign announcing that new luxury units would be available for rental in 2257.

He found himself glad as the city receded from view, as his rental car took him closer to the country roads on the way to the place he’d always thought of as home. And that in itself was odd and untrue, because he hadn’t actually lived there for longer than a few weeks at a time since he’d left home for college. He’d been just as young as the kids in the KFF then, all rawbones and gangly, pining for Jessica and longing for the time they spent together on his breaks. It seemed impossible now, as old as he felt.
As the landscape outside changed from scattered ex-urban development to wide open country vistas, he opened the windows. The air was mild for December, and smelled fresh and full of the land. He navigated off the highway without a thought, winding over roads so familiar that even now he recalled where bumps had been, although they had disappeared, smoothed over by repavings. He wondered what the new surface hid, what this road had been before in lifetimes long gone. It was no idle musing on his part. Of Paw had always warned them that the ground here wasn't as solid as it looked, that back in the days before WWIII and the subsequent nuclear winter, that these fields had been towns, and home to hundreds of thousands of people. He'd told them stories of farmers who had lost tractors when spring rains had softened the ground enough for the cellars of homes long destroyed to open up and swallow them. In the way of adolescents everywhen, he and his cousins had discounted everything they'd been told until the day Leo had plunged headfirst into one of those cellars after he'd jumped his favorite chestnut bay over the last of the hurdles they'd set up on a steeplechase course through the woods. He'd never forget the noise that Blackfoot had made as she fell, or the helplessness he felt when there was nothing to be done but to put her down. He'd done it himself, staring into her pain-filled eyes as he administered the hypo that stopped her heart.

So many of the turning points in Leo's life revolved around death. His childhood had ended when his mother and Joanna had died, his adolescence over there in that field. And his youth, the last piece of his innocence, had died the day that he held his father's hand while he pushed the hypospray gently against his neck, giving him the death that he'd begged for. It had all happened in the house behind the fence, at the end of the long road that Leo was slowly driving up. He had not returned since his father's funeral. Instead he'd returned to Jocelyn and their floundering marriage. Whatever had been left of his remaining optimism had received its coup de grace when the cure for his father's disease had been discovered not three months after his death.

As he pulled the car up to the turn out in front of the farmhouse that Ol' Paw's father had built, he could see his grandfather stand up from the wicker armchair where he'd been writing on a PADD, most likely composing his father's eulogy. Ted McCoy would be 90 in the spring, but his posture was straight and tall, his hair still black at the back and underneath the silver. Leo watched as his grandfather covered his eyes to counter the reflection off the windshield, trying to discern who was in the car. He sighed, but turned the engine off and got out of the vehicle, standing up tall. His grandfather stiffened at the sight of him, his face becoming stony and closed. "I'll get your grandmother," he said in a voice devoid of anything other than disdain. "Welcome home, Leo," he thought sardonically.

Re-entering his childhood bedroom was like walking into an archaeological dig of his past. There, under the boxes that he'd had shipped here after his divorce, was the bed that he'd shared with Jessica on the sly during those very rare times when his father and grandparents weren't at home. Of Paw hadn't cared that Leo and Jessica had snuck off to his room — well, that wasn't exactly true -- he'd cared. He'd made sure that Leo was actually using contraception and given him the dermal barrier gel that would shield him from STDs and other microbes. He'd liked Jessica, Of Paw, approved of her despite the fact that she was a couple of years older than Leo. Gram and his father were more worried about Leo, about the fact that he was 'a sensitive boy'. Really, they couldn't bear the idea that he might have his heart broken, something he both understood and resented. It had been his life to lead, his heart to break. And compared to what came after, the love that he'd had with Jessica still existed in memory as one of the only happy times that he'd known.

Leo shifted the boxes from the bed to the floor, intending to make up the bed with clean sheets, but couldn't stop himself from opening them to see what they contained. His clothes, including all his riding gear, in one huge box. In another, awards, degrees, the professional and academic detritus of his past life. In the last, he found stacks of handwritten journals and the telltale frames that he'd been
hoping for. That box he dug into, not truly surprised to see that Jocelyn had given him all of their wedding holos. He dumped the lot of them into one of the drawers of the dresser without looking. Maybe someday he'd be interested in revisiting that part of his past, but he couldn't imagine when that would be.

He moved down through the stages of his life, looking for images of his father, his mother, Joanna. Those were worth keeping, worth taking back to San Francisco with him, because even his desire to see Gram wouldn't be enough to bring him back to this house where his grandfather's rage and bitterness poisoned the atmosphere. It didn't matter how loudly Gram defended him, reminded his granddad that Leo had only done what his father had begged of him – he would always blame Leo for having killed his own father, for having failed not to discover the cure in time.

The thing was, Leo couldn't disagree with his grandfather on this point. He had failed. He'd fucked up and given in when he should have held on.

"Leo," Gram's voice was soft but stern next to him. She put a hand on his shoulder.

He'd been so deep in thought that he hadn't heard her enter the room.

"Leo," she said again, turning his face to look at her. She dried tears that he hadn't realized he was crying, and turned the frame of the holo he was holding so that she could see what it was. "Your medical school graduation," she said fondly, tracing first her son's face, and then his. "David was so proud of you, Leo – he still would be."

"Don't say that," Leo said. "You don't know that. He –"

"Leo –" she said sharply, and even though he was a grown man, he responded to the command in her voice and shut up. "He was my son," she said deliberately. "He grew under my heart, and I raised him. When his heart was broken and he brought you both to this house so that we could be together, who do you think he told his troubles to?" She smoothed back his hair, her voice gentler. "Do you think he didn't tell me about the burden he was placing on you? Do you think I didn't try and talk him out of it? Of leaving this world before me?"

Leo grasped one of her strong hands in his, but even though his own eyes were streaming with tears, Gram's remained dry.

"I begged, Leo," she said. "God help me, I pleaded with him to hang on, to give you more time, but …" her grip on Leo's hand tightened, and her voice broke then. "He was in so much pain. What you did for him was no crime, but a mercy. You were a good son to him," her voice rose when he shook his head. "You were a good son," she insisted. "I would never have wanted another for him, and neither would he. You've got to forgive yourself, Leo."

"He won't," Leo said harshly.

"Never you mind your grandfather," Gram said, in a low voice that held a bit of a growl. "His need for someone to blame because both of his sons have died before him is his problem, not yours. I love him, but he's a stubborn asshole like the rest of you hard-headed McCoys," she smiled fondly at Leo. "I've lost too much, Leo. I will not lose you." It was as much a threat as it was a promise. "You've been given enough burdens to shoulder in this world for two lifetimes. You deserve to be happy, Leo," she stroked his fingers with hers, then kissed him on the cheek and stood. "Get some sleep, boy," she ordered. "I swear that demon horse knew you were on the way, and has been kicking up a ruckus. You'll take him out in the morning before everything, yes?" It was hardly a question, but she smiled and leaned forward to kiss him again. "It's good to have you home," she whispered.
When Leo had slept, it was restless and unsatisfying. His dreams were full of his father as he looked in the worst days before his death, gaunt and hollowed out by pain. He woke with the smell of death in his nostrils – not the post-mortem suppuration, but the particular smell that the body makes as it dies piece by piece over the course of a long illness. If he were anywhere but here, he would have drunk himself into a state of insensibility, but his grandfather's hard words about his weakness, his constant drunkenness in the days after his father's death had stung, and he'd vowed not to give him the satisfaction. There'd be time enough for a big glass of bourbon when he got back to San Francisco, which would be tomorrow morning at the very latest.

By dawn, he'd organized what he was taking to be packed in a second duffel, and discarded the remainder as unworthy. If his grandfather chose to torch the rest of his belongings, there would be nothing destroyed that he'd miss. He began to dress for a ride, and was surprised to find that he couldn't really get his jodhpurs up over his thighs and that the ends of the breeches were taut around his calves. The damned things were supposed to fit snugly, but cutting off his circulation was not going to cut it. Pulling on his favorite riding shirt over the silk turtleneck also confirmed that he'd gotten bigger through the chest and shoulder.

He stripped them off and slipped quietly from his room to his father's across the hall, dark and silent in the morning light. Before illness had wasted him, David McCoy had been built like a broader version of Leo, so he had hopes that his father's clothes would fit. Leo stopped after closing the door, and before he turned on the light, drawing in a breath of pain at its emptiness. All of the medical equipment had been removed, the clutter cleaned off the bedside tables, and the holos that had stood there when his father was well had been returned to their previous positions. He carefully pulled one or two out of place, knowing that only his Gram would notice that they were gone, and she would not object to him taking his parents' wedding picture, or one of the four of them, the summer before it had all gone to hell. He blinked back the tears that threatened and crossed to his father's closet, only to find himself assaulted with the smell of his father's aftershave and his riding boots on the floor, all of the elements that added up to an olfactory memory of 'Daddy' in Leo's subconscious. He inhaled deeply, feeling the ache of pleasure in his chest just as sharply as the pain, before he fumbled for the light to find his father's jodhpurs and his favorite dark green riding pull over. On a whim, he also took a couple of his father's well worn flannel shirts, and his bathrobe to add to the pile of things he was taking from the house.

He slipped on the jodhpurs and they fit him like a glove, putting the subtle padding in the places where he'd need it most. It'd been months since he'd ridden, and no matter how much he worked out with Jim, he knew he'd be saddle sore tomorrow. He strode across the hall and stepped into his boots, which were broken in enough to accommodate the small changes in his calves, then dumped his gloves and crop inside his helmet as he went down the stairs. He was pulling his father's shirt on as he entered the kitchen and heard the intake of breath. Fuck.

"You know," his grandfather said hostiley. "Clothes most certainly do not make the man, especially in this case. Take that off."

"No," Leo said clearly, pulling the shirt down.

"No?" Ted echoed, with a crazed look in his eye. He stepped right up to Leo as Leo ignored him, tucking his crop into the top of his boot and putting apples in his helmet.

"No," Leo said firmly, and this time he looked his grandfather in the eye. Since he was taller than the older man, this forced him to look up, which seemed to enrage him more. Leo could see his intent as it was forming, and shifted his helmet to his left hand, easily blocking his grandfather's hand as it
went for the crop. By the time his grandfather went to swing at him, Leo'd put the helmet down on the counter and had pinned his wrist high up against the wall, using his body weight to keep Ted from doing more than grappling with him. And it occurred to him that he owed Jim Kirk several drinks, because he never would have been able to counter his grandfather so easily before. Then again, he'd never had to. Ol' Paw had always been there to stop his son from doing anything so foolish, and even Ted McCoy had not dared to disobey his father. But Ted McCoy was the patriarch now, and just about all he had left was his anger.

They struggled for a few minutes, eyes glaring murderously at each other, until Leo felt Ted realize that he wasn't going to get the better of a man nearly 60 years his junior.

When Leo was sure that his grandfather wasn't going to start up again, he let him go, taking his helmet and stepping back out of the range of his swing in one motion.

"I see you've learned something at Starfleet," Ted spat vituperously, rubbing his wrists one after the other. "You arrogant useless prick."

"You oughta know that the apple doesn't fall from the tree," Leo said, tossing him one from his helmet as he crossed the room to the back door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Leo ignored him, already halfway across the wide verandah.

"That's my damned horse," Ted insisted, coming out on the porch behind him as Leo strode the path to the barn. "And I forbid you to ride him!"

As if in answer, Leo heard the sound of Saturn whinnying in the barn and laughed out loud. "And who was it who told me that the horse chooses the rider, old man?" he taunted over his shoulder. At the sound of his voice, he could hear Saturn rearing up, his hooves clattering against his stall door as he called out for Leo.

He turned his back on Ted and pulled the large door to the horse barn open. Curious, the other horses came to the fronts of their stalls and Leo murmured and whistled to them, but went straight for the last filled stall, the one with the empty stalls on either side. He could see Saturn's black mane flying as he alternately bucked and reared.

"There's my beauty," he said as he got closer to the stall, and Saturn backed away from him, baring his teeth, eyes wild and angry. "I know, I know," he crooned, coaxing the horse forward.

"Shoulda known it was you, Doc," a voice behind him said affectionately. "He's been crazier than usual."

Leo didn't need to turn his head to know that it was Steve, the man who'd been their horse farm manager his whole life. He'd been calling Leo Doc since long before he had his degrees. "He's not crazy," Leo said. "He's high-spirited."

Steve laughed, but there was a sad note in it. "I'm afraid that he has gotten a little crazy without you," he said, and this time Leo did turn and look at him. "We let him out and run him, but there's only a couple of the hands that'll he tolerate riding him. I swear he's waiting for you."

Leo's heart ached, but like so many other things, there was little he could do about it. He felt the snort of Saturn's breath against his neck above his collar just before he felt the nip on his shoulder. He turned back to the horse, stroking a hand down his muzzle, then rubbing under his forelock where the white blaze shone, the only bit of light on the otherwise pitch-black horse. "That true, you devil?"
he crooned to the horse, who whinnied in answer. Leo put an apple on his palm and felt the skim of teeth as Saturn continued to make his displeasure known. "Are you gonna let me ride?" he whispered to the horse, staring into his left eye. "Are you?"

"He bucked the old man off last week," Steve told him.

"Good," Leo retorted. "How many times is that now?"

"More'na three dozen," Steve said ruefully. "I've told him that it ain't his horse, but he won't listen." He paused. "You should take him with you, Doc."

Leo sighed from deep in his chest as he opened the stall door and Saturn pranced out, then followed him to the tack room. "Where am I gonna keep him -- in my dorm room? Besides, he ain't my horse."

"The hell he ain't," Steve retorted as Leo saddled Saturn.

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Riding was the closest thing to flying that Leo did voluntarily, and he relished how the world became a blur when Saturn reared and then burst right out the door of the barn at a flat out run as soon as Leo's weight hit the saddle. The horse immediately bolted for the long trails that ran through the woods. Leo gave him his head, leaning forward and feeling the power of the horse between his legs, knowing that they were airborne as they rode together, Saturn's stride only touching back down every few feet to propel them forward at breakneck speeds. There was a special kind of grace that he felt in moments like this, a sympathy with nature that he'd only found in the partnership between man and horse. As they charged into the woods, the air streaming by them, he was awestruck anew that this magnificent animal had chosen him, allowed him this perspective of the world, the freedom that he felt astride him.

Jim would laugh at him, he was sure, seeing the contradiction in his willingly placing his safety in the hand of a 450 kg animal that most people thought was crazy. But he wasn't crazy, Saturn. He just refused to be broken, to be forced to run and perform in the ways that made a horse a champion in the circles that Leo's family moved in, and Leo had to admire the tenacity of spirit that made him stand his ground.

Aside from Gram, Saturn was the one thing that Leo missed about Georgia.

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Leo was fucking exhausted by the time he got to the last shuttle out of Atlanta that night. The situation with his grandfather was just impossible and ridiculous, and he'd whispered apologies to both his grandmother and Saturn as he'd left that evening. He knew that he'd hurt them both by leaving so soon, but he just couldn't countenance another confrontation with his grandfather. His control was slipping, and sooner rather than later, he'd have hauled off and belted the asshole right in the mouth.

It had been a day full of surprises. The first had been the feeling of a hand on his arm at the after-funeral luncheon, a hand that he hadn't felt the touch of in almost a decade, but still remembered. Jessica. She'd been off-world when his father died, but had sent condolence notes to him and to his grandparents, and he had no idea that she was back planetside. He told her so before he wrapped her up in a hug that told him that more things had changed than he'd first recognized.

He broke away from her and looked down to where her abdomen was slightly distended. "When?"
"I'm about halfway," she said, smiling up at him.

He stammered his congratulations, and she looked at him with a quizzical expression on her sweet face. Jessica had been a beautiful girl, but she was glowing with health and vitality as a pregnant woman. "I didn't even ..." he looked down at her left hand. "Why didn't you tell me you got married?" He couldn't keep the accusatory tone out of his voice. Sure, they were only sporadically in contact, but he'd invited her to his damned wedding years ago. He'd expected to receive the same accord from her.

Jessica was staring at him, eyes wide. "But I did," she said, "you declined."

He was shaking his head before she finished the sentence. "I never saw an invitation," he said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't gotten so much as a message from you for years other than the note you sent here when my father died."

Jessica's face was shuttered, as if something she'd long suspected had been confirmed. "I had hoped ..." she began, then stopped herself. "I'm sorry that you didn't know, Leo. I did write to you. More than once."

Leo huffed out a breath, suddenly glad that Jocelyn hadn't so much as sent a message herself, much less showed up. He'd been feeling a little wistful about that fact until precisely that moment, had felt sad that everything that they had, all that promise, had been reduced to gall and then ashes, and then ... nothing. He sighed. "When things were going to shit between us," he said, "she must have felt threatened." He shook his head. "I'm not making excuses for her, I swear," he said at Jess' dubious expression. "I just know the way her mind works. I should have made more an effort to stay in touch," he finished. "It's partly my fault."

He jammed his duffels into the overhead bins, grateful that he was early enough before the holiday rush that he hadn't had to check his bags through, then went to the head with his medkit and gave himself an even lower dose of anti-anxiety meds than he had on the way out. He had every intention of having a drink when he finally got his molecules back in order in San Francisco, and he had no desire to pass out before he had a chance to relax. Goddamned Ted McCoy and his vicious fucking mouth, he thought, washing his face. He'd ordered Leo out of his house the instant that they got back to it after the funeral, and even though Gram had practically ripped his balls off defending Leo, he'd been happy to go. It just wasn't fucking worth it to hang around for one more night, and one more ride on Saturn in the morning. He'd tried to explain it to Saturn, and then his grandmother when she came down to the barn to try and talk him out of it. God, he loved that woman – she'd put up with way more shit than she should have had to because of McCoy men, and he was ashamed to count himself among those who'd wounded her, but there was nothing he could do about it.

His life was no longer in Georgia, and this last trip 'home' had proven that beyond a shadow of a doubt.

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He'd dozed a bit on the way back, bringing his grand total of sleep somewhere close to four hours out of the previous 48, so at first he thought he was still dreaming when he saw Jim wearing practically the same outfit he'd worn the first time he saw him, minus the blood, standing behind the glass wall at the transport station in the waiting room. Jim was leaning back against the wall, one leg up and braced behind, drumming his fingers restively as he scanned the crowd. Leo blinked, but when he opened his eyes, Jim was gone. He sighed and moved along with the small crowd as it streamed out of the transporter bay.

"Bones!"
He almost heard the whistle of Jim's hand through the air as it moved toward him, and he braced himself, ready for the clap. So of course Jim surprised him by squeezing his shoulder and turning him to face him.

"You look like crap, Bones," he said. Jim looked like he hadn't slept all that much in the past couple of weeks, but he was full of his usual cheer and his nearly manic energy level. "I'm sorry about your great-grandpa," he said sincerely, blue eyes warm with concern. He pulled Leo forward into a far too brief one-armed hug before he peeled one of Leo's bags off of him and slung an arm across his shoulders.

Leo felt a mild déjà vu. "What're you doing here, Jim?" Leo asked.

"Taking your tired, sad ass out for a drink," Jim said. "Shit, Bones. Is packing light not a concept you've ever heard of?"

They'd ended up going back to Leo's dorm first to drop everything off, and Leo changed into jeans and a t-shirt himself, digging through his bags for this or that. When he came back out of the bathroom after brushing his teeth, he found Jim sitting on his bed next to one of the duffels, staring at a holo in a frame he didn't recognize with a rather awestruck expression on his face.

"Privacy, Jim?" Leo chided, but Jim just stared at him like he'd never seen him before.

"When was this taken, Bones?" he asked, turning the screen around so that Leo could see himself talking to Saturn, his brow resting below the horse's blaze, hands on the horse's muzzle.

Leo shook his head in surprise. Either his grandmother or Steve had taken the picture, and his money was on Gram. "A few hours ago, I guess," he said. "I didn't realize I wasn't alone."

Jim turned the holo back towards him and pressed the lower right hand corner, before turning the screen back toward him. "And this one?"

Leo barked out a laugh. Gram had caught him with an apple clenched between his teeth, offering it to Saturn. "This morning," he said.

"I can't believe you didn't get bitten," Jim said.

"As you shouldn't," Leo said, pulling out the same overshirt that he was wearing in the holo. His lip was still a bit tender where Saturn had nipped at it, and he rubbed where he'd regenerated it, watching Jim's eyes track from his lip to the shirt and back.

"He bit you?" Jim was incredulous.

"Not the first time," Leo said, turning the shirt upside down.

"And yet you keep feeding him that way?"

Leo shrugged and put his arms in the overshirt.

"And you say I'm reckless?" Jim chided.

"He's not gonna hurt me," Leo said, as if the very thought was the dumbest thing he'd ever heard of. "It's just his way of telling me that he was pissed at me for being gone so long, and also that he knew I was leaving."
Jim was staring at him again with that inscrutable expression on his face.

"What?"

"You really surprise me sometimes, Bones."

Leo pulled the shirt over his head, and when he popped back out, Jim was staring at the holo screen with a pensive expression on his face.

"What?"

"Look at you," Jim said, but this time he didn't turn the frame toward Leo, so he shoved his duffel bag back on the bed and sat down, feeling his boots push up against his sore backside.

"I'm riding," Leo said, wincing at the sight of the goofy but thoroughly necessary helmet he was wearing. As a point of fact, he was jumping, and Gram had caught him at the apex of Saturn's flight over the hurdle, when all of his legs were off the ground, and Leo was slanted forward tight over him, urging him on as they flew together.

"You're smiling," Jim said quietly. "I've never seen you smile like that."

Leo looked at Jim quizzically. "I'm sure you must have," he said.

"No," Jim said surely. "Never."

"I never said I was Mr. Happy," he remarked. "Are we going to get a drink or what?" He started to stand, but pulled the boots out of his bag to set them upright on the closet floor.

Jim advanced the holo, and a short film of Leo riding filled the screen. As he watched, Saturn burst out of the barn doors like he was being chased by the devil himself with Leo smiling and urging him on from above. "Wow," Jim said.

Leo shook his head. "It's just riding, Jim. You musta done some of that out in I-O-way," he said in exaggerated tones.

"Not like that," Jim said, eyes still glued on the screen. He must have looked up when Leo plopped the boots down on the closet floor, because he asked, "Hey, aren't you going to need those when you go home?"

Leo scratched his head with his back still to Jim and considered how to answer that question. Finally, he turned around and said simply, "I'm not going back, Jim."

Chapter 8

Leo should have realized that with only one more day of finals and the looming winter break, every bar near campus would be crawling with Cadets on the prowl, looking to make a memory to keep them warm during their nights back home with the parents. Then again, it had been a damned long time since he was in college. He and Jim had rejected several noisy, crowded and excessively hormonal options before ending up at Finnegan’s, a place where they were both comfortable
elbowing their way through the crowd. Luckily, the emphasis on bagging someone before it was too late meant that they only hung out on the edge of the bar for a while before they were able to snag two seats in one of the smaller booths at the back. Of course, that also meant that Leo’d gotten his ass groped a number of times as they walked back to claim their table, which … he supposed he should be complimented by the fact that the youngsters thought his old ass was still worth groping, but Jesus, did they have to choose the one night when it was so sore to play grabass?

Jim opted to cram onto the bench next to Leo rather than sit opposite him, which Leo assumed was because he wanted to scope out his options for companionship. However, after several drinks and one or two dances, Jim just kept coming back to the table.

“Somebody just grabbed my balls,” he announced as he returned from his last foray to the bar, his hands full of drinks.

“Congratulations,” Leo said sarcastically.

“It was actually kind of painful,” Jim said, kicking an empty chair over opposite to where Leo was slouching into a relaxed state of inebriation.

“Are you intimating that you need a doctor’s attention?” Leo asked, raising an eyebrow. He hoped that didn’t sound as dirty as he thought that it might.

Jim smirked at him and put the drinks down on the table. “Maybe later, big guy,” he said, sitting down and crowding up next to Leo. He leaned forward and shrugged out of his leather jacket before he leaned back and toed the chair over, putting his feet up on it. “But no, my point was that I usually like, you know, a basic introduction, maybe a handshake, before someone goes for the goods.”

“I did not know that about you,” Leo said, mock-seriously, jostling against him to get a foot on the chair. “That you have standards and all.” Leo moved the small table over so that their drinks were out of the line of fire.

Jim elbowed him, but didn’t knock his foot off the chair. They were pressed up against each other’s sides from shoulder to ankle now.

“Seriously, Jim, I thought it was more free-form than that,” Leo continued, maneuvering carefully to get his other foot up on the chair without upending the table. He crossed his feet at the ankle and slouched down a little more, taking his body weight off the sorest part of his ass.

“Well, I do like to actually see the person who’s copping a feel,” Jim said. He put the heel of his right foot on the toe of his left shoe and leaned across Leo to the table. “I can’t reach my beer, now,” he complained, reaching. He was holding his shot in his other hand.

“Sucks to be you,” Leo said flatly, and picked up his whiskey. They’d eschewed bourbon for Jack boilermakers, because Leo would be damned if he’d pay bar prices for the horse piss they dared to call bourbon. “Yeah, Jim, you’re a real old-fashioned guy,” he mocked, lifting his glass, but Jim’s hand covered it before he could knock it back.

“Wait,” he said. “Here’s to … what was your great-grandpa’s name?”

“Horatio,” Leo said fondly, touched at Jim’s thoughtfulness. “Horatio Ellison McCoy.”

“Horatio Ellison McCoy,” Jim echoed, his face serious. He raised his glass as he said it, then tilted his shot in Leo’s direction in lieu of clinking his glass, before he paused.

“He was a true original,” Leo said, around the lump in his throat, repeating Jim’s motions.
Jim’s eyes were serious as he held Leo’s gaze, never looking away as they both downed their shots, and Jim leaned across him to slam his empty down on the table that really was too far away from him. Leo was the first to blink, pretending that it was the burn of the Jack that had brought tears to his eyes. Jim didn’t say a word, just pressed his forehead against Leo’s, his hand resting on the base of his skull and rubbing his nape before he shifted and settled back along Leo’s side, a comforting, solid weight. His arm slid behind Leo casually, comfortably filling the empty space along Leo’s lower back that had opened up when he’d slouched to put his feet on the chair.

“So, tell –” Jim began, but a voice interrupted them.

“Hi,” a young woman said in a throaty intent voice, and Leo looked up. She was brunette, voluptuous, a second or third year. Ramirez, he thought her name might be. She glanced at him, but her eyes immediately snapped back to regard Jim with hungry interest.

“Hey, Aribel,” Jim said easily. “Bones, this is Aribel.”

She tipped her head to one side, exposing the long line of her pretty neck. “Bones?” she asked.

“Leonard,” he answered. He would have extended a hand to greet her, but Jim was a dead weight on his right side. He felt Jim shifting, and thought that he was moving to accommodate him, but was surprised when Jim just moved closer to him, dropping a head on his shoulder.

“Nice to meet you,” Aribel said, but he kinda doubted that from the tightness of her current expression, and the way her eyes had narrowed.

Next to him, Jim leaned across his body and managed to snag his beer, smiling triumphantly before he dropped his head back on Leo’s shoulder.

“I really love this song,” Aribel said in a meaningful voice. “And you did promise me a dance.”

“I did,” Jim said apologetically. “But I haven’t seen Bones for a couple of weeks, so … rain check?”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Leo said in his ‘I’m a big boy’ voice, just to fuck with Jim’s head the way Jim was fucking with his, and Aribel’s.

“He’s very generous, isn’t he?” Jim said fondly, and Leo almost inhaled a mouthful of beer up his nose when he felt Jim’s hand slide around his hip and stay there.

He looked up to see that Aribel had definitely noticed.

“Generous,” the young woman said. “Yeah. Well, I’m leaving in ten minutes, so … that’s how long your rain check is good for.”

“Thanks,” Jim said brightly.

Aribel looked confused and pissed as she walked away.

Leo wrested his arm out from where Jim had pinned it to his side and pinched a smirking Jim by pressing the **vastus medialis** and **lateralis** together with his strong hand on Jim’s thigh just above the knee, hard.

“Ow!” he complained, “what the fuck was the monkey bite for?”

“Why are you using me as a cockblock?” Leo growled.

Jim’s blue eyes widened. “Wow, say that again, Bones.”
Leo stared at him, unblinking.

"Seriously," Jim said. "That was really hot."

Leo flexed his fingers on Jim’s thigh threateningly and Jim began talking. “I promised her that dance a coupla weeks ago, before I found out that she’s kind of an asshole,” he said. “She thought the whole leapfrogging thing was funny.”

Leo searched Jim's eyes and seeing that he was telling the truth, eased up on his grip, but left his hand laying on Jim's knee.

“Besides,” Jim said, shrugged and settling back down against Leo. “I do feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Leo sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah,” he said. He dropped his head back against the bench and closed his eyes. God. He was really tired, and starting to feel it all: the alcohol, the shuttle lag, the funeral, his fucking grandfather, Saturn …

“Hey …” Jim said softly. “Tell me about your great-grandfather. Horatio. Was he a sailor?”

Leo couldn’t help the smile that crossed his face at the question. “There aren’t too many sailors from Georgia, Jim,” he said, turning his head and opening his eyes to find Jim’s face inches from his own, listening.

“I know one,” Jim said, with a small smile. “He’s gonna sail the stars in a couple of years.”

“Don’t remind me,” Leo groaned. “If I’m lucky, I’ll find a nice starbase somewhere.”

Jim shook his head. “That’s no fun, Bones.”

“Yeah, well that’s me,” he retorted sourly. "No fun Bones."

Jim looked like he wanted to say something, but stopped himself and said, “So, Horatio McCoy wasn’t a sailor.”

Leo shook his head. “He might’ve wanted to be, though. A real star sailor,” he said to Jim. “He did his time up in the black.” He thought about it. “More than his time, really. But that was before we really had Starfleet, just when the Academy was starting.”

Jim had an encouraging look on his face, but was otherwise quiet.

“You would have liked him, Jim,” Leo said, and he couldn’t help the smile. “He definitely would’ve liked you.” Shit, he was drunk, and if he wasn’t careful, he’d get maudlin and do something really stupid, like lean forward the few inches that separated them and kiss Jim’s pretty mouth. He shook his head. “He didn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, that’s for damned sure – the surest way to get something done was to tell Horatio McCoy that it was impossible,” Leo laughed. “Then, he had to do it – just to prove you wrong.”

Jim smiled at Leo. “You really loved him.”

“I did,” Leo said. “I did.” He took in a deep breath, and thought about whether or not he should say what he wanted to, searching Jim’s blue eyes. It was so weird, but despite the many unanswered questions and all the mixed signals, he trusted Jim. He knew that Jim was his friend, whatever else he might be besides. “We moved to the farm the summer I was eight,” he began, "after my mom and my sister died."
Jim’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry, Bones,” he said quietly.

Leo nodded. “Yeah, well. Thanks.” He sighed. “But, you know, everybody wanted me to talk about how I felt, and I just … I just couldn’t.” There was something … a flash of understanding, of empathy, in Jim’s eyes. “And Ol’ Paw – Horatio,” Leo clarified. “He was the only one who wasn’t at me all the time, asking me how I felt.” Leo smiled at the memory. “He taught me to fly fish, instead.”

“And you talked to him, didn’t you?” Jim asked.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “He was smarter than all of them put together. Don’t get me wrong,” he said, quaffing the rest of his beer. “They love me, and they were worried about me, but …”

“He was the one who understood you,” Jim said surely.

“Yeah,” Leo said, surprised at Jim’s insight. “He was.”

Jim nodded, and peeled himself away from Leo. “Save my seat,” he said. “I’m going to get us more drinks.”

“We should probably —” Leo began, but Jim leaned right into Leo’s space again.

“And we should probably drink another toast to Horatio McCoy,” Jim said.

And Leo huffed out a laugh, and let his head drop back against the bench. “Yeah.”

Leonard Horatio McCoy was drunk.

D.R.U.N.K.

Drunk.

The kind of drunk where he was prone to ramble, had to check himself to make sure that he wasn’t spewing too much of his inner monologue aloud, because even if he didn’t talk a lot (out loud, anyways) in general, he was sure as hell thinking a lot of things that he was better off not saying. Like how good it felt to lean up against Jim, to feel him bolstering Leo up from below as they staggered their way back to Leo’s dorm. They’d closed the bar, not surprisingly, and so far, Leo’d managed not to say one stupid thing like, 'You got such pretty eyes' or lips. Or cheekbones. Hell, Jim even had a pretty nose, fer cryin’ out loud.

“Jesus, Bones,” the prettiest man on Starfleet campus groused. “You are fucking heavy.”

“’ts’all muscle, Jimmy my boy,” Leo said grandly.

“Yeah, yeah, Muscles McCoy,” Jim complained. “Could you try and maybe use them just a tiny bit to support yourself?”

Leo tried to correct himself, realizing that he’d probably been leaning on Jim because he enjoyed the feeling of Jim's body pressed up against his far too much. The only saving grace in this whole situation was the fact that he was too drunk and too tired to get really hard.

Although, actually … now that he'd thought about it …

"Bones, man, what in the hell are you thinking about?"
"Huh?" He managed to rasp out, hoping he looked innocent.

"You have the most bizarre expression on your face," Jim said, propping him against a wall.

No, wait … Leo barely restrained himself from reaching out to grab at him as Jim moved away, but he started tipping anyway, and Jim planted one of his beautiful hands – the right one, Leo's favorite – against his chest to press him back against the wall. Leo looped one hand around Jim's wrist and spread the other one over Jim's hand. "Jim …" he said softly.

"Yeah, Bones," Jim said. He seemed a little unsteady himself, and seemed to be having trouble with … where the fuck were they? "Shit," Jim said.

Leo looked around and recognized his surroundings. "Didja forget my code?" he asked.

"Shh … Bones," Jim said, putting a finger up over his own lips, and then moving the finger toward Leo's mouth. Leo made a small noise of disappointment when it moved away. It was Jim's left hand, Leo's other favorite. "It's way the fuck after curfew." Jim turned back toward the door, and fumbled with the keypad again, letting out a relieved breath when it clicked through and the door popped open.

"It's pathetic, you know," Leo groused when Jim slung Leo's arm around his shoulder and they staggered in through the door. "Being 28 fucking years old and having a curfew."

"It's not that great when you're 22, either, Bones," Jim whispered. "And shut the fuck up." He propped Leo up against the wall next to the turbolift and then rolled him into it when the door opened.

Leo closed his eyes against the feeling of vertigo that roiled through him as the world shifted around them, and then Jim was shaking him.

"Bones," he said urgently. "Stay with me here. I'm shit tired and I don't think I could carry your drunk ass." The turbolift opened, and Leo leaned off the wall and onto Jim, facing him, as they kind of waltzed out of the 'lift.

"Shit, Jim," Leo said. "Are we dancing?"

Jim huffed out a laugh right next to Leo's ear. "Whatever works," he said, propping Leo up next to his door. "I've never seen you this bad, Bones, and I've seen you drink way more than this before." He searched Leo's face. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Afraid I'm gonna throw up on you?" Leo asked grouchily, and then thought better of having brought up the subject of food as his stomach flipped.

"Should I be?" Jim asked in a stage whisper, finally getting the door open.

Leo thought that over, as Jim half-wrestled, half-waltzed him into the dark room. "I ate lunch," he said, and then, suddenly, he was tipping over, tripping over something. "Shit!"

He and Jim both said it at the same time, as Leo's upper half hit the bed, hard, and Jim landed on top of him, right on his sore ass.

"Fuck!"

"Shh …" Jim hissed furiously, standing up. "Lights!" He moved to the door and closed it, as Leo groaned.
"50%!" Leo said loudly, trying to right himself as the damned lights refused to respond to his slurred command.

Jim repeated the command, laughing at him. "I guess the computer doesn't understand drunk Southerner," he said.

"Fuck you," Leo groused. He was lying half on, half off the bed, his legs tangled up in something that he kicked at feebly. "Oh, fuck! My holos …" he groaned, trying to sit up and almost falling off the bed again, before Jim caught him and pushed him back down.

"Here, here …" Jim said, untangling Leo's feet from the straps of his duffel, and pulling off his shoes for good measure. He lifted the bag up, and handed it to Leo when he grabbed at it. "I'm sure they're fine," he said. "I didn't hear anything break."

Leo managed to sit up, his strained muscles complaining all the while. He pawed through the bag, and saw that Jim was right. Everything looked OK. He pulled out one of the journals that had gotten bent, and straightened it out, smoothing the leather cover, and looking for the rest of them.

"Your diaries, Bones?" Jim teased. He had sat down on the bed next to Leo, and was leaning against him comfortably.

"Not mine," Leo said. "Horatio's."

Jim looked at him in surprise.

"From when he was up in the black," he said, finding the next one and placing it atop the others.

"Wow," Jim said. "Have you read them?"

"No," Leo said quietly. "He asked me to wait until …"

Jim nodded.

"I think he saw a lot of shit," Leo said drunkenly. "He told me, you know, back in the summer when I wouldn't talk," Jim's eyes widened at the implication, "that if I couldn't talk about it out loud, that it helped to write things down." Leo stroked a hand across the journal. "He enlisted, too, you know."

"No, I didn't," Jim said.

Leo nodded, finding the last of the five leather-bound journals. "He went up to fight the Romulans."

Jim went very still next to him.

"Almost a hundred years ago now," Leo said. He paused. "I think there are things in here he never told another soul." He looked at Jim, who seemed to be intently listening to his every word. "I didn't even know that he'd been up there until this other old guy in town was telling war stories one time, and I could tell that Ol' Paw was pissed."

"Why?" Jim's voice was a whisper.

"He said that the guys who fucking bragged about everything were the ones who'd done the least, seen the least. That the men and women who knew about valor and sacrifice and what really happens in a war don't need to brag about it, that they didn't take pride in war stories." He looked over at Jim and found himself momentarily sobered by the expression of deep knowing on Jim's face, of how suddenly old Jim's eyes looked, but then Jim blinked and his eyes cleared and Leo wondered
if he'd just imagined it.

Jim gently pried the journals out of Leo's hands and stacked them carefully on Leo's desk. "Not tonight, Bones," he said. "You've got to get some sleep."

"Yeah," Leo sighed.

"C'mon," Jim said, and he stood, taking the duffel and placing it carefully by the door. "Let's get you in bed." His hands reached for the hem of Leo's, no, his father's shirt, and he pulled it and Leo's t-shirt up and over his head, before he reached for the button of his jeans, and Leo stopped his hand, and stood. "Bones," Jim said, as Leo swayed.

"I gotta use the head, Jim," he said, trying desperately to cover the fact that the idea of Jim undressing him was leading him down all sorts of bad roads. Jim was just trying to be a good friend to him, not a lover. He staggered to the bathroom, undoing his pants as he went.

"I'm timing you, Bones," Jim warned. "Any longer than three minutes and I'm coming in after you."

Promises, promises, Leo thought sardonically.

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Leo was only half-conscious when Jim came back into the room. He'd dozed off to the sound of the shower running and had been lost in his dreams, so he startled when Jim's weight hit the bed.

"It's just me, Bones," Jim said.

"Jim?" he said muzzily, rolling over. He'd been dreaming that he was back in Georgia, alone. The house was deserted, windows open and curtains flapping in the hot, empty breeze as he laid in the narrow childhood bed he'd only ever shared with Jessica, alone. Always alone.

"S'ok," Jim murmured, stroking the hair off his forehead, and Leo knew he was still dreaming, especially when he felt Jim's hand wiping at his face, felt Jim's lips pressing against his hairline. He hadn't been crying, had he? He was dreaming.

Jim's arms wrapped around him, sure and strong, and Leo pressed his face into Jim's neck and sighed. "Jim," he said, and he wrapped his arms around Jim's back and held on, because he was dreaming.

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Chapter 9

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The second time Leo woke was to the sound of Jim swearing as he rolled away from his back and vaulted out of bed, his right hand pressing against Leo's hip as he used it for leverage. He vaguely recalled having heard muttering from the comm before then, but had ignored it.

The first time he'd woken, it was right around daybreak, and the room was still mostly dark. He remembered falling asleep with his face pressed into Jim's neck, and the sensation of his collarbone under his lips, but maybe his imagination was more vivid than he'd given himself credit for in the past, because he'd woken in just about the same position he'd dozed off in. Of course, Jim had not been completely wrapped around him then, his knees tucked up behind Leo's, his heart beat steady and slow against Leo's back, his face pressed into the nape of Leo's neck as they shared the pillow.
Jim's right hand was splayed like a starfish over Leo's abdomen, holding him in place even as Jim slept. Leo wondered drowsily what had made Jim abandon his usual posture of casual possession, the one where that hand claimed his hip. Not that he was complaining. The length of Jim's skin along his felt indescribably good, and when he’d shifted to rub at his gritty eyes, Jim had followed him, pressing his pelvis and his cock more firmly against his ass. Leo had closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep with a wry smile on his face. Jim's body knew what it wanted, that was for damned sure.

"Shit!"

Leo rolled over and tried to focus on Jim.

"Bones, man," Jim said in an urgent voice. "You've got to wake up."

"Why?" Bones groaned, throwing his arm over his head. Jesus, he was hung over. His mouth was dry and filled with sawdust, and he could feel the bones in his skull moving in time with the pounding of the blood in his head.

He opened an eye when he felt the weight of something hit the bed. It was his medkit. He looked up to see Jim wearing last night's t-shirt under a suspiciously baggy open red tunic. He was running Leo's sonic razor over his jawline.

"Bones?" Jim said. "You got anything there in your magic bag you can dose us with?" Jim looked hung over and just … Jesus, he was so fucking young. Leo was a total idiot sometimes. Jim raked a hand through his dampened hair attempting to straighten it out.

"Where's the fire, Jim?" Leo asked, yawning and closing his eyes. He didn't need to be at the hospital until 1200 hours, which gave him another couple of hours to laze around.

"Astrophysics," Jim said.

Leo cracked an eye open at him. "You have a fucking test this morning, and we went out and got drunk last night?"

Jim looked at him like he was the insane one. "Bones," he started in a reproving tone, but Leo cut him off.

"You really are an infant," Leo said sharply, looking through the medkit for the right hypo.

"I'm not worried about the fucking test," Jim said exasperatedly, pulling on a pair of red pants, and stuffing his foot into his decidedly non-regulation footwear. "I'll do fine. You gotta dose yourself, too, Bones," he cocked his thumb back at the comm and hopped into his other boot as Leo looked up at him. "Your surgery's been moved back to 1030."

Fuck. "I really don't need this shit," Leo growled. "What time is it?"

"0830," Jim said, zipping up the jacket.

He was wearing one of Leo's reds, and the poor fit only served to make him look younger. The tunic was too broad, the pants too loose around the hip and thigh – Leo was pretty sure that if he tugged on them, he'd expose Jim's briefs. "Nice outfit," he said sourly, stabbing himself in the neck before he sat up. Jim handed him a glass of water and he raised an eyebrow as he mumbled his thanks.

"Sorry, man," Jim said cheerfully. "I don't want to get bagged out of uniform on the last day of the semester. I'll return it." He added, "Clean, I swear," when Leo scowled at him.
Leo grumbled, but nodded, relieved to feel his head clearing and the vise around it loosen. "C'mere," he said to Jim, who bent down. He pushed the collar of his/Jim's uniform down and pressed the hypospray against his neck. Jim winced and rubbed at his neck as he moved away. "Baby," he muttered.

"Bones," he said. "Can I steal a bag?" He was already stuffing his clothes from the previous night into one of Leo's duffels, so Leo just grunted. Jim turned and looked at him from the door. "Do you need me to set the alarm?"

"No," Leo said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, and rubbing the back of his neck. After a minute of silence, he looked up to find Jim watching him with an inscrutable expression on his face. "Jim?" he asked.

Kirk stared at him for a moment longer, almost like he had something to say, but then he smiled. It was one his falsely sunny ones, and it didn't reach his eyes. Jim had never smiled at Leo like that before. "I gotta go," he said.

Leo stared at him, not quite sure what in the hell was going on. "Good luck on your test, kid," he said. Jim nodded and turned toward the door. "And Jim," Leo added. "Thanks for last night."

Jim looked over his shoulder at Leo, and smiled with one side of his mouth, a wry, sad smile. "What are friends for?" He paused. "Later, Bones."

'What the hell?' Leo thought, as he stood up. Maybe he had done or said something last night, after all.

Fuck.

One shift turned into three when a couple of Cadets decided that the ideal thing to do on a Friday night now that the term was over was to climb one of the biggest trees on campus. All told, Leo spent about 36 hours at work, most of it in surgery, repairing the delicate bundles of nerves that made the central nervous system of humanoids, even the morons, operate. By the time he got back to his room again, he was strung out on stims and needed a shower and a glass of bourbon, not necessarily in that order. In fact, he was seriously considering taking the glass of bourbon right in the shower with him as he fumbled his way into the room, ordering the lights on, only to reveal that Jim had been there first. On Leo's desk there was a bottle of bourbon with a red bow, and next to it in a gold bucket was a small live pine tree. It was decorated with small starships of various sizes and generations, and as Leo watched, the nacelles flared on them one after another, flashing their red lights. He huffed out a laugh and saw that his uniform was laid over a chair, cleaned and pressed, with a note affixed to it.

Good as new,

it said in Jim's loopy scrawl. Gone sightseeing, JTK and in smaller scrawl at the bottom, Back before 2256.01.

Leo sighed, and spun one of the starships on the tree. Well, hell. He couldn't expect Jim to babysit him, or give up his own plans for the holidays just to suit Leo, but … Jim’d always been particularly closed mouthed about his family, so Leo had just assumed that he’d be around for the holidays.

Of course, maybe he was just a little bit jealous that Jim had somewhere to spend the holidays, or maybe someone to spend it with. He sighed, and sat down at his desk, reaching for the open bottle of bourbon in his bottom drawer.
Merry Fucking Christmas.

Leo’s dour mood did not improve as the days went on.

Unlike Thanksgiving, the campus was mostly deserted during winter break, with only those students who were offworlders, grinds or orphans like himself remaining. Overseeing them was a skeleton crew of faculty, both at the Academy and at Starfleet Medical. The days dragged, although it was possible for Leo to actually focus on long-delayed research projects of one kind or another. Mostly, he caught up on a lot of journal reading. Still, the short days and the darkness, combined with the increasing damp and cold, made for a miserable Christmas. It didn’t help that Leo had been warned that this was just a prelude to the Bay Area winter which consisted of rain, rain, and for some variation, cold rain. Atlanta might get colder, but there was something about the persistent damp of San Francisco that got inside his bones and left a chill.

Christmas Eve was cold enough that Leo could see his breath as he walked across campus, and it felt like the fog was clinging to him long after he'd gone inside his building and waited for the turbolift. He'd already spoken to Gram, and was slated to work the next day, so he was looking forward to a long evening of reading, alone in his room. Maybe he'd crack open the bottle that Jim had given him. Hell, it was Christmas, after all. He’d shrugged out of his overcoat and turned away to hang it up after ordering the lights on when something sparkling on his desk caught his eye.

His mini-Christmas tree was now sporting a glittering holographic star at the top. Smaller ones were twinkling between the starships, and Leo couldn't help but laugh out loud, which he imagined had been Jim's intention in the first place. Only Jim Kirk would give an aviophobic a space-themed Christmas tree, an attempt to transform something frightening into something amusing, and beautiful. He shook his head.

That boy could rule the world if he put his mind to it.

Late one day, after Christmas, but before most of the students had begun returning to campus, Leo found himself alone at the row of terminals assigned to fellows and junior faculty for updating medical records. He'd been waiting for such an opportunity to arise, not wanting anyone to witness him looking up Jim's medical records. It’s not that updating Jim's record with his allergic reactions was anything that he'd be questioned about – it was that he felt guilty. He knew that he was snooping, giving in to a desire to get answers about Jim’s past by looking at his records instead of asking him directly. Leo was dry-mouthed and sweaty-palmed, half-expecting that Jim would suddenly transport into the room and look at him accusatorily, but nothing happened when he pulled up Jim's records, and scrolled down to the known allergies section. He added Jim’s response to the full-spectrum anti-microbial that he'd given him, but made it seem as if Jim had had the reaction when he'd been seen after sparring with Yu, a time when he'd legitimately been Leo's patient. He requested that Jim’s attending physician give him a full-panel work-up at his next visit, and then scrolled through the allergy section, finding that Jim had some other sensitivities listed there, before he backed out into Jim's general medical history.

He couldn't restrain the whistle when he saw the listing of injuries and treatments over the past few years, evidence of Jim's history of problem-solving with his fists. As he scrolled back and clicked through, he noted that Jim hadn't been lying about doing time in the county system. He appeared to have been in and out of Juvenile Detention a number of times before his eighteenth birthday, but there was nothing in Jim’s record to indicate how he’d gotten those whip marks on his back. Leo went back through the entries carefully, especially the County ones, looking to see if someone had
tried to cover up the actions of an abusive guard, but the only entry that even referenced those scars was from one of his first admissions to a County facility when they were referred to as identifying marks.

He scrolled back, and found himself getting more and more anxious as the years peeled backward. God. He thought of Jim as being a kid now at almost 23, but that was nothing when compared to the idea that someone would have put their hands on a boy so savagely. He was already back to 2247, the year Jim had been all of 14, when his eye stuttered to a stop at the code for quarantine for offworld exposure, followed by a hospitalization that lasted for weeks. Leo stared at the entry -- Jim had never said a word about having been off-world, but that was clearly what the entry implied – at the very least, it meant that Jim had been exposed to some off-world pathogen and suffered life-threatening consequences. He watched his hand move to click through to the entry with a sense of utter dread, and the sure knowledge that he was absolutely, utterly intruding.

When the screen came up, Leo sat and stared blankly at it for a full minute: 13-year-old James T. Kirk had been processed for Terra re-entry from Tarsus IV on 2246.332.

Leo’s hands were shaking as he clicked through for more details, hoping against hope to find that Jim had just gone to Tarsus with the rescue teams -- that he'd been aboard a ship with his mother – she'd stayed in Starfleet, hadn't she? He wanted to believe that Jim had ended up on that godforsaken hellhole after it had all gone bad, wanted to believe that Jim had not been witness to the genocide, to the grotesque culling of colonists that Kodos the Executioner had enforced after the crops failed, that he’d not seen people he knew and loved being led away to be forcibly slaughtered. It had been one of the biggest news stories of the past decade, had led to massive changes in the authority of colonial governors, to more direct oversight of remote locales – all too late for the 4,000 that had died in Kodos’ death chambers, or the 2,000 that starved or were killed when the insurrection that followed the genocide was cruelly suppressed.

His lips compressed into a thin line as he read the entry that detailed Jim's condition: he’d been malnourished, his height and weight below the 25th percentile for his age group, and way off his projected targets based on his previous growth history. His body had been ravaged by a bovine-analogous off-world pox that he'd contracted, most likely from eating dirt contaminated with animal wastes in an effort to sustain himself. He'd almost died during treatments – he’d had an atypical response to one of the medications, and his ravaged immune system had misfired with near fatal results. Further complicating matters was the early stage sepsis that he was suffering from, most likely from the bacteremia he’d acquired, a bacteremia attributed to the severely infected whip wounds on his back.

The light tremors that Leo had felt upon opening the entry had been eclipsed as his system was so flooded with adrenaline that he felt lightheaded and nauseous.

Leo had spent a considerable period of his life feeling sorry for himself, although not without some justification. For all the gifts he'd been given: life, intelligence, good health, a strong and loving family, he’d been subjected to losses -- most of his family and in ways that he thought were horrific. He’d mused, in his more morbid moments, that he’d been born under a particularly dark star. But Jim Kirk, born in the dark void of space one minute before his father died to save him, Jim Kirk …

He thought of Jim’s face the night before he’d left, when Leo’d been talking about Horatio, the flash of knowing that he’d seen on Jim’s face, the way that Jim, the eternal optimist, sometimes had the saddest eyes that he’d ever seen. He’d always assumed that the way Jim had been born, the inevitable comparisons to his heroic father, had worn on him, made it hard for him to create an identity for himself, made him become larger than life to even begin to compare. But now … now he knew that everything he’d ever assumed had been far too simplistic.
But it all made a kind of sense now, like he’d found the one puzzle piece that he’d been looking for and could assemble all of the other broken pieces around it: the way Jim had gotten moody on Thanksgiving, for example. In retrospect, Leo could see that Jim had been disturbed by the amount of food left to waste on people’s plates. And the night before Jim had left for wherever he’d been these past couple of weeks, that look he’d seen in Jim’s eyes had been real, not some drunken imagining on his part.

Jim knew what Ol’ Paw had been talking about, had known it since he’d been a kid as small as some of those kids in the KFF. Anyone who’d been alive when the news about Tarsus IV had become public knew that it had been the kids who’d fought Kodos’ men to get the word out to the Federation about what was really going on planetside. That it was the kids, starving adolescents and children, who’d organized a raid and gotten control briefly, and at enormous cost to their ragtag army, of the communications array so that they could contact Starfleet. The Children’s Revolution, they’d called it – it had been the headline on the news for the days and weeks that followed.

He closed his eyes, and he saw Jim dancing, singing Jumpin’ Jack Flash with a smile on his face, rolling out the words not defiantly, but with … understanding. What was it he’d said about Federova? That was what important was that she’d survived what had happened to her.

Jim had not only survived The Children’s Revolution, but Leo would lay money down that James T. Kirk had been one of its leaders.

He toggled away from the medical records database and did a general search for the colonists of Tarsus IV. There had been larger genocides in history, certainly, but still … seeing the listed names and how many of them were red and how few were black was sobering. Nearly a decade later, the effects of the genocide still rippled outward – Leo had read an article just last week that documented the unusually high suicide rate among the survivors, many of whom felt guilt for having been chosen to survive, when the rest of their families were not, or who couldn’t take the isolation, the loss, and the memories. He wondered how it was that he’d never read a story that capitalized on the fact that James T. Kirk, the son of Federation hero George Kirk, was one of the survivors of Kodos the Executioner’s bloody reign. Cynically, he imagined that the Federation had a vested interest in keeping the fact that they’d delivered the child of a galactic hero into the hands of a murdering madman out of the news cycle.

He scrolled down the list until he reached the Ks, and started when he saw two names on the list, one red and one black: George S. Kirk and James T. Kirk. Goddamnit. Both of George Kirk’s boys had been on Tarsus IV, only his namesake had not come back.

"Used t'sleep with my big brother," he heard Jim saying again, on the verge of sleep. "Long time ago."

In his pocket, his comm chimed and he flipped it open so he could see the view screen. Starfleet Medical Service was notifying him, as Jim Kirk’s attending physician, to make sure that Jim had a full allergy panel on his next visit. He closed the comm and toggled back to Jim’s medical records, scrolling up to the basic information. He swallowed hard around the sudden lump in his throat, when he read that not only was he listed as Jim’s attending physician, but that under Primary Contact it read 'Leonard H. McCoy', followed by his comm code.

"Damn it, Jim," he whispered.

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Chapter 10
Leonard “Bones” McCoy knew a few things about himself. He had a tendency toward the obsessive, and an inability to unsee the negative side of things, like the fact that he knew, in excruciating detail, the many ways to die in a shuttle mishap, not to mention the odds of doing so. The fact that one’s chances were 1:100,000 meant far less to him than they should. Probabilities were probabilities, but somebody still had to be the one in the equation, a fact he’d known intimately for most of his life.

It would be easy to write him off as a pessimist, although there was a kernel of truth there. But he was also a certified contrarian, a man who didn’t like mysteries, medical or otherwise. He liked certainties, believed that solutions could be found if one was just dogged enough, stubborn enough. The fact that his father’s cure had been found just weeks after his death only cemented his belief in the rightness of staunch perseverance.

“You’re like a dog with a bone,” Gram has said repeatedly over the course of his life. And it’s true, he will not give up until he gets every last little bit of whatever it is that he’s after. Right now, that’s answers. The very next day found him back at the same terminal, the same desk, the minute his shift was over.

He was under no illusion that he’ll like what he finds, but he needed to understand. He needed to know how the fuck Jim Kirk, cocky bastard and bright light, ended up almost dying on Tarsus IV with his brother.

There were no easy answers to be found, at first. There were only two Kirks in the colony database, and Leo had no idea what Jim’s mother’s first name was. He toggled over to the Starfleet database and entered George Kirk into it to see that not only Jim’s father, but his Kirk grandfather, Tiberius, had served in Starfleet. Jim’s mother was listed as a Winona Kirk, and when Leo clicked through to her name, he saw that she was offworld on the Endeavour, a ship they’d been getting tremendous amounts of data from as it explored unknown portions of the Beta Quadrant. She’d never changed her name, not even through two subsequent marriages and divorces, but as far as Leo could discern she had not spent a lot of time on Terra during Jim’s childhood. He couldn’t find any indication that she’d been to Tarsus.

Leo pressed his lips into a thin line and tried to figure out where to go next. Jim’s maternal grandfather, a James MacAllister, had a youthful Starfleet service record, but there was no indication that he’d been on Tarsus – and no MacAllisters appeared on the listing.

He had been frowning at the terminal for a while when he heard an amused, lyrical voice nearby.

“I’m pretty sure scowling at the computer won’t make it work any faster, McCoy.”

He looked up to see Patty Stefanakis, one of the psychiatry attendings, standing on the other side of the row of terminals, a stack of PADDs in her arms. Her long dark hair was pulled up into a messy bun secured at the back of her head by a number of PADD styluses, and her pretty face was both tired and cheerful.

“Yeah, well …” Leo said.

“Merry Christmas?” she offered, cocking her head to one side.

Patty’s dark green eyes were focused on Leo in an incisive manner that he found extremely irritating, and Leo’s scowl deepened. He liked Patty – she was brilliant and kind and damned good at her job --
which was exactly the problem right now. Psychiatrists were notoriously nosey pains-in-the-asses, and Patty was a prime example.

“Bah humbug,” Leo offered.

Patty smiled. “You know, if you ever smiled real bright and pretty like I know you can, you might have to resuscitate me,” she said in an amused tone.

Leo rolled his eyes.

“What’re you working on?”

Well, Patty, I just discovered that my new best friend, the most brilliant, generally optimistic, yet sufficiently cynical man I’ve ever met, may have forever redefined the concept of resiliency in my head. “I was updating one of my patient’s records and noticed something that I’m tracking down,” Leo said instead.

She nodded. “Something that’s really gotten under your skin,” she said.

“Yes, well,” Leo answered, then paused and thought, before looking up at her. “What do you know about Tarsus IV?”

Patty’s professional mask dropped into place in an eye blink. “I know that there may be survivors among the Cadets,” she said carefully. “There may also be personnel in other posts.”

Leo raised an eyebrow at that careful reveal, but instead asked, “Have you met with them – the Cadets, I mean?”

“If I had, Leonard,” she began, and he waved her off with an eye roll clearly meant to convey ‘please give me a fucking break’.

Patty was a couple of years older than he was, but he knew that she’d checked out all his quals – she was a psychiatrist, for fuck’s sake. Besides, he’d done the same to her, and he respected her, and she knew it, and she knew him well enough, he was sure, to know that respect was not something he automatically granted to either peers or superiors.

Patty stared at him, and then said, “Part of my job over the course of the time that the Cadets are here is to evaluate them on how their track choices jibe with a realistic assessment of their skills.”

Leo nodded.

“You’d be surprised at how much grandiosity and narcissism plays into career track choices.”

Leo snorted.

“OK, maybe not.” Patty smiled at him, the expression just shy of a smirk. “Anyway, part of my job is to assess whether or not the Cadets are truly suited for the post they want, regardless of their training and aptitudes. So, the answer is: I’ll see them all eventually.” She paused again. “Actually, I do know that you’re very well aware of the limits of standard testing.” She looked him in the eye. “I was given an interesting assessment you wrote of a third year who was on the command track until recently.”

Leo perked right up. “Was?”

She nodded.
“Thank fuck,” he said, rocking back in his chair. “That boy could turn into an authoritarian nightmare in a flash.”

“I concur,” she said. “And I only read your assessment after I’d already made my own. I came to my conclusions via different observations, but for many of the same reasons. Some personality types will become abusive when given unchecked authority. Which brings us back to Tarsus, quite neatly. Why do you ask?”


Patty shook her head. “Human beings have extraordinary resiliency,” she began hesitantly, and he smiled at her echoing his thought from earlier, “but what’s less predictable is who will be resilient. Certain personality types have a higher rate of success, obviously, but that’s not always associated with positivism, or overall achievement in career or socionormative experiences.”

“Meaning?”

“Some people do well because they can compartmentalize and divorce themselves from the experience. Some integrate and move on,” she shook her head. “I wish we could predict who was going to succeed, have some more reliable benchmarks so that we could set up fail safes. The rate of suicide among Tarsus survivors is fairly high.”

“Fairly?” From what Leo’d seen, it was unacceptably high. But then again, he was a doctor, not a statistician. Loss of life was anathema to him.

“Compared to the rates of suicide in other genocidal situations,” Patty said, putting down her PADDs and pulling up a chair to face Leo. She had a contemplative expression on her face, and a bit of a gleam in her eye as she said, “You referenced the ‘fuckwittery of Eugenics theory’, but many of our colleagues believe that as a race we are stronger and smarter, more resilient in general since the Augments became part of the genome, that they’re part of the reason for the decline of many kinds of illnesses.”

“Bullshit, Patty,” Leo snapped, sitting up. “I’m sorry, but there is zero evidence for that being biologically true. I grant that some of those enhancements may have made their way into the gene pool, but speaking of narcissistic and grandiose fuckers, Keniclius has still to this day never explained what the hell he was doing with anything remotely resembling true scientific disclosure, nor has he submitted to any form of peer review. I just don’t buy it.”

“And yet he’s still alive, more than 200 years later.” Patty was observing him very carefully, and Leo found that he didn’t care, because about this bullshit, he’d never stop arguing, not until the day he died.

“Is he?” Leo asked. “I mean, is he the Stavos Keniclius that was born 200 years ago? How many body parts can you replace before you’ve physically become a clone of yourself? You know, my great grand-daddy just died at nearly 123 years of age. All original body parts,” he emphasized. “Even back when Keniclius was born, the McCos were regularly living in good health until their ninth decade, and here my great-grandfather has outstripped that in a few generations, by a long shot. That’s just one example of what I find it to be the more likely scenario,” he said emphatically.

“Which is?” Patty asked.

“That Darwin was fucking right,” Leo answered. “We’re all of us that are alive now the offspring of those that survived WWII and more importantly, everything that came after. Luck could have
accounted for the former but there was a definitive culling, in the true biological sense, that occurred in the latter case. It’s all there in the records, the starvation and the plagues that followed the nuclear war. That was where the natural selection occurred, although, I’ll grant you, by unnatural means in true evolutionary terms.”

Patty was watching him. “You’re a very passionate person,” she observed, and Leo felt, abruptly, that he’d been far more revelatory than he’d intended to be.

He shrugged in response. “Yeah, well,” he said. “I’m not much of a fencesitter.”

She smiled. “No, I definitely see that,” she watched him for a few more minutes and said. “So, your patient? Is there something about his or her behavior that has you worried?”

“No,” Leo said surely. “I’d have referred him if that were the case. Mostly, I’m just plain surprised. It explains some anomalous findings on his basic physical, but it’s not something that he disclosed to me voluntarily. In fact, there’s absolutely nothing in his behavior that would indicate that he’s lived through such a traumatic experience.”

“Hmm …” Patty nodded.

“You’re not surprised by that observation,” Leo said.

“He could have integrated,” she suggested.

“He could have …” Leo said. “But I don’t think that’s it.”

“For the most part, the Tarsus survivors have tried to live their lives quietly,” she said.

Well, now. Quiet would never be among the first dozen words he’d use to describe Jim Kirk. Even when the kid wasn’t talking at all, he was impossible to ignore, and he was pretty sure that it wasn’t just a halfway in love Leonard McCoy who felt that way.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Patty,” he said, “I’m invoking confidentiality on this conversation, even though you do not know the identity of my patient.”

“Understood,” she said.

Leo sucked in a breath. “I have reason to believe that he was one of the leaders of the Children’s Revolution.”

Patty’s eyes widened. “That is … why do you think that?” She was leaning forward in her seat.

Leo shook his head. “It just … it just fits,” he said. “It just … some things make sense now in a way they didn’t before, I guess.”

“He’s not really just a patient, is he?” Patty asked shrewdly, then added. “I’m not judging or questioning your ethics here.”

Maybe you should be, Leo thought grimly. “I’ve treated him on a number of occasions, but we did meet socially first,” he said, prevaricating.

She looked thoughtful. “Have you read the trial transcripts?”

“What? No,” Leo said. “You know, I don’t even remember any trials. I must have been in med
school when they happened.”

“Maybe,” Patty said. “But because of the age of most of the survivors when the crimes were committed, there were no cameras allowed, and names of underage witnesses were redacted. And with no Kodos to try …”

Leo shook his head sourly. “I see. No fucking news at 11:00, so no coverage, right?”

Patty shrugged. “Anyway. They’re a frustrating, but fascinating read,” she watched him for a minute, then turned to her terminal. “Let me send you a link to them.”

“Oh …” Leo began.

“There’s quite a bit of testimony about the leaders of the Children’s Revolution,” she said quietly. “If you have questions, you’ll know where to find me.”

The room fell to absolute quiet for a few seconds. “Send it to me,” Leo said.

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It had been a week since he’d last seen Jim, the days ticking down slowly to 2256. A week from tonight, it’d be another Friday night, but it’d be Remembrance Day. Jim’s birthday. He couldn’t imagine what that must have been like for Jim, to know that the whole world was mourning his hero father’s death, on his birthday. Did Jim ever have a birthday party, any celebration on that day? Leo couldn’t imagine how that would work, and the whole thing just struck him as a sad and wrong. He was musing darkly as he lay on his bed, wearing jeans and a ratty t-shirt, his ankles crossed and the pillows bunched up under his head. He had a glass of bourbon balanced on his lower abdomen as he scrolled down through the testimony he’d transferred to his PADD. It was an old studying trick of his that served multiple purposes, holding the bourbon like that. For one, it proved that he wasn’t getting a gut, even if he was holding those muscles taut for long minutes in between sips. For another, he knew that if the glass slipped he was getting drunk, and he’d stop imbibing. So. Win, win.

The dormitory was still pretty quiet, but he wasn’t listening to music as he normally would. Be back before 2256.01 Jim’s note had said. He wasn’t sure when exactly that would be, but the last thing he wanted to be caught out doing was reading what he was reading. He had a journal article on new techniques in myelin regeneration open on another screen, so he’d be ready to close the testimony if he so much as heard the turbolift move.

Truthfully, the testimony had been an excruciating read so far, and he wasn’t entirely sure how much more of it he could take. It had become pretty clear that the only adults that Kodos had allowed to live were the most passive ones. Any adults that might have posed a threat, that might have risen up and led the colonists to rebel had been killed first. The ones who were left … Leo hadn’t spend a lot of time in his life blaming the victims, but goddamn … he never would have given up the way some of these people appeared to have.

Pieces of the testimony burned through his consciousness as he read.

_We didn’t know what he was really doing, you know. We thought that he was in charge, that he knew what was best._

_There wasn’t enough food, no matter what he did. People would have died._

_I had to protect the children I had left. I couldn’t think about what had happened to all the others._
That last statement had been echoed elsewhere, and that one, that brutally pragmatic view, Leo could understand, to some degree. Every doctor who dealt with trauma learned to triage, to assess and decide who could wait, and who would take precedence. Of course, triage also meant that sometimes a doctor had to decide that the most critical patient would take too many resources, or too much time. He’d already been in enough battlefield sims to know that he’d be called upon to decide who lived or died at some time in his Starfleet career, if he went up into the black. Hell, it could happen tomorrow, if there was a big enough disaster at the Academy itself.

He unclenched his muscles and grabbed the glass and took a swallow as he scrolled down, carefully tightening his muscles before he balanced the glass again.

*There were three of them, of the kids, that were the ringleaders. Those two boys, and that girl that the older one was always with. He’d said that they were the future, those three, his best and brightest, so it was ironic that they were the ones that brought him down.*

*They were beautiful, those boys … they were brothers. The little one was blond. The girl was fair, too. He didn't keep anybody who wasn't Caucasian. I don’t think that he even kept anyone who had brown eyes.*

*I thought he'd killed the old people first, and then all the babies, but later I realized that I hadn't seen some of the colonists my age. There were a few that had been in Starfleet, and they were just gone. I'm pretty sure that they were {redacted} and {redacted}. {redacted}, he taught {redacted} at the Academy, that's what I heard. The rumor was that he was keeping them close to help him with strategy, but it was a lie. It was always lies.*

Leo made a mental note to look in the regular database at work tomorrow. There'd been mention of the man whose name was redacted more than once. There had to be some way to cross-check for names of Academy personnel who'd died on Tarsus. At the very least, there had to be a memorial marker somewhere on the campus.

Leo scrolled down, noting how even in testimony, the deposed kept referring to Kodos as He, almost like he was God. In a way, he supposed he had been.

*His voice, I still hear his voice in my sleep sometimes. He never let us see his face, you know. Only the kids saw his face. He killed everyone else who'd be able to identify him, after he found out what those kids had done, that they'd gotten the word off-planet to Starfleet. He called his senior staff into a conference room, and he poisoned them all. Only he had the antidote.*

*I heard that it was a poison gas, like the one he used in the chambers.*

*He knocked them out with some kind of toxin, and then he blew up the building. That's why we thought he'd died in there with them. But that was after … after he killed those kids, the ones that were the traitors, he said. He never came out of the building, but we could hear his voice from the balcony as he spoke.*

*They whipped them. The girl first, and the older boy tried to save her … and [let the record show a gap of three minutes before Witness 507 composes herself] … and they whipped him until they killed him. The guards, they just killed him, and the younger one, {redacted}, kept screaming for his brother …*

Leo sat straight up in the bed, his bourbon forgotten, barely registering the wetness as it soaked into his jeans.

*They left their bodies in the square, all three of them, naked with the sun beating down on them. I*
thought they were all dead. They just left them there in the dirt, staked down with chains around
their necks, bleeding. The rescue ships showed up two days later.

The little one? He never stopped fighting. He never stopped talking, yelling at us to stand up, to do
something, even when they were whipping him. So, they gagged him and when he finally fell, one of
the guards spat on him, and said he was the biggest traitor of all.

God forgive us. We were too afraid to do anything … I can't believe he lived. [let the record show a
gap of two minutes before Witness 507 speaks again] He's really alive, [redacted]? Would you …
would you tell him that I'm sorry? I'm so sorry.

Leo vaguely heard the sound of glass shattering as he stumbled to the small bathroom, the PADD
dropping from his numb hands. The bourbon burned as it came back up, mingling with the acids
from his stomach and the tears that streamed down his face as he choked.

Chapter 11

Leo was glad that he was working the early shift the next morning, because it gave him the excuse to
give up attempting to sleep entirely. He couldn’t actually picture Jim as a child, but that didn’t stop
his imagination from conjuring up the scenarios described by the Tarsus survivors in the testimony he
had read. Now that he was awake, the words rained through his consciousness like drops of blood as
he walked across the campus at 0500 to Starfleet Medical in the winter dark, the swift wind off the
bay a cold knife that drew tears from his eyes. The moon had been diminishing to a sliver over the
course of the week, and all Leo could discern of it now was its shadowed outline, and probably only
because he knew where to look. The absolute darkness suited him at the moment — the sky was as
black as Saturn’s mane, with only the blaze of starlight as contrast -- he turned his face down from
the glittering heavens and tucked it into his upturned collar.

In old Terran astrology, Saturn ruled the stars for this next moon cycle. And if Leo was remembering
correctly, Saturn was associated with a domineering father figure, with the myth of Cronus
swallowing his own children so they would not supplant him. It was ironic, because George Kirk
had sacrificed his life to save his wife and son, but in so doing, had made himself the measure against
which that son would always be judged. It was the exact opposite of Cronus’ selfish intentions, but
ultimately had had much the same effect.

Of course, Saturn was also associated with melancholy, one of the four basic humors that ancient
physicians had ascribed to human nature. Saturn ruled them to some degree too, supposedly,
scientists and physicians, and he could see how that would fit his own personality. What he could not
see was how Saturn could be construed as Jim Kirk’s ruling planet. After all, he’d been born on the
other side of the galaxy, far beyond its reach. Besides, there was something expansive about Jim,
something golden and well-lit that defied the darkness even in the face of sure death.

He had no doubt that the blond boy who’d refused to lay down and die, to capitulate to the evil
father that was Kodos, was Jim. And despite the horror that he felt at all that Jim must have suffered,
or the rage that threatened to consume him when he thought of the layers of betrayal that it
represented – he was grateful that Jim had survived. Hell, he was in awe. Jim Kirk was not a perfect
person by any stretch of the imagination – he was cocky to the point of arrogance, and reckless,
presenting an air of invincibility to the world at large. He believed that he could charm, manipulate,
bull, seduce or punch his way out of or through any problem, a tendency that Leo had worried
would lead him to harm. He’d never considered that there was anything in Jim’s past that would
have proven to him that these were workable strategies. In fact, he’d been secretly hoping that the universe would knock him down a peg so that Jim would exert a little more care for himself. Now that he knew about Tarsus, however, he had no idea what the fuck anyone could do to check Jim. Starfleet thought they were going to break Jim down and mold him into their ideal officer, but that? That was not fucking going to happen. As the saying went, the past was prologue.

What Leo was most afraid of, aside from Jim’s own safety, was what that meant for him, and his already bruised heart.


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As he crossed the threshold from the infirmary’s artificial light and heat into the darkness again, he experienced a moment of dislocation. It was hard to know what time of day or night it was when he came to work in the darkness and left in the darkness again. He’d seen the winter sunlight from the windows as he’d passed by them throughout the course of the day, but hadn’t been outside once since he’d entered the building. With a shiver at the cold, Leo wondered how it would feel to spend days and weeks and months aboard a starship, never feeling the wind. Cold as it was, he found himself relishing the fresh air.

His day had been long and boring -- a large part of it had been spent arbitrating between two junior colleagues who were intently arguing over the best course of treatment for a patient. There wasn’t a doctor alive who wasn’t a bit of a control freak, wanting to outwit death at every turn, wanting, needing to fix what was broken, as Leo well knew. That was part of the reason that he had ended up in Starfleet, broken by his failure to fix his father, but knowing this about himself didn't mean that he relished spending his day as a referee.

Leo wandered the campus in the direction of his dorm, but found himself with no desire to turn down the appropriate path and head there. Instead, he walked off campus and into the city, not acknowledging until he was there that he was heading for Finnegan’s. The bar was pretty packed for a Saturday night, and it was clear that a number of the Cadets had headed back to campus even though classes weren’t scheduled to start up again until the Monday after Remembrance Day. Leo wasn’t so old that he didn’t remember the desire to spend New Year’s Eve with friends. He looked around the room, half-expecting to see Jim somewhere. He told himself he wasn’t disappointed as he made his way through the crowd at the bar, wedging himself into a corner and catching the bartender’s eye.

He took a slug of the bourbon he was treating himself to and watched the crowd, feeling nostalgic for simpler times, or maybe for his own innocence. In some ways, as cynical as he liked to believe himself to be, he’d lost some more of that just this week. He should be happier about that, he supposed – he honestly hadn’t thought that he had any left to lose. All over the bar, young people of all species were talking, most of them flirting. He watched hands touch and mouths smile, eyelashes lower coyly. It was early in the evening still, too early for the more overt displays of sexuality that became more commonplace as everybody got a little loose from the alcohol. He wasn't expecting any such overtures to be directed at him tonight, knowing that he was projecting his foul mood like a cartoon black cloud over his head.

“Hello,” a low voice said next to him.

Leo turned to his left and was surprised to be meeting the eye of a Denobulan female who hadn’t been there before. She was a few years older than he, and tall, very fit. She was certainly not the type of female that he expected to see in a bar routinely patronized by Starfleet Cadets. Then again, he supposed he stuck out as well. “Ma’am,” Leo said courteously.

“You are very attractive,” the Denobulan said, in a direct way. “I prefer when males do not exercise
Leo raised both his eyebrows, and stifled his chuckle. So much for his earlier thoughts on the subject.

“The lower facial muscles,” the Denobulan continued. “I should have specified. Your forehead ripples impressively when you raise the upper ones.”

Leo felt like laughing for the first time in days, but contained himself. “Why, thank you, Ma’am,” he said. “Your forehead is also quite impressive.”

The Denobulan made a moue of approval, and Leo hastened to speak before she out and out propositioned him or blasted him with her pheromones.

“My companion has stated his preference for my forehead ripples on a number of occasions.” Two, to be precise, and it was really more about his eyebrows, but … in for a penny, in for a pound.

The Denobulan’s mouth turned down a bit at the edges. “Is your availability only to males?” she asked bluntly.

“Generally, no,” Leo said, “but at this particular time …”

“I see,” the Denobulan said. “There is nothing I can do that would persuade you otherwise?”

“No,” Leo said, believing it better to err on the side of bluntness, rather than risk misunderstanding by trying to be kinder. “But I thank you for your expression of interest. It was most complimentary.”

The Denobulan searched his eyes for a moment, but must have seen his sincerity, because she turned and left after nodding. Leo shook his head and focused on his bourbon, ignoring the curiosity of the guy on the other side of him. He supposed he should feel slightly guilty for using Jim as a cockblock, but he did owe the kid one. Besides, he’d never know.

Leo spent about an hour at the bar all told, and got chatted up twice more, although he wasn’t really sure if the last guy was being friendly or flirty. It wasn’t the first time that had happened recently, what with Jim and all. He was really incredibly out of practice, was the problem. He’d been with Jocelyn since he was slightly older than Jim, and even though they’d been separated for months before their divorce, and estranged for longer than that, he hadn’t felt unmarried until he actually was. He’d meant his vows when he’d made them, and then there was the whole stubborn thing. Even though he knew Jocelyn had moved on, he just … hadn’t. It was what his Gram referred to as his ‘patented McCoy mule-headedness’ – up until the day they’d signed the papers, he’d hoped that they were going to figure things out. The thing was, he knew that it wasn’t much out of love for her anymore that he felt that way. It was just that once Joss was gone, every piece of his former life, everything that he’d thought to count on, was gone. That was one of the downsides of his stubbornness, right there.

He pushed away from the bar and began working his way across the more crowded room when a flash of something familiar caught his eye. He turned toward the back of the bar, just catching a glimpse of a man that might be Jim as he disappeared behind the curtained door that was staff only. Curious and slightly pissed that Jim might be back in town without telling him, if he had to admit to it, Leo changed direction and made his way to the curtain, making sure that he was unobserved before he stepped behind it.

The material wasn't soundproofed but the noise from the room was muffled. The most startling change was the seeming total darkness before Leo’s eyes adjusted. He moved forward, hearing a
laugh, breathless and low, that sounded like Jim’s. He moved gingerly past the crates of full bottles that diminished into racks of empties as the corridor went on.

The corridor opened up in two directions just before the doorway to the back alley and Leo stopped, unsure of which way to go, and even more unsure of why he was there in the first place. What the fuck would he say to Jim if he came in from the outside door with a load of booze? He turned to walk away when the sound of a moan, low down from a man’s chest, reached him. He stopped, and deliberated for a full thirty seconds before he turned back and cautiously looked back around the corner, already knowing what he was going to see, but helpless or too masochistic to stop himself.

Leo stood at the large window at one of the conference rooms on the highest floor of Starfleet Medical, watching the barrage of fireworks over the Golden Gate Bridge illuminate the night, welcoming in the New Year. Occasionally, the door to the room would open behind him as his colleagues came and went, and he’d catch a glimpse of himself superimposed over the burning lights, tall, grimfaced, arms crossed over his chest.

Happy Fucking New Year.

“What’s your resolution?” Patty Stefanakis asked quietly.

He’d smelled her perfume for the past couple of minutes as she’d moved closer to him, and had kind of figured that she was waiting until they were alone to speak to him. Patty had made a habit of checking up on him the past few days, wanting to follow up with him on the Tarsus testimony. They were becoming, not exactly friends yet, but more than colleagues.

“Heard that?” he hummed, buying himself a little time. Try as he might, he couldn’t wash the image of Jim Kirk -- pants open and head thrown back against a back corridor wall at Finnegan’s as he sunk his hands into the hair of the broad-shouldered, dark-haired man who knelt at his feet -- out of his mind. Jim's eyes had been heavy-lidded, his mouth open as he gasped, hips bucking forward as the man pulled them toward him. Jim’d looked down, and laughed a little through a moan, urging the man on. ‘Just like that,’ he’d said roughly, and the way he moved turned his head into the light enough that Leo could see his blue eyes flashing. ‘Just like that.’

“I don’t suppose that not being such a fucking idiot is a resolution that a psychiatrist might find particularly healthy.”

Patty didn’t answer him for a few seconds, and when the last of the fireworks surged into the sky, he was shocked to see a brief expression of absolute misery on her reflection’s face before she realized that he had seen her.

“Patty?” he said, turning toward her.

She watched him for a long moment, those big green eyes searching his before she pushed him over to sit in the armchairs near a coffee table in one corner of the room. “Is it your ex-wife?” she asked in a low voice, and he shook his head, not understanding. “I see you sometimes with this expression on your face, and I know,” she said harshly, “I know how that look feels.”

He regarded her carefully, but had to admit that he felt moved enough by her words to lean in. He put a hand on her arm. “I haven’t given her more than a passing though in months, Patty,” he said softly. “My current idiocy is all about me wanting something I can’t have.”

“Is she married?” Patty had hesitated minutely before using the pronoun, and Leo smiled, and shook
his head. She really was pretty goddamned good.

“No, Patty,” he murmured with a hint of sarcasm, “he’s not married.”

She tilted her head and blushed a little, knowing that he’d heard her hesitance. “Is he not queer?” she added. “Like us?”

Leo thought about her question. “I don’t know how he’d identify,” he said slowly, “but from my perspective? He’s a 2.”

Patty smiled at him referring to the Kinsey scale. “And you are?”

“I am a solid 3, darlin’,” he drawled. “You?”

“If I were going to use such an outmoded, speciesist system --” Leo rolled his eyes at her, and she huffed out a laugh, before she said, “I’m a 4.”

“Well …” Leo said, slapping on the Southerner extra-hard. “Ain’t that nice? We got all the middle flavors of the rainbow covered there, between us three. And your friend? What’s she?”

Patty’s expression became more bleak. “She’s says she’s a 0.”

“Ah,” Leo said, rolling his shoulders. “If she’s kissed you, she ain’t a 0.” He watched Patty’s cheeks pink up, and he pinched one, trying to tease her out of her sad mood. Oh, he could suffer in silence forever and ever, but give him someone to fix, and he’d forget all about his own troubles.

“Has your 2 kissed you?” Patty asked.

And right there? That was the problem with trying to fix another damned doctor. “No,” Leo said, shaking his head. “Goddamn him.” He looked at Patty. “He’s not what you’d call shy,” he said slowly. “So the obvious conclusion is that he just wants to be my friend. I’m just … making myself miserable.”

Patty took his hand and squeezed it, looking down.

He tilted his head forward, catching the sheen of tears in his eyes. “Patty?”

She wiped her other hand across her eyes, and Leo fished in his pocket and found a little packet of tissue and handed it to her. She laughed at the sight of it, and he could hear the water in her throat. “You are such a gentleman, Leonard McCoy,” she said.

“And that definitely ain’t his type,” Leo said wistfully, thinking of the leather-clad man he’d seen on his knees in front of Jim.

“Then he’s an idiot,” Patty said firmly, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“So’s she, Patty,” Leo said sincerely. “Tell me.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m too old for this shit, Leonard,” she said. “People are supposed to have figured themselves out when they’re over 30, you know? Especially when they’ve studied and gone through therapy themselves.”

“Patty,” Leo said quietly. “We all know that being educated doesn’t make a damned bit of difference about this kind of stupidity.”

“Yeah,” she said. She said. “She’s from a very traditional background,” she said softly.
“Southern Baptist?” Leo asked, wrinkling his nose. “Church of God?” He paused. “Is she Terran?”

“Yeah,” Patty said. “And no, she’s Muslim.”

“Ah,” Leo said. Even after the devastations from the Eugenics Wars, that part of Terra had been prone to spates of religious-based violence all the way into this century.

“Her parents want her to marry a man from their faith,” she said bitterly. “They have him all picked out and everything.”

Well. That was fucking byzantine in this day and age, but Leo held his tongue. “And she won’t say ‘no’?” he asked gently.

Patty rocked her head back. “No,” she whispered sadly. “I don’t think she will. I think that she doesn’t love me enough to make a stand.” She looked up at Leo, and the devastation in her expression moved him to open up his arms and hold her. “It’s still easier being a 0, in some parts of the universe.”

“Patty, darling,” he said, “I am sincerely sorry.” He felt her nod, but before she succumbed to her tears, Leo's comm chirped in his pocket, the code for emergency sounding loud in the now quiet room. "Oh, fuck," he said, fumbling for it, as Patty's comm began to beep the same code. "Happy Fucking New Year, and here we go."

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Men were idiots. Leo knew this. He was one, after all.

Tonight's particular brand of idiocy revolved around drunken brawls, never a good idea, but made especially bad by having taken place on a fifth story stairwell. The Cadet with the blown-out kidney had gone down the staircase, but the Cadet with the major head injuries had gone over the railing and down five stories. The blown spinal column was just the icing on the cake.

Leo'd been operating for fuck knows how long, but he was pretty sure that he was past hour seven. The team that had been assembled was pretty good, although they'd not had much experience working together. Leo was the most experienced of them, but the one without a 'fleet title in front of his name, which had led to some unnecessary pissing matches. Leo had been growling a lot at one of the other surgeons, whose technique was too slow and timorous for his taste. There was a lot to do and not enough time to be hemming and hawing. Trauma surgery required incisive decisionmaking, and Spencer didn't seem to have the knack for it. Finally, after two micro-leaks of CSF that were just totally unnecessary, he'd had enough and stomped around the bed, issuing a sharp, "Move!" as he took over.

His right hand was aching from the hours of work he'd put in, so he picked up a laser scalpel with his left hand and glared at Spencer, who was still standing way the fuck too close. "Move!" he said again, before looking down and seeing that there were more microleaks opening up everywhere. "I said to seal the spine, Doctor," he barked, "not make it fucking porous!"

"You're going to use your left hand?" Spencer was gaping at him, but his pomposity was showing. "That's highly irregular."

"Not when you're ambidextrous," Leo said, biting the words out through his teeth. "Not to mention this is a better angle, so fucking move before I knock you out!"

One of the other doctors pulled Spencer away, and Leo took a deep breath, then ordered the anesthesiologist to make some minor changes to the sedation. He focused on the spinal column,
seeing it the way it was, then closed his eyes and let his head drop back, visualizing what it should
look like in this body and prioritizing what needed to be done in an orderly fashion. There. He had it.

He opened his eyes, still looking up, and found himself staring up at Jim Kirk. Dressed in civilian
clothes with nary a bruise or a drop of blood on his shirt, Jim was leaning against the window of the
otherwise empty observation space, just watching him, wearing that leather jacket over his ubiquitous
jeans and t-shirt. Leo started, concentration blown, and closed his eyes again. Goddamnit, he was
fucking hallucinating now.

When he opened his eyes, Jim was still there, still watching him. He nodded at Leo, then glanced at
the kid on the table before looking back at Leo. Leo snapped out of his stasis and looked down at his
patient. He didn't recognize the kid, hadn't even looked at his face before he began this process, but
could see the pale expanse of freckled skin on the table. This must be someone that Kirk knew, he
thought, then he bent his head and put his mind to the task of saving the kid's spine.

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When he stumbled out of the hospital at the end of the day, the sun was still up, but low in the sky.
Patty and he had met up as they finalized reports, and they'd discussed dinner desultorily before
giving up on the idea. He just wanted to sleep, and so did Patty. They crossed the campus together,
hurrying as much as tired muscles would allow, shivering from the cold, too much caffeine and the
comedown from the stims.

"So, final tally," she said blearily. "Two into anger management, one discharge from the Academy,
and one kid undergoing detox from od-ing on synths. Unknown if his brain will ever be the same,
but maybe that's for the better," she paused. "He was pretty serious about killing himself," she said
tiredly.

"Jesus," Leo said. "My two idiots are going to be OK, I think. Not sure about fine motor on the kid
with the bad spine, but that is not my fucking fault," he said crossly.

"I heard that you reamed Spencer," she said, yawning. "He was yelling about it, but the rest of the
team wasn't backing him. They'll review the vids of the surgery," she said soothingly, as if he might
be worried. "I'm sure that you were right."

"What-the-fuck-ever," Leo said. He wasn't worried. "I was right." He yawned so hard that his jaw
cracked and Patty yawned again, swatting at him to stop.

"Hey," she said, at the point where their paths were going to diverge. "Did you ever figure out if …"
she looked around at the passing Cadets, and didn't finish her sentence.

"Yes," he said tiredly. "I'm pretty sure I was right. G'night, Patty," he said, turning away and
trudging towards his dorm.

In fact, he knew he was right, had figured out how Jim had gotten to Tarsus in the first place. Instinct
was never going to be good enough for him. He was a scientist, not a psychic. He needed proof. So,
he'd cross-checked the name of dead Starfleet personnel, finding the answer to that mystery in one
Brian Williams, Lt. Cmdr. (Ret.).

Williams had taught Hand-to-Hand at the Academy before he and Marinell Williams, nee
MacAllister, had taken their two small children to Tarsus to try their luck on a new world. He could
only imagine how dizzy with excitement and adventure Jim must have been about him and his
brother going to visit their aunt and uncle on a new world. Those poor boys. Their uncle had tried to
save them the best that he knew how, had taught them to fight and strategize, so that they could stand
on their own if he couldn't protect them. His own children had been too little to fight, and by all accounts they'd perished in the first wave of the killings along with their parents.

God help them all.

Leo's room was lit by the plum shadows cast as the winter sun set rapidly in the West. He shrugged out of his coat and kicked off his shoes, too weary to even think about showering again. He stunk from the antimicrobial treatment that was part and parcel of post-op, but he'd deal with it in the morning, or whenever he woke up. He left his clothes in a heap on the floor, only stopping to slap his comm on the table next to the Christmas tree on his desk which hadn't turned on when he came in the room, he realized.

"Lights," he said to the computer, but the tree stayed stubbornly dark. Although Gram had been known to leave their tree up long past the New Year, he knew that some folks undecorated the tree on New Year's Day. Someone in Jim's family must have kept the same custom, because although the starships still dangled from the branches, their nacelles were dark and their skins pewter against the pine needles.

He took a closer look, realizing that there was something different. A new starship, larger and more scuffed looking than the rest, dangled upside down awkwardly. Unlike the other starships with their loops for ornament hangers, this one had red thread snaked through holes on the top of it at the main saucer's edge. There were small crystals stuck on the thread and he touched one cautiously, then tasted it. Salt.

On the saucer, Jim had neatly printed the words 'USS Enterprise' and below that in bigger letters 'NCC 1701'. Leo was mystified as to how a beat-up salt shaker had come to represent Starfleet's new flagship, when there were a couple of other models of Constitution-class heavy cruisers on the tree. He turned the ship over, and a small shower of crystals rained on his desk. On the under side, where the crew quarters would be, Jim had written a small J and then a bit further down, an equally small B. Unless he missed his guess, Jim'd put them where the command staff's quarters should be.

He huffed out a laugh and placed the small, odd gift back on the tree, tapping it with a finger to give it a spin as he did. "Lights out," he ordered the computer and got into bed. He was too tired to contemplate any more Kirkian mysteries, so he rolled over and went to sleep.

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**Chapter 12**

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Leo's sense of dislocation continued on into the next day, oddly inverted because this time, he'd gone to sleep when it was light out and when he'd woken hours and hours later, it was to the bright light of the morning. He was felt muzzy in that hungover way that one felt when one had gotten too much sleep, as if the world was a little far away, as if his thoughts were processing just a bit too slowly. He had the strangest sense of not being alone and he opened an eye, expecting to find Jim sitting at his desk watching him sleep the way he'd been watching him operate, but the room was empty, and nothing seemed disturbed. There were no new ornaments on his Christmas tree, no notes … nothing.

He was really losing it over that kid. It was only 2256.02 and he'd broken his resolution immediately upon waking. He sighed and rolled over onto his stomach, flipping the pillow up and over, only to stop short before his head actually hit the fabric. He sniffed at the pillow and then at his sheets, which just smelled like sleep and him and hospital. He returned to the pillow. Well. He guessed he wasn't
that fucking crazy, after all.

Jim had been here, in his bed again, goddamnit.

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The thing he was pondering as he ate his second bowl of oatmeal in the mess was whether or not Jim had actually slid into bed with him at some point last night, and then slid out again before Leo'd awoken. As tired as he'd been the night before, he hadn't noticed anything other than bed and horizontal before he slipped right over the edge of sleep. However, he was a light sleeper, like most doctors who'd done urgent care, so the idea that Jim could have crept into his room while he was sleeping and not awakened him at all was a bit disturbing, he had to admit.

The man in question squeezed his shoulder and plopped a tray down next to his before he sat. "Bones!" he said cheerfully. "Happy New Year, man!"

Leo turned to look at his companion, schooling his expression to be as neutral, as normal as it ever had been. Jim was far too intuitive to not notice if Leo started acting weird around him, and he didn't particularly relish the conversation they'd need to have about how Leo had obsessively figured out the mystery of Tarsus. "Thanks, Jim," he said, as politely as Gram would expect him to be. "Same to you. How was your Christmas?" He hadn't really gotten a good look at Jim either time he'd seen him before, so he allowed his eyes to really drink him in, noting that his hair looked lighter, and that he was a few shades darker than he'd been the last time he'd seen him.

His sun-kissed color only served to highlight how blue his eyes were when he looked at Leo. "I don’t really celebrate it," he said, shrugging.

"Really," Leo said. "I've got a Christmas tree in my room that says otherwise."

Jim was looking down at his tray, cutting his omelet up with a semi-disgruntled expression on his face. "Well," he said, after muttering about his requests being ignored. Leo noted that his omelet had peppers in it, but Jim wasn't picking them out. He was going to eat what he'd been given, regardless of whether or not it was what he'd asked for. Leo felt his heart constrict with a pang. "I knew that you had to be here for work," Jim looked up at Leo and smiled. "I thought a little holiday spirit wouldn't hurt."

Leo raised an eyebrow, and Jim's smile kicked up in wattage.

"You liked it!" he crowed.

Leo rolled his eyes. "It was very thoughtful of you, Jim," he said begrudgingly, and Jim crowded up against him in a seated hip check, holding his fork far too close to Leo's eye. He pushed the hand away, maybe a bit more gently than he would have done ten days ago.

"You loved it!" Jim said enthusiastically. "I rock."

"I'm not actually required to participate in this conversation, am I?" Leo said, amused and touched by Jim's enthusiasm, but letting his answer slide out as sarcastically as ever. "I'll just be quiet over here while you and your ego congratulate each other.

Jim smirked at him, then glanced down at Leo's tray. "Bones, what's with all the oatmeal?"

"I'm hungry," he said, feeling a twinge in his gut and clamping down on the smart remark that he'd normally have made. "Yesterday was a lot more hectic that I expected."
"Skipping meals?" Jim asked sympathetically, and it was all Leo could do not to gape at him, or burst into tears.

He focused on his food instead, and just nodded, taking a breath in before decidedly changing the subject. "So, you decided that the way to spend New Year's Eve was watching me perform spinal surgery on one of your pals."

Jim looked puzzled. "Who?"

Now Leo was confused. "The kid on the table — I thought you knew him."

"No," Jim said, looking at Leo over the rim of his juice glass. "I was looking for you."

"Huh?" Leo said.

"I said I'd be back before 2256.01," Jim said, as if the answer were self-evident, which it most decidedly was not. "You were supposed to be off shift at 2000 hours, so …"

Leo just stared at him. He needed some sort of damned translator key for Jim Kirk, that was the trouble.

Jim continued talking, waving his fork in the air for emphasis as he took a swig off his coffee. "When you weren't back in your room, I figured you'd been delayed, so I was just hanging out, waiting for you," he shoveled a forkful of omelet up toward his mouth, "when Rajphantongsy called me."

"Huh?" Leo said again, mystified.

"Raji," Jim said patiently. "Bones, did you not get any sleep while I was away?"

"Jim," he said in irritation, "what does Raji have to do with you showing up in the OR?"

"I'm telling you!" Jim said, tucking into his home fries. "He and Sen went to some party last night, and Sen got dosed with some crap."

Leo sat up straight in alarm, thinking of Patty's litany of ODs. "Jesus, Jim! Is he OK?"

"He's fine," Jim soothed, before his face tightened. "Although I hope he fucking learned his lesson about taking drinks from strangers."

Leo was already sifting through the screens on his PADD, looking for admissions from the night before.

"It wasn't anything too serious," Jim assured Leo, "but Raji was scared and I went and got them and brought them to the infirmary. The idiots were at some party with 3rd and 4th years," Jim's expression was grim, "and I guess somebody thought it would be funny," his voice was hard, "to fuck one of the little kids up."

"Cupcake?" Leo asked, scrolling down to read that Sen had already been discharged.

Jim was peering over his shoulder, his breath grazing Leo's ear as he spoke. "Not at the party, and Gaila said she didn't think it had been malicious, but …" Jim sighed, "she misses the nuances a lot of the time."

"He's been discharged already," Leo said, putting the PADD down. His appetite was gone, but he made himself focus on eating his oatmeal. He'd be goddamned if he'd leave as much of a morsel of it
in his bowl. "I'll check on his chart when I get a chance."

Jim nodded. "Anyway. I asked for you, but by the time he got seen, you were already in surgery. And you know, I've never actually seen you in all your Bones-y glory before, so …"

"You snuck in to watch," Leo said, looking up at Jim. "Why?"

"I just said it," Jim said patiently, squeezing Leo's shoulder. "Seriously, man. Sleep? Didja get any?"

"But you knew that I'm a surgeon, Jim," Leo said.

"Yeah, yeah," Jim said with a smile. "You have mentioned it once or twice," he mocked. "And yeah, you patch me up and I've seen you take care of a few other people, and you wield a mean hypospray, but I've never actually seen you in your real element before. And …" Jim looked down. "It wasn't just me, you know. I was trying to figure out where you actually were, trying to get someone at the desk to comm you when the whole place just started buzzing with activity, and then they were talking about who was on and who could deal with the new patients, and your name kept coming up. So I stuck around, and then when the others left the observation room, I went in."

"Others?" Leo asked.

Jim nodded. "Evidently that kid is the grandson of some Admiral, or something. That's why that douche fought so hard to be on the OR team."

Leo blinked. "Huh."

"You had no idea, of course," Jim said warmly, "because you're just about doing what needs to be done."

Leo turned his head and looked at him sharply.

"You were amazing, man," Jim said. "I was tired just watching you, and when you knocked that douche –"

"Lt. Spencer," Leo corrected.

Jim just rolled his eyes. "What-the-fuck-ever Bones – don't ever let that douche near me if I need surgery, OK?"

Leo had to laugh. "Jim if you need surgery, I'll be doing it."

"My plan exactly," Jim said, before Leo interrupted him.

"Although, you could try, you know, not to fucking need surgery in the first place."

"Anyway," Jim said loudly. "When I'm Captain --"

Leo rolled his eyes and muttered about delusions –

"I know that you'll have the right to pick your own staff as CMO, but I'm putting my foot down on the douche," he concluded, downing the rest of his juice. He turned and looked at Leo after a few seconds of silence. "What, no commentary?"

"About the imaginary ship you'll be commanding where I'll be your imaginary CMO?" Leo said. "I didn't think I actually needed to participate in the conversation, as it might constitute encouraging your delusions of grandeur."
Jim grinned at him, and Leo rolled his eyes. Jim turned and swung one leg over the bench as if preparing to take flight. "Anyway," he said, "it turns out you've been holding out on me."

Pot, meet kettle, Leo thought bitterly. "What the fuck are you talking about, Jim?"

"Ambidextrous?" Jim said smugly. "That totally changes your fight training plan."

Leo raised an eyebrow and drawled out. "Imagine you not noticing, what with your tactical genius and all."

Jim smirked, but it was rueful. "Yeah, yeah," he said and stood up.

"Where you going?" Leo asked, not quite ready, never quite ready, for Jim to leave again so soon.

"I've got a meeting with Rosovsky," he said.

"Commander Rosovsky? What for?" Leo couldn't imagine what the hell Jim had done already in the short time he'd been back.

"I'm petitioning him to take his summer course," Jim said. "You want me to take your tray?"

Leo handed his over. "The survival thing?" Goddamnit. That was probably one of the three most dangerous classes that Starfleet offered. "The one where they drop you off all by yourself in the middle of some godforsaken hellhole with fuck all to use to keep yourself alive?"

"The very one," Jim said cheerfully.

"Jim, were you dropped on your head a lot as an infant?" Leo asked crossly. "What about that sounds like a good way to spend your summer vacation?"

"Oh, c'mon," Jim said, "like you aren't going to spend your summer break working on some incredibly lethal disease or something."

"Damn it, Jim! Have you been hacking into my comms?" Leo was flustered as much as he was irritated by the potential incursion. He thought with relief of the PADD he'd broken that had the Tarsus testimony on it, and how careful he'd been to download it from the central computers and not to link to his home console at all, even for a synch.

"No," Jim said, and he sounded hostile and a bit insulted. "It just seemed like something you'd do, and obviously, I was right. Anyway, the rumor is that Rosovsky's going to pick a desert site this summer …"

Of course, Leo thought. Because going to a desert in the middle of summer was an awesome idea.

"And I checked out a couple of possible locales when I was off sightseeing."

Leo started. "You didn't go home?"

Jim stared down at him, then shifted Leo's empty bowls and cups over to his tray before stacking the two of them and picking them up. "What for?" he asked Leo without a trace of bitterness. Then he clapped a hand on his shoulder and shot him a sunny smile and a "Later, Bones," and walked away, whistling lightly.

Leo watched as he strode across the mess hall, occasionally spinning around to catch the rear view of a Cadet in a mini-skirt, waving at and speaking to a number of people, and probably flirting with every single one of them, including the elderly kitchen attendant.
He sighed, and shook his head, and headed out in the opposite direction for the infirmary.

Patty found him late in the day at the same console he'd come to think of as his. He was updating his final notes on the surgical procedure on the kid with the bad spine, whose name had turned out to be Buckley.

"Hey," she said, sitting down next to him. "Do you have a minute?"

He looked over at her, and saw that she looked significantly less well-rested than he did, and he frowned. She was pale, which her olive-toned complexion translated into a sallow tone. If he had to guess, he'd guess that she hadn't been eating well, either. "Are you all right, Patty?" he said softly.

She shook her head. "No." Her voice was just above a whisper. "My 0 was waiting for me when I got home this morning." Her green eyes were full of tears. "And you know, I told her that she can't keep on using me like that. That I won't be her lover behind closed doors, her dirty little secret." Her expression was so bleak, so haunted, that it hurt to look at her.

Leo looked over his shoulder, but no one appeared to be paying attention to them. He rolled his chair a little closer and put his hand over hers, and Patty curled her far smaller hand into his and grasped it. Even seated he towered over her and he felt simultaneously protective and ungainly as he mutely tried to will some of his strength into her.

"I'm trying to keep our resolution, you know?" she said, with a weak smile, squeezing his hand.

"What did she say?" Leo said quietly.

She shook her head. "She tried to change my mind," she looked up at Leo, "not with words. But you know, it's easy when it's just the two of us, behind closed doors. It's always been easy there. And I've let her make the rules for too long. She can't just say that she loves me one day, and then tell me that she might have to get married to a man the next." She gave Leo's hand a final squeeze before dropping it. "Especially since her next words were about how we didn't have to stop just because she got married to someone else."

Leo's eyes widened. "Are you kidding me?"

Patty looked up at him.

"No, I'm sorry, darling, I know you're not kidding me," Leo said hastily. "But why would he … sweet baby Jesus," he said, "is he queer, too?"

Patty shrugged. "I have no fucking idea," she said. "And I could really care less what his motivation is. I just don't … why would I want to participate in this clusterfuck?" she asked him, and he nodded sympathetically. "And if she really loved me, I mean, really loved me, she would know, wouldn't she? She would know how disrespectful and wrong this is."

Leo sighed. "Most people are selfish when it comes to love, Patty," he said, laying a hand on her knee. "You know this."

"Yeah," she said, looking down. "That doesn't mean it doesn't fucking suck, though."

"Amen," Leo said.

Patty took in a deep breath. "How're you doing, Leonard?" she asked.
He shrugged. "I'm OK."

She searched his face. "Really?"

"I didn't grab him and plant one on him when he showed up this morning, or anything," he said.

Patty smiled, "Well, there is that, I guess." She cocked her head to the side. "You know," she said, in a confidential tone. "The Leonard McCoy Fan Club has acquired a few new members due to your recent display of … adroitness," she said wickedly. "As a matter of fact, I was personally witness to a meeting which revealed that there are a few pretty cute members of the nursing staff, not to mention the residents, who'd be glad to experience your adeptness at getting them out of their lingerie."

Leo did not blush. Seriously. He was a grown man. Clearly, there was something wrong with the environmental controls in this room.

"You are freakin' adorable," Patty teased him. "Would you like a list? It might just be the thing to break the back of your problem with your 2."

Leo rubbed the back of his neck and thought about it. "I …" he began, and looked at Patty helplessly.

She was staring at him with an intent, shrewd expression. "Mm hmm," she said assessingly. "Not in the mood for lingerie at the moment, are you?"

"No," Leo said. "I tend to switch back and forth, and there's been nobody since my ex-.

She nodded. "Well," she said. "Luckily, the Leonard McCoy Fan Club is equal opportunity." She paused, and seemed to be considering some things. "Do you know Rick Jindal?"

Leo shook his head. "I think I've seen the name," he said, "but I can't …"

"Surgical fellow," she said. "About your age, I think. Not as smart as you, but I imagine that's true of 95% of the people you meet," Leo shook his head at her. "Oh, please," she said, "you have a ridiculous number of initials after your name, Dr. McCoy, so don't even bother with the denials. Anyway, he's fit, he's good-looking, he's very nice," she said, "and I happen to believe that he's your Number One fan." She stood up and smoothed a hand over her hair, which only served to make it more messy, not less. "And I'll bet you dinner at your favorite restaurant that if he isn't a 6, then he's a 5."

"Patty …" he started, in a demurring tone.

"I didn't say you had to marry him, idiot," she said affectionately. "Just pay attention the next time he talks to you, and see what you think." She picked up her stack of PADDs and bent forward, brushing a kiss against his cheek. "Thank you," she whispered into his ear.

"Back atcha, darlin'," he said quietly. "Take care of yourself."

"You, too," she said.

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It was raining on Remembrance Day, and although it felt somehow appropriate, Leo couldn't help but feel bad for Jim. Nearly his whole life, or as far back as he could remember clearly, this day had been commemorated with ceremony. It usually began the hour before the destruction of the Kelvin. This year, the ceremony began "Twenty-three years ago today …" and Leo felt an unexpected stab
of pain. All these years, as the world, the Federation, counted its distance from this tragedy, they were counting the years of Jim Kirk's life.

The ceremony continued on in the ritual that he'd heard for years but felt like he was listening to for the first time, recounting the communications between the doomed ship and its home planet, detailing the events as they unfolded. At the hour of the Kelvin's destruction, they all stood, pausing for a moment of silence, and all Leo could think of was one-minute old James Kirk, probably being held in the arms of his weeping mother, innocent and unaware of the fate he'd been born to.

After the pause, the names of the lost were read out in alphabetical order, until the Admiral came to the last two on the list. Every year, they did it the same way, so Leo braced himself for what was coming.

"Captain Richard Robau," the Admiral solemnly intoned, and paused.

In all the years that Leo'd heard the last name read, there had always been a note of defiance, and triumph in the way it was said, and this year was no different. "Captain George Kirk," the Admiral said, and let the name ring in the air for a minute before he added, "Heroes all. Never forgotten."

Leo turned and looked, but Jim's face was in the shadows and barely visible. He doubted that anyone other than him had noticed Jim slip into the room after the ceremony had already begun, only the escaping pressure from the hydraulics marking his passage. Leo had sat near the back, one seat in from the aisle, and crossed his long legs in front of the empty seat, leaving room for Jim and trying to discourage a latecomer, another latecomer from slipping into the space that he'd left for him. He'd been right about what door Jim would use, but hadn't counted on the fact that he'd refuse to actually enter the convocation. Not that he could blame him, really. George Kirk had been a hero, no doubt. But he wasn't the only hero named Kirk, goddamnit.

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It was technically no longer Jim's birthday when Leo entered Finnegan's just before closing time. He'd commed and even gone by Jim's room, but no one had heard or seen of him, least of all his useless roommates. After thinking about it, Leo had decided that this was probably where Jim had been hiding, at least for part of the day.

Liam Finnegan was behind the bar, not his usual post, and he nodded at Leo when he stepped up to the bar, his eyes cutting to a corner in the back, the same one where he and Jim had dug themselves in after Horatio.

"Is he bad?" Leo asked quietly, ordering drinks. He pulled his wallet out of his civilian overcoat. He'd changed into civvies, thinking that the last thing Jim wanted to see today was a 'fleet uniform.

"Been nursing the same beer for the last 45 minutes," Liam said, pouring out the shots. "Before that, he was out back loading up all the empties into the truck for recycling." He looked up at Leo. "Usually takes a couple of days. Hallway's totally empty."

Leo nodded, and refused to accept Liam's hand wave of the bill, tossing some credits down on the bar and picking up the small tray.

As he crossed the room, he could see Jim slouched in the dark corner. Jim had a number of slouches – and was able to broadcast a wide variety of emotional states via them. Tonight, he was sprawled across the bench with his head against the corner of the booth, one foot up on the chair opposite, the other down on the ground. There was nothing particularly relaxed about his posture. Instead, it said 'Fuck Off' and 'Leave Me Alone'.

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Leo nodded, and refused to accept Liam's hand wave of the bill, tossing some credits down on the bar and picking up the small tray.
Leo kicked the chair out from underneath Jim's foot and put the drinks down on the table, tossing the empty tray onto another table nearby. He put his coat on the back of the chair and picked it up, turning it around and sitting down right inside Jim's airspace. He moved the table a little closer to him, and parceled out the drinks, two shots and one beer apiece. He picked a shot up in either hand and waited, staring at his friend.

"And what are we drinking to exactly?" Jim asked. Leo could hear the thread of exhaustion and finally, that undernote of bitterness that he knew had to be there, somewhere.

"Sit up," Leo ordered, and wonder of wonders, after staring at him for a good long time, Jim did just that. Leo had positioned his chair so that when Jim sat up, they were inches away from each other, directly opposite one another.

Leo held Jim's eye and handed him the first shot.

Jim looked at Leo warily, almost belligerently.

Leo took in a breath, and said in a clear, low voice, "To George Kirk." He raised his glass and waited.

He thought he saw a bit of a tremor in Jim's lower lip, but he nodded and said, "To George Kirk," blue eyes dark and wet looking, before he tilted his head back and drank the shot down.

When Jim slapped his shot down on the table, Leo picked up the other two and sat there with them, staring at him.

"No, Bones," he said.

"Yes, Bones," Leo answered. "Take the fucking shot."

The air between them was fraught with tension, but Leo was not going to back down, and Jim must have seen that in his expression because he finally reached out, still reluctant, and took the shot.

"To my friend," Leo said, "James T. Kirk." He raised the glass.

Jim just stared at him, and this time there was a definite tremble to his lips.

"Jim," Leo said quietly. "It's a new year for you. Drink to it with me."

Leo saw Jim's throat work as he looked down at the glass in his hand.

"Please, Jim."

Jim nodded and tossed back the drink without saying a word. This time, it was Leo who slammed his against the table. Uncharacteristically, Jim just kind of slid his across the surface. Before he could lean back into his sullen slump, Leo caught him by the back of the neck and pressed Jim's forehead against his own, rubbing his hand up and down over the nape of his neck the way Jim had done to him.

"I'm grateful to know you, Jim," Leo said to him quietly. "I'm glad that you're here."

He heard the hitch in Jim's breath as his words sunk in, and then felt Jim's hand come up and grasp the back of his neck, pulling Leo in a little tighter before he pressed away.

"Thanks, Bones," Jim said. He turned his head and thumbed at his eye before he reached for their beers. When he handed one of them to Leo, he could see Jim's vulnerability, how alone he'd been for
so long. "I just … thanks."

"You're welcome," Leo said, and picked up his own beer.

This time, they drank in companionable silence.

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Chapter 13

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January was as unrelentingly grey and rainy as he’d been warned, but hearing about something and experiencing it were two different things, a fact that he reflected upon with bitterness. Normally, he would have done everything possible to protect himself from the cold deluge – used an umbrella, taken shelter in a doorway or under an awning – but not this morning. Leo walked home in the pre-dawn deluge, soaked to the skin, and hoping that somehow it would wash away his sin. Because he had broken his first and most important promise: he had done harm. And this fact was made all the more bitter by the knowledge that he has done so out of his own base selfishness, betraying himself as well as that whom he’d injured.

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Rick Jindal was a really nice guy, Leo had to admit. He couldn’t help but notice him after Patty had mentioned him, and it was clear from the minute Leo began paying attention that this guy liked him. Not that he actually knew Leo or anything, but Rick’s every glance let Leo know that he was attracted to him, that he wanted to get to know Leo. When the Buckley case had been reviewed at M&M, Jindal had spoken articulately on the needs of the patient taking precedence over the maintenance of protocol, neatly refuting Spencer’s arguments on the necessity of preservation of rank and its importance in the military surgical theatre. Leo had taken the opportunity, next time he saw him, to speak to him directly. He wasn’t so much thanking him for his support as he was acknowledging the commonality of their viewpoints. That initial conversation had led to others, which had led to Rick asking him out to dinner, which had led to Leo walking home in the darkness before dawn, in the freezing cold rain, feeling like the biggest asshole on the planet.

What he should have done was said ‘no’ when Rick had asked him if he’d like to go back to his place for an after-dinner drink. He’d had a good time, and he’d had enough to drink. He was pleasantly mellow, not buzzed to the point where inhibition would fall away, where the loneliness of the past year and his desire to drive Jim Kirk from his brain would overwhelm his common sense. That point he got to after they got back to Rick’s small but nicely appointed apartment, with its bay view and fake fireplace that threw off real heat. The conversation turned more personal, and when he was one drink beyond the point where he really should have stopped, he had turned his head in for a second round of kisses when he should have drawn back, made plans for a second date, and gone home.

But he hadn’t. Instead, he’d let himself get swept up in Rick’s desire for him, let himself revel in being the object of another’s longing, because it felt so damned good to be wanted. There had been real pleasure in the surrender, to have someone be so responsive to his every twitch and sigh and moan. It wasn’t Rick’s fault that Leo had opened his eyes up, realized where he was, and what he was doing, and that he wasn’t doing it with the guy he had been imagining.

The disconnect had begun when he’d run one hand through Rick’s hair, and the other over the smooth plane of muscle in his shoulder as he knelt in front of Leo, trying to swallow him whole. He knew, somewhere, that it wasn’t Jim that was touching him, but he’d been so caught up in the holo
playing inside his own head that the coarse straight hair running through his fingers, the difference in skin texture, shocked him into reality. Leo’s eyes had snapped open and he’d seen and suddenly it was all wrong – the shape and color of the eyes looking up at him through half-lowered lashes, the curve of the mouth, the play of tongue, the feel of the hands grasping him at his base and pressing behind his balls – and Leo’s own hands went from encouraging Rick closer to pushing him away. He’d tried to play if off as wanting something else, not someone else, and when he got up on his hands and knees, he hoped that by turning his back he’d be able to focus on sensation and not have touch or vision intrude. As long as he couldn’t see what was going on, he could pretend it was somebody else’s cock, somebody else’s hands, somebody else’s mouth.

Jim’s hands on him, that was what he was imagining. Jim’s hands, Jim’s lips and tongue, Jim’s cock pressing him wide open and wanting.

He closed his eyes and focused on the sensations, trying to block out Rick’s voice and listening to his own internal monologue, but he’d found himself faltering again, falling out of focus and disconnecting, when Rick’s hand, not the hand he wanted, moved down to stroke him in time with his thrusts. Leo braced himself on one arm, moving his hand down to take over, and Rick redoubled his efforts, thrusting harder, bending over him, holding onto his shoulders for leverage. But it wasn’t until Rick’s hand shifted and landed on Leo’s right hip to pull him back and in to one of his thrusts, that Leo felt himself coming with a strangled cry of “Ji-“ that he just managed to stifle as Rick bit into his back above the shoulder blade and came.

They collapsed into a tangled heap for mere seconds, and Leo had a hope, a vain one, that if Rick had heard his strangled cry that he’d be able to pass it off as his last name, as if anyone would find calling someone’s last name in bed remotely attractive. But the way Rick moved away from him while he was still trying to catch his breath let him know that he hadn’t gotten away with anything.

He pushed himself up to turn around and look at Rick, and found that he had turned his face away, covering up with an arm he’d flung over his head, hiding himself from view.

Leo opened his mouth to say something -- what he had no idea -- when Rick’s voice sounded in the quiet room.

"Well," he said. "I can honestly say that's never happened to me before." He pulled his arm away from his eyes and looked at Leo, anger and hurt clearly evident. "What was your ex-wife’s name?"

Oh, fuck. Leo closed his own eyes, knowing that he’d been granted an out of sorts, but one that would make it infinitely worse. "Rick …" he began, not knowing how to start.


"Jocelyn," Leo said softly.

"Yeah," Rick said, getting up off the bed.

"Rick," Leo began, reaching for him, but Rick wrenched his arm out of Leo's grasp.

"I really, really don't think that you should fucking touch me right now," Rick said, standing at the edge of the bed. He began stripping the bedclothes off that had been rumpled by their sex.

"I'm sorry," Leo said sincerely. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah," Rick said, not looking at him. "I think you should leave."

Leo stood and began looking for his clothes, which were nowhere in the room they currently
occupied. "I'm gonna --" he said, pointing in the direction of the living room.

"Yeah," Rick said harshly, still not looking at him, while making a pile of the sheets. "There's a washroom off the living room."

Leo left the bedroom silently after staring at Rick's back, seeing the tightness and the grief in the other man's posture.

When he came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, Rick was in the kitchen, wearing a robe that covered him from the neck down, the rest of him hidden by the counter he was standing behind. He'd already washed what they'd used, and was drying and putting the glasses away. He looked up at Leo as he stood awkwardly in the living room. "So, was I the first person you've fucked since her?"

"Yeah," Leo said, because that at least was the truth.

Rick nodded, wiping off the counter. "I pushed," he said.

"No," Leo said.

"Yeah, I did," Rick said angrily. "There was a moment when I knew that you were thinking you really should leave," he met Leo's eye for the first time since it had all gone to hell, "and I decided to convince you otherwise."

"Rick," Leo sighed. "I wanted to be convinced."

"I get it," Rick said, balling up the towel he'd used to dry the counter. Leo figured that he was probably going to wash everything that Leo had touched, and he felt shamed, knowing how he'd just crushed this guy's hopes. "I just, uh, think that maybe you need to take some more time."

There was nothing Leo could possibly say that would make the situation anything but infinitely worse by admitting that it hadn't been Joss' name that he had almost said, that it wasn't Joss that he had been picturing. "Yeah," Leo said, feeling lost and stupid. He was usually the fixer of problems, not the cause, and the idea that he could do nothing to make the situation better was just- "I am sor--"

"Just go, OK?" Rick said, not looking up again. "Let's forget this ever happened. Forget you know me."

Leo left without another word, and walked out into the dark San Francisco morning.

He didn't even notice the rain until he was soaking wet.

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He’d seen Rick the second day after their humiliating encounter, and as he’d expected, the other man had passed him by in the hall at Starfleet Medical with a curt nod. Also as expected, Leo still felt like a total shit.

Jim had noticed his crappy mood and kept commenting on it, but Leo kept telling him to fuck off and leave it alone. Surprisingly, he’d done so, but only after having been told that six or seven times in a row when they'd been out drinking the night after his disastrous re-entry into the dating world. Finally, Jim had stalked away to chat up some young and less grouchy female, and that had been the last he'd seen of him for the evening. Well, aside from the worried looks that Jim had thrown him as he sat in his corner, nursing his drink and his bitterness in equal measure.
Patty, of course, was a totally different story. Telling a psychiatrist to fuck off and leave it alone was the same as painting a phosphorescent circle with huge arrows pointing at whatever it was that you didn't want to discuss. Which was pretty much what she told him when she locked them into the on-call room and told him to "Tell me what's got you growling at everyone like a constipated fucking bear before I hypo you with truth serum."

He stared at her, mutinous and angry, because this was partly her fault.

"Leonard," she said softly, putting her hand on his arm and looking up at him with those big green eyes. "Please talk to me."

Aw, fuck it.

He spilled the whole sordid tale and Patty, bless her heart, immediately felt guilty. "Oh, no," she said, "This is all my fault! I should have just kept my big mouth shut – oh, Leonard!" She wrapped her arms around his waist, and her head resting against his breastbone felt a little bit like absolution. "I'm such an asshole!"

So, of course he had to disagree with her. "No," he sighed, sitting down with a heavy whump on one of the beds in the room. "That's me. The asshole that called out somebody else's name as he came."

Patty wrung her hands and winced. "He really thought that you were calling your ex-wife's name?"

Leo nodded wearily and Patty paced back and forth in the same room. "Oh, that poor guy."

"Yep," Leo said.

"Didja …" Patty began, looking at Leo imploringly.

"Patty, what the fuck was I going to say!" He put on a chipper, yet sarcastic voice, "'Actually, Rick, I was calling out the name of another guy, a guy that just wants to be my pal. My ex-wife? She hates my guts, and I love him. And you? You're nowhere in this scenario, even though you were the one fucking me. Thanks, though!'"

Patty moaned and dropped down on the other bed, holding her head. "Oh, God," she said. "How … awkward."

"Oh," Leo said. "Try fucking living it, if you want some awkward. You know, this is why I never put out on the first date – it was a good goddamned policy over the years – because that way, if things get all weird after the sex, at least you know the other person. Sex needs to either be totally anonymous, one night, that's it, no names -- or in an established relationship." He was waving his hands every which way as he spoke. "Anything in between is just totally …" He flapped around, looking for a word.

"Awkward," Patty sighed. She stared at Leo with an expression of abject sympathy. "Seriously, though. Your ex- and your number 2 have similar names?"

"No," Leo said. "But they start with the same letter," he paused. "Come to think of it, my high school girlfriend's name started with J too, damn it." He looked at Patty. "That's weird, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "It's not like you named them, Leonard."

Which was true, but he still found the whole thing vaguely unsettling now that he'd noticed it. It was as weird as the Andorians and all their Ts, and well, fuck it, he had a bunch of them, too, didn't he?
"What're you gonna do now?" Patty asked.

"I'm going to become a fucking monk, that's what," Leo said crossly.

"Oh, Len," Patty said. She looked pensive, like maybe she was thinking a little too hard.

"Don't even make a fucking suggestion, Patty," he pointed a finger at her in warning. "I swear to God, not one word about anybody else. You promise me, woman!"

Leo had managed to forget all about the whole sorry mess for a little while when he'd been sparring with Jim. It was late, and they were alone in one of the smaller training rooms, running through Jim's new routines for him. There had been this the moment when he became weightless, when he left behind all the pain and the confusion and was simply acting with and reacting against Jim. For the first time, he actually understood why fighting things out could make sense, because he wasn't thinking and he wasn't hurting, he was just … doing something.

Jim had been ebullient about his progress, but their post-session conversation had been cut short by Harry Yu. Leo’d been unaware that he’d even come into the room, his focus had been so narrowed by the fight, so he jumped when Yu complimented him on his improved skills. Leo had to smile at the man, still wearing Leo’s too tight KFF t-shirt even after all these weeks, just to make a point. Yu had smirked back at him, then commandeered Jim for a talk about his second semester sections – the requests for admittance to Jim’s section had gone through the roof, and Jim had agreed to take on one more group, but refused to turn the KFF over to another instructor.

Leo’d excused himself to the showers, happy to not have to suffer the pleasure and pain of soaping up alongside a naked and chatty Jim, because sure, men let it all hang out in the locker room, but Jim was as comfortable naked as he was clothed, and … it just wasn't good for Leo to dwell too much on the very idea, much less the stark reality of Jim as God had made him.

So, by the time Jim bounced into the locker room, naked as the day he was born, talking a mile a minute and drying himself off as he walked, Leo had just given the boys one last drying and was pulling on his briefs, bent over in front of his open locker, which was, of course, next to Jim's. When he straightened up, he heard Jim's monologue just kind of snap off an instant before he felt Jim's fingers ghost along the skin of his back, two fingers lightly outlining the lower part of the bruise that Rick had left on his shoulder blade. Fuck.

Leo closed his eyes against the conversation that he knew was coming. He should have made Patty regen that bite for him, or made a more valiant attempt to take care of it himself, even if it was in a place that was difficult for him to reach. The truth was that he'd left it there, like a scarlet letter, the pull of it when he moved his right arm a reminder of the pain he'd caused another human being.

"Wow, Bones," Jim said lightly, in a tone that was not light at all. "That's kind of a big mouth for a chick."

Leo decided that his best course of action was to just fucking ignore Jim. He pulled his red pants off the hanger and snapped them open, stepping in one leg at a time.

"I mean, seriously," Jim said, and Leo could feel his gaze on the bite as if it were an actual touch, and it burned accordingly. "She must have been a really big girl."

When Leo continued pulling up his pants, Jim stepped closer. "Bones?"

Leo looked up at him finally, feeling trapped and shamed and fucking hostile, because he knew that
Jim knew that no woman had left that bite mark. "Stupid is not a good look for you, Jim," he said sharply, looking him in the eye as he pulled his deodorant off the shelf of his locker.

Jim's gaze was hooded and frankly assessing as it traveled over the front of Leo's body, looking for more marks, more evidence, looking as if he were seeing Leo for the first time. The towel Jim'd been using to dry himself had halted halfway down his torso, and his hand held it there, thankfully hiding his crotch from Leo's view, but exposing the expanse of his smooth white hip.

"Am I gonna meet this guy?" Jim asked casually, but once again, there was not a thing casual about his question.

"No," Leo said, pulling his t-shirt over his head. He refused to hurry his movements, even though he was flushing from the heat of Jim's gaze. How dare he be fucking … jealous or whatever it was that he was? Leo took his time, tucking his t-shirt into his pants, his actions as precise as ever.

"Bones," Jim said seriously, and Leo couldn't help but look up. "Was this …" Jim looked a little flustered. "Did he … did you not want to?"

Goddamnit, was the kid actually worried? Leo stared at him for a moment, incredulous to see that he was … confused at the very least. "Jim," Leo sighed, sitting down on the bench and reaching for his socks. Jim had made no move whatsoever to get dressed, and as Leo looked down he could see the long bones in his feet, and how oddly vulnerable they looked unshod. He said nothing more.

"What, Bones?" Jim said. "Jim, what? I mean, what am I supposed to think here?"

Leo looked up at him now in pure exasperation. "Why are you even thinking about it at all?" he demanded.

Jim's lips compressed into a thin line, and he got that mulish, obstinate expression on his face that Leo had come to dread. "Why am I …" he repeated. "Bones, I fucking tell you everything about my sex life," he said angrily, and before Leo could protest that he'd never asked for that dubious honor, he continued, "and you're fucking someone and you've never mentioned it? Should I start calling now before I come over? Are you gonna be too busy to hang out? What!?" Jim said, off Bones' expression.

"I already said," Leo gritted out, "that you won't be meeting him."

"And, what does that even fucking mean?!" Jim said. "You don't want me to meet him? I thought we were friends!"

"Damn it, Jim," Leo said, standing up again. "You won't be meeting him because I won't be seeing him!"

Jim just stared at Leo, and he looked … startled.

"What?" Leo said, zipping up his fly and buttoning his pants. Jim was still naked.

"I … I …"

Jesus, the kid was stammering.

Leo shook his head at him, wordlessly conveying that he had no fucking idea what Jim was trying to say.

"Jesus, Bones," Jim said. "I didn't think you did casual sex. Have you been fucking people this
whole time?"

"Jim," Leo said wearily. "This whole time is what, six months?"

"Bones," Jim said tightly, his blue eyes flashing.

"OK, Jim, you want to hear it?" He searched Jim's eyes. "What I still do, evidently, is make a huge fucking mistake once in a while. So, no, it wasn't good, and it wasn't fun, and I don't want to talk about it, OK?"

Jim stared at him for a moment longer, holding his gaze. He clearly recognized the echo of his own words from a couple of months ago. "OK," he said softly. "OK."

Leo turned and put an arm into his jacket. He could still feel Jim's blue gaze burning into his skin, despite the two layers of clothes.

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Chapter 14 

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Leo hadn’t expected that that would be the last conversation about his sex life, so he wasn’t surprised when the inevitable questions began. What was surprising was how long it took for Jim to start asking them, and the way Jim sometimes looked at him when he thought Leo wasn’t paying attention, as if he found Leo intriguing, like a new alien species, or a talking dog. It was just so fucking bizarre, as if Jim Kirk, hypersexual, had never really considered Leo a sexual being.

Or maybe he’d just thought that Leo was straight, which was also a little strange, because straight guys usually didn’t crawl into bed with one another, even if it was to just sleep. In fact, they generally didn’t sleep in the same bed together unless they actually were brothers, and that habit usually ended in childhood. It all kept leading him back to the same depressing conclusion: that he really had been a substitute for Jim’s lost brother. The question was … what was he now?

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Jim hadn’t crawled into Leo’s bed for quite a while, nor had he shown up at Leo’s doorstep late at night, bleeding and bruised. He was happy about the latter development, obviously, but the former made his heart ache. There was an odd kind of stutter about Jim’s physicality with him, as if Jim had suddenly become aware of how his actions might be perceived and was consciously holding himself back. It wasn’t that Jim didn’t touch him at all, because he did, but they were the kind of touches that Jim doled out to every person within a specific radius of his being, and therefore impersonal. The thing that Leo missed the most, aside from waking at some point in the night to find Jim beside him or even rolling over in the morning and catching the scent of his skin on the sheets and realizing that somehow Jim had managed to slip into bed and slip out again without waking him, was the way that Jim used to sling an arm around his neck, the way that Jim had used to lean on him in bars. The only way that he got any full body contact with Jim these days was fighting with him, and that was never going to be a substitute for the affection that he’d grown used to.

Of course, there was the possibility that Jim’s reticence to touch Leo wasn’t so much about his consciousness of Leo’s sexuality as it was about a kind of trust between them being fractured. When Leo had had time to think about his response to Jim’s questions in the locker room, he had to admit that he’d overreacted. Jim wasn’t responsible for how Leo felt about him, nor was he responsible for the whole gruesome scene at Rick’s, even if he had been an unknowing participant in it. Leo had
taken out some of his resentment and anger on him, and harshly established a boundary in their friendship. Not that Jim seemed to resent him for it, at least outwardly. In fact, his line of demarcation had made his sex life and his history all the more interesting to Jim. He could tell by the way Jim watched him, watched who he was looking at when they were out drinking.

Jim was trying to figure him out.

If only Leo knew why.

Midterms had just ended, and when Leo entered Finnegan’s after working a shift at the hospital, the place was packed to the rafters. He was later than he expected because he’d had to wait for Patty to get ready to meet her 0, Shohreh. Patty had held firm to her New Year’s resolution of all or nothing, and refused to let Shohreh back into her life halfway. After weeks of no contact and grieving on Patty’s part, Shohreh had contacted Patty and asked if they could meet at a restaurant for dinner. Patty was ecstatic; the restaurant was not only elegantly romantic in its setting, but it was located well outside of the historically gay districts of San Francisco. In their past relationship, they’d stuck to small, out-of-the-way places where’d they be less likely to stand out, hiding in plain sight. Patty had high hopes for what this evening would mean.

Leo had stayed late to help her get ready, and to hold her hand while she hyperventilated. He was happy for her, but as he crossed the threshold to Finnegan’s, he couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for himself at how he’d damaged his friendship with Jim. Jealousy was a part of human nature, he reckoned. After all, he had no romantic designs on Patty, but if she and Shohreh got back together, he knew that he’d lose his partner in commiseration, and that was a real shame, because misery did, in fact, love company, especially when they could laugh and talk and compare notes about how much their lives sucked. If Patty got what she’d wanted, well, he’d be back to being miserable alone.

He scanned the room for Jim and finally spotted him all the way across the room, his tall form ringed by a circle of young human women. Jim had been working his bad boy smile on the group but it brightened into a true one when he spotted Leo, who couldn’t help but smile back. Leo felt his shoulders ease down from their tense posture as he decided, right then and there, that he was going to change how he’d been behaving toward Jim. If they were friends, they were friends — and that meant that he had to learn how to let him in a little more. He’d come to Starfleet with a chip on his shoulder, guarding his secret about his father’s death and his role in it. When he’d met Jim, he’d not wanted to yield a bit in his solitary stance, but Jim had refused to let him be. It wasn’t Jim’s fault that Leo felt more than he let on. Jim confounded him, that was true, but he was willing to bet that Jim felt the same way about Leo’s own mixed signals. One of them would have to change the dynamic between them, and if Jim’s recent reticence with him was because he thought he was unwelcome, well … it was up to Leo to set it right.

Across the floor, Jim scowled and put on a grumpy face, making a gesture that Leo interpreted as ‘where the fuck have you been?’ and Leo shrugged. He pointed at the bar in the universal signal of ‘you ready for another round?’ and Jim nodded, their silent conversation taking place over the heads of the bouncing, grinding mass of Cadets determined to burn off their test-taking stress one way or another. Jim tilted his head and pointed to the back corner, where they usually hung out when they were together, and Leo nodded before turning to push his way through the thick crowd. As he got close to the bar, he found himself getting drunkenly pawed by a young woman at least a decade younger than he was. He returned her grabby hands to her person gently but firmly, only to find her draped over his back while he ordered drinks.

“Hello?” he said over his shoulder.
“You’re nice,” the young woman drunkenly slurred. She was tall enough in her high heels that her head rested on Leo’s shoulder. He could feel the weight of her breasts against his shoulder blade and spine as she settled, resting her slight weight against him.

He sighed, shaking his head. “Not that nice, darling,” he said to her, tilting his head into the light to take a good look at her. She was beautiful, in that raw, ill-defined way that youth can sometimes be. Her unnaturally blue eyes had been tinted to cover up their natural brown, and she’d emphasized the color with heavy eyeliner and long blue eyelashes. The effect was not as pleasing as she suspected, but she was young — she’d learn what really suited her as she grew up. Ever the doctor, he couldn’t resist checking out her reactions to light, as she stared at him, barely focused. Her pupils indicated that she was just very, very drunk, not drunk and high. While he understood the logic behind allowing 18 year-olds, who could vote, wield weapons and fight and die in wars, to drink, he also recognized that sometimes they really lacked the emotional maturity to do so. He slid an arm around the girl to steady her as he turned to face her and she threw her arms around his neck. Leo stifled a grimace.

“Where are your friends, darlin’?” he asked, touching her cheek to rouse her from her stupor.

She pouted. “I wanna stay wi’ you,” she said. Her head dropped back onto Leo’s shoulder. Leo loudly asked if anyone knew who the young woman was, but was met with indifference. “What about you?” he asked the barkeep, a Tellarite.

He nodded toward the dance floor, then put Leo’s drinks on a tray at his request. He tipped the guy, then turned both him and his new friend toward the floor. “Darlin’,” he said to her, and she drunkenly raised her head and smiled. “Your friends are sad without you.”

“I hate ‘em,” she announced. “Wanna stay here wi’ you. You’re nice,” he raised his chin to dodge her kiss and she mashed her nose against his throat and mumbled something, pressing her face into his neck.

Leo moved them steadily toward the floor, balancing the tray above his head precariously, while he alternately dragged and lifted the young woman with him. Across the dance floor, he saw Jim’s eyes widen, and then question him across the distance.

Leo shook his head helplessly, and he just caught a glimpse of Jim’s smirk before he lost sight of him in the crowd.

“Darlin’,” he bellowed into the young woman’s ear. “Are these your friends?”

She looked around blearily. “No,” she said, “but I love this song! Dance wi’ me?” She came alive and began trying to drag Leo into the crush of dancers.

He planted his heels and counterbalanced her, and she bounced back towards him like a slingshot, thumping against his chest, making his drinks slosh over the sides. “Damn it!”

“I cannot take you anywhere,” he heard Jim say right into his ear, his voice low and amused. Jim snagged the two shots off the tray and downed one, then came around to Leo’s front and held the shot to his lips. “You look like you need this,” he said, eyes twinkling with dark mirth.

Watching Jim, Leo opened his mouth and took the shot. It was an awkward angle, and some of the Jack escaped over the edge of the glass and onto Jim’s fingers. Unselfconsciously, Jim licked his long fingers and watched Leo, eyes sliding from him to the young woman plastered to his side. Jim tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.
“The missus is really lovely,” Jim said blandly.

“Fuck you,” Leo snorted.

Jim laughed and took the tray from Leo’s hand, returning a minute later just carrying their two beers. He handed Leo his, and Leo took a long pull.

“Now what?” Jim asked.

“Her friends are out there,” Leo said, moving a little bit closer to the dance floor. “Darlin’,” he bellowed at the drunk. “Do you see your friends?”

She raised her head woozily and looked at Leo as if she’d never seen him before.

“Darlin’?” he asked, concerned.

“Ashley!” The shriek was ear-splittingly high and rendered extra loud for having been made in triplicate.

“Wow,” Jim said, widening his eyes. He put a finger in his ear, as if to clear it.

Meanwhile, something small and hard began smack Leo in the chest, and he raised his beer out of the line of fire.

“Let go of her, you creep!”

Leo was being beaten by a tiny, metallic evening bag being wielded by a tiny young woman, while her two equally tiny friends echoed her every word. The evening bag was a surprisingly effective weapon.

“Stop it,” Ashley said, drunkenly, pushing at her friends, whom she towered over, as Leo rubbed at his sore pectoral. “He’s wunnerful. I’ma stay wi’ him.”

Leo’s eyes were going to roll right out of his head one of these days, honestly. “No, darlin’,” he said, passing her over to her friends' collective embrace. “You stay here with your friends. Bye now.” He turned around and caught a laughing Jim by the elbow, dragging him away over his protests.

“Bones,” he protested, “It was just getting interesting! There was going to be like a cat fight, maybe.”

Leo looked at Jim like he was insane.

“The other two,” Jim said, “they thought you were hot. You coulda gotten some multi-partner action,” he crowed.

Leo rolled his eyes.

“I mean, that would be new and different, right?”

Leo looked at Jim, allowing the tiniest smirk to curve his mouth.

Jim’s mouth positively gaped, his eyes wide. “Bones!” he said, then narrowed his eyes. “You’re totally fucking with me, aren’t you?”

“Where are we goin’, Jim?” Leo asked, refusing to answer. He was wearing what he hoped was a secretive smile.
Jim stared at him for a beat longer, then turned to lead the way back toward their usual corner, stopping short and almost spilling Leo's beer again. Goddamnit. They really needed to find a less crowded place with fewer hormonal children in it. Why couldn't they ever go to a nice jazz bar or something?

"Damn it, Jim," Leo said, flinging beer off his fingers.

Over Jim's shoulder, he could see what had stopped his forward progress. Gaila was tucked into the corner of the booth Leo thought of as theirs, her arms full of another young woman. She was inspecting that young woman's tonsils quite thoroughly, one hand on her face, while the other was out of view, under the other woman's skirt.

Jim whistled softly in appreciation.

"Oh," Gaila said, looking up. "Jim — I thought you'd left."

Jim cocked his head and Leo looked at his expression. He didn't seem jealous. In fact, he looked … interested.

"Oh …" Gaila purred out. "You found your doctor."

She extended the hand that had been holding the young woman's face, and Leo grasped it, placing a kiss on the back of her hand.

"Miss Gaila," he said.

"Doctor," she answered, stretching sinuously. Her companion hadn't looked away from Gaila once. Instead, she was stroking the smooth skin of the Orion woman's neck, tracing the edges of her rumpled uniform, running her palms over Gaila's breasts. Gaila glanced at her friend, and said, "We're thinking of leaving." She looked at Jim and then at Leo. "Would you two care to join us?"

At the offer, her companion finally seemed to rouse from her stupor. "No," she said firmly. It was clear she wanted Gaila all to herself.

Gaila looked into her eyes, and then nodded. She rose gracefully, pulling the young woman up with her. "Perhaps another time?" she said. She leaned up and kissed Jim on the lips and then turned to Leo, pressing a nipping kiss to his upper lip. "Pity," she sighed, then strolled away through the crowd, holding onto the other woman's hand, and leaving a trail of pheromones in her wake.

Jim shook his head as if to clear it. "Wow," he offered.

"She is something else," Leo said, pushing around Jim to sit down.

Jim crowded into the booth next to him, and Leo felt his whole body relax at the contact. He looked out over the crowd, feeling slightly dizzy from the aftereffects of Gaila's presence.

He hadn't realized that Jim was staring at him until he felt Jim's fingers against the skin of his throat. He looked over at him and Jim was smirking, rubbing something between his fingers. He pulled a napkin from below an empty drink and wiped his hands. He held up the napkin. "Blue's your color, Bones," he said.

Leo stared at the napkin, not comprehending right away. When he did, he raised his chin, baring his throat to Jim. "Didja get it all?"

"No," Jim said, and this time, he leaned in as close as he ever had, to wipe Ashley's makeup off
Two hours later, the bar had only cleared out a little and Leo was definitely buzzed. Jim was still sitting next to him in the corner booth, but he wasn't pressed up against his side. This wasn't disturbing him, because Jim wasn’t pressed up against him because he was turned toward Leo, studying his face, calculating his next question about Leo’s past sexual experiences. And Leo had to admit it – he was enjoying the hell out of tormenting him by being mysterious.

Jim had started out by asking him if Rick was the first guy he’d been with, which Leo had answered by just staring at him for a while.

When Jim had pressed the question, Leo’d wondered aloud why, when Jim has always been really clear that he was bound by neither gender nor species, that he would find it so odd that Leo has had lovers of different genders.

Jim had made a face at the use of the word ‘lovers.’

“What’s up with that?” Leo asked.

“What?” Jim said.

“When I brought up my lovers,” he pointed at Jim, “you just did it again.”

“It’s just … lovers,” Jim said, emphasizing the word. “What does that even mean?”

Leo looked at Jim in real surprise. “You have had sex, right?”

Jim rolled his eyes at Leo.

“Well,” Leo said, in an exaggerated Southern accent, “when you have feelings about the person that you’re having sex with,” Jim rolled his eyes again and opened his mouth to speak, but Leo only spoke louder, “aside from how hot they are, and you have a relationship that sex is a part of but not the only thing, that’s when you have a lover. Also, when part of the sexual relationship is figuring out what that person really likes because you want to give them the most pleasure possible.” He paused. “Although it’s entirely possible to have a lover that you just have sex with, but it’s still about mutual gratification, but more about the sex.” Jim looked startled. “But it’s a multiple kind of thing. Not that kind of multiple,” he added severely. “I mean, not a one-time thing.”

“I have repeaters,” Jim said grudgingly.

Leo grunted.

“So, how many lovers,” Jim said the word as if it tasted bad coming out of his mouth, “have you had?”

“Enough, Jim,” Leo said smugly.

“What, are you done or something?” Jim asked.

Leo smirked at him in a ‘wouldn’t you like to know’ sort of way.

“So, you’ve had long-term lovers that were men?” Jim asked.

“Not all of them were long-term,” Leo said. “But, yes.”
Jim just stared at him, digesting this information.

“Spit it out, kid,” Leo said, taking a swig of his beer.

“I … it just surprised me, Bones,” Jim said.

“That I’ve had sex?” he asked grouchily.

“No!” Jim said, punching him in the shoulder. “I mean – you were married.”

Leo drew his brows down at Jim’s emphasis on the word, and he hastened to explain.

“I mean, you married young, Bones,” Jim said seriously and paused, but Leo wasn’t going to disagree. He had been young, only a few months older than Jim was now. “So, I just had this idea that you were Southern, and you’re always yelling at me about STIs and casual sex and I just thought …”

Jim’s sentence kind of drifted away unfinished and it took Leo a second to comprehend what Jim was really saying to him. When his brain caught up, he laughed out loud, surprising the hell out of Jim, who looked startled and then gaped, before he smiled and finally chuckled.

“Jim,” Leo said, after a few minutes, “did you think I was a virgin who got married so I could have sex or something? I mean, shit, you know me well enough to know that I am the farthest thing from religious, right?”

Jim shook his head helplessly, “But you’re old-fashioned,” he said, “and you’re always talking about doing the right thing and the moral thing,” Leo was still laughing a little, and Jim added, “and you said that there were some things that should be sacred.”

Leo shook his head. “If I did, Jim, I was talking about love,” he said. “Love is sacred.”

Jim rolled his eyes.

“You don’t believe that love is sacred,” Leo said.

“I don’t know if I believe that it even fucking exists,” Jim said, and there was such a hardness in his tone that Leo felt the words like a blow. “Or if it’s worth it, if it does.”

“Why would you say that?” Leo asked, truly curious.

“Why wouldn’t you?” Jim said. “The first time I met you, you were half-crazy about everything you’d lost. Why would you want to do that over and over again?”

Well, now. Leo hoped his mouth wasn’t gaping open as he digested that statement. ”I think,” he said, ”that most of us hope that we won’t have to keep doing it over and over, that we’ll find the right person –”

Jim snorted. ”Because that always works out so well, even when that happens,” he said sarcastically. Jim shook his head and brought his beer up for a long drink. “And don’t give me that crap about how much better sex feels when you’re in love. You’re always telling me that a lot of things that feel good are really bad for you. And the way people talk about love — it’s like it’s a drug,” he said. “I’m not taking it.”

And like he always did whenever Leo got too close to something that he really didn’t want to discuss further, Jim asked Leo if he’d been late because he’d a bad case at the hospital that evening.
Leo considered whether or not he should let Jim change the subject, but figured that he had enough to dwell on for a while. He felt overwhelmed by Jim’s answer, and wondered what kind of men his mother had married after his father’s death, if her two divorces had convinced him that love was just a joke. Or maybe it was that she’d never been able to move on past the loss of Jim’s father. God knew that his own father never could transcend his mother’s death.

“Actually, I was with another friend of mine,” Leo said. A muscle in Jim’s jaw ticked, which he found interesting. Jim might not believe in love, but he certainly subtly expressed some of the emotions associated with it, like jealousy. The way he’d acted that night in the locker room had initially read a lot like jealousy, like Jim was afraid that if Leo took a male lover, that he’d be out … of whatever this thing was between them.

“Am I gonna meet him?” Jim asked, playing at being supportive. He was looking at his drink, and not Leo.

“Her,” Leo corrected. “And I’m sure you will, at some point.” Jim looked at him curiously. “She had a big date tonight,” Leo continued, “wanted opinions on what looked best on her, what would impress her lover,” he said decidedly, “the most.”

Jim’s flinch was fairly contained. “Now you’re just being an asshole,” he said. “Although it’s very nice of you to help her dress up for some other dude.”

“Her lover’s not a dude,” Leo drawled, and Jim looked intrigued. "Don’t get too excited, kid. Unlike Miss Gaila, I don't think she'd invite you to watch, or participate." Before Jim could ask him another question, Leo asked one of his own. “It doesn’t bother you that Gaila left with someone else?”

Jim looked at him as if the idea had never occurred to him. Curious and curiouser. "No," he said plainly. "She's not my lover," he said with exaggerated emphasis.

"But she's one of your repeaters," Leo clarified.

Jim shrugged. "We have fun sometimes," he said, as if it were all that simple. "Aliens are … different," he said in a kind of vaguely paternalistic fashion, "but I guess you'd have to had sex with an offworlder to understand --" He broke off abruptly and stared at Leo, who had involuntarily twitched in annoyance at Jim's casual condescension. "Oh my God, Bones," he said, eyes wide. "You have!"

Leo just smiled serenely at him. Two could play at the smug bastard game, and when he finally did tell Jim about Tharis and Talea – hell, he'd even cop to Teara, although technically, they'd never actually gotten it on, but she'd been there, so, she counted – he was willing to bet that he'd blow Jim's tiny little mind.

"Bones!" Jim warned, his hand on Leo's thigh, digging in. "Tell me."

"Why, Jim –" Leo began, all honeyed drawl and flirtatious charm, "what makes you so sure that I have something to tell. After all, I was married and …" Leo lost his train of thought when he saw a woman working her way through the crowd, looking around frantically, obviously distressed. "Jesus, God," he said. It was Patty, and she looked … she looked wild-eyed and crazy and utterly destroyed. "Jim," he said, urgently, already standing up. "I gotta go."

"Bones –" Jim protested, “what the fuck?”

Leo turned around and looked back at Jim, putting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing it to let him know that he wasn't just being an asshole. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said, raising his voice to account for
the distance between them. Jim wrapped a hand around his wrist. "It's an emergency," he said.

He looked back over his shoulder to where Patty had come to a stop at the edge of the dance floor. As he watched, she spotted him and it was as if all the momentum she had had to move herself forward just deserted her. She wavered unsteadily and her face crumpled. Under her open coat, Leo could see the green silk dress that she'd picked out so carefully, so hopefully, and his heart broke for her.

"I gotta go," he said to Jim. He pulled his hand away after giving Jim's shoulder one last squeeze before he walked across the floor, arms already opened up to catch Patty in his embrace.

When he got home hours later in the dark morning, exhausted and worn down by Patty’s sorrow, he knew that Jim had been there before he even got into the bed.

This time, he’d left a note on Leo’s console that said, “More proof that love is awesome, right? JTK”

Chapter 15

Leo had never been a fan of the Catch-22, a trap where one’s choices were mutually exclusive, so he was far less than pleased to be living one. He was well on his way to being in love with a man who refused to believe in love, seemed not to want anything more than the relationship that they already had. At the same time, it was clear that Jim did love him, but preferred to cast their profound attachment as a strong fraternal relationship, a platonic best friends type of thing. As if they hadn’t already traversed that physical and emotional boundary more than once, without there being actual sexual contact.

But, if he forced the issue and made Jim confront the reality of their relationship and Jim rejected him, he’d break his own heart more than it already had been. And if he waited for Jim to make the first move, he might be waiting forever, because Jim clearly knew that Leo wanted love, not just sex, the one thing that Jim had sworn that he wouldn’t try. Although the idea that Jim could actually stop himself from feeling, from falling in love, was completely ridiculous to Leo, maybe because he’d never been able to do it. Feelings weren’t fucking rational, and they didn’t follow the rules. They just were.

The problem was that denial was a feeling, too.

So. There he was.

Exactly fucking nowhere.

Awesome.

He waited out the Jim Kirk Dance of Avoidance, biding his time with a silent and grieving Patty, surprised to realize that the kid, who prided himself on his unpredictability, was actually pretty predictable. If he were around, he’d show up by the fourth day of absence. The one variation, so far, had been at Christmas, but Leo supposed that if anything could affect the parameters of behavior, it would be the holiday season, where it seemed that every being in the universe was talking about family and nostalgia and so on, like everybody had some glorious past, some home to return to. Or as
if those like him, who had had that, still had the capacity to return there.

Consequently, he wasn’t that surprised when Jim kind of stumbled into his room on the fourth night. Leo was halfway to bed, shoes off, the red uniform tunic that he’d worn over one of his white KFF t-shirts slung on the back of his desk chair. He’d been going over the latest comments regarding his application for the research project he’d proposed to begin that summer, work on a vaccine for one of the more virulent strains of Capellan Plague. The Capellans were supposed to be an advanced civilization, but their laissez-faire attitude toward death and disease was more than Leo could stand. He reasoned that the Capellans might take an interest in the health and the well-being of their people if it were actually proved to them that one of their most pernicious cyclical scourges could be defeated.

His request had already gone through two rounds of approval; the clarifying questions for this third round were about safety, experimental design and resource allocation. He scowled as he read them, knowing that it was too late for him to marshal a real response, but wanting to know what he was up against.

“Careful your face doesn’t freeze that way, Bones,” Jim said, standing in the shadow of the doorway. He was cradling his right hand in front of him, and Leo could see the blood staining the tight bandage even in the dim light.

“Jesus, Jim,” he said, crossing the room hurriedly and pulling Jim into the light and pushing him onto the bed. “What now?”

“Attempted robbery at Finnegan’s,” he answered.

“With what, a broken bottle?” Leo guessed.

Jim gritted his teeth as Leo unwound the bandage. “Some kind of pig sticker,” he said.

Leo raised an eyebrow at the slang, examining the damage. “Pig sticker?” he asked, trying to keep Jim talking. This was beyond his capacity to fix outside of the infirmary.


That explained how the robbers had gotten the fucker by the sensors. “And it didn’t occur to you or Finnegan that you should let a medic see you on the scene?” he growled.

“She put this on,” Jim protested. “When she started talking about surgery, I told them you were my doctor, that you take care of me.”

Well, now, wasn’t that an interesting turn of phrase? Leo’d been toying with putting more psych in his academic plans, maybe finishing that Ph.D. he’d been working toward a couple of years back, but he didn’t need a coursework refresher to hear what was important in that sentence.

Before Leo could say anything, Jim continued on, his voice deeper and with a stubborn edge. “You promised.”

Leo looked up at him from where he was crouched over Jim's torn hand after sealing off the biggest of the bleederers as a temporary hold. Jim was far too pale, and Leo could see that he was resolving into shock. “Yes, I did, Jim,” he said quietly. “And I keep my promises.”

“I know,” Jim said easily, but Leo couldn’t fail to notice the way Jim’s eyes searched his intently looking for any sign of wavering. When Jim finally looked away, he glanced down at Leo's t-shirt. A
small smile curved his mouth as his fingers brushed over the KFF that was etched in a vertical line over Leo’s ribs.

“We gotta go to medical, Jim,” Leo said, standing to wrap his hand back up in a fresh bandage. “I need to make sure that there’s no upstream damage from any of the ceramic shards.” And probably also to repair some tendons, but he skipped that part.

“OK,” Jim said, starting to stand up, but Leo stopped him, easing him back down on the bed.

“You gotta go on a stretcher or in a chair, Jim,” Leo said. “There’s no telling what’s floating around in your bloodstream.” He scanned Jim with the tri-c, looking for bleeders in his system, ignoring his protests, then finally hypoing him unconscious so that he could move him onto the hover-stretcher from the First Aid station.

Jim woke up while Leo was performing the surgery on his hand, as he knew he would. He’d put a nerve block on Jim’s right arm, and set things up so that one of the view screens was turned so that Jim could see what he was doing. He knew that Jim liked to watch him work, and reasoned that he wouldn’t mind much if it was his own hand that Leo was fixing. He spoke to Jim quietly as he worked, telling him exactly what he was doing and why, his head down as he focused on repairing torn tendons, finding and removing the bone chips and ceramic shards that were strewn throughout the elegant architecture of Jim’s hand. His focus on what he was doing was so pure that it wasn’t until he was ready to close and begin to repair the damage to Jim’s skin that he realized that Jim hadn’t turned his head to watch the vid screen. Instead, he was watching Leo, his eyes blinking drowsily as if Leo had been telling him a good night story for the past three hours.

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When Leo woke up a few hours later, Jim was watching him again, albeit this time from the biobed where’d he’d been put for post-surgical observation. Leo’d fallen asleep to the drone and hum of the bed as it ensured that there was nothing but blood circulating in Jim’s veins, no clots or pieces of ceramic floating around to do harm. Leo knew that the bed would zap anything foreign with sonic waves, but he meant to stay close for the first bit of recovery, not quite trusting Jim to leave the regen glove on for as long as he should before he crept out of the hospital. Leo’d fallen asleep sitting up, with his legs crossed in front of him and stretched out, his arms crossed over his chest.

He rubbed the back of his neck blearily and blinked, then yawned, looking at Jim. “How’re you feeling, kid?”

Jim shrugged. “OK,” he said. “But these beds aren’t that great for sleeping.”

Leo frowned at him and stood up and stretched. “They’re better than a chair, Jim,” he muttered, cracking his back. “Where in the hell is your chart?” he asked Jim accusatorily.

Jim used the regen glove to point downward. “Don’t look at me, Bones,” he said. “It slid off your lap.”

Leo groaned and bent down to retrieve it, finding his stylus there as well.

“Can you take this thing off?” Jim asked, waving the glove at him again.

“Hold your horses there, Jim,” Leo chided. He got a data dump from the bed to the PADD and noted that Jim had only slept about four hours. “You didn’t sleep very much, Jim,” he said. “Are you in pain?”

“No,” Jim said, still holding his hand up in the air. “It was about as much as I usually get.”
Leo shook his head, and put the PADD down. “It all looks good,” he said, moving to the head of the bed to shut down and disengage the regenerator unit.

“How’s your friend doing?” Jim asked.

Leo looked down at Jim, but he was decidedly not looking at Leo. In fact, he seemed fascinated by the regen unit. “She’s pretty upset,” Leo said.

“What happened?” Jim asked.

Leo sighed. “She thought her ex- wanted to get back together with her.” Jim looked at him, waiting for the rest of the story. “But the ex- wanted to tell her that she’s marrying someone else.”


His tone was supposed to be sympathetic, but there was an underlying tone there, a ’see, I told you so’ that Leo found goddamn galling.

“Yeah, Jim,” Leo growled, feeling protective of Patty. “It does.”

He removed the glove and picked up Jim’s hand, seeing no evidence of the gruesome wound that had been there the night before. He flexed Jim’s fingers and smoothed his fingertips over Jim’s palm testing his reflexes, and ensuring that Jim’s nerves had been regenerated by tapping and asking, “Can you feel that?” He looked up at Jim. “Don’t look at your hand,” he ordered. “Look up.”

He expected Jim to look up at the ceiling, like most patients would, but as usual, he made eye contact, almost defiantly.

“Can you feel that, Jim?” he asked, pressing on a nerve.

“Yeah, Bones,” Jim answered, “that I can feel.”

If he’d thought about it all, he would have seen that the progression from friendship to lovers was inevitable between them, that there was a point at which their sympathy, the way that they both understood exactly how the other hurt, would lead them into bed. They were neither of them getting what they wanted, not from each other or from the one that they each loved, but at least, for a little while, there was a kind of oblivion that occurred when they were in each other’s arms. And there was the comfort of someone else’s skin against his, even if it was softer and curvier than what he really wanted, the taste and smell of it all wrong. It was still Patty, and she would never be what Jim was to him, but he loved her, because she understood how he felt and she took him as he was. And he knew that she felt the same way.

Besides, she was hurting, and Leo's compulsion to heal, to help, would never have allowed him to say no, not the first time when she'd looked at him that way, not with the way she'd said "please" when she asked.

Jim knew. That was clear by the way he never asked about Patty anymore, by the tension in his jaw when he decidedly didn’t ask Leo where he’d been when he didn’t appear for dinner after a shift. It was fucking annoying was what it was, how Jim's unvoiced fucking jealous accusations could make Leo feel like a hypocrite. Except that he really didn't need to explain what he was doing with Patty to Jim, especially when Jim made pointed sarcastic barbs about love and was clearly continuing on his path of avoiding love at all costs.
At first, Leo thought that Jim was just totally bullshitting him about his housing problem as their first year ended, but he was too goddamned busy to figure it out. A number of the undergrad dorms were being rehabbed over the summer, and Jim had said that he'd been assigned to one of the abysmal four-bunk rooms after the semester break, which was just depressing as all hell, he had to admit. Even if Jim would only be sleeping there for the two weeks before he went off to his godawful survival training thing, and the couple of weeks after when he was back, he could absolutely see how Jim, or any twenty-three year old man, would find the situation completely intolerable. So, he didn't object when he came home one night to find a duffel full of Jim's crap at the foot of his bed, and his uniforms in the closet.

Besides, there was no Jim there for him to object to, and fuck it, he was just tired. He'd done the early shift at the infirmary, then spent the afternoon meeting with his new tech, trying to get the tiny lab space that he'd been allotted to study Capellan Hemorrhagic Fever III into some kind of shape. He'd intended to eat dinner with Patty, but his intentions had ended up in a trail of clothes leading to her bed, and a late meal of ordered in Chinese food. It was not an unpleasant way to end the day, certainly, but, he was just fucking beat.

His life was so weird. He was fucking Patty, if he wanted to be crude about it, but had yet to spend the night in her bed, on the off chance that by sleeping in his own bed that he'd spend the night with Jim, the man he wanted to fuck. He yawned and shucked his clothes, getting in the shower and cleaning up before he got in bed. He'd noticed over the months that Jim always showered before he got in bed with him, maybe to mask whether he'd been in somebody else's bed, maybe because it was his typical practice. Whatever the case, Leo wasn't going to put himself in the position of having to listen to more of Jim's imprecations against love by getting into bed with him after having had sex with Patty.

Or that's what he told himself. He tried not to think about the fact that maybe he was sparing Jim's unacknowledged feelings about whatever the fuck it was that they were doing, as much as Jim was sparing his, maybe, by showering before he slid in bed with Leo.

The last he'd seen of Jim had been his sleepy grousing that "You set the alarm too fucking early when there's no classes, Bones!" before he spread out to cover the space where Leo'd been a minute before. He'd grabbed Leo's pillow and held it to his chest, the same way he'd been holding onto Leo and dropped back into sleep instantly, like someone had hit an old-fashioned light switch.

Jim had been working long hours at Finnegan's, doing a much-needed software and systems upgrade, aside from the more physical labor that he put in, so Leo was surprised to hear the knock on the door to the lab and see Jim standing there with an envelope in his hand.

"May I help you?" Bet Wah said solicitously.

"Jim --" Leo said, just a bit behind her. Jim was in civvies, still wearing that leather jacket, even though it was June. Not that Leo could blame him. The late San Francisco spring left a lot to be desired, mostly warmth.

"Thank you," Jim said to Bet Wah, smiling. "I found who I'm looking for." He crossed the room to Bet Wah and extended his hand. "Jim Kirk," he said smoothly, white teeth and blue eyes flashing.

Bet Wah smiled and extended her hand, "Tsang Bet Wah."
"Ni hao," Jim said easily, and Leo began to smirk. Bet Wah was quite happily married, and he was looking forward to her shutting Jim down, even if he was flirting without any real intention. His jaw dropped, however, when Jim continued to speak to Bet Wah in one of the Chinese dialects. Which one, Leo was unsure. Xenobiology he could easily decode. Language was far more mysterious to him.

Bet Wah smiled and answered him, obviously pleased by Jim's courtesy.

They spoke for a few minutes more, Jim saying something that made Bet Wah laugh out loud before she said, in English. "We're being rude, Jim. And may I say that your accent is excellent, and in more than one dialect. Your teacher must be very proud."

Jim's smile twisted a little at the corners, although Leo doubted that Bet Wah noticed. "Yes," he agreed, and said softly. "She was a wonderful teacher. I learned a tremendous amount from her."

And Leo knew, with an instinct too strong to doubt, that this particular teacher had been one of those redacted names in the Tarsus records that he'd read months before. "Jim," he said gruffly, to forestall Bet Wah asking any more questions, "what're you doing here? And who's sending you letters? Starfleet finally kicking you out?"

"I wouldn't know, Bones, as it's not addressed to me, and I do not read mail not addressed to me," Jim tilted his head and batted his eyes at Leo, trying to look innocent but failing quite badly. He handed the envelope to Leo.

"Starfleet Housing," Leo said. "Why the fuck are they sending me a paper letter?"

"My guess," Jim said, "is that they send you a paper notice when you ignore all their comms in your e-mail."

Leo slipped the letter out of the envelope, as Jim took a turn around the small lab, looking at everything. "In my defense," he said. "Most of the comms from 'fleet Housing are bitching about people cramming too much laundry in the chute, or breaking the environmental controls in the common areas."

"True," Jim murmured. Then, "I'd also like to point out that this, he waved at the letter, "is completely not fair." He paced around the tiny lab space like a panther, clearly irritated.

Bet Wah looked at Leo questioningly.

"I'm getting a new room," Leo said.

Bet Wah shrugged. "It's common practice for second years in good standing, and you're half-faculty now, with the teaching in the fall semester, right?"

"I'm almost a third year! And I teach!" Jim said loudly.

"Not a grad student, Jim. And you're a TA," Leo reminded him, then said, "They put him in a four-bunk single for the summer," sotto voce to Bet Wah.

She winced. "What'd you get?"

Leo scanned the letter. "Upper floor, better dorm, bigger room. Kitchenette," he said with surprise. "I remember those rooms fondly," Bet Wah said. "My husband and I lived in one for the first year of our relationship. If you can survive that," she said, casting an eye toward Jim, "you're good for
anything."

"Oh—" Leo began.

"Please," Jim said, "I'm already bunking in with him in the room he has now, which is the size of a shoebox. A shoebox that is still bigger than what they're giving me!"

Leo raised his eyebrows at Jim's complete and utter weirdness, than shrugged at Bet Wah. "He's a volatile personality," he said lamely.

"So I see," she answered.

He turned around when he realized that Jim had gone utterly quiet behind him. He was staring at the whiteboard where Leo'd written a few notes on their project.

"Bones," Jim said in a deadly voice. "Please tell me that CHF does not stand for Capellan Hemorrhagic Fever."

Leo was just going to refuse to be surprised by Jim Kirk, starting from right now. "I can't tell you that, kid," he said.

Jim whirled around and looked from him to Bet Wah and back like they were both crazy, hands on his hips. "OK, seriously, Bones?" he said. "Handling deadly fucking diseases that have raged for centuries with no known cure? You have officially lost your right to chide me about being reckless."

"Jim," he said patiently. "How do you think deadly fucking diseases get cured?"

Jim stared back at him, jaw tight and eyes angry. "Right," he said, then paused. "Nope. You know what? I'm gonna go pack up your crap," he said, "since your hypocritical ass is supposed to be moving tomorrow." He turned and addressed Bet Wah in her first language, then stalked out the door.

Leo was pretty sure that the hypocritical remark was supposed to cover Patty, and not just this situation, although he really couldn't understand what the fuck Jim was so upset about. And then, something else occurred to him. "Hey!" He yelled down the long corridor at Jim's retreating back, startling another doctor into almost dropping his PADD. "You said you didn't read my mail."

Jim shot a reproving look over his shoulder. "Oops," he bellowed down the hall. "I guess you're not the only one who says one thing and does another." Then he turned a corner and disappeared.

"Fucker," Leo growled, not quietly at all. He had definitely been talking about Leo's relationship with Patty with that last shot.

"Well," Bet Wah said, hiding a smile. "You certainly have an interesting relationship."

"It's complicated," Leo said uneasily, flushing.

"Most things worth having are," she said, turning her attention to the lab PADD and getting back to business.

+Chapter 16+

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They'd been able to achieve a kind of balance before Jim had left for his survival training, mostly prompted by the fact that when Leo'd gotten back to his old room that night, Jim had been sitting at his desk with a pensive expression on his face.

"I was an asshole," he said to Leo.

"Yeah, you were," Leo answered, not backing down one bit.

"There was …" Jim began and stopped.

He seemed to be struggling with what to say, and Leo questioned how much of Jim's petulance from earlier in the day had been prompted by the reminder of Tarsus. He wondered if Jim had ever spoken to anyone about what had happened up there, but somehow he doubted it.

"I was … out of line."

"Is that an apology?" Leo asked.

"Yes," Jim sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Buy you a drink?" he asked hopefully.

Leo looked around the room. Jim had, in fact, packed Leo's few belongings into his various duffel bags. It kind of astonished him to note that even after all these months that he had acquired so few things. He might have had three bags to Jim's one, but anyone looking at his life objectively would see that he was still living as if he were a transient. This was his life, right now, and after ten months he'd never even bothered to buy himself a better set of towels and sheets than the crappy 'fleet-issued standard. Maybe it was time for some things to change.

"From the looks of things," Leo said, "I should probably be the one buying 'em."

Jim smiled brightly. "There really wasn't that much to do," he said. "Besides, I owe you for you letting me crash here."

Leo watched Jim levelly. "OK, kid," he said. "Let me just get out of this monkey suit and we'll go."

Jim spun around in Leo's desk chair. "You can tell me all about your research," he said.

Leo turned and looked at him sharply.

"I'm serious," Jim said.

"How much do you know about disease pathology?" Leo asked sarcastically, not really sure of the answer.

Jim shrugged. "I'm always willing to learn," he said.

Leo bit back the 'Maybe. Maybe not.' that threatened to erupt, settling for a grunt and a raised eyebrow as he pawed through one of his duffels, looking for his favorite jeans.

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At the bar, Jim had been so full of opinions about his research that Leo suspected that he'd spent the hours after he packed reading everything that he could get his metaphorical hands on. At the very least, their conversation that evening seemed to have gone a long way in assuaging some of Jim's fears.

"Tell me why, though," Jim insisted. "Why one of the Capellan plagues?"
Leo felt his teeth grinding together in exasperation at the very ideas that he was about to express. "All right, so you know how the undergrads have to do Interspecies Ethics – customs, how not to be an ass in diplomatic situations, IDIC?"

Jim nodded.

"Medical personnel have to take the same kind of classes, but they're more specific, about religious or other prohibitions that might have an adverse impact on your capacity as a physician to treat another species."

"OK," Jim said. "Logical."

"Yeah," Leo said hotly. "Except where it's fucking not. So we had this big section on the Capellan system because they're mineral-rich, you see?"

Jim nodded, drinking his beer.

"But they're total fucking idiots," Leo said, and Jim raised his eyebrows in surprise, almost choking on his beer.

"They don't believe medical intervention, like it's the Easter Fucking Bunny or something, because they're all about brute strength and survival of the fittest and every year, Jim, every year, thousands and thousands of people die from treatable diseases. Or at least, they'd probably be treatable, if they had any kind of scientific or medical tradition, but they don't and we're supposed to, doctors, are supposed to go there and smile and nod and let people fucking die so as not to be 'culturally insensitive'."

Jim was watching him with a wry expression on his face. "How big of an argument did you get into with the Professor, Bones?"

Leo took a long pull of his beer. "A big fucking argument. But it's just … it's ludicrous in this day and age to allow such ignorance to go on."

"So, you're gonna cure their worst plague?" Jim asked.

"I'm gonna try," Leo emphasized, "which is a damned sight more than some of those fuckwads have tried. Because don't you think that somebody on that friggin' rock can be reasoned with? That maybe if the diplomats went there to the Teer with a cure that maybe that would be something worth trading for mining rights?"

Jim smiled at him with admiration. "I don't know if it'll work, Bones," he said. "I don't know enough about their society, but it's a hell of an idea. Just … be fucking careful, OK?"

"That is fucking rich, kid," Leo said. "Are you gonna promise me the same thing when they beam you into some godforsaken hellhole with nothing in your hands?"

"I always try to be careful, Bones," Jim smirked. "Besides, I'm not going in with absolutely nothing," he raised his fingers to tick off what he'd have. "The assumption behind the exercise is that it's an away mission gone bad. I'll have clothes appropriate for the environment, although maybe not in prime condition. I'll have at least some part of what I would have beamed down to the theoretical planet with. I'll have my brain."

The look that Leo had shot him had been suitably withering, but Jim had just smirked and pressed his leg up against Leo's. "It's a pretty good brain, as far as they go."
And it was. Leo knew that Jim was bright – shit, he was brilliant. But brilliance wasn't an inoculation against scorpions or dehydration or the ravages an unrelenting 49 degree Celsius temperature could inflict on an unsheltered body.

And all of Jim's reasoning that it was better for him to practice these scenarios in 'safe' environments was not convincing to him. There was no such thing as safety, not in that kind of scenario. People lost their comms when they became addled by the heat, wandered off naked into the desert to dive into the oasis that only existed in their brain. And his fears about death were real. In 2250, a Cadet had frozen to death on an Antarctic expedition to one of the last remaining polar areas on the planet.

No. It was going to be a long fucking summer of worry for Leo, no doubt.

His thoughts were so consumed by Jim wandering in the desert that it was almost always a shock for him to leave the lab or his new dorm and find himself confronted with the cool, misty gloom of a San Francisco 'summer'. Leo'd heard that San Francisco was foggy, and thought that he'd experienced the fog in living there for nearly a year, but this was of an order of magnitude that he'd never seen before -- the way the fog crept in and settled for days on end, the sun overhead barely making a dent.

Every day, he hoped that he'd find that the sun would finally burn away the gloom, but it persisted. Sometimes, he could swear that he felt himself dissipating like a ghost as the time went by without Jim, the days grey and colorless, one after another.

The small shift of the mattress as her weight hit it roused Leo from his post-coital doze. The clink of a spoon against ceramic made him open his eyes as Patty settled herself in the curve of his body. He was laying on his side, knees curled up. Patty draped herself over his sheet-covered hip, and he could feel the silky length of her hair as it spilled across his lower back. He opened his eyes to the sight of her small feet. This week, her toenails were painted a dark raspberry, something the whole world would know if the weather ever got warm enough for her to wear sandals. As of right now, he was pretty sure that he was the only one who had that particular knowledge, which was quite all right with him. He and Patty were good at keeping each other's secrets.

"Open up," Patty said, leaning forward. She was wearing his t-shirt, and it was absurdly large but somehow beguiling on her. "Don't look," she ordered. "Just trust me."

Leo raised an eyebrow, but dutifully shut his eyes and opened his mouth, only to have them shoot open a minute later. "Peaches," he murmured appreciatively.

"You're such a Georgia boy," she said with a smile, taking a big mouthful of the vanilla ice cream and peaches for herself before giving him another bite. "Although, I'm sure that mere Central California peaches will never be as good as real Georgia peaches, if the grousing I've had to put up with for the past two weeks is any indicator."

Leo smiled, because he had, in fact, been thinking that. "They're still good, though," he said warmly, running a hand down her hair. "Thanks, Patty."

"And there's the smile," Patty observed, looking at him with her sharp eyes. She fed him another bite. "So," she began. "You've been sleeping over lately."

Leo looked at her in alarm, afraid that he'd trespassed on their unspoken arrangement.

"Cut that out," she said immediately. "I'm curious as to why, that's all."
Leo closed his mouth, intending to chew very, very slowly before he answered.

"Stop stalling," she said. "Or I'll stop giving you peaches."

Leo sighed. "You know, you being a psychiatrist is kind of a pain in the ass," he said.

She smiled brilliantly, holding up a spoonful of peaches. "Speak, and they're yours."

"The thing is," he hedged, "there's no reason for me to rush back to my room while Jim's gone."

Patty looked puzzled at his half-answer, then thoughtful. She dumped the spoonful back in the bowl and came up with a far smaller portion. "You can have the rest when you give me the rest of the answer."

Leo rolled his eyes, chewed and swallowed. "He sleeps with me," he said.

He'd never seen Patty's big green eyes quite the big before. "You're not being euphemistic, right?"

"No, damn it," he said tersely.

She gazed at him steadily, ice cream dripping off the spoon into the bowl until she seemed to recollect herself and scoop up another serving. "Start from the beginning," she said, giving him a big mouthful of the peaches.

So, he told her how he'd let Jim crash that one time, and how he'd begun showing up with greater frequency, sometimes drunk, sometimes beat up, sometimes both, until it evolved to the point where Jim didn't even ask anymore, just crept into bed with him some nights, all the way through to him sort of moving in before he went away on the survival training. When he finished his recitation, he could practically see the wheels in Patty's head turning. "So," he said, "kind of pathetic, or creepy, right?"

Patty's brow drew down as she contemplated Leo's words. "That's not … that's definitely not what I was going to say," she said thoughtfully.

"C'mon, Patty," Leo said, "even I know this is not normal behavior. I'm pretty sure that I'm taking the place of his dead brother."

"Huh?" she said sharply. "Why do you say that?"

"Because he did, the first night he slept over."

"What exactly did he say?" Patty asked.

Leo closed his eyes and thought back. "He said that he hadn't done this in forever, and when I asked him what he said he used to sleep with his big brother, a long time ago."

"Hmm …" Patty murmured, stirring the ice cream thoughtfully.

"So, clearly," Leo said again, "I'm the big brother substitute."

"I really don't think so, Leonard," Patty said surely.

He stared at her.

"I don't," she said stubbornly. "Tell me how you sleep with him."
"What do you mean?" he asked. "Like, do I sleep well? 'Cause I do, and I find it really unsettling that he can sneak into bed with me, and that I don't notice until the next day, and lots of times only after he's gone."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"My bed smells like him," he said simply. "Even though he showers before he gets in bed with me." Patty's eyes opened even wider. "Really?" she said.

Leo shrugged and took the spoon away from her, serving himself some peaches, since she was so distracted. "So, it's clearly weird, and …"

"So, does he have one-night stands only, or regular lovers?"

"You should have heard the whole disquisition on the word lovers," Leo said, shaking his head. "He refers to the people he's slept with more than once as 'repeaters'."

"Mmhmm," Patty said, in that perfect psychiatric tone. "Do you know any of these 'repeaters'?"

"Aside from the Orion woman," Patty's eyebrows skyrocketed, "There's a Denobulan -- guy," he clarified, "and a couple of other Cadets who seem to have the same emphasis on 'fun'," he said sarcastically.

"Fun?"

"Sex is supposed to be fun for everyone involved, no strings, at least that's how he expresses it to me," he said.

"You didn't tell me how you sleep with him," Patty said.

He stared at her. "Like in what position?" he asked.

She nodded, taking the spoon back.

"I usually sleep on my left side and he sleeps behind me," he said slowly, feeling like sharing the details was breaking some bubble of intimacy that was just his and Jim's.

"Does he touch you?"

Leo nodded. "He usually puts his right hand on my hip, and sleeps right behind me. On my pillow," he clarified. "Some nights – actually lately," he said, "he pulls me in and holds onto me like I'm his teddy bear."

"He knows we're having sex," Patty said suddenly.

Leo stared at her. "How the hell did you get there?"

"It's obvious to me," she said. "He must hate my guts."

Leo had gone quiet and still at her words.

"He does, doesn't he?" Patty said.

"He doesn't have the right!" Leo insisted.
"He's in love with you, Leonard," Patty said surely.

"No, he's not," he said wearily. "He doesn't believe in love, he's not going to fall in love, he's told me over and over."

"Has he now?" Patty said, leaning back against his thighs and crossing her feet at the ankles. "Huh." She was smiling.

"Patty, what the fuck are you smiling about?" he growled.

"He's in love with you," she said slowly. When he started to protest, she continued. "I didn't say that he knows it, or that he's willing to admit it, but he is," she said surely.

Leo shook his head and rolled away, flopping back on the pillows and Patty squeaked as her seat back disappeared. "Why are you saying this to me?" he said angrily. "Why are you trying to make me hope for something that's never going to happen?" He felt completely irrational and raw, exposed.

He heard the clink of the bowl being placed on the nightstand, then the press of Patty against his side. "Leonard," she said softly, but he didn't open his eyes. "I am not trying to hurt you," she said. "In fact, that's the last thing I want, but ... I just don't think that you're seeing this situation clearly."

"Patty," he said to her, turning his head and opening his eyes, "you've never even met him, you don't know how he is. If he sees someone he wants, he goes right up to them. He never backs down from a challenge."

"But he's never been in love before, has he?" Patty asked quietly.

Leo stared at her. "I ... no, I don't think he has," he admitted.

"So he has no frame of reference for how he feels," she said not relenting. "Did he have good role models?"

"No," Leo said hoarsely. "I don't think so. Plus, he's been left behind a lot."

Patty tilted her head, listening.

"Dead or absent parents, impermanence" he said. "Then, Tarsus."

She nodded. "So, pretty much everyone he's loved is dead, is that what you're saying?"

Leo thought about how Jim had never mentioned his mother or his past, how he'd gone off alone at Christmas. "Dead or gone," he answered. "But you know, Patty, the kid is a genius, like off the charts."

She smiled at him. "What did you say to me about it not mattering how educated someone was? It's the same with intelligence."

"My point exactly!" Leo said. "He's determined not to be in a fully realized relationship, ergo, there's no chance."

"Yet he's intimate with you, without being sexual about it," Patty countered. "You've assumed that this is because he doesn't want to have sex with you."

"Yeah," Leo said, "Like I said – I think he's pretty open about going after whomever he wants sexually."
"The thing is, Leonard," Patty said slowly. "I've slept with you a few times now."

"OK?" Leo said, puzzled.

"And you don't sleep curled on your left side facing away," she continued. "You sleep on your back. You sleep facing me. You don't hide from me, like you're hiding from him. You're telling him 'no', without saying it."

Leo stared at her. "You couldn't fit two people, much less two grown men, in my old single."

"You have a bigger bed, now?" Patty asked.

"Yeah, you know, new room," Leo said. "It has a double – it's still small, but … what?"

"Only married students get the double beds, Leonard," she said. "Didn't you tell me that he moved all your stuff for you while you were working?"

He stared at her, but didn't answer.

"So, in the new bed … which he evidently procured for you," she said. "You're still doing the same thing, aren't you?"

"Because he's going to fucking break my heart," he said fiercely. "OK? I know he is."

Patty lay her head down over his heart and was quiet for a few minutes. Leo hoped that she'd gone to sleep, and tried to will himself to calm down, even as her words tumbled through his head making knots and clumps of hope and hurt.

"The thing I love the most about you is how loving you are," Patty said surely. "You're just … you're a healer through and through. I know that you're going to figure this out."

"Why," Leo said after a while, "are you pushing so hard on this, Patty? After everything you've just gone through, after everything you've just gone through, why are you pushing me?"

Patty rose up to look down at him, her hands on his chest. "Because one of us still has the chance to get what we really want," she said. "And I'm not saying it's going to be easy, and I'm not saying that it isn't fucked up, but I want that for you. I do," she said when he began shaking his head 'no'. "He's not getting married, and he'd not dead, he's just … young and he's wounded, and he's stubborn. Maybe more stubborn than you, even. And you love him and it scares the shit out of you, and I'm sorry, but we can't hide here in my bed forever, and you know it," she said, and shook him by the shoulders. "You know it." She pressed her face into his neck for a moment and held him close. "Don't shut yourself off from possibility or use us as an excuse. It would kill me to know that you did that."

She broke away from him and looked at him again, her green eyes earnest and sad. "Also? If I ever meet your ex-wife, I'm gonna punch her right in the face."

Leo laughed through the tears that had been threatening for the last ten minutes.

"Really fucking hard," she added seriously.

He pulled her down into a hug. "Can I belt Shohreh for you?" he drawled.

She kissed him, "You never would," she said. "But thank you for offering. Just …" her voice dropped down to a whisper, "don't shut yourself off from this, Leonard," she said. "You'll regret it.
And I don't want that for you."

Chapter 17

There had been specific points in Leo’s life where the insanity of what was happening to him made him want to look over his shoulder for a guy with a holovid camera, where he was almost waiting for someone to burst from the shrubbery and announce that whatever fucked up shit was going on was all part of an elaborate prank for one of those inexplicably popular holoshows. But whatever weirdness he thought he’d endured before had been eclipsed by his current situation, because, when he thought about the fact that his erstwhile girlfriend was encouraging him to end their sexual relationship because it was keeping him from pursuing the man of his dreams, it seemed more like the premise of a bad romantic comedy rather than the real life a grown man should be living.

Except that he knew that it was for real. And he knew that Patty was honestly his friend in a way that was rare and true, and that, if the tables were turned, he would no more stand in her way of achieving happiness than he would ignore an accident where someone might be injured and in need of aid. He knew that Patty was sincere when she said that she wanted him to be happy. The thing was, aside from all of his fears about the whole Jim thing – after all, once bitten, twice shy – he wasn’t entirely certain that happiness was a concept he believed in. Or maybe he was just terrified to once again pin his greatest hopes on something outside of himself, on someone who had built his life on not making the kind of connection that Leo craved.

Then again, he was also pretty sure that at one time James T. Kirk had sworn on all that was holy, and the rest that was not, that he would never join Starfleet. And yet, here he was. Right next to Leo, a man who would have told you a year ago that you were fucking crazy if you’d told him that he would end up in Starfleet.

So maybe he had to learn how to relax a little, to trust that there was some sort of plan, even if he couldn’t see it.

Maybe, in those universes where he was Leonard or Len instead of Leo, he had still become Bones anyway, and ended up at Jim’s side, despite all the differences between those universes and his. Maybe all the people he knew in this now had floated through his lives in all the other whens, too. Maybe they were always circling each other in some great cosmic swirl, like a nebula.

Maybe some things just were, like the universal constants that had helped them plot the stars and then sail them.

Maybe.

It wasn’t like there was much he could do about the whole Jim thing, anyway, what with him off in the middle of nowhere somewhere, risking life and limb for … not even death and glory, because Leo doubted that anyone would see the valor in dying on a training mission. And it was just plain irresponsible that Starfleet still ran courses like the survival training one. Not that he doubted that Cadets needed to be trained to get them as ready as possible for real life situations, it’s just that when he was doing a battlefield medical theatre training exercise, nobody beamed him down into the middle of a live battle. And yeah, maybe sims weren’t as good as the real thing, but, there had to be a better way to run a survival training course other than dumping a bunch of kids off in the desert.
He knew, or needed to believe, that Jim would come back at the end of the summer, full of piss and vinegar and with plenty of new stories to share about the fuckwittery of their fellow Cadets, if not the survival training class itself. But that was the best case scenario, and Leo’s brain, the one that had worked triage in a real ER, the one that had been participating in battlefield sims and disabled starbase sims and shipwide plagues sims for the past year, could not help but analyze the situation for all possible outcomes, and create scenarios to fit them all.

It wasn’t his fault if most of his scenarios were gruesome. He was a doctor, not a playwright -- and gruesome things happened all the time, and a fact he’d known forever, or at least since the summer he turned 8.

So, as the days counted down to his 29th birthday, he found himself cherishing the nights that his dreams were filled with the protein chains from the viral envelope for CHFIII. There was something there, something that he could not yet see in the encoding that was the switch, the way to turn it off, to make it incapable of binding to the host cell. His subconscious brought up images of protein chains swirling in balls and helixes, interlocking and twisting, as they plugged into receptor sites that Leo needed to block. He would wake sometimes, after dreaming complex and seemingly perfect solutions, ready to write down his thoughts on a PADD only to realize that he’d been dreaming in complete gibberish, or about interactions between imaginary molecules, or that what he’d thought so brilliant in the dreamscape was either hopelessly facile or totally unworkable.

Still, he’d learned over the years to quell the negative voice that would chime in about his uselessness, and dutifully record what he had been dreaming, no matter how crazy or impractical it seemed. More than once, it had turned out that at least part of the solution had been gleaned from these fragments of problem solving. And so he tried to direct his dreaming to his lab and its whiteboard and the view through his microscope.

It was far better than the alternative, where his dreamscape was transformed into sun-drenched vistas of breath-taking dryness, the heat rising from the scorched, barren earth in shimmering waves of distortion. He’d walk, his feet slowing down as he approached the thing he feared the most -- the one thing that he wanted to convince himself was a heat-induced hallucination -- the clear outline of a ribcage he’d recognize anywhere arcing up from the sand, hollow and empty, the shell of what had once contained Jim Kirk.

Those nights, when he woke gasping and shaking in his room with its mockingly half empty bed, he never returned to sleep. His footsteps would be oddly muffled as he crossed the foggy campus in the early morning with no starlight to aid him, and barely a benchmark to note in the thick oppressive blanket of chilly precipitation that was the San Francisco summer. The security guard at the lab building became used to seeing him leave late and return only a couple of hours later. And if Bet Wah noticed that he was running through the experimental protocols faster than they’d originally planned, she was too polite to ask why, just bought more tea to account for what Leo was drinking in the early morning to combat the chill of August, and his dreams.

Only Patty was bold enough to come to the lab in the evening and drag him out, threatening to sedate him if he didn’t sleep. Even in her bed, however, he was not immune to the dreams that plagued him, especially as the weeks wended on silent and grey, one after the other.

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Leo hadn’t started to freak out until Jim was 48 hours overdue in returning from his survival training class. He knew that he should be patient -- the return date was an estimate at best, a return window -- in theory, Jim could have returned anytime in the last week or so, having collected all of his stupid flags and ‘completed his mission’ or whatever the bullshit exercise was. But when the last day of the
window had passed, and then another, he couldn’t help the rising dread. Summer semester was ending; finals were beginning. He knew that Jim’s successful completion of the summer survival course was how he’d be graded, that it would determine if he’d start his second year on par with the third years. But even with no need to sit for a test, Jim should be back on campus.

By day four, he was beyond pretending that he was not worried, and spent a significant portion of the evening ranting at Patty. Day five found him at Tactical, wanting answers before the weekend began and the department would be closed until Day eight. Answers which were frustratingly scarce on the ground, and even Leo’s status as Jim’s primary contact couldn’t shake information loose.

’The course is still within the parameters of finishing on time, Cadet McCoy’.

‘There would be no information on the status of individuals on the course until it was deemed completed.’

If there were casualties, he was told, their primary contacts would be notified, ergo the fact that he had not been notified was what he should be focusing on.

Not that this was any comfort to Leo at all.

After refusing to back down, Leo’d finally gotten the junior instructor to admit that search parties were not launched for ‘unreturned’ Cadets until 72 hours after the initial deadline. And as Lt. Cmdr. Wilson had minimal contact with the Commander in charge of the program while he was out in the field, he had no knowledge of a problem. He would assume, though, this Lt. Cmdr. Wilson, that if there were casualties, that Starfleet Medical would hear of them first, and that the point of contact would be more than likely to be someone in Commodore Alberghetti’s staff than his. Leo spent similarly fruitless time in the Admin offices at Starfleet Medical, where the Commodore’s secretary was impassive in the face of his worry, although she did reassure him that as Jim’s contact, he would be the first to be called should the worst arise.

He met Patty for dinner, but he had no appetite and less conversation. She’d tried to talk him into coming back to her place, at least for the companionship she could offer, but he wanted to be alone, even if that meant that the only thing that would be accompanying him was the rising voice of doom in his head. He walked the few kilometers from Patty’s off-campus apartment back to the grounds of Starfleet in the grey gloom, hoping that the exercise would help settle him down, give him a chance to get some sleep, but all he felt was chilled and sweaty by the time he got back to his room, aching for a hot shower and maybe some decaf tea with whiskey in it.

He ordered the lights to 50%, so discouraged that it took him more than a few seconds to register the slightly smaller, sand and dirt-encrusted hiking boots on the tray alongside the shoes that he’d just toed off. He whirled around, half-expecting to be confronted with an empty room, only to see Jim in his bed, laying on his stomach with his hands tucked up under his pillow, fast asleep. Leo closed his eyes for a second, in thankfulness and disbelief, before he crossed the room in a few steps, his jacket halfway off. It was as if everything around him had snapped back into focus for the first time in weeks, like the fog had burned off from one minute to the next. Jim was really there, alive and bright, as if he’d brought the sun back with him. It had certainly touched him everywhere Leo could see – Jim’s hair was streaked with gold, bleached by the desert sun, his shoulders and upper back and arms darkly tanned.

Leo was caught somewhere between a smile and a sigh at the idea that Jim had been both hat- and shirt-less in the desert. Ever the doctor, Leo couldn’t resist bending over and examining what he could see when his eye discerned that Jim’s shoulders had burned, blistered and peeled, and that he’d developed freckles. Jim clearly hadn’t had any skin protection with him on his little jaunt, or not enough, and what Leo could see made him wonder what lay under the covers. Clearly, he was going
to have to do some dermal cellular repair to counter damage, particularly anything melanomatic. His hands were literally itching with the desire to touch, to whip out his tricorder and do a status check, but he couldn’t help but notice how peacefully Jim was sleeping, and the fact that he had not stirred at all upon Leo’s entrance or his continued presence alongside him. He looked at Jim’s profile and noticed the circles under his eyes, the slight sunkenness of them, indicative of dehydration. The line of Jim’s jaw was particularly sharp and prominent – he was utterly exhausted, a bit on the thin side, and still ... he was the best thing Leo’d ever seen, the most beautiful sight in the universe.

Leo forced himself to back away from the bedside, and hung up his jacket, then continued on into the bathroom to shower. His own exhaustion had started to make its presence known, now that he no longer had to worry, but he didn’t allow himself to rush through his evening routine – well, not much. Clean, and mostly dry, he strode across the room in his briefs and commed Patty from his console with a simple text that read, “He’s home” before he overrode the daily alarm and set the incoming messages for emergency access only. Tomorrow was Saturday, he didn’t have any experiments that needed to be checked until later in the afternoon, and he was off shift until Sunday. He had no reason to be anywhere else, and no desire to go there anyway. He gave his hair one last drying with the towel before he stuffed it down the chute. Next to it, on the floor, he noted that the duffel bag Jim had left there weeks ago was open, and that he’d clearly been rooting through it for clean laundry. He smiled and crossed the room to the foot of the bed, ready to crawl up ‘his’ side against the wall, and stumbled over a knapsack that he hadn’t noticed, jostling the bed. Jim never stirred.

Leo narrowed his eyes, feeling a bit of his elation leak out of him. Jim had never been that heavy of a sleeper. He crossed back to his desk and got the tri-c out of his medkit, running the scanner over Jim’s head and down his spine, shaking his head as the numbers came up on the screen.

He’d seen better numbers on marathon runners at the end of a race, not that he endorsed such activity. By the looks of it, Jim had been running a marathon for days on end -- he had extreme muscle fatigue, with endocrine and electrolyte readings showing elevated lactic acids and calcium, and lowered testosterone. He was full of broken down ketones, evidence that someone had treated him, probably with IV fluids, but that he needed rest and a lot more sustenance. All in all, he’d lost close to 7 kg, more than Leo would have expected or wanted to see, and he was pretty sure that most of it was muscle.

“Damn it, Jim,” he said in a low voice.

“Bones,” Jim said groggily, swatting up at the scanner, and Leo almost dropped the tri-corder on him in surprise. “I’m fine.”

Leo could see the edge of an abrasion on the inside of his arm that had been regenerated, but needed one more treatment to really heal. “You’re not fine, kid,” he growled.


“Huh?” Leo asked.

Jim eyeballed his briefs, and Leo rolled his eyes.

“All I’m sayin’ is, you’d probably be the most popular doctor at Starfleet Medical if you went to work like that, Bones,” Jim said with a smirk. His eyes were twinkling at Leo, who couldn’t hold back the smile that curled the edges of his own mouth.

“I missed you, too, kid,” Leo said, continuing to scan his friend.
“Bones,” Jim grouched. “Just cut it out and get in bed. You look like you haven’t slept since I left.”

Jim blinked at him, eyes vividly blue in his tanned face. “Or gone outside at all.”

Leo snorted, eyes back on the tri-c.

“I’m fine,” Jim said again. “C’mon, Bones. They told me I need to sleep, an’ I can’t sleep if you’re scanning me.” He started to sit up.

“Where you going?” Leo asked, shutting off the tri-c.

Jim pointed at the bathroom, yawning and running a hand through his hair, which was longer than Leo’d ever seen.

Leo studied the results for a few seconds more, then got into the bed and slid over.

Jim came out of the bathroom, still yawning hugely, and rubbing his arms. He was tanned everywhere, as if he’d shucked all of his clothes at some point, although the skin on his lower arms and face was noticeably darker. He sat down heavily on the bed and shoved his feet under the covers, pulling them up before rolling over on his stomach, facing Leo. “It’s fucking freezing here,” he groused, eyes already sliding closed.

“It’s been like this all summer,” Leo said, watching Jim settle himself in the bed.

“Mmm …” Jim said. “Tell me tomorrow. Lights?”

“Computer, lights off,” Leo ordered, but he didn’t close his eyes. He was laying flat on his back, the arm closest to Jim up over his head, waiting for his vision to adjust so he could watch Jim.

“Nice sheets,” Jim murmured, rubbing his cheek against the pillowcase

“It’s a nice bed,” Leo observed. “I thought I’d splurge.”

“Mmm …” Jim said sleepily.

“You know what I heard?” Leo asked. Jim said nothing, but he continued. “I heard that only married students get the double beds.” Jim twitched the tiniest of amounts. “And you know, my status is still listed as divorced, so I guess it was just a happy accident that I ended up in a room with a double b--”

Jim’s hand had slipped out from underneath his pillow and two fingers landed on Leo’s mouth. “You wan’ me to give it back?” Jim asked, cracking an eye open.

“No,” Leo said, his voice muffled by Jim’s fingers.

“Then shhh …” Jim said, his last utterance ending in a sigh.

Leo felt Jim’s hand go slack and heavy against his jaw, and he twisted his head, feeling slightly claustrophobic. Jim’s hand dropped down to his upper chest, the tips of his fingers splayed against his neck. Jim’s mouth had opened slightly, his face slack. He was already out.

Leo shifted closer to Jim, feeling the weight of Jim’s arm across his chest. He ran his fingers over the warm skin, feeling the smooth tension of Jim’s brachioradialis resolving into the decided curve of his biceps. Jim’s breath puffed in and out, sure and steady, as he slept.

Technically, it was two days too late for it, but … a whole and relatively healthy Jim was the best birthday present he’d gotten in forever. He kept his eyes on Jim as long as he could, eyes drifting closed and then reopening, not to ensure that Jim was really there – Jim’s arm laying across his chest
anchored Leo to this reality – but just so that he could see him again. He didn’t feel the slightest inclination to turn away and face the wall, not when he could be looking at Jim. His last cogent thought before he drifted away into a blissfully dreamless sleep was to feel slightly sorry for any of his other selves out there in unknown universes who’d yet to know this feeling.

Maybe, just maybe, he was the lucky one, after all.

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Chapter Notes

Part II covers Chapters 18-36, through Year 2 at the Academy until approximately 12 February 2258, i.e., when the Battle of Vulcan has concluded, but the Battle for Earth is just about to engage. It's ~163 pages long.

**Chapter 18**

A muffled gasp of pain near his left elbow roused Leo from a deep sleep.

“What’s wrong?” Leo rubbed his eyes and looked over at Jim’s empty pillow. He lifted the covers to reveal Jim, curled up in a ball and in obvious agony. He sat up. “Tell me what’s wrong,” he ordered.

Jim barely lifted his head. His hands were digging into his leg muscles. “Hurts,” was all he said.

Leo slid down and out of the bed, and got the tricorder. He was pretty sure that Jim was experiencing the mother of all charley horses from his deadly combination of overexertion and dehydration, but he wanted to be sure. He scanned Jim with one hand while assessing what he had to stabilize him in his medkit. He dialed up the appropriate combo swiftly and uncovered Jim, telling him, “Kid, I gotta go in the muscles for this one,” before he hypoed him in the thigh.

“Motherfucker,” Jim gasped out.


Jim didn’t complain, just gritted his teeth and rolled over, which made Leo both sad and wary. He wielded the hypo with less than his usual force. Leo watched him for a few more seconds, trying to assess Jim’s level of pain. Jim’s eyes were closed and every muscle in his body was rigid. He’d obviously been in spasm for quite a while.

“They really should have kept you overnight, Jim,” Leo said grimly. Without any IV equipment, he’d have to improvise. He pulled a cup out of the cabinet in the small kitchenette and put baking soda, sugar and salt in it, then ran some warm water in it to dissolve them before mixing a burst of cold water into it.

“Jim,” he said, putting the drink on the nightstand. “C’mon, sit up.” He cupped a hand behind Jim’s head and helped lever him upright. “Put your feet on the ground, and push your heels down against the floor.”

Jim issued a low moan and said, “Fuck!” He grabbed on to Leo’s arm, gripping his biceps with bruising force as he tried to do what Leo said. He screwed up his eyes, leaned forward and pressed his head against Leo’s arm, then rolled it into the crevasse between his arm and his torso.

Leo rubbed Jim’s neck and shoulders with his free hand. “Try and slow your breathing down, Jim,” he urged. He dipped his head to try and see the kid’s face, but he was pressed tight up against Leo, and he could only feel the grating pants of pained breath against his arm and ribs. He bent and slid
his hand down to one of Jim’s calves and felt the muscles there, long and pulled up in spasm. He pressed his fingers into the gastrocnemius and followed it from the side of Jim’s leg all the way down and around the back of his thin calf, and Jim gasped against him. “OK,” Leo said, taking his hand away. He grabbed the cup from the nightstand, and made Jim down the liquid, ignoring the swearing. Talking Jim into letting him go for a minute was more difficult.

When he got back into the room, Jim was sitting on the side of the bed, rocking a little, his fingers digging into the backs of his legs.

“Jim?” Leo said to him suspiciously, “you’d tell me if you were going to throw up on me, right?”

Jim gave him a wan smile. “You shoulda thought of that before you made me drink that crap.” Leo uncapped the tube in his hand, and Jim’s head rocked back. “What’s that?” he asked suspiciously.

“Liniment,” Leo answered him. Jim’s blue eyes were watering. Leo got an antihistaminergic hypo out of his medkit and dialed up an appropriate dosage just in case. “You’re not allergic to menthol, are you?”

Jim shrugged.

Leo urged him to lay back on the bed, then pulled a foot up and began working the muscles out of their spasm, starting from the center of the sole of Jim’s foot and eventually making his way up to Jim’s quads. He could feel the tension leeching from Jim as he worked on one leg and then the other, making Jim flex the foot of whichever leg he wasn’t working on.

Jim’s skin began to regain its pink undertone as his circulation was restored, and his expression relaxed. Leo could see one blue eye peering out at him from the arm Jim’d been hiding under for most of the massage.

“Better?” Leo asked. He wanted to ask Jim why the hell he’d lain there and suffered, but he was pretty sure that Jim would just dodge the question, rather than give an honest answer. The kid was absolutely perplexing. He trusted Leo enough to come to him with the obvious hurts – why was this different?

Jim nodded. “Sorry I woke you up,” he said.

Leo stared at him. “Yeah, well I’m sorry you were walking in the fucking desert for days, Jim,” he said gruffly. “Fucking ridiculous exercise in the first place, and then they don’t fucking fix you when they get you out of that hellhole.”

“They had other priorities,” Jim said, licking his lips.

Leo wiped his hands on a towel and went to the kitchen, refilling Jim’s glass with cool water, and swirling the residue of the powders back into the mix. “Drink,” he ordered. “Are you telling me that somebody was in worse shape than you?”

Jim hesitated, looking into the water glass. He downed it before he answered. “The guy I brought out with me,” he said simply. He winced a little as he drew his legs up to lay down.

“The guy you brought out with you?” Leo knew his eyebrows were at his hairline, but Jim didn’t comment. “Flex your feet, Jim,” he ordered.

Jim yawned, and shrugged. “I couldn’t just leave him there,” he said sleepily.

Leo stared at Jim, knowing he wasn’t going to get more of an answer. Between the muscle relaxants
and the massage, not to mention the exhaustion, Jim was out cold again within seconds. Leo sighed and covered Jim up, and crawled back into his own side of the bed. His mind was buzzing with unanswered questions, but almost as soon as Jim pressed himself up against his side, he fell asleep.

The hand squeezing his shoulder was much too large to be Jim Kirk’s, so Leo turned, looking up in surprise as Harry Yu swung a leg over the bench and sat down next to him at lunch. “Eating with the plebes?” Leo asked drily.

“Yeah, yeah,” Yu said. “How’s our boy?” He nodded at the wrapped sandwich and the covered bowl of soup on Leo’s tray.

“He’s OK,” Leo said, thinking about how he had had to wake Jim up to make him eat breakfast. He had no doubt that he’d have to do the same to get lunch into him, too.

“Really?” Yu said dubiously. His concern was clear, and Leo’s hackles rose.

“Aside from being malnourished, dehydrated and completely fucking exhausted, yeah,” Leo said. “What do you know?”

“He’s a big goddamned hero,” Yu said, looking around to see who was nearby, “which is no fucking surprise to any of us who actually know him.”

Leo stared at Yu, but he didn’t think that Yu was talking about Tarsus. It seemed more likely that he was thinking about Jim’s work with the KFF. “You talking about him bringing somebody out with him?”

Yu snorted, unwrapping his burrito. “Is that how he put it?” He shook his head. “Goddamned kid has the biggest ego on the planet, except when he actually does something heroic.”

Leo stared at Yu, waiting while he swallowed his mouthful. “And?”

“The other kid?” Yu said. “Gary Mitchell? He would have died.”

Leo nodded. “He did say the other kid was in worse shape than he was.”

“He’s still unconscious,” Yu said, looking at Leo. “And your boy didn’t bring him out, he carried him out.”

Leo leaned back away from Yu, nodding. “That explains … a lot,” he said, thinking of Jim’s muscle damage.

“Yeah, well,” Yu said. “That kid would be dead without Jim, no lie, but that doesn’t mean jack shit to the pinheads in charge.” Yu sounded absolutely furious.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Leo asked.

“I know, right? He should be getting a medal or some field stripes, or something, but instead I just spent the morning arguing with some of the morons in Command who think Jim should get a scratch on the course because he didn’t ‘complete the exercise within the acceptable parameters’.”

“Acceptable parameters? Are you fucking kidding me?” Leo growled. “So, if he’d walked by the kid who was dying that would have been acceptable?”

“No,” Yu said. “I guarantee you that if he had done that, and he’d made it out two days earlier and
told them exactly where to find the kid, the same assholes would still be arguing for a scratch.”

Leo could feel the flush rising on his neck. “Are you telling me that there are folks in Command who are determined to sabotage Jim’s career?”

Yu was looking at him steadily. “I’m telling you that all the bullshit about the best and the brightest is just that – bullshit. They all talk about training men and women to be heroes, to do their best and make their best judgments, and then when someone actually does it?” Yu was shaking his head, his angry eyes as black as his jacket. “They come down on them like a ton of bricks.” He pointed at Leo, the other hand gripping his burrito so hard that Leo was surprised that it hadn’t exploded. “Make no mistake, McCoy,” he said. “If George Kirk had lived – if he’d managed to find a way to save his crew, and himself? He wouldn’t be the poster boy for Starfleet. Starfleet likes their heroes best when they’re dead. They don’t fucking talk back that way.”

The cold knot of anger in Leo’s belly was twisting. “Where’s Pike in all this?” he demanded.

Yu smiled grimly. “He’s not back yet,” he said. “And I don’t know the man well enough to feel comfortable comming him.” He looked at Leo pointedly.

Well, shit. He didn't know the man all that well, either, but he wasn't shy. “Consider it done,” Leo answered.

Yu smiled. “Good.” he said. He dropped his half-eaten burrito on his tray, and stood up. “You take good care of him,” he ordered. “And I know you don’t have the requirement anymore, but you need to keep up on your hand-to-hand.” He looked at Leo. “It’s important to Jim that you know how to take care of yourself.”

Leo raised an eyebrow at his words.

“It is,” Yu insisted. “That kid trusts you –“ he paused, “well, as much as he trusts anyone.” He clapped Leo on the shoulder and turned to walk away.

Leo nodded, acknowledging Yu’s words, his open comm nearly forgotten as he contemplated what he’d said. “Harry!” he yelled at the man’s retreating back. “Thanks.”

The Commander acknowledged Leo’s words with a small salute, and then continued on his way.

“So, Pike commed me,” Jim said to him.

Leo’d been so focused on studying the 3D holo of the viral envelope that he’d projected from his PADD that he started. “Jesus, Jim,” he said. “I didn’t realize that you were awake.”

Jim was still in bed, laying on his stomach, with his pillow bunched up and his arms wrapped around it as he watched Leo.

All in all, Jim had slept for the better part of three days, most of the time so soundly that even Leo’s normal activities had failed to wake him.

The night before however, Leo’d taken his PADD to bed with him while he was trying to figure out how to generate the 3D sim of the viral envelope, only to have his fiddling and muttering wake Jim. Leo’d been sitting propped up against the pillows when Jim tossed an arm over his lower body and pressed up against his hip. Leo’d looked down at him, but he appeared to be fast asleep, so he went back to trying to figure out how to get the program to work correctly. He’d worked for hours, not
realizing that while he was reading or trying to puzzle out the directions for the program, he’d been running one of his hands through Jim’s hair. He’d looked down and Jim was awake, watching him with those big blue eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry, kid,” he could feel himself flushing. He pulled his hand away. “Did I wake you up?” Jim had just smiled at him. “Do you know that you talk to yourself, Bones?”

He’d stared at Jim.

Jim had picked his arm up off Leo and rolled onto his back. He pulled the PADD out of Leo’s hands. “Do this,” he had said, going back and switching two of the steps and changing part of a formula. Suddenly, the image that Leo’d only been able to generate in 2D was beaming up out of the pad. Jim looked up at him. “Is that the virus?”

“Yeah,” Leo said, looking at the virus as it glowed in the light. It was beautiful in its own way, coiled and sleek, designed for maximum efficiency. He admired it, despite its utter lethality.

“Bones,” Jim said. He’d returned to his position low in the bed and on his side, head propped up on a pillow just above Leo’s hip.

He looked down at Jim. “Hmm?”

Jim was smiling at him softly, face painted in the shades of violet and green that the image was generated in. “You look like you’re in love, man.”

Leo had laughed softly. “It’s a more than worthy opponent, Jim,” he said.

“Mmm …” Jim had murmured, yawning.

Leo looked down at him, putting a hand on his shoulder. It had been hours since he’d last checked Jim out. “Maybe I should check your …”

“I’m fine,” Jim insisted, his voice deepening with sleep. He picked up Leo’s hand and put it on his head.

Leo had stared down at him, but Jim’s eyes remained closed. He moved his head a little under Leo’s hand, encouraging him, asking for what he wanted without words. Leo hesitated, but it was only momentary. He’d sat there, watching Jim sleep, running his hands through Jim’s hair and over his scalp, until he soothed himself asleep, with the forgotten image of CHFIII rotating slowly in the darkened room.

“Yeah?” Leo asked neutrally, making notes on another PADD as the generated image simulated one of the experimental responses that he’d been able to provoke. He watched the receptor sites blacken as they were blocked.

“He’s going to go with me to the review board,” Jim said.

Leo looked at Jim in disbelief. “You have to go to a fucking review board for saving someone’s life?”

Jim stared at Leo with an inscrutable expression on his face. Leo supposed that he had thrown Jim for a loop by not pretending that he didn’t know why Pike had called. “So, you did comm him.”

“Yes,” Leo said.
“Why?” Jim said. His tone was edging toward the defensive, and Leo was struck again by how contradictory the kid was. When he was all beat up and bleeding, he could come to Leo and present himself for help. But when he was in pain from something that didn’t need a bandage? He’d rather lay there and suffer, next to his own doctor, rather than ask for help.

He’d talk nonstop about the fights he’d gotten into, but he hadn’t said a word about what had really happened with Gary Mitchell. Somewhere along the way, Jim Kirk had gotten the idea that being the jackass that most people thought he was, was preferable, or easier, or … something. Was it Tarsus? Was it because he’d learned that being the hero didn’t mean that everyone came out alive, or whole? Was it easier to live down to people’s expectations rather than up to them? Or was it that he’d learned that other people weren’t to be trusted, that they couldn’t be counted upon?

Leo took in a deep breath and told him the truth. “Harry Yu told me that they were giving you a raft of shit for saving Mitchell,” he said. “So, I commed Pike and told him he might want to look into the situation.”

Jim looked surprised by his words, and a little angry, so Leo kept talking. “And I’m glad I did, Jim,” he said, “because if they’re bringing you up to a review board then somebody’s gunning for you, and Pike knows all the players involved. He’s on that track – he went through with some of those guys, and trained under some of the other ones. He can help you strategize. And maybe I should have said something earlier,” he continued, “but you’ve been asleep most of the weekend.” He held Jim’s blue gaze.

Jim nodded slowly. “Just … tell me next time,” he said. “If it’s about me, or my life, I need to know about it.”

“OK,” Leo said. So, it was about trust, at the heart of it. About proving oneself to be trustworthy. He could do that, because if there was one thing that Leonard McCoy was, it was steadfast. And that resolution, that steadfastness, was the bedrock of trust. “But that’s got to be a two-way street, Jim,” he said surely.

Jim looked startled, and then offended. “I don’t …”

“Hacking my classes last fall,” he said. Jim opened his mouth to protest, but Leo kept talking. "If you’d told me why,” Leo continued. “I would’ve done it. But you should have told me before you moved me around like a chess piece.” He could see a flush on Jim’s cheek. You have to trust me, he was thinking. You have to trust me. “If it’s about me, I need to know about it, same as you said, all right?” He’d held Jim’s eyes the whole time he was speaking, watched the emotions shift behind them like turbulence in the ocean. He forced himself to wait for the younger man’s response without adding anything more to his statement.

“All right, Bones,” Jim said quietly.

All right then.

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Chapter 19

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“So – what’s going on?”

Leo looked up from his dinner to Patty’s expectant face. “Well – the models are showing better results, but one of the — “
"Leonard." Patty’s voice was exasperated. “Not work, Leonard. Life, your life.”

Leo simply looked at her, refusing to answer.

“Your love life,” she intoned slowly, green eyes beginning to spark angrily. “You remember that?”

“I dimly remember having one fairly recently, yes,” he drawled out. “But my privileges seem to have been revoked.” He was only speaking so plainly because they happened to be the only two people on dinner in the tiny break room behind the nurse’s station at the Academy’s ER.

Patty pinned him with an utterly implacable stare. “You are not going to make me feel guilty about that,” she said. “You know that it was for the best.”

“So, you don’t miss me?” he grumbled.

“Parts of you?” she asked mischievously. “Maybe. But how can I miss the passive-aggressive part of you when it’s always front and center?”

Leo sighed. “What do you want me to do, Patty?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, as if she were speaking to someone very, very stupid. “Maybe kiss him? As I recall, you were kind of good at it.”

Leo wrapped a foot behind her ankle companionably under the table. “You do miss me,” he drawled.

Patty stepped down on his instep. “Leonard …” she said firmly.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Patty,” he said. “The ball’s kind of in his court.”

“The ball is kind of in his court?” she repeated in a disbelieving tone. “What does that even mean?”

He shrugged. “He stayed over a couple of nights since his dorm opened up, and I haven’t been sleeping on my side and .. that sounds really lame, doesn’t it?”

“In my professional opinion?” Patty asked. “Yes. Why don’t you just kiss him? Or ask him out on a date?” When Leo didn’t answer, just pursed his lips, her voice got more irritated. “You want him to make the first move, don’t you?”

“Yes. No,” Leo said swiftly. “Yes. I want him to make the first overt move.”

“You are going to drive me insane,” Patty said, “and you know, that’s really pretty special, because I am a psychiatrist, and therefore spend a LOT of my time talking to crazy people. But you are just …” she threw up her hands in frustration. “Why?!?”

“I think,” Leo said slowly, “that if I kiss him, he’d kiss me back. But I also think that he’s smart enough, and manipulative enough, that he would use sex to keep me close, and to keep me out at the same time.”

"Then why would it be different if he kissed you?"

"Because then he'd be telling me that he wanted me," Leo answered surely. "He'd be admitting that he needed something more than the friendship we already have."

Patty sighed. “Are you sure this isn’t about your own feelings of trepidation?”
“No,” Leo said honestly. “But I also know that it’s like …” he cast his mind around looking for an example of what he was talking about. “I can’t even articulate this, because it’s instinctive, but I know I’m right,” he brought his hand up over his heart without even thinking about it.

“No,” Leo said honestly. “But I also know that it’s like …” he cast his mind around looking for an example of what he was talking about. “I can’t even articulate this, because it’s instinctive, but I know I’m right,” he brought his hand up over his heart without even thinking about it.

“No,” Patty said.

Damn it.

Leo had always loved the fall, loved riding Saturn through the woods over the scarlet Virginia creepers and the carpet of fallen leaves. Inevitably, his dreams at this time of the year brought him back to those beloved landscapes, but even though the calendar said that it was fall in San Francisco, Leo found himself shedding the sweaters he’d worn all summer, just as Gram wrote to tell him that the creepers were aflame in the woods and that Saturn was growing in his winter coat.

Leo had always loved the fall, loved riding Saturn through the woods over the scarlet Virginia creepers and the carpet of fallen leaves. Inevitably, his dreams at this time of the year brought him back to those beloved landscapes, but even though the calendar said that it was fall in San Francisco, Leo found himself shedding the sweaters he’d worn all summer, just as Gram wrote to tell him that the creepers were aflame in the woods and that Saturn was growing in his winter coat.

It’s not that he minded the warmer weather. He was a Georgia boy, after all, and he was used to milder climes. Besides, after the fog and chill of summer, he needed the days of sunlight, dwindling as it was, to warm his bones before the winter rains set in. Sunny afternoons, he got in the habit of taking a break sitting outside on the lawn, puzzling over the latest results from the lab, while he tried to soak up as much sunshine as possible before it fled for weeks on end. It was already October, and the time, along with the light, was fleeting.

“Hey.”

He recognized the skinny calves clad in Cadet red even without the voice. He looked up, shading his eyes against the lowering light to find a fidgeting Jim Kirk standing there.

“Hey,” he answered easily. “Y’allright?”

Jim shrugged, running a hand through the back of his hair, ruffling it more than it already was.

Leo hadn’t seen Jim for a couple of days, which wasn’t all that unusual. Jim’s nocturnal patterns had continued on unabated, which meant that he crept into Leo’s bed about every fourth night. Some mornings, Leo only noticed because the PADD he’d been working on would be on the nightstand next to the bed. Reaching for it, he’d catch the scent of Jim’s clean skin on his sheet, lingering on the pillow he’d used. In contrast, the nights he spent alone he was more likely to wake himself up in the middle of the night by rolling over onto the PADD. Most times, he’d see Jim at the mess, where they’d routinely meet for dinner a couple of nights a week, usually sparring afterwards. They hadn’t gone out drinking in weeks. It wasn’t that Leo was feeling particularly abstinent, but both of their schedules were pretty filled. Jim had gotten his third year status, but not without a fight – Pike had been clear with Jim that he was being watched and measured in everything he did. A year ago, Leo
would have expected that Jim would have done something outrageous as a response, but this year … Jim had risen to the challenge by setting an even more ambitious goal. Now he was determined to take firsts in a number of areas, and he was working with Pike on a thesis topic for a Master’s level project in tactical analysis.

Leo watched his friend, obviously chewing over something as he fidgeted.

Jim studied Leo for a minute, lips pursed and expression dark.

“Just spit it out, Jim,” Leo said, saving his data.

Jim rolled his shoulders and breathed out, sat down next to Leo and picked up a small branch of oak leaves from the grass. He began methodically shredding it. “OK,” he began. “Remember how you said that if it was about you or your life that you wanted me to tell you?”

“Yeah,” Leo said, completely perplexed as to where this topic of conversation was going.

“I just wanted to remind you of that,” Jim said, “in a ’don’t-shoot-the-messenger’ context.”

“OK,” Leo drawled out.

Jim took in a breath, and began peeling the bark off the now leafless branch. “So. Last night? I’m pretty sure that I saw Patty out on a date.”

The end of the sentence all kind of ran together, and Leo supposed he shouldn’t find the whole thing completely endearing, especially since it was clear that Jim was both nervous and upset for him.

Jim’s nervousness immediately dissolved into irritation when Leo smiled. “You think that’s funny?”

Leo shrugged. “Did her date look nice?” he asked softly. “Was she pretty?” He relished the look of complete and utter shock that crossed Kirk’s face before his brows drew down.

“Are you serious?” Jim asked. “I just told you that your girlfriend was out with another chick, and you want to know if she was a hot chick?”

“I said nice,” Leo said, bemusedly, “not hot.” He wondered about Jim’s use of the word girlfriend, since he’d never once defined his relationship with Patty to him using that term. In fact, they’d never discussed it at all.

Jim made an inarticulate noise, accompanied by hand flailing. “Totally not the point here, Bones.” He pointed a long finger at him, “Your girlfriend is stepping out on you.”

“Jim,” Leo said patiently. “Patty and I are just friends.”

Jim narrowed his eyes. “Bullshit,” he said. “You were having sex with her.”

Leo nodded. “Yeah, we were lovers,” he said, just to watch Jim flinch. “Were.”

“Oh, so now you don’t love her anymore?” Jim said critically. “That doesn’t sound like you, Bones.”

Leo licked his lips, considering how to answer the question. “We were kind of … helping each other,” he said.

Jim arched an eyebrow sardonically and flopped down onto his side, propping himself up on one elbow. His blue eyes were sharp. “Well. I often find myself in need of some help, if that’s how we’re defining it now.”
“Jim …” Leo sighed.

“Don’t ‘Jim’ me,” Jim said irritably. “You’re the one who’s suddenly in an open relationship.”

“I’m suddenly what?” Leo said. “And no, but if I was, so what?”

“I’m just surprised that you’re not jealous,” Jim said. “I thought that was part and parcel of the whole ‘love’ thing.”

Leo blew out a breath and tried to rein the conversation in. “Not with Patty and me,” he said. “We … we love each other, but we’re not in love with each other.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?” Jim asked incredulously. “Seriously, Bones!”

“It means that we were both lonely, and trying to get over something that was hurting us,” Leo said, beginning to feel angry despite himself.

“Oh,” Jim said flatly. “So, basically, you were using each other for sex? Just like everybody else in the world, but you called it something else to make it seem all noble.”

“That is not— you know, Jim, you can really be an asshole when you want to be,” Leo said. “Because it is not the same thing. There’s no intimacy in fucking someone you pick up at a bar and walk away from minutes or hours later, there’s nothing shared beyond bodily fluid, no real honesty.”

“It’s honesty if that’s what you both want,” Jim shot back.

“But it’s not intimacy,” Leo said, “the kind where you come to know the other person’s secrets.”

“What – like you talk to her about things you don’t tell me?” Jim said hotly.

“Right, because you’re so open and welcoming to talk about love,” Leo said snidely.

“That’s —“

“You just want to crow about how right you are to stay away from it,” Leo shot back. “So why would I talk to you about my broken heart?”

“That’s not – that’s not fair,” Jim said stubbornly.

“Oh, really,” Leo said, “Tell me one time I said something to you about love that you didn’t make a smart remark.”

“Why are we even fighting about this?”

And there it was. The diversion, the tactical maneuver that Jim fell back on time and time again. "We're fighting about this, Jim, because you made an insulting and unkind remark about someone I care about."

"Oh?" Jim said. "So, now it's down to caring?"

"Jim," Leo said, exasperated. "Why are you baiting me about this?"

Jim shrugged. "I guess I thought that you would want to know about this, that you wouldn't give up if you really loved someone," he said.

Leo struggled to school his expression, but Jim was looking at the lawn and not his face. "But Patty
and I have already discussed this," Leo said, and paused. "And to answer your question, I wouldn't
give up if I really loved someone," Leo said plainly. "I didn't, when push came to shove."

Jim looked up at him, with open curiosity in his expression.

"When my marriage ended, that was not my idea, Jim. I don't make vows that I don't intend to keep," he said. "Is that clear enough for you?"

The rapidly sinking sun was reflecting in Jim's eyes as Leo spoke, the light heavy and golden, painting his skin. He watched Jim wrestle with the words before he let them escape his mouth, while the silence stretched around them and the shadows grew.

"If you say so, Bones," he said noncommittally.

+ 

The darkness of the late fall was more familiar to him, but no less unwelcome as the semester wended on. Midterms came and went, but Leo's focus remained on the encoding of the viral envelope for CHFIII. In fact, his focus on it was so utter that Jim accused him of being obsessive, an accusation not without merit. Maybe he did have something to prove, to himself not the least, about his ability to be a healer. But the truth was, he was so close to a solution, to creating a workable antiviral that he could practically taste it.

After spending nearly an entire weekend at the lab tinkering with a proposed antiviral, he was relatively certain that he'd cracked the mystery. All he had left to do was to convince the Research Safety Committee to allow him to do run a test on the actual virus. Bet Wah read through his proposal for the next stage of research with a sad smile.

"What?" he asked, concerned that he'd missed something. She couldn't have failed to notice that he'd included her in the next stage of trials.

"I won't be able to continue on the project with you," she said quietly.

Leo looked at her askance.

"I'm pregnant," she said, with a slow smile. "And it's just too …"

"Oh, darlin' –" he said, in relief. "Of course it's too much of a risk! How far along are you?" He couldn't help but be happy for her, even as part of him lamented the loss of Bet Wah's skilled hands and years of lab experience. He estimated that she'd saved him weeks of work with her incisive understanding of current techniques and workarounds.

"I've put in a good word for you with a couple of friends," she said regretfully, "but the truth is that I know I'm leaving you in the lurch – it's the middle of the semester, and everybody is committed to other projects."

Leo sighed. "Setting up the trials shouldn't be that much work," he said. "I just need someone who's got experience with the appropriate safety protocols."

Bet Wah nodded, but her expression was still troubled. "That's not a small thing, Leonard," she said.

"I know, I know," he said. "But you can't worry about me right now," he smiled. "So, tell me – do you want a boy or girl?"

+
Despite his assurances to Bet Wah, finding a tech had proven to be far more difficult than he'd anticipated – he didn't get someone in place until after Halloween, an Andorian chan named La'an, who was only taking on the project to supplement his meager income as a research fellow. La'an was doing research on extending Andorian fertility by outside means, so Leo assumed that he would be adroit with manipulation of cell lines. Unfortunately, La'an was no Bet Wah, and Leo found himself taking on more and more of the set up for the experiments that he was running to test of his two proposed antivirals, while he waited for final approval from the Safety Committee to actually test the medicine on live virus.

Between shifts at the Infirmary, his own classload and the class that he was teaching at the Medical School, he was more than running on empty, and it showed. Jim had been concerned about his lack of physical coordination the last time they had sparred together, and he had recently come home so late that he found a concerned Jim comming him from inside his own room when he arrived. Jim had taken one look at him and whatever angry tirade he'd been about to start on had abruptly snapped off as he simply pointed at Leo's bed and took the PADDs he'd brought home to work on away from Leo. He'd refused to give them back, no matter what Leo had argued. When Leo awoke at the dark of daybreak, Jim had been gone, but so were the PADDs. Leo had cursed his way into the shower, and stomped back into his bedroom drying off his hair, only to find Jim waiting there with breakfast. He'd refused to let Leo do any work until after he'd eaten, only then surrendering the PADDs.

So, it wasn't entirely a surprise when Leo let himself into his room a week later after having been out all night long, to find Jim looking worried. Jim's expression swiftly morphed from worry to anger when he took a good look at Leo. He moved into Leo's personal space and sniffed, shaking his head with lips thinly drawn down.

"Oh, I get it," he said. "You blew off sparring so you could 'help'," he sketched the quotes in the air, "someone? Let me guess," he continued sarcastically. "Patty?"

Leo shook his head in consternation and anger. He was beyond fucking exhausted, and had, in fact, spent the night with Patty, but really, there had been little pleasure in it. "You're an infant, you know that?" Leo snapped.

"Right," Jim said, starting to move around Leo to the door. "I'm an infant because I've been worried about you, and you were blowing me off. I got it now, Bones."

Leo closed his eyes in exasperation, and grabbed Jim's arm as he went by. "Patty's lover got married yesterday."

"So … you comforted her with your cock?" Jim asked snidely.

Leo laughed. "Yeah, actually, I did," he said bitterly, pulling Jim in while he struggled half-heartedly to break out of Leo's grasp. "Not that it worked, but you know, I gave it the old college try."

Jim looked startled by his words.

"What, you want me to deny it?" Leo asked. "Or you want details? About how sad and lonely she was? Or how I know how it feels to be denied what you really want? What, Jim? What do you want to know? But you fucking tell me this: why do you want to know?"

Jim's eyes were traveling from Leo's mouth back up to his eyes, and Leo could see it all: the confusion, the anger, the hurt, and something that looked a lot like longing.

Leo waited, holding onto Jim's shirt, his breathing harsh and uneven.
Jim's color was high and he opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, then stopped himself before he said, "I'm worried about you, Bones," in a quiet voice.

"Why?" Leo said, trying to push him into telling the truth.

"I don't want you to get hurt," Jim said.

Leo stared at him, and then let go of Jim's shirt with a laugh that was bitter.

"Damn it, Jim," he muttered, and stomped off into the shower. The worst part was that Jim really did believe that he meant that.

Chapter 20

It was as if he were struggling in turbulent water, the sound only coming through clearly in bursts when he rose to the surface. What he could hear was often indecipherable -- a muffled roar of voices and alarms blaring -- but all the bits and pieces were muddled and tangled up. He couldn't figure out what they were trying to tell him, or even if they were talking to him.

It was quieter, but there was still the noise of constant motion, of something rising and falling, mechanical and rhythmic, like the tides.

Occasionally, he would hear a voice, so familiar ... sometimes, it was far away but loud, the words unclear, the tone, angry.

Sometimes, that same voice would be much closer, saying 'Bones' in a tone so pleading ... and the rushing sound, the rising and falling, would speed up as if in answer.

Jim.

"Bones," Jim said.

He felt the pressure of the word against his lips, followed by a kiss, warm and coaxing.

"Bones," Jim said again, drawing away.

He felt Jim's nose brushing against his sideburn as he spoke directly into Leo's ear, then traced his cheekbone with it.

Leo waited for the kiss, his whole body taut with longing. He could feel the weight of Jim’s body resting above his groin, could tell that he was bracketing his head with his hands on either side, resting the weight of his upper body on them. He struggled to open his eyes.

"That’s it, Bones," Jim urged. “Wake up.”

Jim’s voice got quieter as he got closer, but more hungry. He kissed Leo with the intensity that he’d
been waiting so long for, his lips warm and wet. Leo thought he could feel the swipe of Jim’s tongue against the seam of his lips.

“Jim,” his voice was strained, barely present.

Jim breathed in sharply, and kissed him again. “That’s right,” he said in a low voice. “Wake up.” He pressed his lips against Leo’s in a quick kiss.

Leo struggled to open his eyes, tried to lift his hands to touch Jim, but it was so hard. He sighed in exasperation.

“Bones,” Jim said again.

He could feel the breath against his face as Jim spoke. He opened his eyes. Jim’s face was blurry, indistinct, but he could see the blue of his eyes. He blinked.

“Stay awake, Bones,” Jim said.

Leo parted his lips for the kiss that didn’t seem to be coming.

“Open your eyes again,” Jim said.

It took far too much effort, but Leo finally slitted an eye open. He could see the sharp line of Jim’s jaw, the tilt of his head, the light shining off a bare shoulder. His brow wrinkled.

Jim leaned forward and kissed his bottom lip, pulling on it as he drew away. “Now, both eyes,” he urged.

Leo struggled to comply, trying to focus on Jim. He was bare-chested, braced above him in the bed, wearing only a pair of grey boxer briefs. When he saw Leo’s eyes open, Jim leaned forward and kissed him softly. Leo blinked and tried to clear his head. That sound. That was a biobed, wasn’t it? What was a biobed doing in his old dorm room? He lifted a hand off the bed, trying to put it on Jim’s bare knee, but missed.

“Jim?” he asked. His eyes had dropped closed again, and he struggled to open them.

“Right here,” Jim answered him.

Leo waited for his kiss, but it didn’t come. He made a monumental effort and licked his dry lips, trying to catch the taste of Jim on his mouth.

“Bones,” Jim said again, in that low voice. He gave Leo a sip of cool water through a straw.


“Open your eyes, Bones,” Jim answered him. His voice sounded farther away.

Leo struggled to open them, but his lids were so heavy. Everything felt weighted down and sluggish. He could feel himself fading back into oblivion, but he caught himself from sinking at the last minute, his fingers grasping for the phantom touch of Jim’s skin, nowhere near his hand. “Love you, Jim,” he murmured.

He felt the stillness above him, heard the intake of breath just before he felt the kiss, claiming and hard enough to bruise. “Prove it,” Jim ordered in a ragged voice.
He could feel the press of Jim’s forehead against his.

“Wake up, Bones.”

Leo tried, but gravity was drawing him down, and he slid below the surface.

+ 

Gradually, Leo’s thoughts became more orderly. He knew that time was passing him by, but how much, he simply couldn’t tell. His best guess was that it had been a number of days, and possibly more than a week.

He had dim memories of white moonsuited bodies around his biobed, of struggling to rise to consciousness and being briefly aware.

He also remembered Jim’s bare shoulders bending toward him, the feel of his lips pressing against his, opening him up, breathing life into him, but what was real, and what was vivid dreaming, was unclear to him.

He tried to organize his random thoughts into a coherent timeline. At least he could think, even if the effort to open his eyes still seemed monumental.

He remembered ...

being in the biohazard suite to conduct the test on the live virus ...

La’an putting the vial of CHFII into the robotic hand that would carry it into the containment chamber ...

The cold wash of panic that ran down his spine at La’an’s shocked exclamation, before every ounce of training he’d ever had asserted itself in a furious rush of adrenaline ...

hitting the bio-containment control panel and the shrieking of the alarm ...

scrambling for his PADD and comming the antiviral formula information and his research to the head of the Safety Committee, Bet Wah, and Jim ...

removing both variants of the experimental antivirals from the containment chamber, and marking the hyposprays ‘1’ and ‘2’ as he calculated and loaded up the dosages. They were both more than likely dead, he and La’an, so he was risking nothing ...

hypoing the hysterical Andorian with the first variant, and himself with the second ...

writing ‘1’ and ‘2’ on their hands before he stumbled, beginning to slide toward the blessed silence of unconsciousness, where there was no more alarm shrieking, no more blood-splattering screams from La’an, no more comms bleeping in his pocket with Jim’s code flashing ...

He remembered seeing the blood dripping from his nose as he flipped open the comm, hearing Jim calling his name. He’d wanted to say that he was sorry, he’d wanted to say that he loved him, that he loved Jim.

Had he said it out loud?

+ 

Leo had no idea what day it was, but he figured that it was nighttime by the sounds of the hospital
around him. It wasn’t as if the hospital was ever completely quiet, but night was quieter with far less
foot traffic in the hallways, even in critical care, where he assumed he was. He could hear the sound
of his biobed as constant and as soothing as the tide, the chime of occasional bells at the Nurse’s
Station and the murmur of voices from a nearby room where someone was watching the news feed.

He had yet to open his eyes. He was taking inventory first. He felt heavy, myalgic, his limbs
lethargic and non-responsive, but he was breathing on his own, without the aid of any forced
respiration. Still, his lungs had to be partially compromised, as he wasn’t entirely recumbent; the head
of the bed was propped up at a thirty-degree angle.

It was distinctly possible that the room he was in had a controlled, sterile environment, but he’d heard
no telltale hiss of a vacuum when the occasional nurse or attendant came in it. He distinctly
remembered that sound when he’d awoken to find moonsuited figures looming over him at some
point, Jim’s muffled voice yelling in the background. He inferred that he was no longer in quarantine
because of this observation. If he was no longer in quarantine, then he was no longer infectious,
which meant he’d more than likely been in the hospital for 10 days, and probably closer to two
weeks.

His back ached, but he was reasonably certain that the ache was from his liver and to a lesser degree,
his kidneys, rather than the fact that he’d been laying on his back in one attitude for days, or weeks,
on end.

He could feel no intravenous sites on his extremities or his chest, but he thought that he remembered
them being there.

He felt weak and headachey, but he didn’t seem to be bleeding from anywhere, a fact for which he
was grateful. He had a dim, but vivid memory of opening his eyes to a world rinsed in red before
someone in a moonsuit had pressed a hypo against his neck.

Maybe it hadn’t been real. His febrile dreams had felt so real, especially those he’d had of Jim. That
last one had seemed so real, but he was here, in the hospital, not in his old dorm room … He licked
his lips reflexively, but they told him nothing.

He was here, wasn’t he?

Under his left hand, he could feel the whirl and thrum of the biobed, and believed that if he pressed
down just where his hand has been purposefully left that he could summon aid.

Under his right hand, he could feel the silken texture of warm skin and the coarse ends of short hair.
His hand rose and fell with Jim’s deep, even breathing. He could feel the top of a head, pressed next
to his hip. The heavy weight of a somnolent arm lay across his thighs. At the apex of Jim’s
respirations, Leo could feel the scratch of Jim’s beard stubble under his jaw line as it grated against
the pad of his thumb. It was so real, so vivid, that Leo was afraid to open his eyes and see that it was
yet another hallucination, another dream of longing born out of the fever.

He drifted instead, feeling comforted by Jim’s closeness.

\+

The light was different when he woke next -- brighter, clearer, and he surmised that it was morning,
and after sunrise. The sounds from the floor outside his room seemed more purposeful, less hushed.
Leo could still feel Jim’s skin under his hand, but now Jim’s long fingers were looped around his
wrist, holding him in place. He slanted his eyes toward him, needing to see him more than he was
afraid to be hallucinating again.
Jim looked exhausted, Leo had to admit, even as he felt his face curve into a smile at the sight of him, his eyes greedily taking note of everything. He was slumped forward onto the high biobed, head turned toward Leo. There were dark circles under his eyes, and only someone as young as Jim was could sleep so soundly in such an uncomfortable position, although he supposed that he could give Jim a run for his money now. Christ, he was so tired that even though he’d just woken up, he could probably fall asleep standing up. If he could stand up, that was.

Leo kept his eyes on Jim, trying to glean clues from his appearance. Jim’s mouth was slightly opened, his eyes moving behind his eyelids restlessly as he dreamed. His scarlet uniform was rumpled and Leo couldn’t help but smile ruefully at the imagination that had given him a nearly naked Jim as a hallucination. There was nothing about his appearance that gave him a clue about what day it was. He stifled a sigh, not wanting to disturb Jim’s sleep. From the looks of him, he hadn’t had much of it for a while.

Something caught his eye and he turned his head to the left. The privacy curtain had been opened so that he could have seen the occupant in the next room, if there had been one. Instead, Patty stood there with tears streaming down her face and a bright smile. He smiled back at her, and nodded toward the door of his room, urging her to come in.

She shook her head ‘no’, and pointed at Jim when his brows drew down. Leo’s smile turned rueful when he understood. She wasn’t coming in because Jim wouldn’t like it. He had just enough energy to roll his eyes.

Patty covered her mouth with her hands, and then moved them to her heart, crying through her smile. She mouthed ‘later’ at him.

He nodded a bit or hoped that he had, feeling his eyes getting heavy.

Patty tapped at the window and he made the effort to open them up one last time. She pointed at Jim. ‘He’s beautiful,’ she mouthed, and Leo smiled, agreeing with her. He had just enough energy to turn his head back toward Jim so that he was the last thing he saw before his eyes blinked closed again.

\[Prove it.\]

Leo started awake this time, his hand jerking up uncontrollably at the fragment of memory. He felt fingers close around his wrist and opened his eyes to see Jim, watching him with wide eyes, awake, grabbing for his retreating hand.

"Jim," he croaked out, and as Leo watched, the emotions rolled over Jim’s face in rapid succession, hope, longing and relief, being replaced by utter, wild fury.

Jim started away from the bed, standing up and out of Leo’s reach, leaving Leo’s empty hand dangling in space.

"Jim." Leo shifted his body forward on the bed to follow Jim as the alarms began going off.

The sound snapped Jim out of his retreat and he moved forward urgently, pushing Leo back onto the bed. He was still wild-eyed and trembling. "No," he rasped. "Stay still." He picked Leo up by the shoulders and shifted him back on the bed as the door to his room opened and medical personnel began pouring in. Nurse Jones was followed by a doctor that he didn’t recognize and Jim stepped back, letting Jones take over.

Paul Barresi came up on the other side of the bed, looking exhausted but relieved. "Jesus Christ,
"McCoy," he said. "You scared the shit out of us."

Jim continued to back away toward the door, and Leo turned his head toward his retreating figure, opening his mouth to stop him. Jim fumbled in his pocket and pulled out his comm, looking at it. "I gotta go," he said aloud, looking up at Leo. His eyes were huge in his face, his lips white and compressed. He turned and wheeled out the door as Leo dropped his head back against the biobed in utter frustration.

"Damn it," he said, and passed out again.

+ 

He drifted in and out of consciousness for the next little while, waiting for the sound of Jim's familiar footfall in the hallway, the feel of him sitting next to him in the chair that remained empty, mocking him. The business of the hospital whirled around him. Jones had come back and fed him some simple fortified broth, disgusting but useful, and he'd slept again, not wanting to, but incapable of doing more than healing. Paul had left him a PADD of his research on the bed next to him, but he was too exhausted to contemplate even picking it up. All the months of work, the obsessive focus … he'd achieved his goal, a workable cure for CHFIII, but at what cost?

+ 

The voice out in the hall was not the one he expected to hear, so at first he thought that he was dreaming again. But when he opened his eyes, he saw his grandmother, her hand looped gracefully around Jim's elbow, her spine ramrod straight as she spoke to the doctor who he'd learned was the head of Infectious Diseases. Dr. Henriksen was a tall, imposing blonde, but she was eye to eye with Elizabeth McCoy, whose 88 years and countless hardships had not bowed her dancer's posture one iota.

He heard his grandmother thank his doctor before she turned toward the door, which Jim held open for her as he escorted her into the room.

Leo closed his eyes as she stepped close to the bed and smoothed her hand over his brow, pushing the hair back off of his face. "Open your eyes, Leo," she said firmly, kissing his cheek.

He looked up into her furious, loving hazel eyes, the mirror of his own. "Gram," he said with a smile.

She tutted at him, not willing to be charmed in the least. "If you ever do anything so foolish again, Leonard Horatio McCoy," she said to him, her accent so thick that it betrayed her every emotion, "I will kill you myself."

He heard the muffled snort of surprise and laughter from Jim, and looked over Gram's shoulder to where Jim stood at the foot of the bed.

Gram straightened and turned to Jim. "Thank you, Jim," she said, stepping over and kissing him on the cheek. Leo was amused to note that Jim's neck turned pink. "Would you be so kind as to leave us alone for a while?"

Leo opened his mouth to object, but one look from his grandmother silenced him.

"My grandson and I have a few things to discuss," she said meaningfully, narrowing her eyes at Leo.

"Yes, ma'am," Jim said. His hand flinched like he'd just stopped himself from throwing a salute in her direction before he fled the room with a smirk, leaving Leo to his fate in the form of the glaring
McCoy matriarch.

Chapter 21

The sound of Jones’ rubber-soled nursing shoes against the floor was enough to rouse Leo from a light sleep. Not that he minded, exactly. He was a little bit in love with the compact, broad-necked and dark-completed Jones, who was built like a cross between a Greco-Roman wrestler and an old-fashioned fire hydrant. Sure, he had none of the lithe, bright gracefulness of Jim Kirk, but unlike Jim Kirk, Jones had actually saved him from the mother of all tongue-lashings from his Gram.

Not that she hadn’t gotten her shots in before Jones came in to complain that Leo’s rising blood pressure was not good for his fragile hematological system. Never let it be said that his ability to wield words with acerbic perspicacity was only a McCoy-linked trait — and certainly not in front of Gram, who would have disproved any such assertion in fairly short, if not succinct, order.

”And just what were you attempting to accomplish with this damned foolish display, Leonard? Don’t even bother grimacing at me, young man, because that is your name and I’ll damned well use it in place of the other imprecations that you most certainly deserve. You’ve spent almost half of your life working in one sort of laboratory or another, Leonard, and never before have you left something so important in the care of another, less trustworthy, person. Dr. Henriksen told me that this new technician didn’t adhere to even the most basic of safety protocols, and certainly nothing on the order of what should have been observed for what you were doing. And how did this escape your notice?”

Her arms were crossed over her torso, long fingers splayed lightly onto her arms. He couldn’t see her feet, but he knew enough to know that she was standing in second position, poised for the next word.

“I’ll tell you how,” she continued relentlessly, “Jim told me that you’ve not been sleeping or eating, that he’s had to hunt you down on occasion to do either or both. Jim says that you work through the night on this research, and all while you’ve been teaching and taking classes besides. And you’re working on yet another PhD, maybe even two, according to Jim.”

Leo raised both eyebrows at her words and her Jim-this, Jim-that. He was so going to kick that kid’s disloyal ass as soon as he was able, no matter how good of a kisser he was — might be.

“Gram –“

“I am not through speaking,” she said curtly, and Leo pursed his lips.

In his experience, when Gram stopped using contractions it was a bad, bad sign.

“I suppose that you believe that you have something to prove, especially after everything that happened with your father, and maybe in some part of your warped, obsessive brain you decided that curing a centuries-old disease with a potential to save thousands of lives would somehow be appropriate penance for not being the one to find the cure for your father’s disease -- but you hear me now, Leonard Horatio McCoy, you are not responsible for his death, nor for any self-imposed, ridiculous penance.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Leo argued.

“Oh, it wasn’t, was it?” Gram snapped. “So you didn’t fall back into obsession the same way that
you did when you were trying to cure your father? You didn’t neglect your own health, and become so focused on proving the outcome of your work that you couldn’t accept even a two-month delay and wait until the new term started to find an experienced technician, but instead rushed headlong and hired an incompetent tech–"

“It wasn’t his fault --” Leo began to defend him.

“On that point, we agree,” Gram said sharply. “You should have been the one to ensure that all the protocols were adhered to. You were the one with the experience, and you were in charge.”

Leo sighed. “Believe me,” he said, “I know that it’s my fault.” La’an was still in a coma; his Andorian physiology was not responding as well as Leo’s had.

“And what are you going to do to recompense that mistake?” Gram asked acerbically. “Cure all the remaining forms of cancer by the summer?”

Leo rolled his eyes at her.

“Don’t you roll your eyes at me, boy,” she snapped. “You’ve got a lot of strange ideas rattling around under that thick skull of yours, and frankly, despite all your brilliance, you can be the stupidest man alive.” Her eyes glistened with sudden tears. “And I thank God you’re alive, Leo, despite yourself and your foolish recklessness.”

“Gram …” he said, and reached out a hand to her, which she accepted.

“When Jim commed me,” she began and trailed off. She covered her mouth with her other hand. “You are not allowed to do this to me, Leo,” she said fiercely. “It has been too hard, for too long. You are not allowed to be foolish and squander the gifts that have been given to you, do you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said softly.

“You scared the living hell out of me, boy,” she said. She squeezed Leo’s hand and then reached up to her hair, which was still mostly chestnut, with the exception of the white that framed her heart-shaped face. “I’ve got a centimeter more of white, thanks to you. And you’re going to give Jim a heart attack, and he’s much too handsome to die so young.” Her hands went to her hips, and she narrowed her eyes. “And how is it that this is the first I’m hearing of Jim?” she asked. “When he called to tell me what your fool self had gotten up to, it was clear that he knew all about me, and I just had to pretend like I knew exactly who he was, Leo. And thank God he had the courtesy to call me, since he’s your primary contact -- otherwise, I would not have known what was going on!”

Leo had still been gaping at his grandmother when Jones had come into the room and saved him from exposing Jim’s hacking skills. Leo had, in fact, designated his grandmother as his primary contact, and had felt pathetic while doing so, as it was just more proof of his failure at being an adult, like the failure of his marriage.

“You up for some lunch, Dr. McCoy?” Nurse Jones asked.

Leo grimaced, since he knew that the question was purely rhetorical. “What kind of glop is it now?” he asked.

“Fortified glop,” Jones said cheerfully, saving the readings from the bed. “They’ll be coming to you soon. I sent your latest readings to your PADD. You’re doing well, despite everything.” He elevated the head of the bed to a more acute angle. “We might actually try getting you up and walking in the next 24 hours.”
Leo nodded, picking up the PADD. “How’s La’an?” he asked.

Jones shook his head. “Still no change,” he said.

Leo sighed, and dropped his head back against the biobed, closing his eyes.

“Hey,” Patty said as she entered the room.

He opened his eyes to her tremulous smile as she walked across the room to him. “Hey, darlin’,” he said quietly.

She stood up on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. “You scared me so much,” she said in a stern tone. “Please don’t do that to me again.”

“I’m sorry,” Leo said, wrapping his arms around her and dropping his head on her shoulder. “I really fucked up, Patty.”

“You did,” she agreed, pulling away, and wiping at her eyes before she said. “Jim's been pretty insane for the past couple of weeks.”

“He hacked my personal data to make himself my primary contact,” he told her.

She nodded. “I’m not surprised,” she said. She paused. “When you were still in the hot room, there was a lot of discussion about how to treat you. Jim kept arguing that you should be given more doses of your antivirals, but Henriksen –”

Leo nodded. “Wasn’t interested in giving me an essentially unproven medication.”

“Yeah,” Patty said. “Jim was so insistent that Henriksen asked him what right he had to be part of the conversation, and he said that he was your primary contact. I think only Paul Barresi and I noticed the second of hesitation before he said it.” She looked at Leo, “I’m sure he covered his tracks well.”

“Oh, yeah,” Leo said bitterly.

“What?” she asked.

“He ran off this morning when I woke up,” Leo said. “He only came back to drop my actual primary contact, my grandmother, off.”

Patty shrugged. “I’m sure that she wanted to see you on her own,” she said. “And Jim’s been pretty glued to your side.”

“While I was unconscious,” Leo said, “but as soon as I wake up …” he ran one palm over the other indicating flight.

Patty studied him. “He’s been through a lot, Len,” she said. “You were in quarantine for more than a week, and they wouldn’t let him in, even in a moonsuit. He was sleeping out in the hallway on the chairs.” She paused. “One of the nurses used to let him talk to you over the speaker, but … he really does love you.”

Leo shook his head. “You should have seen how furious he was with me this morning,” he said.

Patty nodded. “I believe it,” she said firmly. “I’ve been pretty pissed at you myself.”

“No,” Leo said, “not about me being stupid.” He thought about it. “Not entirely, anyway.”
“I believe that, too,” she said calmly.

Leo looked at her, demanding more explanation with a glance.

“You almost left him behind,” Patty said reasonably. “There’s no way that he’s not going to resent you for that. Plus, you’ve made him love you.”

“What?” Leo stuttered out.

An orderly came in and put a lunch tray on his table, rolling it in front of Leo. He was so focused on Patty that he didn’t even say ‘thank you’ until the kid was practically out the door.

“You told me that he doesn’t want to be in love, that he’d decided that he simply wasn’t going to feel that emotion, right?” Patty said, turning the tray around so that it was facing Leo, and opening the lid on the clear broth. “Ooh, yummy,” she said in a faux-enthusiastic voice. “Eat up,” she ordered, handing him a spoon. “Well, it’s pretty clear that he does have feelings for you, and I’m sure that he feels resentful about that. You’ve made him care more than he wants to.”

Leo stirred the soup thoughtfully. “I don’t know, Patty,” he said.

“I do,” she said. “I’ve had ample opportunity to observe him through this whole …” she waved a hand in the air. "Eat," she urged him, sitting down. “You know, he’s much more intense in real life than I comprehended from your descriptions of him. He’s very brash, but he’s got the intelligence to back it up. You should have heard him arguing with Henriksen,” she said. “It was clear that he’d read all of your research and understood it — and he just would not back down.” She paused. “And he’s very, very thorough.”

“What do you mean?” Leo asked.

“You almost died, Leonard,” she said in a haunted voice. “I hope you don’t remember …”

He had a flash of memory, of a blood-soaked bed and red-tinted world. “I remember hemorrhaging,” he said quietly.

She nodded and put her hand on his knee, squeezing. “It was horrible,” she said. “Just … “ she visibly composed herself. “Jim went a little crazy,” she said. “Paul’s husband is this huge guy …” she began.

“Harry Yu,” Leo said.

“Yeah,” Patty said, “and he could barely hold Jim back from going into your room.”

Leo’s chest felt tight at the very idea of Jim exposing himself to the virus.

“He had these vials,” she said, “and I didn’t understand at first, but he’d had Bet Wah make up doses of your antivirals.”

Leo stared at her.

“So when Henriksen said that there was nothing left for them to do,” her voice was shaking and when she took in a long breath, Leo reached down and took her hand. “Jim insisted that they use them, arguing that they couldn’t do you any more harm if you were going to die.” Patty covered his hand with her other one and squeezed. “Thank God that Paul agreed with him,” she said, with tears in her voice. “I guess I should congratulate you on curing CHFIII, but mostly I feel like punching you. I can only imagine how Jim Kirk feels.”
“Yeah,” Leo groused. “At least you’re talking to me.”

“I didn’t think I’d get the chance to do that again,” Patty said tearfully. She stood up and hugged him, and he closed his eyes and rested his head on her shoulder as he heard the sound of the door to his room opening.

He opened his eyes knowing exactly what he was going to see: Gram, with an arched eyebrow, with a preternaturally blank-faced Jim Kirk right behind her.

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“Well, Leo,” Gram said, settling herself into the chair in Leo’s room. She pulled her knitting out of her bag and onto her lap. “I see that you’ve been quite busy here at Starfleet.” Her eyes were twinkling with amusement.

“Gram,” he growled at her.

“Patty seems lovely, dear,” Gram said serenely.

“She’s my friend, Gram,” Leo said in exasperation.

“Yes,” Gram said smoothly. “I believe that the old-fashioned term for that would be ‘friends with benefits’, but how exactly does Jim fit into the picture?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Leo groused, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Don’t pout, Leo,” Gram said. “It was unbecoming when you were five, and it hasn’t aged well at all, trust me.” She was consulting her pattern, and had a pair of old-fashioned reading glasses perched at the end of her nose.

“What’re you making?” Leo asked.

“A baby blanket for that lovely Bet Wah,” Gram said. “Jim told me what she did.”

Leo threw up his hands in exasperation.

“Yes?” Gram drawled.

“You’re enjoying yourself far too much,” Leo said, narrowing his eyes, “with your ‘Jim this’, ‘Jim that’ when you know damned well that he’s avoiding me.”

“He did seem a mite perturbed,” Gram said blandly. “But he did say that he’d be back later.”

Leo scowled, not answering her, although he could feel the weight of her gaze.

“Leo,” she said quietly. “You’ve got yourself in quite a mess here.”

“More than you know,” Leo said. “Jim …” he cast around, trying to figure out how to even broach the topic. “He’s …”

“Skittish?” Gram asked.

Leo looked up at her, surprised at the assessment.

“Oh, Leo,” she said, “even when he’s perfectly still, he’s in motion, like a wild creature afraid of being trapped.” She paused and looked at Leo quite deliberately. “Does that remind you of
Leo laughed at her. “Are you comparing Jim to a horse?”

Gram’s eyes twinkled at him. “Is this where I make the stallion joke?” she asked.

“You are incorrigible,” Leo groused.

“Which is more than half of the reason that you love me,” Gram said. “But, I think you’re going to have work harder for that boy than you ever did for Saturn. He doesn’t have any people, does he?”

“His mother is still alive,” Leo said, “but I’ve known him for more than a year, and he’s never once mentioned talking to her, or getting a comm from her. I think everyone else is dead – I can’t be sure, but … you know who he is, right?”

His grandmother looked at him severely. “He’s a nice young man who came into this world under terrible circumstances,” she said. “And he’s an astonishingly loyal friend who helped save your life. That’s all I need to know about him.” She had been knitting quite vigorously, but visibly calmed herself. “He did tell me that he hacked your data, you know. With his head hung and all, and not like he was playing at being contrite -- he honestly thought that I’d be angry with him,” she shook her head. “I told him that I was grateful to him, that I couldn’t say that I would have been as bold as he had been if the decision about treating you had been left to me. That I was humbled by the fact that his faith in your abilities was so absolute. He was shocked, Leo.” She looked up at him. “He had no expectation that he would still be welcome, despite having saved your life.” She shook her head. “Give him a little time,” she said, patting his hand. 'I'm quite sure you've exasperated him beyond all reason these past two weeks.'

He snorted at her words.

"Don't huff at me, young man," she chided. "Being an exasperating bastard is a McCoy specialty. It might do you some good to be on the other end of that for a change of pace."

"Oh, a little suffering is good for the soul, huh?" Leo asked sarcastically.

"Take a nap," Gram ordered. "Maybe you'll wake up less insufferable."

Leo was drifting in the netherworld of sleep, nightmare flashes of might-have-beens running through his subconscious and making him twitch himself awake before he’d slide helplessly back under. The rational part of his brain, the one that was always a doctor, no matter the circumstance, spoke to him calmly, reminded him that it was night and that perhaps his temperature had risen again, that the virus, although beaten back, still had not loosed its grip on his cells. But the part of him that was prone to anxiety and worry couldn't help but be battered by the images that his subconscious was serving up to him.

_The Quad, empty except for moon-suited figures, and in the middle, the fountain outside the Student Center running red with blood._

_and ..._

_Lea’an, screaming, punching him before he could get to the biocontrols and running out into the lab building, spreading contagion and tainted blood everywhere while Leo helplessly began to hemorrhage._
Jim, staggering away from him, and his hand reaching toward the scarlet-clad shoulder to turn him around, only to be confronted with tears of blood rolling from his dulled eyes.

"You killed me, Bones," Jim accused. "You killed me."

Leo wrenched himself awake with a shudder and a gasp. The lights in the room were low, set for the middle of the night, and he was disoriented and dizzy from sitting up, breathing so hard that at first he didn't register the feel of the hand on his shoulder. He blinked, vision still clearing, realizing that it was Jim. Jim, who'd never once touched him so tentatively, not in all the time that he'd known him.

"You OK, Bones?" Jim asked. He was standing next to the bed, the chair he'd usually occupied set further back than Leo was used to seeing.

His voice was soft with strain, and Leo could see the wheeling emotions in his eyes, even in the dimly lit room.

"Am I dreaming still?" Leo asked him. He fumbled a hand up to touch Jim's hand, and saw the flinch that Jim sought to hide.

"Skittish," Gram's voice said in his mind.

"No, you're awake," Jim confirmed, and Leo had a flash again, of Jim standing next to the bed, leaning in to kiss him, but … hadn't Jim been in the bed with him?

Leo leaned back against the biobed, exhausted and confused. He licked his dry lips and noted how Jim's eyes followed the motion, how he unconsciously repeated the action. The viewscreen next to his bed buzzed to life, and Jim jumped, ready to pull away. Leo looped his fingers around his wrist, holding him with a light touch.

"Are you all right, Dr. McCoy?" Melanie, one of the night nurses, appeared on the screen.

"Bad dream," Leo said.

"His temp is up," Jim piped up. His voice had the rasp that Leo associated with strain.

Melanie consulted the bottom of the screen. "Your temperature is slightly elevated," she confirmed, "but it's dropped since you came out of REM. We'll keep an eye on it."

"Thanks, Melanie," Leo said.

The viewscreen dissolved to black.

Jim pulled his hand away. "I should go," he said quietly. He was practically vibrating with tension.

Leo shook his head. "Stay and talk to me for a while, Jim," he said, not opening his eyes. "Otherwise, I'll lay here and dream about what a stupid fuck I am."

Jim stilled next to him. "You're not stupid, Bones," he said softly.

"Tell that to La'an," Leo said. He released Jim and raised his hand to his aching head.

He heard the movement of the chair over the floor, and when he opened his eyes, Jim had pulled the chair close up to the bed. "You didn't mean to fuck up," Jim said surely.
Leo laughed drily, dropping his hand onto the bed in front of Jim, palm up. "That doesn't mean much, Jim," he said. "He's still likely to die."

Jim shook his head. "He had his own part in this, Bones," he answered.

Leo closed his eyes. "I was in charge, Jim," he said. "I should have known better, I do know better. I just … I get tunnel vision sometimes," he admitted.

"You didn't mean it," Jim asserted again.

Leo could have wept when he felt Jim's fingers wrap around his own, but he kept himself still, waiting until Jim's hand settled around his before he exerted even the slightest pressure back. "I'm sorry, Jim," he said thickly.

The silence spun out in the room for long seconds, counted out by the murmur of the biobed and the sound of their breathing.

"Go to sleep, Bones," Jim said. His voice sounded stronger, calmer than it had a moment before. His thumb stroked the back of Leo's hand.

Leo let himself drift away, still holding on.

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**Chapter 22**

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The next days passed in a haze of sleep and the gradual recovery of his strength. Leo was surprised to realize that despite their vaunted ability to keep muscle tissue from wasting away, the biobed had not helped him retain any kind of endurance nor flexibility. It was ridiculously easy to tire him out, and although he was assured that he'd be able to fully participate in the second term that would begin a couple of days after Jim's birthday, that sometimes seemed impossible to him. Especially when he found himself practically staggering after walking a circuit of the ID unit only twice, a distance he knew could not be more than a third of a kilometer.

He had groused in irritation when Jim had found him leaning heavily against one of the railings, resting. Jim's face had the pinched look of worry on it that Leo had come to detest, the one that he took pains to discharge by assuring Jim that he was just fine in his own particular way: by complaining. When he asserted that he was tired but not relapsing and that Jim needed to stop being such a mother hen, Jim's expression had eased before he rolled his eyes and slung one of Leo's arms across his shoulder, heaving him up so that Leo's weight was resting on him.

"Why does this feel so familiar?" Jim asked.

"Yeah, well, where's the booze?" Leo grumped. "If I'm gonna be staggering, I'd prefer to have gotten some pleasure out of it." He paused. "You could sneak me in something," he said.

Jim's laugh was immediate. "Dude, your gram would kick my ass," he said surely.

"I never thought I'd see the day when Jim Kirk would admit that he was frightened of an old woman," Leo said solemnly. "We'll have to mark this day down so that it's recorded properly."

"Go right ahead," Jim said sarcastically. "But first, why don't you ask Miss Elizabeth for some booze? But comm me first. I wanna witness your evisceration."
Leo was totally bemused by Jim's easy use of Miss Elizabeth, and the fact that he'd pronounced it 'Miz' as was right and proper for a woman of her heritage. Gram had finally gotten her way. "What'd she do the last time you called her Mrs. McCoy?" he asked.

"She pinched me!" Jim said in an outraged tone. "I thought she was kidding when she said she would do it."

Leo smiled, wondering if this was a technique he should adopt. "Where?" he asked.

Jim stared at him. "My bicep," he said slowly. "Which really hurt, by the way. Does that mean something?"

"It means she likes you, idiot," Leo said.

The only sound was them shuffling, well, Leo shuffling, down the hall.

"You know," Jim said casually. "I really thought my family was strange before I started meeting yours."

Leo laughed out loud. "Infant." As if any blue-eyed, cornfed Iowans could possibly contend with generations of McCoys, bred in a culture that fucking cherished eccentricity. "Strange don't even get 'show' at the county fair." +

Leo's exciting day had been comprised of a stress test, some disgusting strained mash that was supposed to be turkey, and the nap he was currently being roused from. The source of his awakening was sitting in the chair next to his bed rustling some sort of wrapper and crunching on some oddly spiced snack that was wholly unrecognizable, at least by smell. He opened his eyes to see a young man in reds with a mop of black hair munching on a long, thin stick as he bent forward over a PADD. He squinted. The kid was vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place him. "Hello?" he asked, wondering, not for the first time, how young the interns were allowed to be these days.

"McCoy!" the kid said enthusiastically, looking up.

Leo could see the telltale wisps of the sad adolescent attempt at a mustache, and squinted harder. "Subie?" he said disbelievingly.

The kid jumped up, wiping his hand on his trousers. "Yeah, it's me," he said. "Long time no see."

"Holy crap, Subie," Leo said, shaking his hand. "You grew a ton."

Subie shrugged nonchalantly, but he was preening just a bit as he nodded. "Better late than never, huh? Griffin and Cupcake pretty much leave me alone these days," he said. "But how're you, man? I heard what you did – stupid, but awesome."

Leo sighed. "Yeah, pretty stupid. I'm lucky to be alive." He thought of La'an morosely, still comatose and likely to remain that way, and then made an effort to shake off his dark mood. "What the hell are you eating?"

"Pocky," Subie answered, sitting back down and holding out the bag. "You want some?"

Leo passed with a shake of his head.

"Anyway, I'd hoped that you'd be out of here today to eat with us at Thanksgiving, but …" Subie
trailed off. "I thought I'd stop by – when are they springing you?"

They passed a pleasant few minutes before other members of the KFF began to filter in, all their enthusiastic, bright young energy filling the room with talking and laughter. Leo hadn't seen most of them for months, and found himself surprised over and over again by the changes that had taken place in the time he'd not been paying attention. All of them had grown, transitioning into young men and women, but it was more than the physical changes – they all seemed to be more confident and sure of themselves. They'd still likely be described as the nerds by Cupcake and his ilk, but they none of them would be disturbed by that the way they might have been a year ago.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" That particular greeting, from Irina Federova, was most welcome. She'd walked into the room quietly, but had hugged and been hugged by a number of Cadets as she made her way through the crowd.

"How are you, darlin'?" Leo asked her.

"I'm good," she said to him, and the way her eyes were shining, he didn't doubt it. She'd walked into the room holding the hand of a tall, skinny kid that Leo didn't recognize, but who seemed to be well-known to the other members of the KFF. "You're the one who needs to take better care of yourself."

"Yeah, I know," Leo drawled. Being told off by a bunch of children was a bit humiliating, frankly. He was used to thinking of himself as a loner, but it was clear to him that this ragtag bunch of kids was sincerely concerned about him. "I'll be good."

"You do that," she said sternly, squeezing his hand, and moving away to be replaced by the next enthusiastic kid.

He'd dozed off at some point, despite the incredible level of noise, rousing once to see Gram in a sea of red uniforms, holding onto the arm of Harry Yu while she declaimed enthusiastically, her hand waving in the air. Jim had been in the middle of another knot of kids who had their heads together, no doubt planning some form of universal domination that he was better off not knowing about.

When he woke the next time, Gram was sitting next to his bed. A number of chairs had been dragged in from the hallway to form a loose circle. Jim, Bet Wah and Paul Barresi were filling some of them at the moment.

"Oh, but you don't have to!" Bet Wah was saying to Gram.

Gram shook her head, shaking off Bet Wah's objections as she exclaimed over the blanket that Gram was almost finished with. "There's no obligation here, only desire," she said. "Besides, knitting is good for these old joints – it keeps them supple."

"It's something I always wanted to learn," Paul said.

Jim laughed a little.

"What?" Paul said snidely. "Not manly enough for you, Kirk?"

Before Jim could answer, Gram cut in smoothly. "Traditionally, sailors knitted on long journeys," she said. Jim raised his eyebrows. "Where do you think the nets came from, young man? Or those fantastic sweaters?"

Jim closed his mouth. After a beat, he said, "I kinda thought the sailor's wives made them."

"Jim," Gram said in her teaching voice. "Those journeys were years-long, like the ones you all go on
in the stars." Jim considered what she said. "Look it up, young man," she ordered, then added. "Leo knits."

Jim had been taking a drink, which he mostly inhaled. "Bullshit," he croaked. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize, dear," Gram said placidly. "Swearing well is an acquired skill that increases with age. Just keep practicing and you'll do better next time." She patted Jim on the back. "As for knitting? It requires a type of manual dexterity that Leo excels at," Gram smiled sweetly and drawled out the next bit. "He's a surgeon, you know. Very good with his hands."

Jim goggled at Gram. He looked slightly flushed and confused, like he couldn't believe that Gram had been implying something sexual, but couldn't quite discount it, either.

"Gram, you're bragging again," Leo said, using an admonishing tone.

Jim started, not having realized that Leo was awake.

"If I were bragging, I would show them the holos of the beautiful sweaters you made that fall," she said tartly. "The other boys on the football team were very impressed."

Jim's mouth was now hanging open. Paul tipped back his chair and grinned, while Bet Wah looked amused.

Leo's rejoinder was cut short when the door to his room opened again, and Patty slipped through it, tiptoeing in an exaggerated fashion. She uncovered an aromatic, delicious smelling box that had been ill-concealed by her coat. "I smuggled in pie!" she said in a dramatic whisper. She was followed by a pretty brunette who Leo didn't recognize; the brunette was carrying a picnic basket.

"Thank God," he muttered. "Somebody cut me a piece, stat."

Gram merely raised an eyebrow in a way that led him to believe that she was far from done, and finished her row.

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When he was finally released from the hospital, it wasn't to return to his dorm.

"Do I want to know how you were able to get a suite in the housing reserved for admirals and visiting dignitaries?" Leo had asked his grandmother as he dropped down onto the couch in the two bedroom suite.

Gram put on her most innocent expression. "Your implication seems slightly salacious," she said, "which I don't appreciate at all, Leo." She paused. "However, I will tell you that in an uncanny coincidence, Admiral Barnett is a lifelong fan of dance. He was gracious enough to suggest that this would be an appropriate setting for your recovery when I happened to run into him at the San Francisco Ballet's premiere of the Nutcracker."

Leo rolled his eyes. Admirals could learn strategy from his Gram, that was for sure. "You detest The Nutcracker," he pointed out.

Gram merely smiled. "I may also have promised to analyze some of the fight training sims for how rhythmic movement instruction could be utilized to maximize efficiency."

"I'll just bet you did," Leo had drawled.
Between the replicators and the 24-hour room service, Gram had done her level best to tempt Leo's taste buds and to restore the weight that he had lost. It had been a source of contention between them, Leo's continuing lack of appetite, and Leo knew that Gram was worried that he was punishing himself for La'an's death, or that he was not recovering from his illness. The truth was that neither of those were the truth. He was guilty and depressed that the decision to sever La'an from life support had to have been made, but mostly, his lack of appetite was due to the slow pace of his recovery. He ate well enough in the early part of the day, but by nightfall, after physical therapy and playing catch up with his classwork, he was often too exhausted to do more than eat a small portion of dinner. He absolutely hated having Jim be present to see him leaving food on his plate, but no amount of arguing with Gram would get her to cut down the portion size she insisted on giving him.

The thing was, it wasn't like there was a timeline for recovery that he could point to – even from Capella IV, where there were a few cases each year of those who got CHFIII and survived the infection, reinforcing their Darwinian beliefs about illness. Coupled with a lack of medical tradition on the planet as a whole, the accounts of these recoveries were neither trustworthy nor appropriately documented. Any ideas that Starfleet Medical had about Leo's recovery time was just prediction based upon like disease paths. Basically, Leo just had to muddle along as best he could, pushing a little more each day. By the time that Gram was slated to go back to Georgia, Leo was capable of walking, slowly but steadily, across the campus. He was determined that he'd be able to return to the Med/Grad dorms, which were a bit farther from campus than the undergrad dorms. Gram had been equally determined that he remain in the hotel-like environment of the visiting dignitary's quarters, but he'd finally won her over. Actually, it was Jim who'd won her over, by promising that he'd make sure that Leo was eating and taking care of himself through the holidays.

He'd restrained himself from asking why Jim would forego sightseeing when Gram had asked if he wouldn't miss being home for the holidays.

"I'd be the only one there, Miss Elizabeth," he said quietly, and she'd nodded sadly.

"Well," she began, "you could come home with Leo …"

"Gram," Leo interrupted. "We both know that's the last thing Ted wants."

"You are just as stubborn and ridiculous as your grandfather," she said sternly. "And I don't recall you having been given leave to address him so familiarly."

Leo suppressed the eyeroll that wanted to come, reaching across the table to his grandmother. "It's not the time, Gram," he said. "I just … I couldn't stand to hear it from him again, not right now."

Jim was very still in his chair, listening, while Gram's eyes filled with tears.

She sniffed once, and straightened her shoulders, grasping his hand. "Promise you'll come home sometime," she said. Her eyes had cleared of the tears that had gathered there. "Your demon horse misses you terribly, boy."

Leo smiled. "He does now, does he? Does he tell you so?"

"You know damned well that horse only whispers his secrets to you," she snapped. "By the by, he dumped your grandfather on his ass again the week before I left."

"And you only tell me now!" Leo said with a smile. "Knowing full well that would have aided my recovery far earlier? Damn, Gram!"

Gram tossed his hand aside in disgust and turned to Jim. "Do you ride, Jim?"
Jim shrugged. "Not really. I mean, I've ridden, but not the way I saw Bones," he gestured with a
thumb in Leo's direction, "do in those holos."

Gram rolled her eyes at Jim's nickname for Leo, and Jim smirked. "So, horse is not one of the many
languages you speak?"

Jim laughed. "No," he said, with a smile. "I can't say that my teacher cracked the code for animal
languages, well … at least not that I know of."

"Was she a linguacode specialist, this teacher?" Gram asked pleasantly, beginning to pick up plates.

Without thinking, Leo must have shifted in his seat at her innocent question, although for the life of
him, he couldn't recall having done so. Suddenly, however, he'd drawn both of their attention,
although Gram's eyes on him were far more benign.

"Leo, please eat some more food," she ordered, pointing at his still half-full plate as she picked up
Jim's totally clean plate.

Jim's incisive blue gaze pinned Leo from across the table, "You might say that, Miss Elizabeth," Jim
said carefully, watching Leo all the while. "She invented the linguacode."

"How fascinating!" Gram said. "How lucky you were to have her as a teacher!"

"Yes, I was," Jim said, never once dropping his eyes from Leo's. "Very lucky."

Leo knew that the reckoning would be coming sooner rather than later, but also knew Jim Kirk well
enough to know that not only would he wait until Gram had left town, but that he'd also never
approach the subject the way that Leo would expect him to. Part of him supposed that he should just
grab the bull by the horns and introduce the topic himself, but he honestly didn't know how to start it
off. About the only thing that he'd resolved was not to be defensive and combative about it. That
would only make it worse.

Not that it was gonna be good, whenever it happened.

"I really, really wish that you would change your mind, Leo," Gram said, as she hovered near the
door of his long-deserted dorm room. Jim had gone downstairs to arrange for her luggage to be
transported to Atlanta.

"Not gonna happen, Gram," Leo said, settling himself into his desk chair. He reached out a finger
and spun one of the starships on his Christmas tree. Jim must have reactivated the program, because
the nacelles on the little ships gleamed red, except for the one.

"That's a lovely, tiny tree," she observed.

"Jim gave it to me last year," he said.

Gram pursed her lips, "Did he now?" She looked at Leo with her bright eyes. "What's going on,
Leo?"

"'bout what?" he asked, looking up and trying to look innocent.

"Don't give me those eyes, Leo," she said. "They're mine, which makes me immune to them. And
you damned well know what – there's been tension between you and Jim for days now."

Leo considered denying it, but just gave up. "I believe," he said, "that Jim has realized that I know something about his past that he does not want to discuss or have be common knowledge."

"Is this an important secret?" Gram asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"And how did you find it out?"

"It was in his medical records," Leo said, and at her raised eyebrows, he continued, "which I had access to because I am his doctor."

"I see," she said slowly. She walked back and forth in the small space, thinking. "Did you ever consider that he must have known, even on a subconscious level, that by making you his doctor that you'd discover this information?"

"No," he said quietly, startled. "I hadn't."

"Well," she said, "I told you he was gonna set up more traps and tests than Saturn ever did for you, Leo – you just have to be smart enough to give him what he needs, not what he thinks he wants."

Leo blinked.

She came over and stood in front of him, bending down to look him in the eye. "Luckily, you know how to do that already. That's what doctors do, isn't it? You'll figure it out." She kissed him on the forehead. "And you'll wait him out." She shook her head. "It's the McCoy in you, you know, that can wait like that for the big pay-off. I'd have jumped him already."

"Gram!" Leo protested loudly.

"Oh, please," she said, rolling her eyes. "You may look like me, but you are a McCoy man through and through, Leo. Why do you think that Jessica was after you when you were all of 15, and she was almost four years older? There's something about you McCoy men that says 'Nobody'll ever love you better than me'."

Leo laughed bitterly. "Right. Clearly, Jocelyn got that message."

"I never liked that woman, Leo," she said tartly, and he grunted. She'd certainly said so at the time.

"And I maintain now, as I did then, that she was not the one for you, because when you find the right person, Leo, you will not let go." She stared at him. "That is McCoy nature. Horatio waited all of those years for Susannah. And your father? He had to work to win over Renee, that's for sure. But McCoy men make good on their promises. They're all about determination and staking a claim and keeping their beloved satisfied. Why else do you think I've stayed with that stubborn cuss of your granddaddy all these years?"

"Oh my God, Gram," Leo said, truly horrified. "Please do not talk to me about your sex life with Ted! I am begging you!"

The door to his room had opened just as he made his heartfelt appeal to his grandmother. Jim stood there, the foot he'd raised to cross the threshold hanging in the air. "Oh," he said, wide-eyed. "I'm ah … I'll be out …"
"I'll be right there, Jim," Gram said with a bright smile. "And don't be vulgar, Leo," she said in an entirely different tone. "And stop being such an infant! Now, stand up and give me a proper hug!" She kissed him on the cheek when he closed his arms around her. "I do not want to receive any comms from Jim about you misbehaving in 2257, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Leo said, giving her a big squeeze and tipping forward to kiss her cheek.

She fixed him with a long assessing stare before she let him go.

"And as for that other thing, Leo" she said over her shoulder as she walked toward Jim. "You can deny it all you like, but I've known that you were cut from the same cloth as your daddy and granddaddy for years now." She paused, picking up her coat, which Jim stepped forward to help her into.

"Thank you, dear," she said to Jim, buttoning her coat and picking up her gloves before she casually said, "Why else would those Andorians have wanted to marry you when you were all of 22?"

Jim's expression was absolutely priceless.

Leo just shook his head. "You are completely incorrigible," he said.

"And that," she said sweetly, "you got from me. Remember, baby, use what you got. C'mon, Jim dear," she said, handing him her carry-on bag.

"Andorians?" Jim said aloud.

"Well, that is how they bond, Jim dear," Gram said, stepping through the door. "For a while there, I thought I'd be having little blue great-grandbabies." She tugged on Jim's arm when he simply stood there, blinking. "Leo hasn't told you about them?"

Jim shook his head wordlessly.

"Well …" she drawled, "he is modest, but … he is a McCoy, so their pursuit of him is really no surprise. I'll comm you when I arrive," she said to Leo, as the door began to whisk closed. She waved gaily, dragging a still poleaxed Jim Kirk alongside her.

Leo stood there for a moment, looking at the closed door before the laugh erupted from him. Goddamnit, but it was going to be an interesting Christmas.

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Chapter 23 

+ 

The thing was that Jim Kirk was a tactical genius, or at least that's what he said. Not that Leo doubted it, really. He'd seen Kirk play enough poker, and lost enough chess games against him to know that the kid wasn't bluffing. He was capable of a long game, not to mention a sneak attack. And if Leo needed more proof, he need only look in the mirror: Jim had saved his life by ensuring that when the putative cure Leo'd created was the only option left, that it was ready to be used.

No, the only question was how the opening gambit would occur.

+
As the days went on, one after another, Leo’s encroaching sense of dread turned to analysis. Not that he wasn’t dreading what was to come, just that it hadn’t occurred to him that Jim would put off the conversation in deference to finals. Although he was sure that the time that Jim had spent studying or writing his papers in Leo’s vicinity had little to do with Jim’s desire to do well. It was simply his way of ensuring that Leo did well, that he remained at the top of his class in his chosen areas of concentration, despite having lost time during the term.

It wasn’t that Jim wasn’t as ambitious for himself as he was brilliant — where he was really bullshitting people with his sunny jackass persona was how disciplined he was. He’d go out and drink and fuck and fight all throughout the term, but Leo had never known Jim not to get up and go running in the morning, whether or he was leading the KFF on a training run or not. During finals, Jim was even more than typically focused, all without ever breaking character. That mask wasn’t just a defensive posture on Jim’s part, or a reflection of his fear of commitment or intimacy issues — not that he didn’t have those in spades -- but a tactical stratagem. Jim reflected back at people what they thought about him — that he was pretty, that he was shallow, that his entry into the Academy was about legacy or luck, not talent and hard work. Leo was sure it made it that much more satisfying when he ground them into the dust, all while wielding a winsome smile.

Of course, if they knew how small the effort he had to make to grasp complex subjects, they’d really have something to be truly jealous of. Leo had found himself discussing more than one deeply technical medical or scientific topic with Jim, surprised at the depth of Jim’s curiosity, and his ability to retain information from previous conversations. When he’d been ill, Jim had not only rallied Bet Wah to produce more of the antivirals that ultimately had saved his life, he’d actually assisted her in the lab, and according to Bet Wah, quite adeptly.

He had the aptitude, but not the desire, to excel in any number of areas. Desire was an enormous motivator for Jim. Leo’d often wondered – dreamed, more aptly, what it would be like to be the focus of Jim’s desire. He found it equal parts terrifying and enthralling to contemplate, even as he knew that he was getting a taste of it. Jim’s desire for Leo to be healthy, to be the top student in his areas of study in their Cadet class, was all somehow part of the Jim Kirk Universal Domination plan. He was part of it, in ways that Jim had yet to clearly articulate beyond his oft-stated desire that Leo was going to be his CMO someday. He’d used to think that the kid was bluffing, daydreaming aloud, but the longer he knew Jim Kirk, the more he wondered if that, too, wasn’t part of the mask. That the kid was telling the absolute truth all the time, in an offhand way, about his plans to be Captain in three years.

The weirdest thing was that somehow Leo had begun to wonder, not if the kid was actually going to make that impossible goal a reality, but how.

+ 

Never let it be said that Jim Kirk wasn’t flexible. A true tactician didn’t become so wedded to his plan that he couldn’t adapt to the current circumstances. That had been one of Leo’s first thoughts when he’d woken up one rare sunny afternoon in December to see Jim’s worried face looming over him.

It was the day of his last test, and he’d been up way too early, after having stayed up way too late studying. He’d last seen Jim when he’d met him on the steps of the library, which Jim had been running, after already having done his allotted km of running at his preferred pace. Jim had insisted, however, on accompanying Leo on his morning jogs -- he wasn’t yet up to a run -- just as he’d made a habit of showing up at his PT sessions to see what they were working with Leo on. They’d made plans to have lunch, although Leo figured they’d put off any celebration until the next night, after Jim’s last test.
“Jim?”

The worried expression swept away from Jim’s face when Leo spoke, but there was something else there that he caught before Jim clamped down on it: anger.

“Jesus, Bones,” he said, sitting down heavily on the bed next to him.

Leo squinted at the chrono and saw that he was 30 minutes late for lunch. “Sorry,” he said, yawning. “I thought I’d take a twenty minute nap, two hours ago.”

Jim nodded, staring at him.

“What?” Leo asked.

“You looked …” Jim pressed his lips together and then ran a hand up over his face and into his hair. “C’mon Bones,” he said, tapping him on the hip. “Get your ass out of the bed and let’s get to the mess. This apple isn’t going to hold me for long.”

Leo smiled at Jim as he bit into the apple. The kid wasn’t much for junk food, although he’d indulge in study night pizzas or take-out Asian food – but he’d more than likely eaten close to a peck of apples every week in the time that Leo’d known him.

“All right, all right,” Leo said. “Let me take care of some business first.” He gave Jim a shove to get him out of the way and then yawned his way into the head.

When he came out, Jim was sitting at his desk, spinning the salt-shaker Enterprise with the tip of his finger, a faraway look in his eyes.

“You know, Jim,” Leo said, crossing his arms over his chest and stroking his chin as the thought occurred to him. “You don’t have to stay here and babysit me this Christmas if you’d planned another one of your sight-seeing jaunts.”

Jim’s eyes cut up to him, going from dreamy to incisive in an instant. “Oh no,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.” There was something in his eyes, in his tone, that was almost a threat. “Besides,” he added, his eyes softening minutely, “I promised Miss Elizabeth.”

“OK, then,” Leo said, turning to get his coat. “Let’s eat.” It was clear to him that Jim had planned to broach the subject of Tarsus today, now that Leo was through with his tests, and even though Jim wasn’t. “What do you have tomorrow?” he asked, patting down his pockets, looking for his comm and his wallet.

Jim scooped his wallet up off the bed and handed it to him just as Leo found his comm.

“Xenolinguistics,” Kirk said. “Advanced Orion and Vulcan. Cakewalk.” His eyes cut over at Leo again, who answered the unspoken challenge with a level gaze of his own.

“So you say,” Leo said. “You want to quiz me about their physiognomy, no problem? But once we get into morphology, I’m out of my depth.”

Kirk’s eyes considered him, and that statement. “Somehow I doubt you’re over your head much of the time, Bones,” he said, clapping him on his back. “Let’s go.”

+Finnegan’s was quiet the next night, with just the Christmas orphans that Leo’d seen the previous year: the offworlders, the dispossessed and the grinds. He wasn’t quite as sure that he fit in with that
crowd this year. He’d come too close to death in the past few weeks to feel anything other than gratitude that he was still present to see the archaic decorations of greenery and lights, meant to represent Saturnalia in the ancient world, but coopted for the Christian celebration that had become a pan-cultural Yuletide in the past century. On the dance floor, Jim was grinding up against Gaila, who was suitably attired for the season in a velvety red elf outfit that he was sure would be featured in the dreams of many a man, woman and being in the bar who would hope to wake and find that outfit on the floor of their bedroom and a naked Gaila pressed up against them.

Gaila’s throaty laugh drifted across the bar to him, and he couldn’t help but smile at the joyous sound. He supposed that he should be more jealous of her, since she had seen the wild and uninhibited side of Jim that Leo could only guess at, but he couldn’t manage to summon it up. He knew that Gaila and he were not in competition, in any real way, in the same way that Jim wasn’t in any competition with Patty. He couldn’t pinpoint why he felt that way, though. It wasn’t like he wasn’t prone to jealousy – Jocelyn had accused him of being a caveman at one point. Then again, he was pretty sure that she’d been fucking around on him. Maybe the difference was that he and Jim weren’t lovers, yet.

His jumbled thoughts on the subject were brought to an abrupt halt as Gaila danced her way back to the table and dropped herself on his lap, sitting back on his knees. Over her shoulder, he could see an amused Jim heading to the bar, while around them he could see more than a few long faces who thought that Santa was being particularly mean to them this year.

“You are still not pink enough,” Gaila said critically, turning his face toward the dim light. She pulled off her Santa hat and dropped it on Leo’s head.

Leo smiled at her.

“Well, you are pink to me,” Gaila said. “Pinky beige. All you ‘white’ Terrans,” she sketched the word in the air with a roll of her eyes. “You all look somewhat unhealthy to me. Although Nyota is a lovely color, I think. It suits her.” She thought some more. “Jim would be even more handsome if he were green, though.”

“You think so?” Leo asked, surprised. “I think his eyes wouldn’t be as vivid.”

“Hmm …” Gaila hummed, smiling at him. “They are exceptionally pretty,” she said. “Aren’t they? Although your ocular vessels are also very absorbing,” she said. “They’re like illusions, the way they change shades. Human eyes are very unusual that way.”

“Orions don’t have hazel eyes?” Leo asked.

“Not that I’ve ever seen,” Gaila said. “But then again, we don’t have ‘green’ irises,” she sketched the word in the air again, “as if anyone would refer to that shade as a green.”

“I suppose it would not be a pleasing enough color contrast,” Leo said. “Biologically speaking.”

“Exactly,” Gaila said. “And speaking of biology, I did notice that you clearly inherited your eyes from your matriarch. She was quite lovely for a Terran.”

“Yes,” Leo agreed genially. “I’ve always thought so.”

“And she dances!” Gaila said. “I mean, she can really dance!”

Leo laughed out loud as Jim came back to the table clutching their drinks, chewing on a swizzle stick. “What?”
“Your doctor’s matriarch can dance like an Orion,” Gaila said. “This is somehow amusing.”

Jim looked at Leo. “His matriarch was a professional dancer,” he said, sitting down and crowding up next to Leo. Gaila shifted her position so that she was sitting on both of their laps.

“Oh, I know,” Gaila said, “but still … most humans don’t have the kind of necessary muscle control to even attempt Orion dance. Although, you do very well,” she said to Jim indulgently, as if he were a favorite pet.

Jim grinned. “I’m known for my muscle control,” he said to them both, lifting a shot to his lips.

“Yes,” Gaila said. “It is good, but …” she seemed to be considering Leo in a particularly speculative fashion. “I have to wonder, what with your genetic resemblance to your matriarch, how much of her other gifts you’ve inherited.”

Jim choked on his drink.

Leo raised an eyebrow at Gaila’s words, then winked at Jim before he downed his shot. “Thank you, darlin’,” he said to Gaila.

“I think that you should work very hard to regain your strength as soon as possible,” Gaila said, running her finger along the neckline of Leo’s shirt. She ran a speculative hand down the center of his abdomen, and cocked her head to the side as if listening. “Yes,” she murmured. "But you need to be more pink.” Her inquisitive eyes turned to regard other patrons of the bar, and as Leo watched her nostrils flared, and she rose and moved away from them, hips swaying as she returned to the dance floor.

"The hell?” Jim asked. "More pink?"

"I'm still recovering from a hemorrhagic fever, Jim," Leo said.

Jim's jaw tightened. "And?" he clipped out.

Leo stared at him meaningfully. "I'm not quite in the pink yet," he drawled out. "Circulation wise?"

Jim's eyes traveled down his body to his crotch and then back up, widening.

"Exactly." Leo said, stifling a chuckle at Jim's expression.

He'd left the bar alone at a relatively early hour, leaving Jim and Gaila behind. Jim's mood had turned after he’d been reminded of Leo's illness, freighted with the weight of things that weren't being said. Maybe he'd been a coward, withdrawing from the field before the alcohol loosened Jim's tongue more, but if they were going to have that conversation, they weren't going to have it when they were both drunk. It would wait.

Between the alcohol and his tiredness from his continued recovery, Leo'd not heard the hiss of the door opening to his room, or if he had, he’d known it was Jim and gone back to sleep immediately. Jim had still maintained his schedule of showing up while Leo was recuperating, although he hadn't crawled into bed with him in weeks. Instead, Leo'd gotten used to the sight of Jim sleeping in a chair next to his bed, even at the hotel. Although once or twice he'd woken to the feeling of Jim's hand on his chest, as if he was checking to see that Leo was still breathing, like he needed to feel the rise and
fall of his breaths or the beating of his heart to reassure himself.

So, when he felt the covers stir and felt Jim slide into the bed next to him, he roused enough from sleep to murmur Jim's name and turn onto his side facing him. He reached out a hand blindly, grasping for Jim's, when an inhalation that could only be pain made him wake completely.

"Lights, 50%," he ordered, voice still thick with sleep.

"Lights, off," Jim said immediately, but in the resulting flare of light, he'd already seen his broken mouth, and the bruising around his eye.

"Lights, 50%," Leo said sternly, followed by, "Damn it, Jim!"

"It's nothing," Jim said heatedly, practically spitting the words out of his swollen mouth.

"Right," Leo said, trying to shift to the end of the bed and over the low footboard to get out. Jim grabbed at him. "Just go back to sleep!"

"Jim," he said irritably, "you know damned well that I just can't lay here while you're hurt."

Something dark and dangerous flared in Jim's eyes.

"Oh," Leo said slowly. "Are you punishing me for being a stupid asshole?"

"Wow," Jim said sarcastically. "And people accuse me of being a narcissist."

"Rightly," Leo said, pushing on a rib that made Jim wince and his grasp falter.

"Fucker!" Jim spat.

"Still nothing, Jim?" Leo shot back, getting up and going for his medkit.

He heard the sound of Jim getting out of the bed and wasn't surprised to see him shoving his legs back into his jeans when he turned around. He was shirtless, his breathing loud and angry in the room.

"Jim," he said severely. "Don't make me hypo your ass."

"Save it," Jim said, swaying a little. He must have had a lot more to drink after Leo'd left the bar.

"Fine," Leo said, dropping the medkit on the bed. "You want to just punch me until you feel better?"

Jim looked up at him like he was the crazy one, but stayed stubbornly silent.

"Well, c'mon then," Leo pushed, hand against his chest. "Either punch me, or let me fix you."

Jim scoffed. "Right. Like you let people fix you," he said. He knocked Leo's hand away roughly.

"Jim," Leo said sharply. "You fucking saved my life."

Jim just stared at him, chest heaving, that wild look still in his eyes.

"You saved my life, Jim," Leo said, in a quieter tone, raising his hand in an 'I surrender' gesture. He let the truth of his words shine from him, let Jim see that he was sincere.

When Jim didn't flinch away, he moved in closer. "Let me fix you," he said, dropping his raised
hand on Jim's shoulder. "Jim." He slid his hand up the long line of Jim's neck, closing it around the back, and stepping in closer, as Jim looked down and away from him. "C'mon, Jim," he said.

Jim's head shook, a silent 'no'. "Can't fix it," he said, through clenched teeth. His hand came up to stop Leo from coming any closer.

Leo studied him, thinking of whip marks and starvation, seeing the boy who'd been left behind and betrayed, who'd been alone far too often and for far too long. "I can fix this," Leo said quietly, drawing a finger over Jim's abraded knuckles.

Jim sucked in a breath.

Leo moved his hand from Jim's neck, drawing his thumb along Jim's jawline over a knuckle-shaped bruise that was blooming there. "I can fix this," he said again quietly, making his voice soft and certain. When Jim didn't flinch away from him, he moved his hand to Jim's shoulder, pressing down. "C'mon, Jim," he said quietly, "let me fix this."

Jim lowered to the edge of the bed, jeans still open at the waist, body taut, like he could erupt into flight at any second.

Leo kept his hand on him as he fumbled for the medkit, opening it. He skipped the tricorder, going right for the regenerator and bending to work on Jim's hand. Jim was silent the whole time he worked on him, his breathing harsh and loud in the room. For the life of him, Leo couldn't think of anything else to say, so he worked quietly, making eye contact as much as Jim would allow.

When he was done with all of the wounds that he could see or guess at, he lowered the regenerator from Jim's ribs.

"C'mon, Jim, lay down," he said, keeping his tone calm, making it a request. He held the covers open while Jim decided, finally tucking his jean-clad legs under them. He smoothed the blankets over him and closed his medkit, only dropping it on the nightstand before he crossed to the end of the bed and stepped over the footboard, getting in on the other side. "Lights off," he ordered and lay down in the dark.

Jim's back was to him, and in the dim light of the room, he could see the tense promontory of his shoulder as he held himself, still rigid. Leo's own exhaustion was creeping up on him despite the tension in the room and he let his eyes drop closed.

He'd begun to drift into the twilight of half-sleep when he heard Jim's voice. He sounded drunk, and exhausted. "There was so much blood," Jim said, and his voice was haunted.

Leo's eyes shot open.

"You were bleeding from your eyes," Jim stopped, and Leo could hear the tremor in his voice, and reached out a hand toward him. "Your ears …"

"Shh …" Leo said. "I'm fine now."

"You were dying!" Jim said angrily, and Leo felt the bed shift as he spoke over his shoulder.

"You saved me, Jim," Leo reminded him. "You and Bet Wah. You saved me."

There was a hitch in Jim's breathing, but he swallowed it angrily, in a way so practiced that Leo knew that he hadn't cried in years, and that he wasn't going to allow it now, that he would fight it, just like he always did.
Leo closed the space in the bed between them, pressing himself against Jim's back and wrapping an arm around him. He felt Jim stiffen and turn away, not wanting to yield, but he didn't let go. "I'm right here," he said quietly, and pressed his face into his neck. "You saved me."

They lay there in the dark for a long time before he felt Jim relax and begin to slide over into sleep, or to pass out from the combination of the adrenaline crashdown and the alcohol in his system.

On the edge of a restless sleep, Leo felt himself twitch tonically and startled, reflexively lifting his arm away from Jim, only to feel Jim's hand reach out and grasp him back into place, pulling his hand up against his chest. The position was awkward, and Leo was sure that he'd wake up with a crick in his back but he curled an arm under Jim's pillow and moved in closer, not letting go.

Chapter 24

Leo found himself awakened in the middle of the night by Jim shifting in the bed, knocking him in the chin with his head as he rolled over to face Leo. He had still been a little dizzy when Jim shoved one arm under his ribs and wrapped the other around his waist, closing his arms around Leo tightly and pressing his face into his neck. He could feel Jim’s eyelashes brushing against his skin as Jim dreamed. He hoped that Jim was roving the stars in his dreams -- exploring beautiful new worlds -- but from the way Jim was holding onto him, he doubted that was what Jim was seeing behind his fluttering eyelids. Leo ran a cautious hand down Jim's back, wanting to reassure but fearful of waking him and having to deal with Jim's anger or embarrassment at the position they were in.

Luckily, Jim’s only response to Leo's touch had been to pull him in tighter, crossing his arms behind Leo's back. He’d remained deeply asleep, and it took a long time for his hold on Leo to slacken. Leo kept stroking from the base of Jim’s head down the sweep of his spine and back up, until Jim’s hands loosened from where they’d curled into fists pressed above Leo’s hips. Now and then, Leo pulled his head back enough that he could press a kiss to Jim’s brow, a gesture he repeated until he could feel the curve of Jim’s lips against his throat, and the press of them when he murmured and snuffled against him in a pleased hum.

Only then did Leo allow himself to drift back into sleep.

Leo hadn’t been too surprised to wake the morning after Jim’s drunken appearance in his bed to find himself alone. After Jim’s display of vulnerability, he’d have been amazed to find Jim still there, particularly since he had a dim memory of Jim sliding out of the bed while it was still dark. Of course, with the days shortening as the winter solstice approached, anytime before 0630 would qualify as dark, something that Leo didn’t think he’d ever get used to. As the nights had become longer and longer, he’d found himself wondering, as he had the winter before, how he would cope with the eternal night in the black.

It only occurred to him after he’d been thinking that way for days that somewhere along the way, he’d become used to the idea that he was going up to sail the stars -- that the idea of being planetside, or on a starbase readily accessible to solid ground, was no longer his vision of what his future would look like.

Jim would be up there, in the stars somewhere, and wherever Jim was, that was where he wanted to be.
When the door to his room had chimed once before opening, it was nearing midnight on Christmas Eve, and there was only one person it could be.

Leo had been relaxing, still too awake from getting off shift at 2200. His day hadn't been particularly strenuous -- starting back to full shifts during the holiday season had really been the ideal way to get back up to speed. The days were quieter with the students gone, and he had ample time to catch up on grading the finals for the class he'd been teaching in basic Xenobiology at the Med School before he'd gotten ill. His TAs had stepped in and taught from his lesson plan and lecture notes, and then tested the students with the final he'd written along with his plan. Having depended upon them so much during his illness and recovery, however, he had taken back the entire burden of correcting the finals and finalizing grades.

His intention had been to shower and spend some time at his desk, making a dent in the pile of tests. But as he'd walked across the dark and foggy campus in the winter chill, he'd gotten a text alerting him that he had a package. Despite the fact that he'd had to wrestle the unwieldy thing home, he'd been smiling. Gram would never let Christmas pass by without some direct acknowledgment, and he was grateful that he was here for her to spoil. When he crossed the threshold of his room and his little Christmas tree sparked to life with its holographic stars bursting and twinkling for the first time this year, any thought that he'd had about working fled. It was Christmas, he was alive, and he was going to savor it.

He'd showered and changed into an old pair of red flannel pajama bottoms that Jocelyn had despised and tried to dispose of more than once. They were worn and verging on threadbare, but they were soft and comfortable and they'd traveled with him from college to Med School and beyond, faithful friends. He topped off his Christmas Eve ensemble with a t-shirt that had KFF printed red on the white background. He'd smoothed the letters over his chest, pleased to note that t-shirt wasn't hanging on him as much as it had even two weeks ago. He was putting some muscle back on, finally.

He'd considered what to do while he poured himself a couple of fingers of bourbon. He wasn't in the mood for a vid, so he fiddled with his console until he found a frequency that was broadcasting classical seasonal music and set the volume low. Turning around in his office chair to contemplate his tree, his eye was caught by the leather-bound journals that he'd carried home a year ago. His heart had clenched in his chest at the sight of them, at the realization that Horatio'd been dead and gone so long. He'd reached for them and found the first one, then took his drink and settled in on his bed, pillows bunched up under his head, glass of bourbon balanced on his lower abdomen. He had to really focus on keeping the glass still as he started to read.

The journals began in 2155, with the Earth on the verge of war with the Romulan Empire, and Horatio trying to decide whether or not he should leave veterinary school and join up. He'd already met Susannah, the great-grandmother that Leo dimly remembered from his earlier childhood, but she was still steadfastly spurning his advances, committed as she was to another young man who was completing his graduate work elsewhere. Horatio didn't go into too much detail about his competitor, although he certainly had developed a wide range of creative insults for the whelp he considered unworthy of his Susannah. When he wasn't insulting Susannah's other suitor or praising Susannah's beauty and talent, he was describing his daily life and the techniques he was learning in vet school. Long passages of the journal were devoted to Horatio worrying about the deteriorating diplomatic negotiations with the warlike and mysterious Romulans. Leo had read enough of these to recognize that his own suspicious nature might have found its progenitor in Horatio, who'd been concerned from the beginning that the Romulans were less interested in diplomacy than they were in subjugating a world that had just become a player in the intergalactic political arena.
When the door chimed, he'd just been thinking how Jim would be interested in reading the journal, only to look up and have to grab his drink as he let out a bark of laughter.

Jim stood, leaning against the door jamb, and holding a suspiciously familiar looking box in one hand and a bottle of something in the other. He was wearing KFF sweats and a t-shirt under his leather jacket, topped off with a Santa hat slung low over his brow.

"Didja steal that from Gaila, kid?" Leo asked, looking over Jim's long, lean frame. "Otherwise, you're way off the prototype for Santa."

"This year, the role of Santa is being played by a lovely woman who resembles a more delicate elderly version of you in drag," Jim quipped.

"Hey!" Leo chided.

"There was no insult in that statement, Bones," Jim said. "It's true."

Leo rolled his eyes.

"Does that mean you don't want the booze?" Jim asked, brandishing the ribbon bedecked bottle for inspection.

Leo made a show of looking the bottle over as Jim toed off his boots and dumped the box onto the end of Leo's bed. "I'll trade ya," he finally said, waving his hand at the desk where a bottle of Saurian brandy was similarly adorned.

"Nice," Jim said, shrugging out of his jacket.

Leo rolled and put the bottle of bourbon on the nightstand, getting up to refill his glass from the open bottle on the desk.

"Nice threads," Jim said, plopping the hat on Leo's head. "Like, almost literally."

Leo shrugged indifferently. "I wasn't expecting company," he said.

Something in Jim's eyes shifted before he turned and crossed the small space to the corner where Leo's kitchenette was. He pulled a glass out of the cabinet and came back. Leo held up the open bourbon bottle, offering silently and Jim nodded. He'd spotted the box that Leo'd received from Gram and picked it up, while Leo filled his glass.

"What?" Leo asked.

"Don't you want to see what Santa got you?" Jim asked.

He was keeping his tone level, but Leo could hear the thread of honest excitement that ran like an undercurrent through the question and it gave him an unexpected pang, wondering how long it had been since Jim had had any kind of Christmas. Leo shook his head at Jim ruefully, reverting to form and sarcasm. "You were the kid who woke the whole damned house up every hour from midnight onward, weren't you?" he asked.

Jim smiled, bright and sure. "Who could sleep on Christmas Eve?" he asked. "It's unnatural."

Leo raised an eyebrow and accepted his box of gifts while handing Jim's drink over to him. He picked up his own refilled glass and tipped it at Jim. "Merry Christmas, kid," he said. "At least it's Christmas morning in Georgia."
Jim tipped his glass back and took a belt of the bourbon. "I hate to tell you this, Bones, but it's already Christmas here, too."

Leo looked down at the chrono on his desk, which displayed 0001. "Well, then," he said. "I guess we can legitimately open our presents. Although strictly speaking, Gram only allowed us to open one on Christmas Eve," he spoke louder to override Jim's objections, "which officially lasted until dawn of Christmas morning."

Jim's eyes sparkled with laughter at Leo's words. "I guess I wasn't the only one waking the house up, huh, Bones?"

"That's a scurrilous rumor," Leo answered smartly. "Started by my cousin Tim, who everybody knows is prone to exaggeration, if not outright fabrication." He turned and moved over to the bed, stepping up on it and walking over to where he'd been leaning against the pillows.

Jim pulled the pillows out from under the covers on what Leo thought of as his side of the bed and tossed them down to the footboard, so that he could sit opposite Leo. "So all the kids in your family slept over at your grandparents' house?" he asked. He was pulling at the tape holding his box together as he spoke.

Leo smiled at his eagerness, and leaned over to get the laser from the medkit. He cut his tape efficiently and offered the laser to Jim who scoffed at him. He already had his box open. Leo laughed low in his chest and returned the laser to his medkit, taking a slug from the drink on the nightstand before he pulled at the flaps on his own box, revealing a number of gaily wrapped items inside. "It was still Horatio's house then," Leo said. "Gram and Ted, and my Daddy and I lived there all the time, but he had two other kids, and they had kids and so on. And since Horatio was everybody's Paw, they all came to our house at the holidays. Christmas was …" he smiled, remembering. "We had camp beds everywhere. I remember tripping over them trying to get to the bathroom in the middle of the night. In the summertime, when it was Horatio's birthday, all the kids would sleep out in the hayloft or in the yard. But at Christmas, everybody had to be inside, you know? Most years everybody didn't come and stay over, but when they did? It was just insane."

"Is that what's happening there tonight?" Jim asked, ripping paper. "Oh," he said, at whatever he'd revealed.

"I doubt it," Leo said, craning his neck fruitlessly to see what Jim had received. "Ted might think he's the patriarch now, but I doubt that Uncle Drew and Aunt Lilly feel that way. 'sides they've got grandkids and greatgrandkids of their own now. Maybe it's happening at their houses."

Jim looked slightly sad at the idea. He pulled a small leather-bound case with hinges out of his box.

"Things change, Jim," Leo said. "That's the way it goes, right?"

Jim looked at him. "So no one is there but your Gram and Ted?"

"No," Leo said. "My cousins are there, my Uncle Len's kids, and Aunt Martha and Charlie and their kids. I think they have a grandbaby now, too." He heard Jim suck in a breath as he opened the case. "What?"

"Look at this," Jim said in an awed tone, carefully turning the case toward Leo. "It's a sextant. Is this for real?"


Jim whistled when he found the provenance card. "Bones," he said. "This is from the 19th century. I
can't take this."

"You gonna tell Miss Elizabeth no?" Leo said sardonically. "I'd like to see that."

"Bones," Jim protested, even as his hands ran over the brass fittings. He lifted the sextant up to his eye and focused on Leo's tiny Christmas tree.

"You know how to use one of those, Jim?" Leo asked curiously.

Jim nodded. "I had a grandfather too," he said quietly, turning the sextant over in his hands. "He would have loved this." Jim seemed to realize what he'd said, and looked up at Leo. "What'd you get?"

"So far?" Leo said. "New pajamas."

Jim laughed.

"Laugh it up, Jim boy, I guarantee that you have a pair in that box. Socks that she knitted," he opened another parcel, "and a scarf." He picked up another package and pressed his fingers against it. "I have no idea what this is," he said, picking at the tape.

"Just rip it, Bones!" Jim said, demonstrating on another package, although he noticed that the sextant had been enclosed in its case and carefully moved out of the line of fire. "Man, these are pajamas," Jim said, flummoxed.

Leo wondered if he should tell him that every grandchild got new pajamas for Christmas, but decided that piece of information could wait.

Jim continued to dig in the box. "Chocolate," he said. "Are these credit chips?" he unwrapped the small package.

"For the 'fleet store, most likely," Leo said. "She always makes it so you can't turn 'em in for booze, or some such." He opened the case to find tricorder scanners. He whistled.

"What?" Jim said.

"Wow," Leo said. "She got me some Xeno-scanners."

"Oh," Jim said, trying to summon up enthusiasm.

When Leo started laughing, he felt the bed move as Jim came toward him. "Oh, man," Leo said. "She got me one for Andorians." He held it up so that Jim could see the note on it, that read, 'Just in case …'. "She is relentless," he said, chuckling.

"You still haven't told me that story," Jim said.

"You haven't asked," Leo pointed out, looking in his box and finding his own credits and chocolate, the things he'd typically find in his stocking. He wondered if Gram'd already made Jim a stocking. She'd never made one for Jocelyn, and thinking back he didn't think that she'd given Joce anything more than one present.

Jim narrowed his eyes and lifted out his last wrapped gift, squeezing it. "Hmm," he said, ripping into the paper. He lifted out a crème-colored sweater with coils and cables that Leo well remembered. A note slipped from its folds and dropped to the bed. Jim was still staring at the sweater and hadn't noticed.
Leo chuckled when he read what was written there. 'Proof' was all it said, in Gram's steady hand.

"I can't believe she made this," Jim said, staring at the sweater.

"She didn't, Jim," Leo said, leaning over to pick up his bourbon. "I think that's the one I made for Ted." Jim's eyebrows shot up. "Or, it's more likely Horatio's."

Leo handed him the note and Jim huffed out a surprised laugh.

"I'm surprised the fucker didn't burn it," Leo said, balling up all the paper and putting his presents back in the box. His last present had been holos of home: Saturn, the farm, the fields and the woods beyond. Gram wasn't too subtle sometimes.

When he looked up, Jim was pulling the sweater over his head, and Leo felt his breath catch a little at the sight. Jim pulled the sweater down, his fingers playing over the cables in the worked yarn. "How long did it take you to make this?" he asked.

"A year," Leo said. "Those sweaters are damned hard."

Jim was stroking the arm, looking at the intricacies of the knitting. "I believe it," he said. "Did you make yourself one?"

Leo nodded. "Yep," he said. "I made them for all the McCoy men. Me and Daddy, Horatio … and Ted. That's supposed to be our clan knit."

Jim looked up at him, his eyes shockingly blue in the low light. "So why aren't you there?" he asked quietly. "What happened, Bones?"

And there it was, Leo thought. Finally, the opening gambit. Jim wanted a secret of his as payment for the secret that Leo'd stolen, he guessed. "I'm gonna need more booze for that, Jim," Leo said. He tossed back what was in his glass.

Jim did likewise before he stood and crossed to Leo's desk, picking up the bottle.

Leo tossed all the balled up paper in the direction of the recycler, putting his presents and Gaila's hat in the box and dropping it over the foot of the bed and pushing it away so that he wouldn't trip over it in the dark. If he was going to be forced to fucking talk about this, he was going to be comfortable. Leo stretched out on his side of the bed and found Jim watching him with a puzzled expression on his face. He'd filled his own glass, and was waiting for Leo to hand him his, he guessed. "Bring the bottle here, Jim," Leo drawled.

When Jim did, he filled his glass and put the bottle on the nightstand.

"You might as well get comfortable," he said to Jim. "It's the kind of story that works best when you're not standing."

Jim's expression had become progressively more thoughtful as Leo had readied himself to talk. He cleaned up the debris from his gifts and moved the box over to Leo's desk, laying down with his head on the pillows at the footboard. He lay there, absently drinking, but watching Leo all the while.

Leo took a long breath in and balanced the glass on his abdomen, only looking up at Jim when it was steady, when he was as ready as he'd ever be. "I'm not welcome at home, Jim," he said, holding his eye, "because I killed my father."

Jim was completely still for a full thirty seconds, before he said. "I'm sure you didn't," his tone was
very certain. "Don't you mean that you failed to save him?"

Jim shifted slightly on the bed as he spoke, and Leo picked up the glass from his abdomen and took a long draught before he balanced it again. "Actually, I failed to save him, too," he said carefully. "But the fact remains that I killed him." He paused, his hands lightly circling the glass but not touching, just guarding it in case Jim moved again. "It was not," he emphasized, looking at Jim, "a murder. He asked me to do it, and I did."

Jim stared at him, his gaze penetrating. "If I commed Miss Elizabeth right now," he said, "what would she tell me about this?"

Leo considered that, taking a drink and then balancing the glass on his abdomen while Jim drank and watched him. He looked up at him as he began to speak. "She would tell you that it was a mercy. That she doesn't blame me for killing her only living son. That there was no guarantee that he would have lived the ten weeks until the cure, the one I couldn't find, was discovered." He heard the subtle intake of Jim's breath. "That there was no guarantee that he could have been saved by the discovery, because he was already so far gone. But my grandmother loves me."

Jim sat up and stared at Leo. "More than she loved her own kid?" he said incredulously. "I don't think so, Bones. I think that she's right and you oughta listen to her more."

Leo smiled grimly and thought that Jim believed that because Jim wanted to believe the best about him, because Jim would make the same kind of excuses for him that Gram had, and for the same reason. Because whether or not he acknowledged it or never acted on it, Jim's actions the other night had confirmed for Leo what Patty had long been saying: Jim did love him. And love blurred the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Leo didn't say any of this aloud, but said, "Yeah, but you haven't asked me what Ted would say yet."

Jim leaned forward and snagged the bottle. He refilled his own glass, and then Leo's. "I don't need to know what his opinion is," Jim said. He ran a hand down the front of the sweater again, possessively. "People who are grieving do all sorts of insane things." There was something in how he offered this opinion that made Leo sure that he was repeating words that had been said to him, and more than once.

"Is that why you're not at home tonight?" Leo asked.

"If you mean Iowa," Jim said with a shrug, in a tone just shy of defiant, "I could go there, but the idea of visiting the jail and a bunch of bartenders doesn't really inspire Christmasy thoughts. Hell," he said, "this is the most Christmas I've had in years." Before Leo could ask him another question, he asked, "Why you didn't you tell me this before, Bones?"

Leo's laugh was hollow. "Right," he said. "Now, how would I have begun that conversation, Jim? Say, did I ever tell you about the time I purposefully overdosed my daddy on pain meds?"

Jim didn't even flinch at Leo's bitter words, which he had to admit, was pretty impressive.

He took a swig of the bourbon. "Besides," Leo continued "everybody has secrets."

Jim's eyes had a gleam in them as he said, "But you know mine, right, Bones?"

"Is that what this is about?" Leo asked, as if he didn't already know. "And no, Jim, I don't think I do. I think you have a lot of secrets. And if I've learned some things about you that make you uncomfortable, you have only yourself to blame for that."

"How do you figure that?" Jim said hotly.
"You were the one who told me them," Leo said evenly. Jim's protest was still halfway forming as Leo continued on relentlessly. "You made me your physician, Jim," he said. "A fact, I might add, that you failed to inform me of." Jim closed his mouth, and there was a flush rising on his neck. "So, yeah. I read your medical history, and I learned that you were on Tarsus when the genocide occurred, and it's a good thing that I do know," he said, "because it means that I'll pay attention to what's happening with your heart."

Jim looked at him with a mutinous expression.

"Which you knew I should be," Leo said. "Although you never would have told me yourself, would you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "It might also explain why your immune system is so fucked up. Like that whole event might be the presentation of a lot of things that are very central to what makes you unique. So before you think about hacking the records to get rid of those references, you should consider that."

Jim's mouth drew down into a frown, lips thinned. "You know more than that," he said.

"How'd you figure that?" Leo asked. He wasn't going to give in so easily, not when Jim had claimed his own worst secret as a kind of blood payment.

"You know about Hoshi Sato," Jim said.

Leo shook his head, mystified. "Who now?"

Jim stared at him. "The woman who invented the linguacode," he said slowly.

"Your teacher?" Leo clarified, while Jim looked at him warily. "Yeah, you told me that one too, Jim."

Jim shook his head in disbelief.

"Maybe you shouldn't play poker with me, kid," Leo said. "But the couple of times I've seen you talk about your language teacher, there was something in the way you said it … you made me think this teacher was important to you."

"She was," Jim said levelly, eyes not leaving Leo. "But you know more than that."

"Do I?" Leo asked. "I still have no goddamn idea why you ended up on that godforsaken rock," he said, not giving an inch. "And yeah, I did try and figure out what happened, and maybe I have some ideas, but I still don't understand. I know that you had family up there, but … you had family down here, Jim. What the fuck happened? Did you all go up there together?"

Jim's eyes were shuttered. "No," he said, his voice in a whisper. "They were already there. We … Sam and I," he looked at Leo carefully. "We were sent up there because my mother's husband said that we 'were out of control'."

Leo noted that omission of the word stepfather from that sentence. "And where was your mother?"

Jim's smile was twisted. "In the black," he said blithely, "where she always is."

Leo nodded. "I take it that her husband didn't go up with you."

Jim laughed. "That was the big selling point!" he said. "Ironic, really." He looked exhausted suddenly, and swallowed his entire drink. For a few seconds, the only sound in the room was the low murmur of the Christmas music that Leo had forgotten he'd turned on hours ago. The tiny tree
on his desk cast patterns onto the ceiling above them that glittered like constellations as Jim reached for the bottle that he'd left on the floor next to the bed. "I don't think I can fucking talk about this, Bones," he said finally. His voice had begun to slur, like the hour and the alcohol had finally caught up with him.

"But yet, you wanted my secrets," Leo said mercilessly. "Like some quid pro quo."

"I did," Jim breathed out, filling Leo's glass. He looked Leo in the eye. "That was a dick move, wasn't it?"

"Pretty much defines 'dick move'," Leo answered.

On the console, a long dead singer was wishing them a Merry Christmas, her voice like a sob. "It was …" Jim began. His eyes became unfocused and faraway. "I don't think about it. I don't want to think about it. Everything that happened."

"Your brother died," Leo said quietly.

"They all died, Bones," Jim said drunkenly, but his voice was sharp and higher, an echo of a child's voice. "They all died." His words trailed off to a whisper, his eyes closing. When they opened again, they held the haunted expression that Leo had first seen a year ago when he'd told him about Horatio. Jim was looking somewhere behind Leo, far into the past. "'cept me. We had a plan," he rambled. "And … it worked, too. But they still died." Jim seemed to focus on the glass in his hand. "Absent friends," he said to Leo, lifting it into the air, before he drank it down.

"Absent friends," Leo echoed, his throat tight. He took a slug off his drink, and then sat up, taking Jim's glass out of his hands. "I think you've had enough, Jim," he said quietly.

"Yeah," he said, looking up at Leo. He reached up and touched Leo's face, tracing the bone around his eye with two fingers. "I'm sorry about your father, Bones," he said. His hand dropped heavily back to the bed, and the time between his eyes opening and closing was lengthening.

"C'mon, Jim," Leo said quietly. "Let's get you turned around the right way in the bed." He crawled over Jim to the outside of the bed, feeling how much he'd drunk in the uncoordinated response of his limbs.

"Absent friends," Leo echoed, his throat tight. He took a slug off his drink, and then sat up, taking Jim's glass out of his hands. "I think you've had enough, Jim," he said quietly.

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"I'm fine, Bones," Jim complained.

"Don't make me sleep with your feet in my face, Jim," Leo said. "C'mon." He pulled Jim to an upright seated position, and tossed the pillows haphazardly to the right end of the bed while Jim swayed drunkenly. "C'mon," he urged again. "Crawl up there."

It took Jim forever to flop onto his stomach in the right direction, so long that Leo gave up on the idea of trying to get him out of the sweater, or under the covers. He stubbed his toe against the mostly empty bottle of liquor, just barely catching it before he spilled what little there was left in it. He found their glasses and dumped them on the desk, and fumbled for the off button on his console, shutting down the increasingly maudlin music. He'd intended to use the bathroom before he went into bed, but it all seemed too much effort.

Instead, he crawled up his side of the bed, clumsily struggling against Jim's weight to get under the covers. He'd just settled down on his back when Jim turned to face him, flinging an arm and a leg over him and pinning him even more decisively under the covers. His eyes opened in surprise, and he saw that above them, the false starlight twinkled happily. He turned his head to tell the computer to shut the lights off, and was caught by the sight of Jim, looking impossibly young and handsome in
his sleep. Two of Leo's fingers stroked up inside the cuff of Jim's sweater and lay against his pulse, feeling the reassuring beat of his heart. He let its steady rhythm lull him to sleep, while Jim's starlight shivered and danced across the ceiling.

Chapter 25

Christmas and New Year's had been relatively quiet, especially after their conversation very early on Christmas Day. Jim seemed to be in a thoughtful mood, but Leo wouldn't go so far as to say that he was brooding. What he was doing was spending a lot of time reading things on his PADD, and not necessarily talking, but he wasn’t doing it alone. They’d spent a fair amount of time together, just hanging out. Jim had trounced him in chess, and he’d cleaned Jim’s clock, and that of several KFFers, in an all-night poker game that ended early on New Year’s Day. Technically, he’d showed up at the party while it was still New Year’s Eve, although 2257 had dawned soon enough after his arrival. After the previous year’s fiasco, Jim had taken it upon himself to chaperone the KFF, and although almost no one was entirely sober, and the party wasn’t exactly dry, there were no fights or illicit substances. Jim had saved him some bourbon to call in the New Year with. It was a fine sipping whiskey, and he savored it while he beat the pants off the girl and boy geniuses of the KFF, something which he had to admit was extremely satisfying, even if they weren’t playing for anything more than snacks. He’s ended up with quite a pile of Subie’s pocky sticks, not to mention some other exotic fare that he’d never seen before and most certainly wouldn’t be eating.

He and Jim had stumbled out at midday on New Year’s Day to find the sun shining weakly. They treated themselves to a Dim sum in San Francisco’s old Chinatown. Even if it wasn’t yet the New Year in Terra’s Asian cultures, there was still a healthy respect for the tradition of New Year’s, no matter who was celebrating it. Their small table was decorated with a stalk of sunflower and bamboo in a vase, and when the check was delivered after a delicious meal of fragrant buns and tea, there was a red packet with chocolate for each of them. Jim sent the bill back with tiny Mandarin oranges from the bag that he’d bought as they walked through Chinatown, and insisted that Leo calculate the tip so that the total bill began and ended with the number 8. When they left, the owner came out and spoke to them, the oranges in her hand. Leo listened bemusedly while she and Jim spoke, liking the changes in the tones of Jim’s voice as it twisted and turned over the different musicality of the Mandarin tongue.

His amusement was not shared by the young woman also in Cadet reds (for luck, Jim had insisted they wear theirs), whose eyes flashed as she stepped into the vestibule, followed by Gaila. Leo was amused by the constant irritation that Cadet Uhura always seemed to express in Jim’s presence, especially whenever Jim happened to be expressing his linguistic capacities. It had long been Uhura’s plan to take firsts in all the linguistic disciplines, and Jim’s bursting upon the scene had been a challenge to her, and a thorn in her side.

Of course, Jim didn’t help things any just by being Jim. It was clear to Leo that he loved languages, but he was nowhere near interested in them being his vocation. He was clearly on the command track, but he was challenging Uhura for linguistic supremacy just because he could — just because it would get under her skin. Uhura was an undeniably bright young woman, but she had yet to figure out that as long as she was paying some kind of attention to Jim Kirk, his ego was appeased. Leo knew that Jim’s efforts at wooing Uhura were more for show than anything else, but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t mock them.

“Happy New Year, Cadets!” Leo drawled pleasantly.
“Happy New Year,” Uhura murmured back, eyes barely moving from Kirk more than perfunctorily.

“Doctor!” Gaila said, moving past her roommate to brush a kiss against his lips. “I hear that a New Year’s kiss is lucky.”

“I think that’s supposed to happen at midnight, Gaila darlin’,” Leo said.

“Oh well,” she said with a shrug, pressing another soft kiss to his mouth. “It must be midnight somewhere.”

Leo gave her waist a squeeze and Gaila snuggled a little closer in the small vestibule. “Are you ladies here for Dim sum?” Leo asked courteously.

“Yes,” Gaila said, when it appeared that Uhura would not respond. “Nyota says that eating Dim sum on New Year’s Day is lucky.”

“Why, Jim said the same thing,” Leo said drily. “As is wearing red.”

“Yes!” Gaila agreed with enthusiasm. “And one new item of clothing. I’m wearing new underpants.” She paused, eyes sparkling. “They’re red.”

“I bet they are, darling,” Leo said, feeling even more crowded as Jim finished his conversation with the owner, bowed and then threw an arm around Leo’s shoulders, feigning that he hadn’t noticed Uhura and Gaila until then.

“Ladies!” he said, “Happy New Year, or should I say …” he launched into a series of phrases that made Leo’s head spin, and caused Uhura to raise an eyebrow and answer him in kind.

“Should we leave them alone?” Leo asked Gaila.

“They are kind of boring sometimes,” she admitted.

“Hey!” Kirk and Uhura protested at the same time.

“Happy New Year, Jim,” Gaila said sweetly, leaning across Leo to kiss him.

“Boring?” Jim said petulantly to Leo, his lips still pursed in the shape of a kiss.

“Our table is ready,” Uhura snapped. “Dr. McCoy, it’s always nice to see you,” she said as she walked away.

“She loves me,” Jim said aloud to her retreating back before he fixed his blue stare on Gaila again. “Boring?”

“Something for you to work on in the New Year,” Gaila said with a giggle, brushing a kiss against Jim’s cheek as she walked by. “Doctor …” she waggled her fingers at Leo and he blew her a kiss.

“Boring?” Jim said to Leo, voice incensed.

“Boring,” Leo agreed, opening the door and stepping outside with Jim still half-hanging off of him.

“How do you figure that?” Jim said.

“No matter what language you speak to that woman, she’s still gonna shoot you down,” Leo pointed out.
“But I'm wearing her down,” Kirk insisted, “like water on a rock.”

“Is that the erosion method, or just plain ol’ water torture?” he said as Kirk scoffed. “Because from where I’m standing, you ain’t a step closer to getting anywhere near her brand new 2257 red panties than you were last year.”

“So you say – wait, brand new panties? Bones!”

Kirk had stopped walking, while Leo kept on going, whistling under his breath. “If you weren’t showing off so much, you’d learn interesting things,” Leo said. “Make a resolution.”

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Although Leo’s scientific and skeptical nature would not allow him to embrace superstitions or believe in omens, he couldn’t help but feel relief that in 2257, Remembrance Day would be celebrated on January 5th, which was a Monday. Of course, that didn’t mean that January 4th wasn’t the 24th anniversary of the Kelvin’s destruction and Jim’s birth, but it did mean that Jim got a bit of a respite on his actual birthday, that he didn’t have to be reminded by solemn ritual and public gatherings of what the day represented to the Federation. Still, he wasn’t foolish enough to believe that this respite would mean that Jim would be easier about celebrating his birthday. He didn’t think that there would ever come a time that Jim would see his birthday as a day to be remembered fondly, a day for taking stock and making future plans. Hell, even those people who claimed to hate their birthdays had nothing on Jim Kirk in that regard. It would be up to him, as it had been last year, to make sure that there was some positive remembrance of the day of Jim’s birth. He owed that to Jim as a friend, but he wasn’t stupid. Jim was going to make him work for it. And he knew Jim well enough by now to know that he wouldn’t find Jim at Finnegan’s this year, that Jim would take the rare opportunity for privacy and go to ground with impunity.

True to form, Jim stopped answering his comm on Saturday, and Leo knew that the hunt was on. Whether or not Jim ever confirmed how he truly felt about Leo or acted on it, this was one of the tests that Gram had warned him about. It was up to Leo to find the trail and follow the bread crumbs into the woods.

Prove it.

He heard the echo of those words in his head while he pondered where Jim could be. During the long weeks of his recuperation, he’d come to believe that his fever dream of Jim kissing him was half-dream, half-reality. He knew that his own confession had been. Jim wanted proof. A year ago, Leo would’ve said that Jim wanted to be proven right to not believe in or trust in love, that he would have preferred not to be found, and that he would have resented Leo when he was found – all the ways he’d behaved when Leo had found and practically had to force him to drink a toast. Finding Jim at Finnegan’s had been logical, easy. Nothing about finding Jim this year was going to be easy.

Leonard McCoy was not Jim Kirk. He did believe in no-win situations. But he was stubborn and he was smart, and goddamnit, he was going to prove that he knew Jim, and that he wasn’t so easily shaken. He was a McCoy, after all, and he had his pride.

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By Sunday, Leo had thought of and discarded a number of possibilities. He’d even given some consideration to Iowa -- there’d probably be a grave there for George Kirk, even if his body was nowhere near it, and more likely some kind of memorial park. But that would require a shuttle trip and as angry as Jim had been with him for almost dying, he sincerely doubted that Jim would subject him to that. Besides, his instincts told him that Jim was still here in San Francisco, and most
likely somewhere on campus. He wandered the grounds, trying to think like Jim, trying to find meaning in what he was seeing around him. He even stopped by the Kelvin Memorial, looking up at the hollow-eyed bronze of George Kirk that looked so much like Jim, before casting his eyes over the list of names.

_They all died_, he heard Jim’s voice saying in his head. He’d been talking about Tarsus, but this had been the first loss, the crucible that Jim had been born from, the storm and fire in space. What had happened between this day and the Children’s Revolution was still a mystery, but he had no doubt that Jim’s character had been forged early on. There was no way that he could have survived Tarsus otherwise.

He thumbed the viewscreen on his comm, trying to get an overview of the campus buildings. Jim was here, somewhere, he was sure of it. He returned to his room and studied the campus map, letting his eyes go unfocused and his mind wander, idly spinning the Enterprise salt shaker on the dark Christmas tree. Just like the year before, it had shut itself off on January 1st, the happy sparkle of the stars only lasting a week before they died. He sat bolt upright and studied the map, tapping the screen when he found the building on the edge of campus, as far from the city’s lights as possible. He nodded, sure of himself now.

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Hours later, Leo stood at the door of the campus astronomical observatory, looking at the dark and quiet building, not quite as sure of himself.

He’d waited until the campus was still and quiet, and dressed himself in dark, warm clothes to better obscure himself from the prying eyes of the campus cameras. He watched from the shadows as the cameras ran a circuit of the area around the astronomical observatory and then quietly climbed the stairs, pressing into a darkened corner on their next sweep. He waited two more rounds before he moved, trying to convince himself that he was right to have made this choice, then moved to the front door keypad, holding his breath as he used gloved fingers to type the code for his dorm room into it. With a whoosh, the front door to the observatory popped open, and Leo stifled the chuckle that rose up his lips, swiping the hair off his forehead with a nervous hand. He’d been right to follow the breadcrumbs here. He stopped gloating enough to slip inside the door, following the dim floor lighting. If Jim was here in this building, there’s only one place he’d be – well, there would have been two, but with the moon nearly full and rising, there was only so much that San Francisco’s exceptional ambient light dampening system could do. That reasoning had led him to rule out the possibility of the small observation area that housed the telescope at the top of the building. Instead, he followed the signs to the cosmos visualization center, the high-ceilinged domed room that used to be called a planetarium back in Horatio’s day.

Leo had a moment of doubt when he opened the door to the planetarium and saw nothing projected up on the ceiling. Then he heard the click of a button, and the tap of keys, and he knew that he’d guessed right.

“Over here, Bones,” Jim’s voice said from the center of the room. He was speaking quietly, but his voice echoed in the cavernous space.

Leo kept his eyes on the ground, navigating down the aisles using the dimly lit strips of the same type that you’d see on shuttles … or star ships. He swallowed a shudder and thought longingly of the flasks that he’d tucked inside his boots. He wasn’t looking forward to whatever Jim had cooked up for this evening, that was for sure.

“Nice outfit,” Jim said wryly. Leo took off his pea coat and piled it atop Jim’s. Jim was sitting at the console that the instructor usually occupied in the few demonstrations that he’d seen here. His arms
were crossed over the dark mock turtleneck he’d worn with a pair of black paratrooper pants. “You
know the cameras measure non-visually, right?’’

“Yes, Jim,’’ Leo said sarcastically. “Even doctors know about heat signatures and the like. Still, it
looks like you went with the same idea, so I’m not sure who you’re mocking here.’’

Jim tilted his head in agreement, his expression amused. “Yeah, yeah,’’ he said, spinning a half circle
in the chair.

Leo watched him, waiting.

“So,’’ Jim began finally, half-turned away from him so that all he could see was his profile. “I wrote
this program.’’

“OK,’’ Leo said, when he didn’t continue. “Are you gonna run it?’’

He watched Jim’s chest rise like a bellows, as he took a long breath in through his nose and then
exhaled in a slow, calming stream, and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Jesus, fuck.
Jim was anxious. “Jim?’’

“Yeah,’’ he answered, scratching the right side of his head vigorously. “Yeah. That’s why we’re
here, right?’’

“Jim,’’ Leo said steadily. “We’re here to do whatever it is that you need to do, but we don’t have to
do anything.’’

Jim turned around in his chair and faced Leo fully for the first time. Leo didn’t shrink from Jim’s blue
gaze. He nodded. “Let’s do this, Bones,’’ he said decisively, and stood up from the chair. He clapped
Leo on the back as he walked by him, and strode to the centermost point of the room. He turned with
an expectant air, and Leo followed him.

“Lay down,’’ Jim ordered quietly.

Leo raised an eyebrow, but did as Jim said. He heard the rip of Velcro and looked up to see Jim
pulling a remote controller out of one of his pockets.

Jim pointed the controller at the booth and all the lights in the hall went out.

Leo blinked in the suddenly inky blackness and waited. Above him, the stars began to appear on the
dome of the ceiling. He heard Jim lay down, and put out a hand, only to feel the brush of Jim’s hair
against his fingers. “What?’’ he lifted his head to see that Jim had laid down so that his head was next
to Leo’s, but his feet were facing the other way.

Jim turned his head to look at him. When Leo lay back down, he shifted so that the back of his head
was resting against Leo’s shoulder. “You make a good pillow, Bones,’’ Jim remarked.

Leo rested his head against Jim’s more bony shoulder. “I’m pretty sure you got the better end of this
deal.’’

Jim smiled, just a curve of his lips. When he turned his head away from the projections of the endless
night above them, his eyes were the darkest blue that Leo could recall, his eyes searching Leo’s face.
He turned his head back toward the stars. “My grandfather would have disagreed with you, you
know,’’ he said quietly. “He would have said that confronting the thing that you’re most afraid of is
the one thing that you have to do.’’
Leo watched the Adam’s Apple working in Jim’s throat. His voice sounded dry and strained. He bent his leg up and pulled one of the flasks out of his boot. “Catch,” he said to Jim, arcing it up high.

Jim caught the flask one-handed, flashing his teeth in a real smile. “Thanks, Bones,” he murmured.

“Yeah,” Leo said, unscrewing the other flask he’d pulled from his boot. “Should we drink to courage?” he asked, turning his head toward Jim’s.

Jim snorted. “I thought we were drinking for courage,” he said.

“Semantics,” Leo pointed out. He tilted his flask toward Jim and waited until Jim’s was poised before he took a swig. “Is it coincidental that whatever this fear is aligns so well with mine?”

Jim shrugged as best he could, jostling Leo’s head. “Sorry,” he said. “There was no way I could …” he paused. “Sorry, Bones.” He looked sheepish, but Leo was astute enough to recognize that there was a bit of vengeance in Jim’s choice of birthday activities.

He nodded. “Just remember that apology if I throw up on you,” he said, taking another swig.

Jim laughed and pushed a button on the controller and the stars began to move, the outlines of the constellations that he knew blurring as they would to the eye if it could register the jump to warp. Leo felt his insides curl and closed his eyes, disoriented, only to open them at a small noise from Jim.

The sky above him was comprised of stars in positions that he didn’t recognize at all, but he was sure he knew what they were.

“I’ve tried to picture it, you know.” Jim reached a hand up and traced the outlines of the alien constellations. “What happened that day. When I was a kid, my mother kept me from really knowing about it. She put a block on the computers at home, and I was too little to work around it. Hell, I didn’t even know it was there until Sam told me,” he paused. “And then … once I knew, I was relentless. I wanted to know more.”

“How old were you, Jim?” Leo asked.

“When I broke through the block?” Jim asked. “Five. Sam told me about the block because he was furious with me, told me that my questions were making our mother cry. He ratted me out to our grandfather – I think he was hoping that Tiberius would rip me a new one.”

“He didn’t, though,” Leo said.

“He told me that if I ever had any questions that I should come ask him, that he’d always tell me the truth,” he nodded, his eyes scanning the starscape. “He always did. He showed me the star charts of where I’d been born, and we stretched them out, all over the floor in the barn so that I could see it from the hayloft. He thought it would help me visualize it.”

“Why was it so important that you see it, Jim?” Leo asked.

“Maybe because she wouldn’t talk to me about it,” Jim answered, after a minute. “My mother. It was like it was this big secret. And it is, really.” Jim pointed the controller at the console. “Most of the data that I fed into the program I got from Pike’s dissertation, and he had to get me clearance to read the unexpurgated version of it.”

“Why?” Leo asked, puzzled.

“It’s classified,” Jim said. “I extrapolated from the data feeds from the Kelvin, but a lot of streams were corrupted.” He sat up and twisted around, eyes glued to the expanse above them as the flashes
of lightning began to fill the horizon in front of Leo.

Leo shuddered, propping himself up on his elbows. “Good God, Jim,” he whispered. “That can’t be right.” He watched in horror as a huge spaceship appeared, filling a vast section of space. “That can’t be right, Jim – it looks nothing like a warbird – and Jesus, that thing is bigger than a space station.”

“That’s what the sensor readings sent back for data, and they identified themselves as Romulan to Robau. There was no visual of the ship itself that survived,” Jim said. He appeared to be holding his breath. “But you’re right – it didn’t look like that – that’s just the amount of space it filled. All the survivors, all the comm streams describe the ship as having arms and a huge nacelle, but even Pike couldn’t get me access to those drawings.”

Leo looked at Jim, considering. “Does this help, Jim?” he asked. “Is it better than the floor of the barn?”

Jim still couldn’t tear his eyes away from the dark disk that obliterated so much of the horizon. He pressed another button on the control. “This is the Kelvin,” he said quietly.

“Jesus,” Leo breathed out. It was so small, comparatively speaking. “How the hell did he fight that thing off for as long as he did?”

Jim shook his head. “He knew his ship, knew what it could do.” He paused, looked at Leo. “He knew that he had to do it.”

Leo nodded. “To protect you and your mom.”

“And the other people in the escape pods,” Jim said.

“I’m sure he gave a thought to them,” Leo said quietly. “But Jim, he did it for you and your mom.”

Jim took a breath in. “I'm going to do my dissertation in Tactical,” he said.

“OK” Leo said, sitting up and turning away from the image of the tiny Kelvin superimposed over the black disc of the Romulan vessel that obliterated so much of the available sky, blotting out the stars.

"Have you met Donovan, the head of the department?"

Leo shook his head. “Can’t say that I’ve had the pleasure,” he said, taking a hit off his flask. “I’ve heard he’s an asshole.”

Jim followed suit before he spoke. “He told me that it was too bad that Pike had already written the definitive dissertation on the Kelvin, as that would have been the perfect topic for me.”

Leo ground his teeth together in frustration before he spoke. “I would say you’re kiddin' or some shit, but I know you’re not. But you know that his opinion counts for nothing, right?”

“That’s not the point, though, Bones,” Jim said. He waved a hand up at the heavens. “This, all of this, this is what they all see when they look at me. What happened here, in the first minutes I was alive, it defines me to them. And for most of my life, nobody would really tell me anything. Everybody got somber, or reverent, or looked at me with pity. Or they told me my father was a hero,” he shrugged. “Only Tiberius ever talked to me about my father like he was a real person. He was the one who tried to help me see what everyone else was talking about when they talked about the Kelvin. But all the times we talked about this, about what really happened, we were just guessing.” The hand waved in the air again. “It was all top-secret, need-to-know.”
“Wasn’t your grandfather a Captain in the ‘fleet?”

Jim shook his head. “It didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that my dad was his kid, or that Tiberius had served with honor. They just … they wouldn’t tell him,” he paused and his voice was wistful. “I wish he’d lived long enough to see this,” he said. “To read all the stuff in Pike’s doctoral dissertation about the decisions that Robau made, about the things that my dad did. He would have loved to have known that.” He was quiet for a long time, his eyes fixed on the mass that represented the Romulan ship. "I guess he didn't have much of a choice, did he? My father."

"I'm sure that he didn't want to leave you, Jim," Leo said steadily.

Jim nodded. "There's audio, you know, of him talking to my mother."

Leo took another swallow from the flask. The whiskey tasted bitter on his tongue.

"I couldn't listen to it," Jim continued quietly. "It wasn't … he was talking to my mom, and … it's bad enough to read the transcript, to know that everybody here has heard what they said to each other." He blinked, and Leo felt the weight of unshed tears in his own eyes, before Jim smiled ruefully. "He did more than just save my life, you know – he wouldn't let my mother name me Tiberius. My grandfather would have loved that, too. He hated his name." Jim was quiet again. "He never even saw me, Bones." Jim pressed the button again, and the space around them moved, shuttles escaping the Kelvin while the firefight raged. "I was on shuttle 37," he said, pointing.

Leo watched as the tiny shuttle was pursued and then saved by a blast of suppressing fire from the Kelvin before the cruiser exploded against the unforgiving blankness of the Romulan ship. One minute it was there, and the next, it was just wreckage, dispersing over the starfield as the shuttles streamed away. "He made sure that you got away," Leo said softly.

Jim nodded. "I didn't realize," he said. "I mean, I knew it, in the abstract, but …" He drew a deep breath in. His shoulders were hunched, and Leo found himself thinking about Cronus, about the burdens that a father, even a loving one, could place on a son. Above them, the black disk shuddered and threw off sparks, then disappeared. Jim watched it happening, then said, "I think it's still out there, that ship. I think it's waiting, out there in the black."

Leo shivered and looped his arm over Jim's shoulders and pulled him close. They sat there below the endless night of space, and watched the alien stars wheel and turn above them in silence.

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Chapter 26

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I never thought I'd travel into space. People call it the black and that's how I always pictured it, but that doesn't even begin to describe it, because it's something else beside. It feels alive up here in a way that I had not imagined, somehow verdant, even though that's not the right term for it. It shines. There is light and color arcing through the darkness that is beyond black whenever we pass by a star or a planet. I think the color is made all the more rich by the contrast …

.. We're bunked eight in a room not much bigger than a horse's stall, stacked up one atop another. The lowest man's bunk is on the floor, and the rest of us have less than a meter of air space separating us. It's pitch black in the room at night – that's the real black, the bunkhouse. More than once, I've been awakened to the sound of muffled weeping. I'm pretty sure it's Jenkins – he was too
young to have signed up, even though he’s only a bit younger than me. He got caught up by the same fervor that caught us all up before we signed – the need to protect our planet, our home. Most of them didn’t give much of a thought to what it meant to sign up, the real distances we’d be traveling, how far from home and anything we’ve known we’d be, and even though I did, it’s so much more vast and awe-inspiring than I could have imagined …

It’s been hard on a bunch of the guys and gals, and I don’t mean space sickness, although if I never see (or smell) another full barf bag, that’ll be a blessing. Lewis told me the other day – well, what passes for day up here where it’s always night – that he’s no longer sure if God exists, and he’s not the only one who feels like that. In a way, I understand what he means. That cozy God, the one that Mrs. Taylor was always talking about in Sunday school, the old man with the white hair and the beard, sitting on a cloud with a benign expression on his face, isn’t up here in the black. God is so much bigger than I’d ever imagined, because when I stand on the observation deck and look at everything I can see, it’s only a tiny piece of the universe. It sounds stupid to say it but infinity is so much more infinite than I ever thought. I think I understand now, why in those old Earth myths the mortals went crazy when they learned the truths that only the Gods knew. I think that’s what’s happening to Lewis and some of the others.

And the weird thing is that I feel exactly the opposite. I keep trying to explain to Lewis that being up here makes me surer of a God than I’ve ever been in my life, but they just aren’t hearing me. I think they’ve all just realized that some of us, maybe all of us, will never see Earth again. And they’re right. Maybe no one will ever read these words, maybe they’ll burn and become incorporated in some star that will be born millennia from now, which sounds sad and lonely, but meaningful at the same time. But since they can’t appreciate that, I tell them that I think about how beautiful our planet was when we could see it from space, all the blues and green of the swirling waters, and the brown land. I’d seen the holos before, but the reality was so staggering. I know that our Earth is just one planet among many, and maybe there are other more beautiful worlds out there, but it’s home. And when I think about home, really think about it, I’m not thinking about that beautiful blue ball. I’m thinking about Susannah on the porch swing, laughing as she rocks back and forth, of finally convincing her of what we both know is true – that she loves me as much as I love her. Or I think of riding in the woods and the new foals finding their legs, of spring. I don’t need to understand the infinite – that’s God’s job. I just need to appreciate the finite and marvel at all else that’s around me while I have this chance. And if I die up here, well, I’m no less safe up here than I was down on the planet, because none of us are ever really safe. Lightning strikes, the ground splits itself open, idiots bomb cities with nuclear weapons. Shit happens, my grandfather used to say, and it’s true. If we were back down on the ground somewhere, we’d just be waiting while the Romulans advance on us for war. I’d rather be up here, trying to keep them from getting to the planet.

And I keep telling Lewis that if he believes in God, then he should remember ‘God only helps those who help themselves,’ but it’s like he can’t hear me over his own fear. God knows, and I write that with irony, that I’m scared shitless, but I’ve got to do it. And maybe I’ve been afraid of the wrong things all along, anyway. If I get back there, I’m not waiting any longer, Susannah. I’ve tried waiting, and talking you into reality, but this time, I think I’ll just kiss you until you can’t deny it anymore.

Leo marked his place in the second volume of Horatio’s journal and closed his eyes. He’d thought a lot about bravery these past few weeks, about how Jim had allowed him to be present while he confronted his fear, while he conducted what was a private ritual, a kind of exorcism. Jim’s bravery had never been in question for Leo – he knew that Jim’s bravado was a cover for the heart of a lion, the kind of warrior heart that could take the adrenaline of a fight, and use it for fuel, not paralysis. He could do something similar in emergencies, focus on the patient and do what needed to be done, but he hadn’t applied it to other aspects of his life, hadn’t thought to.
He ran his finger down the spine of the leather-bound book and reached over for his drink on the nightstand. He hadn't been able to move on in this journal, found himself reading these passages over and over again, to the point where he practically had the words memorized. Part of it, he supposed, was the chance to hear Horatio's voice again by reading his words, but mostly, he found himself comforted by how Horatio had experienced the black. He knew, in the rational part of himself that prevailed most times, that the chances of dying in interplanetary space travel were probably comparable to dying in any kind of mechanized conveyance, but there had always been something about the idea of the void of space, the vacuum itself, with no air, no light, that scared the shit out of Leo. It was, in many ways, the fear of the infinite itself, as Horatio had written in his journal.

He laid the book on the nightstand gently. It hadn't been until he'd watched Jim's sim of the Kelvin destruction that he'd really allowed himself to think about what it would actually mean, being out there, sailing the stars. Jim had unwittingly given him a gift that night, even if that hadn't been his intention. He'd allowed Leo to witness him confronting one of his longest-lived fears, to penetrate the veil of secrecy that had been drawn over the events surrounding his birth, and his father's death. And even without all of the available information, Jim had drawn some kind of peace from what he'd seen. It was as if his father had somehow become more real to him, as if recreating the last actions of George Kirk's life had made Jim understand his father on some primal level beyond the platitudes of sacrifice and bravery that had always been used to describe his actions on that day.

It wouldn't be the same for Leo. There was no program he could write to confront his fears. He'd done his zero-grav training, been forced to space dive in a high-pressure suit, and none of those things had broken the block of ice that the idea of the void created in his gut. It was probably because he knew that he was still on Earth, that when he stepped outside the chamber, or ripped off his helmet, that the long gasping breaths that filled his lungs would be filled with air from his own planet. When he's out there in the void, in the unknown, he wouldn't have that option, and the idea of that, of choking in the vacuum if there was some sort of disaster, terrified him.

But Horatio's words ... Horatio's words soothed and intrigued him. He'd never actually contemplated that the void of space could be beautiful. It wasn't as if he hadn't heard others describe it that way, but these were Horatio's words, Horatio's feelings, and there was a kinship between the two of them that went beyond blood. Reading Horatio's words about space had made him actually long to see what Horatio had seen, to feel the curiosity that any good scientist should feel about new worlds, to see beyond all the potential negatives for the possibility of something that he'd never actively contemplated: wonder.

But he was never going to experience that wonder if he couldn't get beyond the fear.

All along, he'd been acting as if Jim were the damaged one, the broken and reckless one, and like he was the healer, the one with the answers, and the cure. But Jim had humbled him with his program, with the true depths of his courage. Jim knew that if he intended to be in command, that if he intended to take his place in the ranks of the Captains of Starfleet like his father and his grandfather, then he needed to understand how he'd be judged, what he'd be judged against, even though learning it, seeing what his father had done to save his life had positively gutted him. He'd shouldered the burden and taken the knowledge in and let it become a part of him. And Jim's bravery had made Leo realize that maybe he'd been broken for a long time, and that what he feared most was not being able to fix things, not being able to control things. And that if he wanted to be up there in the black with Jim someday, then he'd better learn how to fucking deal.

He raised his glass in a toast to Horatio, to himself, and to irony. "Physician," he said aloud, "heal thyself."

And then he began planning.
Leo ground his teeth a little in agitation before he smoothed his uniform tunic down and rapped on the door sharply, twice.

"Come," the voice said.

"Captain," Leo said, stepping through the door and into Pike's office. He'd never actually seen it before, and he had to admit that he was somewhat curious to see what Pike surrounded himself with when not aboard a starship. Not much distinguished the room from any other utilitarian office, although Leo was surprised that it wasn't larger. Still, there were touches here and there that spoke to Pike's personality. A blanket with what looked like a Native American pattern hung over the couch, echoing a cheerfully colored rug on the floor. A chess set of thoroughly modern design stood between two chairs next to the window, and the shade was up, letting all of the spring light into the office and raining down on the various potted cactuses on the sill.

"Lieutenant," Pike said with heavy emphasis.

Leo scowled.

"And," Pike said, "so I see that the stories I've been told about your ingratitude," Pike uttered the word as if imitating someone, "in regard to your rather unprecedented advancement are at least to some degree true."

Leo felt his hackles rising as he defiantly shot his cuffs, still stripe-free. "And?" he asked.

"Don't be an ass, McCoy," Pike said, utterly unperturbed. He waved Leo into a chair. "Talk to me."

"I'm not sure what I should say," Leo grumbled.

"How about the truth?"

"Permission to speak freely," Leo asked.

"I already asked for the truth, McCoy, stop dodging," Pike said. He sat back in his chair.

"Why the hell do you care?" Leo asked. It wasn't like he'd seen Pike since Riverside, and fuck, even if he had commed the man when Jim needed him, that was about the extent of their interaction. He pointed at the chess board, knowing full well that the game in progress was between him and Jim.

"It's not like we've kept in touch."

"You jealous, McCoy?" Pike said blandly. "You want to start a poker night?"

"The 'don't be an ass' thing cuts both ways, sir," Leo said. "I'm not in your track, so I can't really see what my wanting to reject a promotion I didn't ask for-"

Pike held up a hand. "Are you under some misapprehension that we ask for promotion here in Starfleet? Because I'll tell you, that's never been my experience. They're earned, and in your case, the Admiralty believes that you've earned your stripe for creating a viable treatment for Capellan Hemorrhagic Fever."

"Did the Andorian members of the Admiralty agree with that, Captain?" Leo asked in a sharp tone.

Pike stared at him, then leaned slightly to his left. Leo heard the whoosh of a something opening, and then Pike came up with a bottle of Scotch. He turned and hooked two glasses off the credenza
behind him.

"Does it matter?" Pike asked. "If they thought that what you'd done in finding and creating a cure outweighed the life of one of their people, would it change the way you feel at all?" He'd been pouring the whole time he was talking, but he looked up at Leo as he said the last phrase. He handed Leo a drink.

Leo shook his head. "No," he said hoarsely.

Pike held his drink up, and Leo thought he was going to make a toast and frowned. He might have made his point, but Leo was far from easy over the whole situation.

"These stripes," Pike said, and Leo realized that Pike was referring to his Captain's ranking, the thick-thin-thick stripes at the end of his sleeve. "What do you see when you look at them?"

Leo shrugged, "Captain," he said.

Pike's mouth was twisted in a sad smile. "I see every fucking mistake I ever made in command, McCoy," he said, taking a swallow of his drink. "I see the names, I see the faces of everyone who ever died because I wasn't fast enough, or smart enough, or because I was an arrogant ass who thought I knew best." He looked up at McCoy. "That's the reality of those stripes, Lieutenant. And anyone who tells you otherwise is either a liar or a damned fool. And trust me, you don't want to serve under either."

Leo stared at the man. "How do you deal with it?"

"You've lost patients before, McCoy," Pike said brusquely, but his voice was not unkind. "I'm sure that there were those that you know that you could have saved if you'd only done one or two things differently."

"La'an wasn't a patient," Leo said sharply. "He was a technician. It was my responsibility to make sure that he'd done his job …"

"It was his responsibility to make sure that he'd done his job," Pike interrupted. "It was your responsibility to ensure that he was the right person for the job in the first place."

Leo stared at Pike's unflinching face. "Yeah," he said after a minute.

"That's how you deal with it, McCoy," Pike said. "Acknowledging your true mistake and accounting for your weaknesses so that the next time you won't fuck up. You honor those that you've lost by becoming a better, a smarter commander." This time Pike did hold up his glass. "Welcome to command, Lieutenant McCoy."

Leo tilted his glass at Pike's unflinching face. "Yeah," he said after a minute.

"That's how you deal with it, McCoy," Pike said. "Acknowledging your true mistake and accounting for your weaknesses so that the next time you won't fuck up. You honor those that you've lost by becoming a better, a smarter commander." This time Pike did hold up his glass. "Welcome to command, Lieutenant McCoy."

Leo tilted his glass at Pike, but his mouth was still compressed into a thin line when he went to take a drink.

"That was better, by the way," Pike observed. "The flinch was much less noticeable."

Leo restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

"Now," Pike said, "back to your earlier question of 'why do I care'. I care because I recruited you."

"I know," Leo said.

"No, you really don't," Pike said. "Tell me, McCoy, what do you think of most of your colleagues?"
Leo stared at Pike, considering his answer. "In my class, or at 'fleet Medical?"

"Both," Pike said.

"I think that most of them should go work at an ER," he said bluntly. "A real slaughterhouse, like New York, Moscow or Rio. Someplace where they'd have to react and improvise, actually work through real traumas, day in, day out."

Pike smiled. "My former CMO would agree with you," he said, "although he'd express his opinion more vigorously."

Leo raised an eyebrow.

"Phillip Boyce," Pike said. "He's coming back to campus in July, and oh, it's going to be a thing of beauty. Most of the docs hate his guts, and this time, he's coming back as their boss. My only regret is that you won't get a chance to spend much more than a year with him before you go out there," he added. "Really that you won't get the chance to serve with him as your CMO. The two of you," Pike smiled again, "are going to get on like a house on fire."

"I'm going out there next year?" Leo said.

Pike fixed him with a withering stare. "Don't patronize me, McCoy," he said. "I'm well aware of what you've done over the nearly two years you've been here – and you're on pace to get out next June, with Kirk, just as he planned." He narrowed his eyes at Leo. "Or just as you planned."

"You have been paying attention," Leo drawled.

"Maybe you should be," Pike shot back. "Do you know why you got the stripe, McCoy?"

"Honestly, I haven't a fucking clue," Leo said. "Because cure or not, most of the command staff over at 'fleet Medical wanted to throw my ass out."

"I'm well aware of that, Lieutenant," Pike said in a voice dry as dust. "But they're not taking into account that you provided the Federation with an incredible negotiating tool. The Farragut's been called back to take the diplomatic corps to the Capellan system," he said. "It's going to be a short mission, a one-off that will coincide with the summer break."

Leo stared at Pike. "They're going to barter the cure for the mining rights?"

"Topaline, dilithium, God knows what else."

Leo nodded. "So I guess that having a cure discovered by a mere Cadet …"

"Wouldn't seem quite as impressive to a status-conscious society," Pike said.

"Did Jim tell you that was my strategy?" Leo asked. "Not the status bullshit, but the barter."

"He did tell me," Pike said, "when I suggested that he apply for a post on the Farragut. Captain Garrovick is going to take on new hands and use the mission as a training run for promising Cadets. He disclosed that fact then. Surprisingly," Pike said sarcastically, "it was your Medical Ethics prof who suggested this fantastic new negotiation strategy."

"I'm sure he gave me credit," Leo said drily.

Pike held up the bottle. "That's why you have the stripe, McCoy," he said, filling up Leo's glass. His eyes were angry.
Leo nodded in acknowledgment, wondering how much Pike had had to do with his promotion.

"So," Pike said, in a tone that indicated that he was changing the subject. "How do you think Kirk is doing?"

Leo laughed. "How do you think he's doing?"

"I think he's doing pretty damned good," Pike said, "and I'm not talking about the firsts I expect him to take." He swiveled in his office chair and looked at the chess board. "He's more mature. He seems more grounded." He swung around and looked at Leo. "And you seem less weighed down." He paused. "Coincidence?"

Leo couldn't help the wry smile that broke out even as he shook his head at Pike's words. "I'm not sure what you're implying, Captain," he said, although he most certainly did: he was like the earth below the sky that was Jim, and somewhere between them lay the balance.

"Hmph," Pike said, but in such a way that Leo knew that Pike wasn't at all fooled by his words. "What you said earlier about your colleagues in Medical? That's exactly why I recruited you, Lieutenant, for that hard-headed pragmatism, combined with your experience." He looked at Leo. "Despite all of your degrees, it's that quality that distinguished you then. It's that quality that will make you the officer that you're meant to be."

"Yes, sir," Leo said.

"Don't fuck it up, McCoy," Pike said bluntly. "You do what you're planning to do – you take your firsts, and you keep building your resume the way you have, and I will do everything I can to get you on the Enterprise when we go on our shakedown in June of next year."

Leo tried to school his features, but he nodded. "Every active Medical officer is going to want to be on that ship, Captain," he said.

"And I can only do so much," Pike said. "Which is why you cannot fuck up again. Be the pragmatist you are. Put your stripe on."

"And Jim?" Leo asked.

Pike shook his head. "Every ambitious Captain in Starfleet is going to want the Federation hero's son on his crew," he said. "Even though most of them wouldn't know what the hell to do with him. Garrovick's a good man," he continued, "and a good Captain. He'll see Jim's real potential. After this summer, he's the one that's going to fight me the hardest for Jim. All I can tell you is that if I have my way, you'll both be on the flagship with me." He paused. "No promises, McCoy. For either of you."

Leo recognized a dismissal when he heard it, and he straightened his jacket, and put his glass down on Pike's desk. "Thank you for your time, Captain," he said.

"You're welcome," Pike said. "Remember what I said. Starfleet needs you to be the clear-eyed realist that you can be. Do not let them drum it out of you."

"No worries there, Captain," Leo said, standing. "It was bred into the bone."

Pike smiled. "Good choice of nicknames, then, huh?"

Leo smiled.

"Dismissed," Pike said.
He saluted and made his way to the door.

"Lieutenant," Pike said.

He turned, forcing himself to keep his eyebrow in its normal position.

"You're organizing an astrophobics conference?" Pike asked, holding up a PADD.

"This summer," Leo answered.

Pike raised both eyebrows at him.

"You want me on that boat next June?" Leo drawled out. "That is the pragmatic way to get me there."

Pike rolled his eyes. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

Leo wasn't at all surprised to find Jim waiting for him on the steps of the Command building.

"So?" he asked, doing that thing where he radiated tension while being completely still.

"So I'm a Lieutenant," Leo said curtly. "Goddamnit, I need a drink."

Jim leaned in a little closer and took a breath in, raising an eyebrow. "You sure about that, Bones?"

"Drinking with your buddy Pike doesn't count," Leo growled.

Jim smiled, blue eyes dancing. "He's not my buddy," he said, slinging an arm around Leo's neck. "Lieutenant."

"Quiet," Leo snapped. "Or I might start ordering you around."

Jim laughed at him, ruffling his hair. "Oh, live it up while you have the chance, Bones. I'll outrank you soon enough."

"Fuck you," Leo said. "You competitive infant."

"You love me," Jim said.

Leo stared at him.

"You do," Jim said surely.

"You're buying," Leo ordered.

"Aye aye, Lieutenant," Jim said cheerfully.

"And we're going to a bar I like," Leo continued.

"Anything you want, Bones," Jim answered.

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, although Jim was whistling lightly as they did so. Leo's mind was whirling with everything Pike had said to him, all that he had to accomplish in less than fifteen months. Without discussing it, they turned onto one of the cross-campus paths that would take them to a transport center and on to downtown San Francisco. All around them, the good and righteous boy and girl Cadets were headed to dinner, or their evening sections.
"Jim," Leo said, "I want you to take me flying."

Jim stopped so suddenly that Leo stepped out from under his arm. He stopped and turned to find Jim staring at him. His expression went from incredulous to thoughtful as he looked at Leo. "You're serious," he said slowly.

"Yeah," Leo said, crossing his arms over his chest protectively. "I gotta …" he began. "I need to …"

"I get it, Bones," Jim said easily, but there was no mocking in his tone. He stepped up to Leo and put both hands on his shoulders, looking Leo in the eye. "I'll do whatever you need," he said, blue eyes earnest and his voice like a pledge. When Leo nodded, he slapped him on the back and steered them toward the transport station.

"Wow," Jim said, a moment later. "Wow, Bones."

Leo turned his head to look at his friend. "Just remember," he said. "I might throw up on you."

Jim threw back his head and laughed.

+  

Chapter 27

+  

2257.148  

Bones,  

Arrived at Capella IV two days ago. No disease or danger in sight.  

JTK  

P.S. Yes, I know you'll probably get this message after I'm back.  

+  

One of the vagaries of ship-to-planet communication that was controlled entirely by the fleet was that Ensigns-in-Training on a diplomatic mission were probably about one step above the Tribbles they used in Sickbay to calm the patients on the priority scale for comms being sent planetside. So while Jim's messages did indeed beat Jim home, it wasn't until he'd been gone for almost a month, and while Leo was in the midst of last minute details and disasters for the astrophobics conference that he'd been organizing, that he received the first batch of weeks-old messages from him in one large packet.

+  

2257.150  

Bones,  

When I'm in charge, I won't assign the trainees to gamma shift only. Not that I mind being awake at this time of 'night'. It's not like I'd be able to sleep with the way Gonzaga snores, anyway.  

JTK
Leo had decided against organizing the conference solely around the issue of aviophobia after much discussion with Patty. The reality was that while a number of people feared flying, there were a lot of people who feared space itself, as well as travel through it, as Leo did. Leo and Patty had organized the conference around symposia and discussions of what worked and what didn’t for treating symptoms, with a few practical demonstrations of biofeedback and other non-pharmaceutical methodologies for treating panic. Patty had actually twisted arms – or so she claimed -- to organize a couple of flights for attendees who wished to go up into the black in a controlled environment with counselors. It was a great idea, but one which only made Leo even more grateful that he’d opted for the more exclusive controlled environment of just him and Jim, because the notion of being on a shuttle with other people who were freaking out made him more anxious. Unfortunately, they didn’t have time to take Jim’s weeks-long approach to addressing astrophobia during the five days of the conference.

"Jim, why are we eating lunch in a docked shuttle?” Leo asked tensely.

“Because you need to get used to being on them,” Jim said calmly. “I left the door open.” He handed Leo a sandwich and sat down on the floor. “C’mon, Bones,” he said, patting the deck. “Pull up some floor and I’ll tell you about my day.”

Leo still didn’t know (or really want to) how Jim had gotten access to the shuttle bay or the hangar deck, and why no one had objected to them sitting, first in the back and then at the helm, as Jim talked about the construction of the shuttle and the system failsafes for worst-case scenarios, in between bouts of ranting about the Kobayashi Maru, which he’d taken and failed. Leo was pretty sure that the Maru was the first and only test that Jim had ever failed, and he damned well didn’t like it.

"And seriously, Bones, what is the point of this test? Because even though I don’t believe in no-win scenarios, I feel like they’re programming command staff to analyze a bad situation, log it as a no-win and give up, the end. Who the fuck does that help?"

Jim was an odd mixture of patience and impatience, perfectly capable of waiting weeks until he was sure that Leo was ready to go up in the shuttle, but absolutely beside himself with the desire to re-take the Maru again and prove that the unwinnable scenario could be beaten. So far, he’d been unsuccessful in getting the Academy to agree to him re-taking the test, although Leo had no doubt that he’d wear them down eventually. After all, Jim had somehow managed to rig it so that when he deemed Leo ready, they flew several gamma shift supply runs up to the San Francisco High Naval Yard. Week after week, they went up, steering clear of the drydocks around the starships being repaired or outfitted for deep space where they might have been forced them to identify themselves visually. Leo knew that Jim had to be chafing at the literal milk runs of fresh food and supplies that they brought up to the administrative complexes, but he never said a word of complaint, just continued telling Leo exactly what he was doing and when as they went through the routine of launching, docking, unloading and relaunching.

But on the way home, Jim always took the time to orbit the planet, and it never failed to make him smile.

+ 2257.153

Bones,
I think it’s possible that Tellarites don’t have any kind of a sense of humor. That must suck.

JTK
+

The last few runs that they’d made up to the High, Jim had first made him fly, then made him dock the shuttle. No amount of bitching would get him to back down. He’d adopted the same expression that he’d had on his face about teaching Leo hand-to-hand. He was calm, resolute and completely, infuriatingly immovable. As he always did whenever he maneuvered the shuttle himself, Jim narrated the necessary steps to dock until Leo snapped at him, “I know what the fucking steps are, Jim!”

Jim had turned his head away, but Leo’d still wanted to whack him when he saw the indulgent smile on Jim’s face via his reflection. “Just make sure that you follow them while you’re bitching, Bones,” Jim said. “Show me that surgical precision.”

“Fuck you,” Leo groused, connecting to the dock with an easy bump.

“Good job,” Jim said, no longer even attempting to conceal his grin.

He’d been so busy being irritated with Jim that he’d totally forgotten to be panicked about the potential things that could go wrong at docking, always a safety flashpoint.
+

2257.156

Bones,

Maybe I should have let you teach me how to knit. No one on this boat really plays chess, and poker just isn’t the same without booze. Also, no one will play holo games with me anymore since I keep beating them.

Capella IV is a pretty good-looking planet, but it’s not as beautiful as Earth. I’ve had ample time to compare while we orbit around and around and around. Also, the other helmsmen aren’t scintillating conversationalists like you. Nobody’s told me to **** off once.

Disease and danger still totally in abeyance,

JTK
+

Leo couldn’t help but smile at the manner in which Jim was addressing him in his comms, as if they were still having a conversation, albeit a one-sided one. The truth was that they both had a tendency to monologue, although Leo was sure that his rant to Jim’s rambling ratio was running at about a 3:1. Still, if he never heard another word about Jim’s current obsession, beating the Kobayashi Maru, he’d be a happy man. He was sure that Jim felt the same way about his own repetitive rants about the idiocy of the command staff in Medical, and their required, duplicative, ridiculous paperwork.
+

2257.160

Bones,
You know, it may not have been the best idea to spend so much social time, if you know what I'm saying, with other Cadets. I know a few people up here, some because I've been so friendly, and others because they're unfriendly. Some of the former I should have been unfriendly to, in hindsight. It's been a little weird, and we're only a little more than a week into the mission. I've got Gary Mitchell up here with me, so it's not like I have no one to hang out with.

Actually, he's not the only guy I know. I hadn't seen Riley for about ten years and didn't immediately recognize him, but he knew who I was right away. He wants to talk a lot about old times, but you know me -- I don't like to live in the past. I think that we should fix him up with your friend Patty when we get back dirtside. I think they'd really get along.

Leo sat bolt upright in his chair and read the last few sentences over again to be sure that Jim was alluding to what he thought he was, the hum and murmur of the mess hall dimming as he did so. "Shit," he said under his breath. Patty had said, long ago, that there were other Cadets who'd been at Tarsus, hadn't she? Riley. He made a mental note of the name to look up later.

Anyway, I'm going to go run the catwalks in Engineering when I get off shift – the treadmill gets really boring after a while, and the gym is too crowded in the morning – and then try and get some sleep.

Later,

JTK

He shook his head, smiling wryly. It sounded like Jim'd decided to remain celibate for the ten weeks of the training flight, rather than risk being 'friendly' with someone new and creating more awkward encounters. The idea of Jim, who'd always had an active and varied sex life, having to keep company with his hand for that length of time was quite the picture. No wonder he was running obstacle courses in Engineering, trying to wear himself out.

"Heard from Jim lately?"

He smiled as he recognized Patty's voice, even before she leaned in to give him a one-armed hug. She sat down next to him with a yawn. "Putting the psi in psychiatrist, Patty darlin'?" he asked. "Or just reading over my shoulder?"

"There's no need to read over your shoulder," Patty said, putting her tray down on the table next to his. "I just have to look at your face to know that you're reading something from Jim. Can you imagine, though, what it would be like to be a psychic counselor? Knowing exactly what my patients were thinking? It would be …" Her tone was wondering, but her hand stilled holding the sweetener packets over her coffee, her sentence drifting off as she contemplated the possibility. Suddenly, her expression became horrified. "Oh my God," she said. "No. That would be a total nightmare." She shuddered. "No," she said in a firmer tone. "I'll just keep on doing it the old-fashioned way."

"Being nosy?" Leo asked, grinning at her.

"Damned straight," she said. "How's Jim?"

"Bored," Leo said. "At least three weeks ago, when he sent the comm I was reading."

"Ah," she said, adding fruit to her yogurt, "the glamour of shipboard life." She looked at Leo. "I can't believe that you're going up there … willingly."

Leo shrugged. "I'm working on it."
"Oh, please," she said. "Your one-on-one sessions with Jim have done wonders for you. And I just bet," she said sweetly, "that if it got more one-on-one, it would be even better."

Leo ignored her, as he usually did. "He was asking after you in the comm I was last reading."

"He was not," she said indignantly. "I can't even believe that you've stooped so low as to try and change the subject using such a blatant lie."

"Not lying, darlin'," Leo said, swirling the dregs of his coffee and considering getting up for another cup. "One of the other Cadets aboard was on Tarsus with him, and he said that he thought we should fix this kid up with you when he gets back dirtside."

Patty’s eyes shot up to Leo’s. “You never told me that you'd discussed Tarsus.”

Leo flushed a bit, but kept his voice level. “We haven’t spoken about it in detail, but he knows that I know about it, and he's told me a few things here and there.”

“And I’m being very nosy, aren’t I?” She said shrewdly. “You clearly don’t want to break his confidence, and I won’t push anymore. But I will say that I’m really surprised that he’d want to refer this Cadet to me. He’s never been my biggest fan.”

Leo shrugged. “He knows that I respect you professionally,” he said.

Patty’s green eyes twinkled at him from over the rim of her cup. “And that’s all he needs to know, isn’t it?” she asked.

Leo rolled his eyes. “How’s Rachel?”

Patty set her cup down on the table. “Your guess is as good as mine,” she said lightly.

Leo looked at Patty with sympathy. "No need for the big eyes, Len,” she said with a sad smile. “It was a mutual decision, really.” She shrugged. “She was perfectly nice, and perfectly amiable, and …”

“You just weren’t connecting,” Leo said diplomatically, although what he was thinking was perfectly boring. He’d found Rachel to be a bit colorless, especially when compared to Patty's warm vivacity.

“No,” Patty admitted. “Maybe I was looking for something a little less dramatic than my last two relationships,” she said mischievously.

“I resent being referred to as a Drama Queen,” Leo said with outsized indignation.

Patty laughed. “You have to admit, though, that it would make for a dramatic subplot in a movie, the two of us clinging to each other because we couldn’t have what we wanted,” she reached over and covered Leo’s hand with hers. “Did I ever say thank you?”

Leo shot her an amused but chiding glance. “I don’t know if you exactly said it,” Leo drawled, picking up her hand and kissing her knuckles, “but I might have heard a thanks a time or two in some form or another.” He was rewarded with the pretty pink blush on Patty’s cheek, and the return of the twinkle to her eyes. Rachel might not have been a great love of Patty’s, but nobody liked to fail at a relationship.

“You are incorrigible,” Patty said.

“I come by it naturally,” Leo assured her.
Bones!

I found the first two volumes of Horatio’s journals in my duffel. I can’t believe you sent them up here with me. And I know -- you can’t believe that it took me this long to look through my bag.

Thanks,

JTK

“Dr. McCoy?”

Leo was pacing back in forth in front of the fleet Hospital, waiting for Patty. They were heading over to their last meeting with the event planner. Conferees were expected to begin arriving in the next twelve hours, and although everything that could have done had been, Leo couldn’t help but be anxious. The conference had ended up drawing a lot more attendees and scrutiny than he’d ever imagined it would. “Cadet Uhura,” he said in surprise. “I’m not on duty at the moment, but can I help you with something?”

Uhura’s warm smile transformed her often severe expression and revealed her loveliness. “You’re very kind,” she said, tilting her head, her long ponytail shifting behind her. “And brave, I think.”

Leo looked at her in puzzlement.

“I wanted to wish you luck with the conference tomorrow,” she said. “The first time I saw you was on the shuttle from Riverside, and as I recall, that was less than a pleasant experience for you.”

“Your career in diplomacy will be long and distinguished, Cadet Uhura,” Leo said, with a smile. “Less than pleasant, while apt, is certainly one way of putting it. Horrific might be another.”

Uhura’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “Maybe it was your seat companion?”

Leo wagged a finger at her. “You’re as bad as he is, Uhura.”

“I certainly hope not!” she said, still smiling. “I think that maybe you could teach him a little bit about true bravery. I think that it’s wonderful that you’re facing your fear in a constructive way.”

“Actually,” Leo said, “a wise young man told me that confronting the thing that one is most afraid of is what one has to do.”

Uhura quirked an eyebrow. “I find that a little hard to believe, Dr. McCoy,” she said.

“Leonard,” he said. “And the truth is, you don’t really know him at all.”

She considered his statement, arms crossed in front of her. “Your loyalty is also commendable,” she said softly. “I hope he appreciates that, Leonard.”

“I remind him at regular intervals,” Leo rejoined.

Uhura laughed, her musical voice climbing up the scale in delight. “My name is Nyota,” she said. “I trust that we can keep that between ourselves?”
“Definitely,” Leo said, waving at Patty as she came out of the building, looking harried. “It’ll make it all the sweeter someday when he finds out that not only do I know it, I’m allowed to use it.”

Uhura laughed again, and patted him on the arm. “Good luck with the conference, Leonard,” she said.

“Thank you, Nyota darlin’,” Leo said.

Bones,

Horatio’s journals are amazing. They make me wish that I’d been keeping a real journal this whole time. I suppose I should get in the habit, as keeping a personal log is something that you’re supposed to do, aside from the ship’s log. I was able to find the plans of the ‘ship that Horatio was on, and comparatively speaking, the Farragut is the lap of luxury. I’m bunking in with three other guys and that’s crowded enough. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to be in an eight, crammed on top of each other the way they were. The bunkhouse I’m in has two berths on each wall and a desk at the end. If you want to sit at one of them, though, the other one has to be unoccupied, which never happens, since we’re all on gamma. Mitchell and I are on one side of the room and Gonzaga (who snores like a beast, Bones) is on the bottom bunk on the other side, with Wiszniewski on the top. I have no idea how Wiz sleeps through Gonzaga snoring up at him all night. I swear that he’s vibrating in the bunk sometimes.

I’ve totally given up trying to sleep through alpha because of this. Most mornings, I get off shift, go for a run through Engineering and then clean up and hit the mess for my dinner. Pancakes for dinner are weird, but good, by the way. Halfway through alpha, I go to the smallest forward observation deck with Horatio’s journals and read until I fall asleep. I usually make it through to shift change undisturbed, then go back to the bunkhouse and catch some more zs if Gonzaga is gone, or spar with Gary, or just hang out until it’s time for my shift. There’s not much else to do. The mission is still going on, and I get the impression that the negotiations aren’t going all that well. Commander Ameixoeira, the XO, hasn’t gone planetside for the past couple of weeks. The scuttlebutt says that the Capellans are still so sex-segregated that they rejected the idea of a woman in command, even one who could fight and win in ritual combat. She seems pretty pissed off, and I can’t say I blame her. I’ve heard that some of the Orion women in the diplomatic corps have been similarly excluded, but the grunts don’t see them like we see Ameixoeira every fourth shift. Even Garrovick takes gamma, which isn’t something I thought the Captain would do, but he says it’s important that the Captain be visible to all members of the staff. It’s always much more interesting when he’s in the chair.

Speaking of Orions, it never really occurred to me that Gaila is one of the first Orions in the Academy. Most of the crew on the ship have never seen an Orion before. Mitchell told some people about Gaila and me, and the comments and the questions since then have really p&ssed me off. I don’t expect people not to be ignorant, but I do expect them not to be a$hole$ about someone who is our classmate and going to be a member of the ’fleet. (Sorry for the stupid text thing, but did you know that they still redact swearing and sh*t? I didn’t.) Anyway. You know me, Bones, I’m not one to shy away from bragging, but I totally do not name names if I tell a story – I may not be a Southern gentlemen like you, but I’m not a pig. Well. Not a total pig. I’m just plain refusing to answer questions about her, and I told Mitchell he’s a d*ck for bringing it up in the first place. Don’t worry, I’m not going to end up in the brig -- I’m keeping my hands to myself, but let’s just say that the list I started with your buddy Lieutenant Spencer’s name on it has gotten substantially longer.
"Last time he was on gamma, Garrovick said that we might get to go planetside on Kohath, which is what the Capellans call their planet. There's a whole list of things we can't do, however, some of which involve fruit. This makes me irritated. I miss fruit, Bones. Replicated apples taste like cr@p."

"I'm putting fresh fruit on the other list that I keep,"

"JTK"

+ "Leo! There you are!" The exasperated tone in Gram’s voice was mitigated by the ever-present affection.

"It’s not like I’ve been avoiding you, Gram," Leo said. “I told you that I was flat out until I got the conference out of the way.”

"Which ended more than a week ago," Gram chided, appearing to study him through her viewscreen.

"And I had to make up shifts for the colleagues who covered me,” Leo said, “as I said in my e-mail back to you.”

"Yes, yes,” Gram said. “Your very informative e-mail in which you still managed not to answer me about your plans for your birthday.” She raised her eyebrow. “It’s not every day a man turns 30,” she said.

"What's the big deal?" Leo groused.

Gram’s expression was severe. "The big deal, Leo, is that I might not be around for your 40th, or your 50th, so I’d like to celebrate your 30th with you."

"Gram,” Leo said in an aggrieved tone, "that is really hitting below the belt."

"Not when you're staring down the barrel of 90, it's not," she said pertly. "Madisons don't live as long as McCoys do."

Leo sighed, rubbing at the skin between his brows. "Ted …" he began –

"Will not be home," Gram said firmly. "He's going offworld in three weeks to meet with some of those breeders up in the Centauri system, and he won't be back until well into September. Surely you can get someone in the hospital to cover you for a couple of days so that you can come back home and spend some time with your old Gram?" She batted her eyelashes at Leo as she said this, stooping her back to make herself look more elderly.

He groaned in response. "No surprise party," he said firmly.

Gram frowned. "I wasn't planning one," she said. "Although it would be nice if you saw some of your cousins while you were here. But we are celebrating your birthday, boy – I have particular reason to be happy that you're here for this one."

Leo stared at his grandmother, who stared determinedly back at him. "I'm fine, Gram," he said softly.

She sniffed. "Get your ass on a shuttle next month and prove it," she said.

Leo sighed, knowing that he wasn't going to win this argument. "I'll see what I can do," he said.
"Your birthday's on a Sunday," Gram said. "So you'll need to stay longer than the weekend."

"Gram …" Leo protested.

"Don't Gram me," she said. "You haven't been home in more than a year. I want more than two days. And where is Jim? I got his offworld notice when I commed him."

Leo sat up straight in his chair. "Why," he said, with perfect Southern emphasis, "were you comming Jim?"

"Don't you take that tone with me, Leonard Horatio," Gram said. "Last time you were avoiding my calls, Jim was the one who knew what was going on," she paused. "I may have been a little worried," she admitted. "Besides, Jim and I speak from time to time. He," she added severely, "writes lovely thank you notes."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Jim's on a training run for the summer being a junior helmsman, although he prefers to think of it as Captain-in-Training." Gram smiled at his words. "He's supposed to be back sometime in the next month, too. And by the way," he said. "Classes are back in session the Wednesday after my birthday, so …"

"The shuttle can get you back to San Francisco in a snap," Gram said. "And don't try and tell me that you haven't got all your classes already picked out, and the lecture written for the one that you're teaching."

Goddamnit, he thought silently. He was totally sunk.

"I'll expect you no later than the 20th then," Gram said. "G'night, Leo."

She disappeared before he could argue with her.

+  

2257.181

Bones,

Please tell me that your great-grandmother's name was Susannah. I don't think I could stand it otherwise.

JTK

+

Chapter 28

+

The house was quiet with the exception of the background hum of the environmental control system. Leo had woken up sometime after dawn, when the Eastern-facing room was suffused with the thick golden sunshine of an August morning in Georgia. He’d lain there and just reveled in the light, so striking after the grey fog of the San Franciscan summer, before dozing off for a few more minutes.

When he awoke for good, he hypoed himself to mitigate his aching head and went downstairs, dressed in his jodhpurs and a KFF t-shirt, and carrying everything else he needed. Even inside the cool of the house, he could feel the weight of the humid day bearing down from outside, but it was not going to deter him from riding Saturn before the sun rose any higher in the sky. He put together a
bowl of cereal with some honest-to-God Georgia peaches while he waited for the coffee to brew, letting the peacefulness of the house sink into his bones. He couldn’t remember the last time that he’d had no agenda for the day or the one that followed it, beyond the most basic. Other than feeding his body, all he had to do was enjoy himself, and the quiet.

Until he’d gotten home, he hadn’t realized how much he’d accommodated to the noise of congregate life. Even during the summer months, the ‘fleet campus was busy. Inside the medical dorms, there was scarcely a time of the day or night when there was no activity in the hallway, nobody walking across the small quad to or from the main campus. But here in the farmhouse that had been the home to five generations of McCoys, there was a notable stillness -- and he realized with a pang that he wasn’t expecting to see his father at the table reading the morning news, or Horatio out on the verandah, dozing in the warmth. As much as he missed them both, he’d come to terms with the fact of their absence, could reflect on the time that he’d spent with them with pleasure, something that he’d have been unable to do if Ted was here. He was grateful to be able to enjoy these days of peace without his grandfather’s glowing presence. He doubted that Gram felt the same way. He knew that she wished for a reconciliation between the two of them, and that it grieved her that the lack of his grandfather was the primary reason that he’d agreed to come home.

He’d taken the shuttle out the day before, meeting his cousin Tim downtown in Atlanta for dinner and a few drinks. He hadn’t seen Tim since his father’s funeral – and then he’d been so much worse for wear with alcohol and grief that he couldn’t really recall what their interaction had been. Leo’d been afraid that their conversation would be stilted, that the time that they’d spent out of contact with each other had created a barrier between them, but from the minute he stepped out of the transport station, he could see the relief in Tim’s posture and on his face. He’d hugged Leo for a long time, slapping him on the back and muttering ‘Thank God’ under his breath. At dinner, Tim had wasted no time in telling him how very worried he’d been about Leo, and apologizing for not being more aggressive in trying to stay in touch. Tim’s career as an exploratory geologist looking for new exploitable sources of energy took him offworld for significant periods of time, but they’d always at least managed to stay in some form of contact before now.

Of course, it wasn’t entirely Tim’s fault. Leo had been the one to ignore the comms and the letters, leaving them unanswered for weeks and months. It had been easier, at a certain point, to just walk away from Georgia, and if it hadn’t been for Gram, he probably would have, only realizing years later what he’d given up. This was no longer his home, but a part of him would always belong here, no matter where he went. He was just lucky that Tim had happened to be planetside for a brief stay, and that he had the chance to make amends and to reconnect.

They’d talked for hours about their adventures since they’d last seen each other. Tim’s work was both interesting and challenging, and he had an unMcCoy-like wanderlust, and a true love for the wider universe. Tim was incredibly excited by the possibility that he might be able to meet up with Leo at various starbases across the universe, depending upon where Leo’s posting took him. By the time they parted for the evening, he was already planning shore leaves on various worlds he’d been to, and ones he had yet to explore. They’d hugged and Leo had promised to stay in touch, meaning it this time. He’d programmed the car to drive him home before they’d started drinking, so he was free to watch the dark scenery pass by as the autopilot conveyed him back home.

The house had looked the same in the evening light, although perhaps the trees were larger than he recalled. Gram had been dozing on the couch with her feet tucked up under her, the black screen of her PADD indicating that she’d left it unattended for a while. He watched her sleeping for a minute before he roused her, noting the lines on her face that had come with age, but had not robbed her of her beauty. He dimly remembered one of Horatio’s sisters, ancient but lively still in her dotage, telling him that age revealed a person’s true face, that the person they were inside would be etched in their skin, if they chose to allow nature its way. Gram had availed herself of minimal regeneration
techniques, but never gone in for wholesale intervention. On her face there were laugh lines aplenty, but he could see the lines of worry and sorrow there, too, marked on her brow and in the crease of her mouth, and he regretted the ones for which he held responsibility. He pressed a kiss to her brow, and she came awake, her honest pleasure at seeing him healthy and whole chastening him and making him feel cherished at the same time. For much of his life, he’d focused on those things that marked him as unlucky, but he’d always had this, always known that there were people who loved him unreservedly. He’d lost his father and Horatio, but he still had Gram, and he owed it to her to show her that she still had him, too.

He’d crouched down next to the couch as her eyes opened, and watched them spark with fondness and pleasure. “Leo,” she’s said, putting her hand on his cheek. “There you are, boy.”

He’d smiled at her, and pressed a kiss into her palm.

“Charming as always, Leo,” she said. “Although I suppose at nearly 30, you aren’t much of a boy anymore, are you?” There’d been a slightly wistful element in her tone. “Thirty years. You’ve finished your first Saturn return, and I’m just about done with my third.”

Leo’d looked at her in surprise. “What’s that now?”

Gram had shaken her head with a rueful smile. “Just a reference to Old Earth astrology,” she’d answered. “Something my own mother swore by, despite all evidence to the contrary.”

“And?”

“It takes the planet Saturn almost thirty years to return to the degree it appeared to be occupying, from our perspective, at the time of one's birth. When you’re finished with your first return, that’s supposed to be the beginning of real adulthood, when you’ve had enough hard lessons that your illusions have been stripped away,” she’d stroked his cheek ruefully. “That’s certainly true enough of you, my Leo. The hope is that you learned the lessons that you needed to learn, faced down your fears, and are ready to leave childish things behind.” She paused and looked at him. “What do you think about that?”

“I think it’s weird that Saturn keeps coming up in my life,” Leo’d answered, thinking of Jim and legends and dead fathers. “And not just out there in the barn out back.”

“You named that horse,” Gram’d pointed out. “Insisted on it, as I recall. Not that he’s ever answered to anyone other than you.” She’d sat up on the couch and stretched. “And I’ve noticed that you sidestepped my question.”

Leo’d shrugged. “Hasn’t that been what this whole summer’s been about? Confronting my fears?”

Gram had sat very still and observed him quietly. “So that was your biggest fear? Space?”

Leo’d smiled and refused to continue the discussion any further. “It’s a good stand-in for a lot of things,” he’d answered. He loved his grandmother, but he wasn’t going to talk to her about his fears of failure and loss of control and of how the infinity of space was a good stand-in for all of it. Instead, he’d turned the conversation to other topics, until he’d caught up to East Coast time and begun to yawn himself, then seen Gram upstairs and to her room.

He wasn’t surprised that her door had been closed when he’d come downstairs, didn’t expect to see her again until after he’d ridden. Too many years of performing late at night had left Gram a bit of a night owl, or at least a person disinclined to get out of bed at the crack of dawn, like himself, or Ted. He set the coffee maker to keep the coffee warm after he poured himself a generous cup, then
jammed his boots under his arm, and walked out onto the verandah to finish his breakfast. The porch ran around the house almost in its entirety, meaning that there was always a shady spot to be found outside, even during the worst dog days of summer. It was hardly that warm yet, but he plunked his boots down next to one of the comfortable white wicker chairs and ate his breakfast, listening to the buzz and hum of the insects around him in the rising heat. In the near distance, some of the horses were outside in the paddock, tails switching lazily as they nibbled on hay and roamed here and there. He raised a hand to the calls of his name that floated over the distance, bare feet up on one of the low tables as he savoried his cereal and drank his coffee down, eye traveling over the lush greenery that surrounded him, from the grassy fields to the woods beyond with the red clay of the trails exposed like veins of the living earth. Gram had been right to insist that he come back here, to make his peace and to be a part of this again. There truly was nothing like Georgia in the summer. He took his dishes back into the kitchen, and grabbed a couple of apples from the ever present fruit basket on the counter and put them in his helmet, and walked back out onto the porch, stretching out before he sat down to cram his feet into the boots. Then, he strode off across the meadow toward the barn.

"Looking good, Doc!" he heard from his left, and he turned, shading his eyes, to wave at Steve before he headed into the barn.

Most of the stalls were empty, but down the end, nearly hidden in the shadows, he heard the low nicker and snort from Saturn's stall. He started talking long before he could see the horse, a steady stream of reassuring noise and apology. "Yeah, it's me," he said, "and you're mad as hell at me, aren't you? If you remember me, beauty. Now, do you?" He stood in front of the stall and watched the great stallion, who stared back at him with baleful eyes. Saturn had backed up away from him, and he crooned to him. "I'm sorry, my beauty," he said, sincerely, his voice low and soft the way Horatio had taught him, the accent of his childhood coming back to him unbidden, thick and slow, like molasses. "Hey, Saturn," he said, "hey boy, c'mon."

The stallion shook his head from side to side and pawed at the ground in agitation.

He took an apple from his helmet and came closer to the stall door, leaving it and the crop he wouldn't need anyway on the hay bales outside Saturn's stall. "I'm sorry, boy, I am," he said. "C'mere, c'mon, my beauty. C'mon." He never dropped his eyes from the horse. "C'mon," he crooned, "we'll go for a long run, just you and me. C'mon." The horse took a step forward toward him and what he offered, grabbing the apple up in one smooth move, and Leo felt the bone of his teeth against the flat of his palm. "I'm sorry, now," he said. "I am," he reached up and scratched under his forelock, then brought his other hand up to frame his muzzle.

Saturn pushed into his hands, bringing his head closer to Leo's before he dropped a nipping bite on his left bicep.

"Fuck," Leo said, wincing, but managing not to recoil. "I guess I deserved that, didn't I?" He continued stroking the horse's head, watching the horse's eye while he talked to him. "I know, I know," he said. "I missed you, too, you know," he whispered, as if it were a secret that only the two of them shared. "I dream about riding with you in the woods, I do," he said.


He opened the door and stepped back, picking up his helmet and turning down toward the tack room, not letting himself turn and look over his shoulder, trusting that the stallion was following him. When he got to the tack room, Saturn butted him with his head and he laughed, fishing another apple out of his helmet. "You gonna bite me again?" he said to the horse in a low rumble, but Saturn
refused to answer, just flicked his tail and blinked his eyes at him, his long lashes sweeping over his eyes. Leo laughed and gave him the apple. "You gonna stand still and let me saddle you?" he asked rhetorically, going to get what he needed.

He heard Saturn's answering whinny, followed by a thump and turned to find that Saturn had knocked his helmet on the floor and was methodically eating the two apples that were left in it. "Now, don't make a mess," he admonished the horse. "I have to wear that stupid thing!"

Saturn just flicked his tail, totally ignoring him while he suffered the indignity of being saddled. When Leo was finished, Saturn turned his head as if asking what the hell Leo was waiting for. Leo laughed, whacking the helmet to get rid of the seeds and skin, and wiping it out with one of the towels that were stacked in a corner.

"C'mon then," he said to Saturn, walking to the door and standing just outside it. After more than a year away, he thought better of climbing astride the great beast while still in the confines of the barn. Saturn snorted as he flipped the reins over and grabbed a handful of mane, sliding his foot into the stirrup and stretching up and over. "Wait, wait …" Saturn quaked, barely able to hold himself still while Leo crooned low. As soon as Leo's foot touched the right stirrup and slid home, Saturn bolted across the field, breaking for the woods.

"Clear the way!" he heard Steve shout, and then the sound of an ear-piercing whistle as Leo shifted his weight forward and loosed the reins enough to give Saturn his head, letting him go. Steve had anticipated the path the great horse wanted to take and he was waiting at the gate, laughing and waving his hat after he'd pulled it open. Leo smiled as they shot by him, not realizing until he was through the gate that Gram was standing on the lowest rail of the fence next to it, laughing at him, leaning against Jim Kirk's shoulder. Leo twisted and looked back while Saturn raced for their favorite trail, and Jim raised his hands and whistled again as Saturn approached the woods, and Leo was forced to face forward, laughing in surprise, but raising a hand in hello.

He had promised Saturn a ride, and there was no way that he was going to break that promise, or cut it short so that he could go back and greet Jim. Still, it took him a good few minutes to settle down enough to enjoy himself and the day. The trails had changed in the time he’d been gone, new spurs off the paths in places he’d never recalled seeing before. It made him sad that Saturn didn’t seem to know these new trails, either, but instead stuck to the paths they’d worn together in years past. He let Saturn run until he calmed down, dropping into a steady canter in a meadow that seemed smaller and more overgrown than Leo recalled.

When they re-entered the woods on the other side, Saturn was calmer and more willing to explore when Leo urged him onto new paths that eventually brought them back to the main trails. He saw evidence of other riders having recently been on the paths, but otherwise saw no one. This late in the summer, the families whose properties abutted theirs tended to be away – besides, with Ted gone, only Gram and the trainers would take the horses out, and Gram didn’t ride everyday anymore. Saturn headed for a nearby stream and he slid off his back and stretched while Saturn drank, splashing water onto his face and neck.

Jim Kirk.

He should have known Gram was up to something with all of her talk about learning lessons and karma and such. She was too coy by half, but he couldn’t. Wouldn’t fault her for bringing Jim out here for his birthday. Knowing Gram, she’d probably orchestrated his grandfather’s whole trip, too, ensuring that she’d have no obstacles to getting Leo to come back to Georgia. He imagined that if he’d continued balking about the trip that Jim would have been the ace up her sleeve, that she would
have traded the pleasure of surprising him with the knowledge that Jim had already agreed to the trip. He shook his head and laughed, and beside him, Saturn nickered, unused to the sound.

“You wanna go meet Jim?” he asked the horse.

Saturn began to step into the stream, toward the paths that lay beyond its edge.

“All right, then,” Leo said, “I did promise.” He used a nearby boulder to get a leg up on the uneven ground and flung himself into the saddle. “H’yah,” he said to Saturn, who needed no urging to run once he’d picked his way across the pebbles of the low creek, and they flew through green-dappled sunlight of the woods.

By the time they got back to the farm proper, the sun was too high and the heat far too oppressive for him to even think of jumping Saturn. He knew that the stallion was feeling the heat, as he’d slowed down to the stately walk that could have made him the champion that Ted had always wanted him to be, if ‘the damned horse weren’t so cussedly ornery’.

“Never even had to be trained into you, did it?” Leo asked the horse, as they wound around the rails that led to the barn. “But you’d much rather run.”

Saturn snorted as if in answer, nodding his great head.

“C’mon now,” Leo said, “I’ll take off all the gear and you can have a run of it before we take you in and clean you up.”

Saturn stopped and Leo dismounted onto the grass, rapidly taking off the saddle and the bridle that he knew the horse only tolerated. As soon as he was free, Saturn bolted away from Leo toward the larger paddock where some of the horses were clustered under shade trees. As he watched, Saturn headed right toward one horse, in particular. “Well, now,” he said aloud.

“I’ll take that, Lieutenant Doc,” came the voice from his elbow.

“Cut it out, Steve,” Leo said crossly. “I don’t need you to fetch and carry for me.”

“Aw, shut up and give me some of it,” Steve said, snagging the bridle and the reins as Leo stubbornly held onto the saddle and headed to the barn.

“Who’s that?” Leo asked, pointing his chin at the chestnut mare that Saturn was running with. They crossed into the barn and headed for the tack room.

“Her name is Karya,” Steve harrumphed. “You know Ted with the whole Greek myth thing. It’s good, though – it keeps your demon horse from being lonely.”

"Good," Leo said gruffly, dumping his saddle on its rack.

"So …" Steve said, "that's the famous Jim, is it?"

Leo turned and looked at Steve, raising an eyebrow. "Famous?"

"The way Miss Elizabeth goes on about him, you'd think he was one of her own," Steve said.

Leo shook his head. "They go back to the house?"

Steve nodded. "You should head on up," he said.
"Gotta finish up," Leo said, heading back to the meadow.

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He felt the change in the air pressure around him even before the horses lifted their heads to look at the newcomer. He turned around, leaning back on his elbows. "Well," he drawled out. "There's a sight – Jim Kirk in Georgia." He made no move to break away from the fence as Jim walked toward him, letting his eyes drift over Jim's lean form. Jim was wearing low-slung cargo shorts and a t-shirt, a pair of flip-flops on his otherwise bare feet. His ubiquitous smirk completed the ensemble.

"Couldn't miss your big birthday, old man," he said back, closing the distance, his twinkling eyes challenging the sky for which could be more perfectly blue. "30," he said teasingly. "That's old."

"Not for two more days, yet, Jim boy," Leo said. "I'm still in my twenties until then."

"You're glad to see me anyway," Jim said, still approaching.

Leo laughed, and Jim looked a little startled, but his smile grew impossibly brighter. He held out his hand as he came within arm's reach, and Leo smiled, and pulled on him at the same time Jim pulled back. They threw each other off-balance, but wrapped their arms around each other just the same.

"You missed me, you reprobate," Leo said into Jim's ear, holding him as they wrestled their way closer, bumping into the fence. He slid a hand down Jim's back assessingly. "They not feed you on that boat?"

"Miss Elizabeth has already given me the 'too skinny' speech," Jim breathed out against his neck. Leo pushed him back to look at him more closely, his eyes tracing Jim's features and noting the tiredness and the pallor. "Well, now," he said, inspecting him. "No bruising, nothing's bleeding, no visible breaks – you spent the last few weeks of the mission in the brig, didn't you?"

Jim cuffed him on the head, and then wrestled him back into a hug, his body pressing Leo back against the fence. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I just wouldn't be all that surprised, kid," Leo said, grappling with him. "Especially with you braggin' on all the time you spent in the clink in the past."

"Just …" Jim was halfway toward a laugh, when something in his face changed and he leaned into Leo with intent and whispered, "Shut up," before he pressed his mouth against Leo's in a kiss, brief and hard and familiar.

Leo shifted against Jim and turned into him, kissing Jim back before he pulled away and pressed his forehead against Leo's, their chests heaving against each other's, Jim's fists clenching his shirt against his back. Jim's eyes were downcast, the color high on his cheeks.

"Jim," Leo said in a low voice, barely hearing himself over the pounding of his own heart.

"Just shut up," Jim mumbled, wrapping his arms around Leo again, and burying his face in Leo's neck.

Leo turned his head and dropped a teasing kiss against the hard line of Jim's jaw just below his ear, as he ran his hands down Jim's side, feeling the tremor his actions provoked.

"Bones," Jim whispered, raising his head. He made a startled noise, and stumbled against Leo.
Leo laughed and put a hand on Saturn's muzzle, moving the horse's head away from Jim. He shifted them so that he was between Jim and his horse.

"Bones," Jim said, wide-eyed. "Your horse whacked me."

"He nudged you, you big infant," Leo said. "C'mon now," he said to Saturn. "I thought you were visiting with your lady friend."

Saturn tossed his head.

"Hmmph …" Leo said to him in a displeased tone. "Well, get on then." He waved an arm toward the barn. "C'mon," he said to Jim. "Let me get him fixed up." He reluctantly broke away from Jim and started walking backward toward the barn. "Unless you're afraid of a horse," he teased.

"Right behind you, Bones," Jim said, scoffing.

"Jim!" Leo heard Gram's voice calling from the verandah door. "Come help me with lunch."

"Uh," Jim said, throwing a thumb back toward the house and shrugging. He began walking backward, keeping his eyes on Leo for a few paces, his tongue coming out to wet his lips. Then he turned and headed to the house.

Leo sighed and turned toward the barn, feeling equal measures of elation and frustration. "Hiding behind an old woman," Leo commented to Saturn on the other side of the fence. "That's just sad."

Saturn whuffled as if he were agreeing.

"And you," he said to the horse in a severe tone, as Saturn approached the barn door. "I left you alone when you were making time, so you better stow that shit right now, goddamnit. I was actually getting somewhere." He ran a hand through his hair in annoyance. "Shit," he said softly.

Saturn ignored him, prancing ahead of him into the barn.

+ Chapter 29 +

After settling Saturn back into his stall, Leo strolled up to the house in the midday heat, wondering how Jim was going to play what had just happened between them. A wry smile twisted his mouth as he forced himself to keep his pace steady, to not hurry and betray any anxiety, even though occasionally his own thoughts would jolt him with 'Jim kissed me', and he would feel the sensation of Jim's mouth on his own, again. Because that was another thing that had been laid to rest by Jim's kiss. He might have been hallucinating part of what had happened when he'd been coming back to consciousness in the hospital, but not all of it, and certainly not the part where Jim was kissing him. The feel of Jim's mouth against his today had been exquisite and far too brief, but it had not been unknown.

And he was almost entirely certain that Jim hadn't planned to kiss him, that it had been a snap decision that he'd made, provoked by their not entirely playful grappling. Not that it minded Jim's impulsivity in this situation in the least. Hell, after two years of sexual frustration, he was all for it. Still, he wondered if Jim was going to pretend that he hadn't kissed Leo, or pass it off as meaningless, or if this was finally the step forward that he'd been waiting for. The thing was, Jim could try and play it off any which way he wanted, but Leo had felt the sincerity, the weight of Jim's
want and need in his kiss. He might backtrack, he might run, but it wouldn’t really matter in the end. He’d already tipped his hand.

Leo scraped his boots before stepping into the jack and taking the tall black boots off, wiggling his toes against the cool floorboards in relief before he entered the kitchen. He could hear Jim’s laughter as he crossed the threshold.

“Oh, but you mustn’t get the wrong idea, Jim,” Gram said, “Leo wasn’t the kind of child who got into trouble, generally speaking.”

“I’m sure he was totally perfect,” Jim said solemnly, but with a twinkle in his eye, looking right at Leo with his typical stare, equal parts challenge and mirth. He was leaning against the cabinets next to the sink while Gram washed some lettuce she’d probably made him pick from the garden.

Gram swatted Jim with a tea towel. “I’m sure that your grandmother would say the same about you, Jim Kirk,” she said to him smoothly.

Jim nodded and smiled, but he rubbed the back of his neck tiredly as he did so.

Leo kept himself from narrowing his eyes at Jim. Just like last summer, Jim had come back from his assignment utterly exhausted, but this time it was more than physical.

“She might have had a different opinion about the Thanksgiving that he set dinner free,” Leo said, and Gram laughed.

“Oh, Jim, you didn’t!” Gram said, then turned and looked over her shoulder. “You better have wiped those boots good, Leo,” she warned.

This time Leo didn’t stop himself from rolling his eyes.

“They’re very pretty boots,” Jim said innocently.

“Nice manpris,” Leo shot back, and Jim barked out a laugh and mouthed ‘manpris’. “You really oughta brush up on old-time slang,” Leo said.

“But that’s what I have you for,” Jim countered, “to tell me what it was like in the olden days.”

“Jim dear, wash your hands and tear this lettuce for me, will you? Leo, you have ten minutes to not smell like a horse at my table,” Gram said primly. “Now, get.” Jim had his head bent as he dutifully washed his hands and her eyes flicked from Jim to Leo and back again, while her eyebrow assumed a quizzical pose.

“Yeah, yeah,” he nodded, “I’m going.” He made a subtle shrug of his shoulders, knowing that Gram would understand that he didn’t know what was going on. He turned and left the room. But if he had to guess, he would guess that it had something to do with being trapped on a ship with another Tarsus survivor for weeks on end.

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One thing that Gram knew how to do was keep the conversation moving, and when Leo had returned to the kitchen for their lunch, she was regaling Jim with gossipy tales of her dance career. She was a wonderful storyteller and Jim was honestly engaged with her stories, caught up in the world she was telling him about. While Gram talked, she managed to put a bit more food on Jim’s plate telling him that he simply had to try this or that.
Jim was wise to her maneuvers, but he looked up at Leo with eyes that were honestly laughing before he finally stopped Gram by saying that she couldn’t possibly expect him to gain back the weight he’d lost in one meal, could she?

“Don’t be silly, Jim,” Gram said acerbically. “That’s what dessert is for.” She turned and looked at Leo. “Do I even need to ask what you want for dessert on your birthday, Leo?”

Leo eyed the colander overflowing with peaches that was on the sideboard of the sink. “From the looks of it, no,” he answered.

Gram turned and looked at the sink. “I think I need more peaches,” she said speculatively.

Leo raised an eyebrow. “How many people are you expecting, Gram?”

“Just us,” she said. “Oh, and Steve. Tim, maybe. You know I think he has a girlfriend, Leo and I told him to bring her — did he mention anything to you about that?”

Leo shook his head and looked at Jim. “I thought Tim had to head back up on Sunday,” he said.

“I invited people to come over tomorrow night,” she said, “even though it’s not officially your birthday.”

Leo stared at her, well remembering their conversation where she’d insisted that he had to stay longer because his birthday was on a Sunday.

“You said not to make a big fuss on your birthday!” she defended herself. “So that’ll just be us,” she paused. “And maybe some of the hands.” She made a disapproving face at Leo, although he had not so much as twitched a muscle. “Surely you don’t object to that,” she said. “They’ve known you since you were a baby!”

Leo looked at Jim, who was now hiding a smile behind his hand. “You know,” he drawled out, “that sounds suspiciously like two parties, rather than the one I was expecting.”

Gram shrugged. “Well,” she said airily, “math was never much my strong suit.” She patted Jim’s hand. “Are you sure you don’t want some more, Jim?”

“No, really,” Jim said, pushing back from the table. He’d emptied his plate. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

Gram turned back to Leo. “Besides,” she said. “You said no surprise parties. It’s not a surprise if I’m telling you, right, Jim?”

Jim rested his elbows on the table, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “Mhmm,” he said noncommittally, clearly not wanting to be put in the middle.

She patted Jim affectionately. “And,” she added, “I’m reasonably certain that you were pleased with one of my surprises, at least.”

Leo shook his head at her, watching Jim smother a yawn in his bicep, before he flashed a smile at Leo, who held his eye across the table.

It was true. He was not at all averse to some surprises.

Gram refused to let Jim help clean up the kitchen, enlisting Leo to do it with her while Jim wandered
into the living room to catch up on the news. Gram and he worked seamlessly to clean up what little there was, their patterns long ago established as to who did what.

When Leo crossed the room to put a bowl away in a high cabinet, he was not surprised to see that Jim was asleep on the couch. He excused himself and went to the living room to cover Jim up with a throw that was left there, sliding the PADD out of his hands and laying it on the coffee table.

When he arrived back in the kitchen, Gram was standing by the sink with her hands on her hips. “Leo,” she said, “what’s going on with Jim?”

“He’s exhausted,” Leo said.

“Well, I can see that!” she said in exasperation. “What I mean is, what happened?”

Leo shrugged. “I don’t know yet,” he said simply.

“Well, what did you talk about when he came out to see you?” Gram asked, her worry making her more curious than she’d usually be.

Leo’s lips quirked in a half-smile and Gram drew back and looked at him.

“Oh, Leo,” she said. “I didn’t interrupt, did I?”

“Not you,” Leo said ruefully, “but Saturn made his feelings known.”

“That damned horse!” Gram said crossly. “I told you he was a demon!”

Leo shook his head. “What did he say to you on the way here?”

Gram shrugged. “He was excited about being here, asking all sorts of questions.”

Deflecting, Leo thought.

“I did comment that he was too skinny, because he is,” Gram said. “That boy has nothing to spare on the best of days.”

Leo nodded. “He did say in one of his letters that replicated food tastes off,” he allowed. “And I don’t think he got a lot of sleep. They had him working the overnight shift from what he said, and he had a roommate that snored ‘like a beast’, according to his comms. I think he’s just space-lagged and tired.”

Gram was watching him with a shrewd expression on her face. “Uh huh,” she said. “You will tell me if there’s anything I can do to help, won’t you?”

It was not a request, despite the fact that it was phrased like one. He smiled and kissed his grandmother where she was wrinkling her brow. Admirals could learn a lesson or two from his Gram in how to give orders. “Yes, ma’am,” he said.

“Poor boy,” she said. “I get the feeling that he has just about nobody, Leo, and I don’t much like it.”

“He’s got you now, Gram” Leo said, giving her a hug. “I figure you’re worth more than all of them.”

She swatted at him. “You know that’s not true, you sweet talker,” she said. “No one can take the place of your own people.” She sighed. “And don’t think that by buttering me up you’re going to get out of my plans for you this afternoon,” she said. “I want to see for myself exactly how much progress you’ve made back to health.”
Leo groaned. “Gram, do I need to remind you that I rode a horse for the first time in God knows when this morning?”

“All the more reason for you to stretch out,” Gram said smartly. "Otherwise you’ll be all hunched over like an old man tomorrow. I’ll meet you in the den in five minutes.”

Leo sighed and didn't even bother to argue, tromping upstairs to change into a pair of loose-fitting sweats and wandering back downstairs. He stuck his head in the living room, but Jim was still fast asleep, so he backed out quietly and went to the den where he laid down on the floor to take a nap himself. He knew very well that ‘five minutes’ in Gram speak meant anywhere from a half an hour until dinner time, so he figured he might as well take advantage of it.

An hour later, Gram faced him as they stretched out in tandem, the motions long programmed into him. He could feel her eyes critically assessing his posture and his breathing and made corrections before she even said anything, feeling the burn and pull of muscles gone stiff with disuse, but reawakening. "Leo," she scolded. "The program only works if you do it regularly, and you know it. You've got a ways to go, boy."

Leo sighed and rolled his eyes as they both got on the floor. "Gram," he said, "I was working on my Zen."

Gram laughed against her kneecap, effortlessly bent in half, all long muscle and grace. "Funny boy," she said.

The crunching of an apple behind him was only slightly distracting. "Yoga?" Jim asked.

"A little," Gram said easily. Her cheek was now laying on her calf as she looked at Leo with an amused expression. "Some yoga, some Tai Chi, some traditional stretches, a bit of the Alexander Method, some of the Orion disciplines. An intergalactic hodgepodge, really."

"Wow," Jim said, getting down on the floor with them, and watching their motions before he began to mimic them. "This reminds me of some of the new stuff they were having us do last semester at the Academy. Have you heard of the Madison Method?"

Leo laughed out loud. "Jim," he said. "Meet Elizabeth Madison McCoy."

Jim raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Now who's bragging?" Gram said, twisting her torso around and pinching his hip. "Ten degrees more, Leo!"

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, trying to get his body to do what she wanted.

He looked over at Jim and groaned. Of course, he was able to do everything almost as effortlessly as Gram. Overcompetitive, limber bastard.

Leo rocked back and forth on the porch swing on the front veranda, watching the fireflies dance and flirt under the trees across the wide expanse of the front yard. A breeze ruffled the trees and the lawn as he waited for the first stars to come out, sipping on a few fingers of his grandfather’s good bourbon. Jim had insisted on helping Gram with post-dinner clean up, so Leo’d wandered out to enjoy the evening, listening to the crickets and the nightingales, and occasionally slapping at a pest
that had somehow gotten by the bug zappers.

It was cool enough that Gram had opened the doors and windows to let the air in, and occasionally, he could hear snatches of her conversation with Jim as they were carried by the breeze. Jim must have succeeded in talking her out of the kitchen at some point, because he could hear the sound of her warming up on the piano in the front room. The light from that room spilled a warm pool of yellow onto the furniture and floorboards down that end of the porch. Gram’s playing sounded odd and halting as she ran through the scales, stopping and starting — and he thought that she must be still talking to Jim, and distracted. After a few minutes of incoherent random notes, the playing stopped and then resolved into a tune that he did not recognize, one that had a profound melancholic tone. He sat, listening and swinging, as the light from the fireflies flickered out, and the silver burn of the rising moon began to illuminate the sky.

“Leo,” he heard his grandmother say, and turned in surprise to see her standing behind the screen door near the swing, while the music from the living room played on. “Tell Jim I said good night, would you?” She gave a significant look toward the front room. “I’ve got some correspondence to take care of – I’ll be in my sitting room.”

Leo nodded and wished his grandmother a good night, waiting until she’d turned away and begun up the staircase to rise from the swing and walk as quietly as possible to the other end of the long veranda. Jim was sitting on the piano bench, his back to Leo as the hands he’d always admired played over the keys. Leo moved quietly around to a side window, careful to stay far enough back in the shadows that Jim could not see him, but the angle of the piano was such that it was hard for him to see more than the side of Jim’s face. His expression was impassive with no curve to his mouth as he played, but the music was emotive enough to convey the mood of loss, of sorrow.

Leo leaned against one of the veranda posts and the railing on the short staircase down to the western facing lawn as he listened. Across the way, he could see a couple of his grandfather’s hounds coming out of the woods. One of them stopped and stood at the edge of the lawn, looking for all the world like she was listening to the music, although Leo knew that she was just scenting the air and him. “Hey there, Maggie,” he called to the dog, and she gave a low bark and began to run across the wide expanse. It hurt Leo to see how old the bluetick hound had gotten since he’d last seen her. The smaller foxhound that accompanied her circled her dizzyingly while she loped toward him. He walked down the couple of steps and out onto the lawn and sat, pulling on the old dog’s ears and giving her a scratch. “Hey there, old girl. And who’s this?” He pulled at the foxhound’s tag, tipping it toward the light from the house while she yipped and shivered, and he shushed her. “Amber?”

He looked at the dog. “One of the kids must have named you, huh?”

She barked happily.

“All right, now,” he said, “be quiet and listen to Jim.”

The dogs sat companionably on either side of him, Maggie with her head on Leo’s thigh while he petted her and listened to the music, Amber intermittently getting up to circle Leo and Maggie before finally settling next to the bluetick and placing her head on Leo’s knee. He laughed and patted her too, before settling back on his elbows and watching the stars come out as the music ebbed.

“Bones?” he heard the creak of the door as Jim stepped out onto the porch.

Amber stood up and barked excitedly, always happy to meet someone new as Leo answered, “Out here.”

“You need a drink?” Jim asked.
“I wouldn’t say no to a drop more,” Leo drawled, holding up his glass.

Jim came down and retrieved Leo’s glass with a smile, patting the enthusiastic Amber and returning a few minutes later as Amber waited anxiously on the porch.

“Don’t give the dog my bourbon,” Leo warned, still stroking Maggie’s head.

Jim laughed and stretched out next to him on the lawn, putting his glass between them, resting his head on his hand. Amber yipped and lay down with her nose pointing at Jim, tail wagging.

“No,” Leo warned her. “No jumping.”

Amber looked up at him with a falsely innocent expression, tail still wagging, and Jim laughed, scratching the dog’s head. Now that the music had stopped, Leo could hear the activity at the back of the house where the barn was, and knew that soon enough the dogs would be called back for the night.

“Didn’t know you played, Jim,” Leo said.

Jim shrugged noncommittally. “I don’t really,” he said. “My grandmother taught me some things when I was a kid, but … I just fool around.”

Leo nodded. “Sad song,” he said. “I didn’t recognize it.”

“Something my mom played when she was home sometimes,” Jim said. “Always kind of stuck in my head.” He took a sip of his whiskey, as both of the dogs pricked up their ears, Amber jumping up and quivering again.

“Go on, then,” Leo said, patting Maggie one last time. “Good night. They sleep in the barn,” he explained to Jim.

“Ah,” Jim said with a wry smile. “You know this place is nothing like the farms I grew up around.”

Leo lay back on the ground and looked up at the sky, only seeing Jim from the periphery of his eye. “Yeah,” he said, letting the silence grow for a while. “What happened up there, Jim?”

“You didn’t get my comms,” Jim said.

Leo turned his head. “I got some of them,” he answered. “You told me that Mitchell was being a dick,” Jim nodded, “and that you’d met some kid named Riley that recognized you.”

Jim took a swallow of his drink.

“From Tarsus?”

“Yeah,” Jim said in a low voice. The breeze rolled through the trees and across the grass. "He wanted to talk about it all the time."

"What'd you do?" Leo asked after a while.

Jim shook his head. "Listened, mostly." He let the silence build again. "At least, he had enough sense not to talk about it in front of other people."

Leo just waited, watching as Jim shifted on the grass, all tight muscles and tension. From the look of him, Jim had not only been trying to outrun his memories, but work them out. The muscles in his arms were more defined than Leo’d ever seen them, the curve of his biceps prominent and
"He's obsessed with finding him," Jim said, then spat the name out as if it were vile, "Kodos. He's sure that he's still alive, and he kept saying that we have to find him."

"Do you think he's alive?" Leo asked.

"Probably," Jim said. "But it's a big universe, right?" He ran his bare feet against the grass. "It's the proverbial needle in a haystack."

A large shape rose up from the trees and began to fly, the sweep of its wings audible in the quiet as the owl trained its sights on some hapless prey on the ground. Jim watched it fly, the muscle ticking in his jaw.

"He had this program," he said haltingly. "Like one of those age progression ones, that he'd used on a sketch he had someone draw for him." He looked at Leo. "It didn't look like him. Kodos." He paused and looked away before he spoke. "And I keep wondering, you know – I mean, Riley was younger than me when it happened – but … how did he forget that face? How did he get it wrong?"

Jim shook his head.

"I don't know, Jim," Leo said, knowing there was no point in talking to him about trauma and memory, about the contradictions of eyewitness accounts to the same event.

"I wish I could forget, Bones," Jim said quietly, looking up at the stars. "But my brain doesn't work that way." He drained what was left in his glass, and held it up in front of the moon. "I think," he said slowly, sounding a bit drunk, "that I'm going to have another. You?" He looked over at Leo.

"I'm good," Leo said, letting him see how much was left in his glass.

He heard the bang of the screen door as Jim went into the house, and the quieter one on his way out. This time, when Jim lay down on the grass next to him, he barely left any space between them. "So," he said, stretching out. "Tell me about the conference."

Leo turned his head and looked at Jim.

"Don't give me the look, Bones," Jim said, looking right back at him. "I'm OK."

Leo stared at him a bit longer, but Jim had set his jaw in that way that told him that the topic was closed, for the moment.

"Conference?" Jim prompted.

"It was fine," Leo said in a long drawl. "It kind of surprised me how many folks showed up, but we got good feedback from most of them – they said they felt it had been helpful. Some groups came out of it." He paused, and took a sip of his whiskey. "Barnett showed up to hear the keynote speaker."

"Shut up!" Jim said. "Barnett?"

"Mmmhmm," Leo hummed. "I thought he was there to give me the hairy eyeball, you know, to make a list of names of folks that should be kept onworld, or some such, but he made a point of coming up to me and telling me that he thought that the conference had been a good idea."

Jim whistled. "Bones," he said, "getting in tight with the brass."

"You shut up," Leo said, kicking at his leg while Jim smiled.
"You think you're ready to go up there now," Jim said, after a moment. "Now that the conference is over?"

Leo shook his head. "It doesn't have much to do with it, in my case," he said slowly looking at Jim. "I made my peace with it my own way, as you very well know."

Jim grinned at him. "Good," he said. "It is beautiful, Bones," he said, looking back up at the stars. "Strange, but beautiful. Just like Horatio said."

Leo nodded.

"Didja bring the rest of the journals with you?" Jim asked. There was a tone of eagerness in his voice that made Leo smile.

"If I'd known you were going to be here…" Leo answered, watching the question form on Jim's face. "Don't even ask me, Jim," he warned. "I'm not telling you the end of the story, no matter how much you pout." Before Jim could object any further, he added, "And don't even think of asking Gram – I already told her not to tell you no matter how much you give her the puppy eyes."

"Bones!" Jim protested, kicking him again.

"My lips are sealed," he intoned, watching Jim's eyes travel to his mouth and linger just a bit too long. He licked his lower lip and took a drink, watching Jim reflexively mimic his gesture before he turned his head and determinedly looked back up at the stars.

"I don't make puppy eyes," Jim said in a particularly peevish tone.

Leo pursed his lips and tried to keep the bubble of laughter that was threatening to well up at bay. Not yet, Jim Kirk, Leo thought, but it might be fun to make you beg, just a little. He turned his eyes back up to the heavens and let the smile bloom on his face.

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Chapter 30

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One thing that could be said about the quiet of the McCoy farm in the middle of the night — the sound of someone walking around was instantly audible. For one dizzying instant before his consciousness snapped into the correct timeframe, Leo thought that it was his father. Before the situation had gotten dire enough that he had been confined to bed, David McCoy had been restless and prone to being awake for the hours in the middle of the night. But that thought was gone almost as fleetingly as it had arrived, although the memory was still surprisingly sharp, even after all this time.

The sound of the tread -- the way the foot fell on the floorboards as it neared the wide well of the staircase -- was clearly Jim's. Leo was on his feet, running a hand across his face to scrub the vestiges of sleep from it, and opening the door to his room before he really registered that he'd done it. Across the hallway, one foot raised to take a step downward, Jim stopped, looking startled and guilty, and perhaps, just a bit relieved.

"Jim," Leo yawned, noting the running shoes in his hand. "Gonna run in the dark?"

"There's light enough to see by," Jim said quietly.
There was an aching thread in his voice, and Leo knew that this wasn't the time to tease or to push him. Jim's eyes burned as fever-bright as they'd been on the day he'd met him, when he was running from Iowa and a dead end. Tonight he was just running, in a KFF t-shirt and a pair of running shorts that had seen better days. "Can't sleep?" he asked.

"My sense of time is all wrong," Jim said, and his choice of words made Leo wonder what horrors Jim's subconscious was serving up to him.

Leo hummed his reply, hands on hips as he surveyed Jim. "C'mon then," he said to Jim, motioning toward his room.

Jim's eyes flashed up to his, and then darted away, down the hall to where Leo would bet money that his grandmother was wide awake and listening.

"C'mon Jim," he said quietly, "it's not like we haven't bunked in together before."

Jim shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"But running in the dark in a place you've never been before is a fine idea," Leo said.

"Worried about me, Bones?" Jim said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Should I be, kid?" Leo shot back.

"I'm fine," Jim said, his mouth still too tight around the smile he was trying to wear.

"Prove it then," Leo said, motioning back toward his room. "Go on in and lay down." Jim stared at him.

"As soon as the sun comes up, you can go off and run to your heart's content," Leo said. "You need to reset your clock -- start your day on this planet's time." He saw Jim's expression shift as he considered Leo's argument. He took a step toward Jim, but went around him and into the bathroom. "Don't get on my side," he warned.

When he came back out of the bathroom two minutes later, the hall was empty. He blew out a breath, wondering if he'd gambled correctly, but Jim was standing in his room, still holding onto his shoes.

"C'mon, Jim," Leo said, putting a hand on his shoulder as he walked on by him to the bed. He crawled into it and turned over on his side, putting his back to the wall and facing Jim, whose posture uncharacteristically spoke of his indecision, or his continuing problem with authority, no matter how benign. Jim liked to slip in and out of Leo's bed when he wanted to, not because he was told to be there, or God forbid, that he needed to be there.

Finally, Jim put down the shoes, and sat on the edge of the bed before he lay down. He faced away from Leo, who flipped up the sheet over them both. "Awful close quarters, Bones," he said quietly.

"Just like old times," Leo said cheerfully. "Lights off," he said, then tugged on Jim's rigid shoulder until Jim reluctantly turned on his back. "Close your eyes, Jim," he said, curling an arm across his chest.

"Bones," Jim said, sounding unsure.

"You want me to give you a sedative?" Leo asked him, keeping his voice neutral.
Jim was shaking his head no before he even finished the question, his quick response just shy of a shudder. "No," he said in a low voice. "That'd just make it harder to wake up."

Leo nodded, pleased that Jim was at least admitting that his sleep was being disturbed by nightmares. "This been going on for a while?"

Jim shrugged under his arm, and Leo took that for assent, pulled Jim a little closer in the small bed. "But you aren't where your dreams take you, Jim," he said to him in a hushed voice. "You're here," he left the 'with me' unspoken, as he continued on, "where it's nothing but peaceful. I always forget how quiet it is here, how it makes me hear things that I don't notice in every day life," he spoke slowly, letting his drawl come out. He'd let his fingers rest on the pulse point just above the bend of Jim's elbow. He felt like he was willing it to slow down, using his voice to try and soothe Jim.

"Like what?" Jim murmured.

"Like how the wind in the trees sounded when we were laying on the lawn, like the trees were whispering to each other in the dark."

"What do the trees talk about, Bones?" Jim sounded amused.

"Who knows?" Leo said. "You're the one who's into languages, not me," he paused. "They're probably just gossiping. I swear that's what the birds are doing half the time."

"I think they're trying to find mates, Bones," Jim said.

His pulse had settled down from its hectic pace, so Leo kept talking. "Not now, they're not," he countered. "They're all done with that for the year, most of 'em. Now, it's probably all about who got a better nest and doesn't deserve it, and whose kid can't fly because he's too stupid, and arguing about what day to leave and fly farther South."

Jim laughed out loud. "Bones, are you complaining about nature?"

"Well, now," he said, "I'm not really sure how my observation about what the birds might be going on about got turned around to me complaining about nature, but …"

Jim was still laughing but he sobered up and said, "Nature gets blamed for a lot of things, didja ever notice?"

"You mean like human nature, or something?" Leo asked.

"Not exactly," Jim answered. "You were right about the Capellans."

"Oh?" Leo said.

"Long time ago, you said that they'd rather let thousands of people die rather than save them because of their adherence to Darwinian logic," Jim said.

"Don't go blaming Darwin for the misapplication of his observations, kid," Leo said. "I don't think his moral sensibility would have been aligned with the kind of worldview that the Capellans embrace."

Jim turned on his side to face Leo, displacing his arm. "It was like being surrounded by it again," he said.

In the dim light, Leo could see that Jim wasn’t looking at him, but downward at the space between
them. “The eugenics crap?” Leo asked.

Jim nodded. “Garrovick brought a bunch of us planetside,” he said, “but they were only interested in meeting the crew who were considered the strongest, the best fighters.”

Leo’s eyes narrowed. “So you had to fight to get them to accept the cure?”

“Not really,” Jim said. “It was about gaining their respect, but … it was useless.” He looked up at Leo. “They took the cure, Bones, but I don’t think they’ll use it. At least …” his eyes looked over Leo’s shoulder, “not the current Teer.”

“Listen, I’m amazed that the diplomats got them to consent to even have the cure on their planet,” Leo said. “Maybe someone will get desperate enough the next time there’s an outbreak to use it.”

Jim shook his head. “I don’t know, Bones,” he said. “We talked to the younger guys when we were fighting them, and the guy that’s going to be the Teer someday isn’t stupid, but he’s not the kind of guy who’ll rock the boat. Some of the guys around him were brighter and they might be able to convince him, but … they have to live long enough.”

Leo watched Jim, and the grim set of his mouth. “Jim,” he said quietly. “You more than most people know that there is a tremendous amount of stupidity and cruelty in the universe.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to accept it, Bones,” he said quietly, but with anger. “I thought that I was really getting somewhere talking to the younger guys, but Mitchell was on me the whole time about the prime directive, and respecting their culture, and you know, it’s all bullshit, right? I mean, why is it allowable to go there and use a potential cure for a disease as a bargaining chip when that is a huge cultural issue for them, but talking about the logical fallacies in their interpretation of survival of the fittest is seditious and subverting the directive?”

Leo looked at Jim. “Did Mitchell report you to Garrovick?”

Jim huffed out a sigh through his nose. “Not exactly,” he said, “but it got up the chain of command anyway.” He shook his head. “Garrovick agreed with me, by the way, although he did say that I might have been too aggressive in my arguments.”

“I thought the Capellans only respected aggression,” Leo said mildly.

“Exactly!” Jim said.

“What’s Mitchell’s angle?” Leo asked. “He trying to knock you out of the way?”

Jim rolled onto his back. “Maybe. Maybe he believes it, too, all that crap, like being strong is better than being smart,” he shook his head. “I’ve heard it from both sides, you know. But the younger Capellans, their arguments against trying to change things -- it was just like all the arguments I heard my aunt and uncle having with those morons back on Tarsus. All those people who wanted to maintain the status quo, that were too afraid to rock the boat. The ironic thing is that they fucking lived, most of them,” he said bitterly. “But only because my aunt and uncle and Hoshi did everything they could to get us into a position where we could save their sorry asses.”

Leo thought about the testimony of the survivors that he’d read, his own disgust at the passivity and the defensiveness that characterized much of it. “Do you think you did the right thing, Jim?”

Jim was quiet for a long time before he turned his head toward Leo. “I don’t think there was any other choice.”
“Focus on that, then, Jim,” Leo said. “That’s all you can do.” He knew that he was asking Jim for a lot, that he was asking him to do something that he’d been unable to do, at least insofar as his father was concerned.

Jim stared at Leo for a long time in the half-light of the room before he nodded.

“Now, c’mon,” Leo said, “close your eyes and listen to the quiet.”

Jim’s lashes dropped onto his cheeks, his mouth twisted into an amused smile. “I’m never going to be able to listen to birds without thinking of complaining, Bones.”

“Shh!” he ordered. “Sleeping.”

He dropped his arm back over Jim’s waist. At least this way he’d know if the kid tried to run again.

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Jim had still been mostly asleep when Leo’d risen for good, or awake enough to make a crack about the call of the famous Georgia Complainer before his eyes had dropped shut again. It hadn’t been the most comfortable night’s sleep that Leo’d ever had. For one thing, the bed was small. For another, there was a kind of consciousness to the sexual tension between them that hadn’t been there before. He was pretty sure that it was coming from Jim, who didn’t like feeling vulnerable about anything, but it was more than that. Jim had slept restlessly, obviously in the grip of some nightmare at certain points. And Leo had tried to soothe him, whispering and rubbing his back, but had only gotten so far. Then again, it had been egotistical of him to hope that he’d be able to banish Jim’s traumatic past with his mere presence, as if what had happened to him was so easily resolvable. He could only hope that Jim would continue to turn to him, that the friendship that they’d built over the past two years was enough of a base that Jim would continue to confide in him the way that he had started to.

The morning had been cool and damp with dew, but there was a rising hum from the insects that let him know that it was going to be a hot one, a perfect end of summer day for a garden party, if Gram had her way. He could have groused a lot more about the whole thing, but had decided that it wasn’t worth it to display bad manners and ingratitude just because he honestly didn’t see what the big deal was about turning 30. To own the truth, he didn’t think that Gram really thought that it was a big deal either. What she was really celebrating was the fact that he was alive, and that he was thriving, despite his own folly. “I’ll drink to that,” he said to Saturn as they flew through the green woods, watching his black hooves flash against the red ground before he faced forward again and took a deep breath in.

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“No,” Leo said, patting Saturn’s right hind leg when Saturn gave him the left again. "I did that one. Is there something else?” He inspected the already cleaned hoof and saw that it was clear of debris, and dropped it, wiping his hand on his jodhpurs to get at the bits of straw that clung. "No," he answered himself and then addressed Saturn, "Now, quit stalling and give me the other one, c’mon. Unlike you, I haven’t had my breakfast."

Gram had already been in the kitchen when he’d come downstairs, bustling about agitatedly, consulting lists and muttering to herself, so all he’d done was grab a cup of coffee and bolt before he was pressed into service.

Saturn snorted in a way that let Leo know that he wasn’t impressed. When Leo bent to pick up the curry comb, Saturn had moved to the side a little, still skittish even after all these years. Leo slid his hands over the warm horseflesh and crooned. "C’mon now, you know I’ll be careful. There you go,"
he said when Saturn calmed. "That’s right.” He worked his way around to the front of the horse, brushing with one hand while he stroked the horse’s neck with the other. Saturn dropped his head over Leo’s shoulder, expelling a warm breath that ruffled his damp t-shirt. From behind him, he heard the soft sound of an apple crunching and realized why Saturn had been behaving a bit more flighty than usual.

“You should be careful coming too close to him with his favorite snack, Jim,” he said, only looking over at him when he’d started down Saturn’s other side, his non-working hand still smoothing over the animal’s side to keep him grounded. “You’re OK,” he said to Saturn, as he started forward. He’d never held with the idea of tying Saturn up, so he had to hope that the stallion would stay still. “It’s just Jim,” he soothed. “He’s OK.” Saturn quivered under his hand, and Leo looked from the horse to Jim, who was leaning up against the wall of the barn. He was wearing the running clothes that he’d slept in the night before, and was eating an apple, flushed and sweaty from his run.

He noted that Jim’s eyes seemed to be fixed on the hand that was touching Saturn, and he slowed his motions down, tried to make them more conscious, and watched as Jim licked his lips. “Is that another apple in your pocket, or do you have some sort of fast-growing tumor?” Leo asked.

Jim choked a little. “I don’t think that’s how the line is supposed to go, Bones,” he said with a laugh, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“You oughta know, I s’pose,” Leo said, talking to Saturn, as he ran a hand down the ridge of his back. “Right there, boy?”

Saturn’s tail switched, and he made a low whickering noise.

“All right,” Leo drawled, running over the length of his spine again. “There you go.”

Saturn took a step back and he looked over to see that Jim had moved. “It’s OK, my beauty,” Leo said, moving forward to loop an arm around the big horse’s neck. “S’ok.”

Saturn nickered and tossed his head, watching as Jim pulled the apple out of his pocket and moved closer to the horse.

“That’s Jim,” he said quietly to Saturn as he stroked under his forelock, his eyes flicking from Jim to the horse. “He’s trying to bribe you.”

Jim smiled, but his eyes kept drifting up to Leo’s hands as he stepped closer to Saturn, his hand holding the apple palm up.

Saturn blew out a breath and took a half-step forward, bringing his chest in contact with Leo’s back.

“You gonna take it?” Leo asked him quietly, rubbing above the horse’s nose, while he kept his eyes fixed on Jim.

Saturn sniffed at the apple, then moved his head, sniffing at Jim’s chest. Leo sucked in a breath, realizing that Jim must smell like his bed, and him. Saturn’s muzzle ghosted over Jim’s head, and then in a decisive moment, he opened his mouth above Jim’s hand, skimming the apple off his palm with a snap as Jim smiled.

“He really is beautiful, Bones,” he said, rubbing up Saturn’s muzzle as Saturn butted his belly with his nose, looking for more treats.

Leo laughed. “I’d turn out my pockets if I were you, Jim,” he said. “And move any valuables out of the way, if you know what I’m saying. C’mon now,” he said to Saturn, pushing his head away from
Jim, as Saturn whickered and resisted. “Cut that out.”

He finished grooming Saturn in silence while Jim returned to his post, watching Leo all the while. When he was finished with Saturn’s tail, he led Saturn back to his stall as he pranced and tossed his head. “Yes, yes,” Leo said, “you’re all pretty now.” He nuzzled at Saturn’s forelock and closed the stall door, whispering. “See you later.”

He turned and walked back up the barn to clean up and return the currying tools back to the tack room, as Jim watched him with a wry smile, arms crossed over his chest. “What?” he barked crossly. “I got your number, Bones,” Jim said.

Leo raised his eyebrows, which made Jim smile, then turned away to sort the brushes and other gear. He washed his hands and arms at the old sink in the tack room, thinking about Jim watching his hands, about Jim in the meadow the day before. He turned away from the sink and plucked a hand towel from the pile, then walked slowly to where Jim stood, his expression slightly smug.

“You do, huh?” he asked Jim, keeping his voice pitched low. He stood right in front of him and dried off his hands slowly, watching how Jim’s eyes followed his movements, tracking from his hands to his face. He finished and draped the towel around his neck, hands gripping the ends as he took a step in. “Just so I know,” he said slowly, “are we pretending that you didn’t kiss me …” He watched as Jim’s surprised eyes flicked down to his mouth and back up to his eyes. “Again.”

“Again?” Jim asked, licking his lower lip.

“I remember you kissing me, Jim,” Leo said softly, watching the flush bloom on Jim’s cheek and neck. “In the hospital.”

Jim didn’t deny it. “I had to get you to wake up,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Hmm …” Leo said. He dropped a hand on the wall next to Jim’s head, and leaned in. “Interesting method.”

“Not mine, I have to admit,” Jim said blandly, but his eyes were hot. “It does have a long precedent.”

“In fiction?” Leo asked, smiling, and leaning in just a little closer. “And how come I’m Snow White when you’re the one who’s always eating apples?”

“Maybe you need to get some sun?” Jim suggested, smirking.

“Mmm …” Leo said, “Well, now, I was standing upright and awake, and in the sunlight, I might add … yesterday.” There were scant inches between him and Jim now, and he could smell the apple on his breath, hear how fast he was breathing.

“Yesterday?” Jim asked.

“When you kissed me,” Leo clarified helpfully, watching Jim’s eyes watch his mouth and travel slowly upward to his eyes again. “Again.”

“Oh,” Jim said with false innocence. “Well, there I was, just back from ten weeks in space and you started bitching at me right away.”

“Me?” Leo asked, spreading his free hand open and pressed over his heart in mock surprise. “So you had to kiss me …” he began.
Jim’s eyes, almost feverishly blue, tracked the movement, “to shut you up,” Jim finished, in a tone that implied ‘of course’.

“To shut me up,” Leo repeated, looking at Jim intently, feeling the crackle and swirl of the heat between them. “Interesting,” he murmured, deliberately lifting his hand from his chest and stroking a finger across Jim’s lower lip. Then, he leaned in and pressed a kiss, slow and hot and sweet, against Jim’s mouth, sliding his tongue teasingly over the seam between his lush lips as Jim's hands came up to rest on his hips.

He drew back and looked at Jim, all flushed skin and glittering eyes, and traced Jim’s mouth with his finger, before he dropped a teasing kiss against his lips. Then he used the hand next to Jim’s head to push away from him, never breaking eye contact as he took one step away from Jim and toward the door.

“Just so you know, Jim,” Leo said, leaning back to speak near his ear, but not touching him. “That was me kissing you because,” Jim turned his head so that Leo could see his left eye gleaming hotly at him, “… I wanted to kiss you.” He brushed his nose against the skin under Jim’s ear. “Just so you know.”

Then he turned around and left the barn, barely able to contain the grin that had broken out on his face.

“Doc!” he heard from across the way.

“Morning, Steve!” he waved. “Beautiful day, ain’t it?”

“It’s a peach,” Steve agreed, waving back.

Leo smiled and walked on up to the house. “I got your number, Jim Kirk,” he said aloud as he approached the porch step.

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This probably should have felt a lot weirder.

That was all Leo could think as he surveyed the late afternoon garden party that spilled over from the western side of the veranda out onto the lawn. Gram’s ‘small’ get-together included people from all walks of his life, from neighbors down the road, to the odd schoolmate that he hadn’t seen in well over a decade. What they actually had in common was Gram, and not Leo, whose party this ostensibly was. In one way or another, they were all folks that Gram had kept in touch with over the years, with a few notable exceptions. Leo had been surprised to see Jessica walking into the yard, following an enthusiastic but stiff-legged toddler as he burst into the party. Jessica’s husband was off-planet for another month, and then the whole family was moving up to Starbase 23 while Jessica and her husband continued their research. Thomas, their thirteen month old, would be spending his first few years in the artificial environs while his parents studied and quantified new spectrums of radiation. He wondered how the child's boundless energy would work in that kind of world, without green lawns to romp on, and indulgent dogs to chase around while he squealed. At the moment, Thomas was upside-down and giggling as Jim held him by the ankles and swung him loosely, all the while talking to his mother, about quantum physics, the last time he’d checked in on their conversation. Thomas had taken to Jim immediately upon introduction, walking from his mother’s lap to Jim’s like their knees were bridges.

“Well now,” Gram said, from over his shoulder. “That’s an interesting picture.”
Leo raised an eyebrow and turned his head to look at her. “Like you didn’t plan this to the nth degree,” he said.

“I couldn’t have planned that,” she said. “But it’s interesting, just the same.”

“I’m surprised you invited Jessica,” Leo drawled. “Seeing as how you never approved of her and all.”

“Things are different now,” Gram answered. “She’s grown. So have I.”

Leo turned himself around at her tone.

“She wrote me the kindest note after Horatio died,” she explained. “And offered her belated condolences on your father's death. It became clear that her fondness for you was genuine.”

Leo smiled. “I won’t say that I told you so, because now that I’m practically 30, it just seems childish.”

Gram snorted at him delicately. “That’s very mature of you, I’m sure,” she said sarcastically. “Anyway. I sent her something when her son was born, and she and I correspond a bit now.” She peered at him. “So there.”

“You gonna stick your tongue out now, Gram?” Leo laughed.

“Don’t be an infant,” she chided. “Have you met Tim’s girlfriend? Does she seem nice?”

“She’s very smart,” Leo said, “or at least she seems to be. You know Tim — he’s talking enough for both of them.”

Gram made a face. “I just hope he’s not going to bulldoze right over her.”

Leo looked over at the lawn, where Tim and Nobiko were standing, talking to a guy he hadn’t seen since medical school, and some of his grandmother’s knitting group, a number of whose children and grandchildren were running around. Nobiko was listening to Tim with an amused expression on her face, occasionally leaning forward to interject a word or phrase here and there, much to the enjoyment of their listeners. “I don’t think she’s the type to get bulldozed by much, Gram,” Leo said. “sides, did you see the way he looks at her?”

“Hmm …” Gram said, looking at him significantly. “Why, yes, I have. Anything you’d like to tell me, Leo?”

“No,” he said blandly.

“Jim seems very … intent today,” she observed coyly.

Leo hummed a response, as Gram's eyebrow raised and her lips pursed. She stared at him, trying to get more out of him, but he only smiled and slung an arm around her. “Did I thank you for doing this, Gram?”

The smile that crossed her face was delighted and indulgent, and just the tiniest bit smug. "It's good to have you home, Leo," she answered him, kissing his jaw. "You're enjoying your birthday, aren't you?"

Across the lawn, he heard the sound of Jim's laugh and there was something in it that made him look over to where he and Jessica sat. Thomas sat on his mother's lap and pulled at her necklaces while
she kissed his round baby head, but Jim was watching Leo with a wide smile. Leo felt the laugh bubbling up in his chest – there was no mistaking that look of triumph on Jim's face – he'd gotten his answer about Horatio from Jessica. He held Jim's eye as he raised his glass of bourbon and tipped it in Jim's direction, acknowledging that he understood, and letting a slow, lazy smile bloom as he did so. *You think on that for a while, Jim,* he thought, drinking and then sliding just the tip of his tongue out to catch the bourbon on his lips, watching as Jim's eyes dropped, as if magnetized, to his mouth.

To Gram he said, "I'm having a wonderful birthday, Gram. Thank you." And his voice left no room for doubt, whatsoever.

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**Chapter 31**

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The weird thing was this: Leo'd never been so sexually frustrated in his life, but happy at the same time. And he wasn’t in a big rush, at least not at the moment.

It made no rational sense, but then, little about his life did, if viewed from the outside. Or even from the inside, because it sometimes seemed that he and Jim were involved in some sort of bizarre game of chicken, or one-upmanship, something that had started the night of his birthday in Georgia, the day after he’d thrown down the gauntlet in front of Jim by kissing him and not making an excuse for why he was doing so.

But it wasn’t about the challenge -- at least not as far as he was concerned -- because he wasn’t playing a game, even if he wasn’t above teasing and flirting. And why not? It had certainly gotten Jim’s attention, and now that he had it, he intended to keep it.

Besides, Horatio had always told him that anything worth doing was worth doing well. It was an aphorism that he’d lived much of his life by — and he had no intention of changing that now, not when the stakes were so high.

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It had been a more low-key affair, the actual day of his birthday. He’d gone for a long ride on Saturn and had been surprised, and truthfully, disappointed, when Jim hadn’t shown up in the barn when he was grooming the stallion. But when he’d returned to the house, he’d found Jim up to his elbows in peaches, talking to Gram as he sliced the seeming bushels that she was turning into peach cobbler for his birthday dinner.

Dinner had been a relaxed gathering with just a few folks. Gram had invited Leo’s “Aunt” Pauline, her fellow dancer and long-time friend who wore the title as an honorific, Steve, Tim and Nobiko, who’d put off their departure for one more day at Gram’s urging, and Jim. They’d eaten out on the porch as the sun set and the dragonflies drifted away from the creek and buzzed the lawn before disappearing to wherever it was they went when the night came. The day had been hot enough that Gram set the fans turning on the porch to stir the air and left the doors open to let some of the cool air drift out from inside. Leo had smiled at this indulgence of hers, something that she never would have done if Ted had been at home to protest the waste of energy, even if it had been generated by their photovoltaic array.

Watching Jim and Tim get to know each other had been a real eye-opener for Leo, because until he saw them together, he’d never realized how similar they were. It wasn’t so much their physicality. Tim had the McCoy blue eyes that reminded Leo of his father, but otherwise was tall and broad-
shouldered with dark hair just like any number of McCoy progeny. No, Jim’s resemblance to Tim was borne from his recognition that Tim had been the Lord of Misrule of Leo’s childhood, as he gleefully organized games and pranks, the post that Jim, whatever else he might be, occupied in his adulthood.

Over the course of the long dinner, as Tim had regaled Jim with tales of their misspent youth, Jim had countered with tales of his own adolescence, and the recognition had dawned. Interestingly enough, Jim had claimed that it wasn’t until adolescence and hormones set in that he really had come into his own. Up until that point, according to him, he’d been as pure as the driven snow, the perfect student, the perfect kid. This assertion had been met with much guffawing and an “Oh Jim!” from his incredulous Gram, but despite Jim’s wide smile, Leo thought that he’d detected the presence of Jim’s mask. Whatever had happened to provoke Jim’s rebellion hadn’t been pleasant, and he’d pretty much guarantee that it hadn’t had anything to do with hormones.

Tim had reveled in the re-telling of any tale that proved that Leo was somehow the instigator, a fact he would neither confirm nor deny, smiling into his bourbon instead as Steve would chime in with his own bits of the narrative. Many of Tim’s most spectacular pranks involved farm equipment, as he’d expressed an early interest in anything that he could rev up the horsepower of, especially if it was a more sedate machine like a mower. In fact, his most spectacular prank had resulted in a runaway mower that had torn up Ted’s best practice ring for dressage, several dozen yards of fencing, most of the west lawn, some of Gram’s roses (“And you were just lucky they weren’t my own gram’s roses, Timothy Aloysius, or you still wouldn’t be able to sit down”) and a large portion of the porch on which they were now sitting. Tim’s delight at having a story to tell that came with such a substantial price tag on damages was clear.

Tim’d assumed, of course, that Jim would not have a similarly spectacular story to share. However, after a lifetime of knowing Tim, and only two years of knowing Jim, well … Leo’s money was always going to be on Jim Kirk.

Oddly enough, only the value of the antique car that Jim had destroyed had been vigorously disputed, not the actual tale of Jim driving it over the edge of a quarry at age twelve. Tim had protested the destruction of any machine on principal, but Jim’s assertion that the car had been left to him and that he’d rather have it destroyed than sold was accepted as truth, although Leo would bet his life that there was a helluva lot more to the story that remained unsaid. Still, Gram and Pauline had exclaimed over Jim’s foolhardiness, and the cruelty of a stepfather who was trying to steal a family inheritance, and hushed up a protesting Tim who did not understand why Jim’s deeds were seen as heroic and just, while his own were condemned as wicked.

Jim’d just sat back in his chair and basked in the glow of winning yet another competition while Leo wondered why it was that his brother’s name never came up in any of his stories.

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Tim and Jim had been pressed into service to help clean up the kitchen, while Leo, claiming the privilege of his birthday, lounged on the porch and spoke to Nobiko, while enjoying yet another piece of the peach cobbler — also a perk of his special day. Nobiko and he had had a lively discussion and gotten to know each other better in their own more low-key way. She was curious about their childhood adventures, of course, but he could tell that she was also curious about him, and it made him wonder how much of his worry Tim had shared with her before they’d come to Georgia. Nobiko was far too polite to betray more than a mild curiosity, although it was enough expressed that Leo had noticed. She was a Southern belle herself, fourth generation from Biloxi, and had gone to Ole Miss a couple of years behind Leo. It turned out that they knew a few people here and there in common, although their academic paths diverged at the point where they had begun to
specialize in the biological and physical sciences respectively. By the time Tim had come to collect her so that they could retire to one of the guest rooms upstairs they’d become fast friends, bonding over their love for science, and Tim.

After a few minutes alone on the peaceful quiet of the porch, he’d heard the sound of the piano and gone looking for Jim, only to find Pauline, who like Tim and Nobiko had been talked into staying over due to the late hour and amount of alcohol that had been consumed, at the keys. Gram had settled into one of the corners of the couches, knitting a baby sweater that Leo suspected might be for Jessica’s Thomas. His raised eyebrow was met with a confirmatory shrug, as Gram counted her stitches and changed colors, staying quiet so as not to disturb Pauline.

He shook his head in bemusement at Gram and went off in search of Jim, looking first in the clean and quiet kitchen, then returning to the porch where the empty table stood, clear of all adornments. He walked around the house on the porch and found no trace of Jim, entering the house again via the front door, only to find himself pressed into a dark corner under the staircase that went to the second floor. Jim’s eyes gleamed at him with mischief and lust before he leaned in to kiss Leo thoroughly.

Leo’d lost his glass of bourbon somewhere in his travels, a fact that he’d been unhappy about until just that minute, because had he been holding onto it, he surely would have dropped it in his haste to wrap his arms around Jim’s slim body and pull it closer to his own. Jim laughed darkly into his mouth, the sound cut off when Leo tilted his head and swept his tongue into Jim’s mouth, curling it around his tongue, tasting bourbon and peaches and the coffee Jim shouldn’t have been drinking at this late hour.

Jim, never one to shy from a challenge, followed Leo’s tongue back into his mouth as he pushed Leo against the wall. The kiss was passionate and urgent, but Leo wouldn’t let it be the kind of hit-and-run that he thought that Jim had had in mind. Instead, he sucked on Jim’s tongue and nibbled at his lips, keeping him close until they were both panting, breathing against each other. Jim was keeping his pelvis away from Leo’s and he toyed with the idea of pushing things a little further, of pulling those narrow hips flush against his own, but didn’t. It wasn’t just the lack of privacy that was stopping him, but the distance that Jim was reinforcing. Still, he didn’t make it easy for him.

When Jim pulled away and pressed his forehead against Leo’s, he whispered huskily, “Now, what was that for?” He ran a finger around the vee of the neckline of Jim’s t-shirt, just to see if he could provoke a shudder from the younger man, hiding his smirk when he did. “I know how you like your reasons.”

“Can’t a guy …”

Leo kissed Jim, interrupting him by nipping a kiss at his slightly swollen mouth.

“wish another guy …”

This time, the kiss Leo dropped on his teasing mouth was slow and sweet and he heard the murmur of a stifled groan from Jim. For all that Jim seemed to want things fast and hard, true affection seemed to really undo him.

“a Happy Birthday?” Jim was whispering, his voice a breathy rasp that was barely audible above the piano. As he uttered those last words, he pushed Leo up against the wall by his shoulders, pressing their chests together as he kissed Leo for all he was worth, sweeping his tongue back into Leo’s mouth and circling around.

This time, the groan emanated from Leo’s chest, but he didn’t try and quash it, especially since it got an answering full body tremor from Jim, who broke off the kiss and pressed his face into Leo’s neck,
panting against him. “Happy Birthday, Bones,” he said in a throaty whisper.

Leo turned his face into Jim’s exposed neck and breathed him in, pressing a kiss to his warm skin as he held on tight, until the sound of voices on the landing above him drew his attention away. Jim slipped out of his grasp as Nobiko came downstairs to say goodnight, leaving him shaken and stunned, but not unhappy.

He’d slept very little the night of his birthday, listening as he was for the tread of Jim's step in the hallway, hoping against hope that Jim would discard any notion of propriety and creep into his room, but knowing a sense of decorum wasn’t what was keeping Jim in his own bed down the hall. He’d set the terms of their engagement by making it a competition, and as long as it remained on those terms, Jim would continue to tease and torment him, to make what was happening between them not a joke, but less serious than what Leo was intending. He'd always known that Jim would be fantastic in bed — the sexual energy that he exuded just walking around was palpable, and as confident as Jim was physically about himself and his capacities, he knew that he'd be single-minded in his intensity. But he wasn't just in this for the reward of orgasm, for the simple pleasure of skin against skin that their every interaction promised. He wanted Jim, all of him, all the parts that he'd never given to anyone else, wanted him to really know that he was loved.

He wanted Jim to trust him enough to let himself love, and to be loved in turn.

And while he might not be the tactician that Jim Kirk was, he had his own gifts. Gram had had it right when she said to him all those months ago, that he had to give Jim what he needed, not what it was that he thought he wanted. He drifted off to sleep with that thought in mind.

When he arose, it was to the memory of having heard others moving around before him, and for a moment he had a sense of dislocation. The sounds of people moving in the hallway with a purpose reminded him of the Academy, the place he'd come to think of as a kind of home. He'd risen and dressed for a ride, his last for a while, and gone downstairs to the kitchen where Jim sat alone at the table, eating cereal and drinking coffee, reading the news on a PADD.

"Hey," he said, looking up briefly from the news. His expression was mischievous and a little challenging, and Leo smiled gently at him in answer, just catching the surprise on Jim’s face before he turned back to the news determinedly.

"Mornin', Jim," Leo answered, his voice still gruff with sleep. He crossed behind Jim to the coffee maker and poured himself a cup, taking a long drink and letting the heat and the idea of it wake him before the caffeine could. He took the one step that brought him closer to Jim and let a hand drop onto his shoulder, giving it a squeeze, before he bent forward and casually dropped a kiss on the crown of his head. He felt Jim start at this simple gesture of affection, and squeezed his shoulder one more time before going to make his own cereal. He could feel the weight of Jim's eyes on his back as he moved, and he spoke to him, making the kind of conversation that they'd had a million times before. "What's going on in the universe?"

He turned away from cutting peaches when Jim didn’t answer him. "Jim?" he prompted, just catching the edge of Jim's confused expression and narrowed eyes before he clamped down on both, although he could do nothing about the pink staining his cheeks.

"Nothing good, Bones," Jim answered, eyes returning to the PADD, although he looked up at Leo when he sat on the opposite side of the table from him. "More incursions into the Neutral Zone," he
Leo sighed and drank his coffee. "Goddamned Romulans," he said. "Still peddling the same shit as they did back in Horatio’s day." He shook his head. "What time do you want to head back?" he asked.

"Please tell me there's coffee," Gram grumbled, coming into the room suddenly. Leo got up to make her a cup but she waved him off and poured her own, sitting down at the table next to Jim as she scowled at them both over the rim of her cup. "Morning people," she said in a severe tone. "Why did I marry into a clan of them?"

"Why are you up?" Leo asked, with a wry smile.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Maybe because I figured that you'd try to slip away at some ungodly hour like Tim," she groused.

"Gram," Leo said. "Tim already stayed far longer than he should have."

"So you're trying to even it out by leaving early?" she said acidly.

Leo shook his head at her foul mood. "You need a hypo for the hangover, Granny?" he asked snidely.

"Shut up," she said. "And don't change the subject."

"You know I have a shift tomorrow," Leo said calmly, "and Jim hasn't been at the Academy in weeks. We've got things to do, Gram."

She scowled and took a big sip of her coffee, looking at Jim accusatorily.

He hastily shoveled a large spoonful of cereal in his mouth and looked at Leo with wide eyes.

"I don't want you to go," she sighed. "It's been nice having you here. Both of you," she said to Jim affectionately, ruffling his hair. He looked stunned, forgetting to chew for a moment. "Promise me you’ll wait to leave until after lunch."

Jim stared across the table at Leo, letting him know with a look that it was up to him.

"We promise," Leo answered.

Gram smiled and leaned up against Jim, reading the news over his shoulder. He looked amused but his ears were red at her proximity. His every reaction was confirming what Leo had long surmised: that Jim’s tactility was about him expressing a desire to be touched, a desire that had probably never been met in childhood.

Gram yawned and shifted in her chair, blinking at the PADD. "Goddamned Romulans," she said. "They just never stop, do they?"

Jim’s smile across the table was bright and blinding in its warmth.

He thought that he saw just a hint of a wince on Jim’s face as he sat down on the shuttle back to San Francisco. "Saddle sore there, Jimmy?" he asked.
Jim automatically went to deny the charge when something shifted in his expression. “If I said yes,” he said slowly, “would you rub liniment on my ass?”

Leo turned and looked Jim in the eye. “Are you gonna buy me dinner first?”

Whatever comment Jim might have made back was lost as final announcements were made before they lifted off and the older woman in the seats across from them looked at them balefully, her eyes flickering over their Cadet reds.

Jim straightened up his posture unconsciously, watching Leo from out of the corner of his eye as he fastened his safety harness just before the engines began to rumble.

Leo drew in a deep breath and blew it out through his nose slowly, trying with limited success to disperse the tension he always felt at take-off. It was nothing compared to how he used to be, and Leo noted that the wry twist of Jim’s mouth had a hint of pride in it.

“I would have been fine,” Jim said, pointedly not bringing up Leo’s phobia, “if I could’ve just ridden on a normal saddle.”

Leo raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “Normal?”

Jim waved a hand. “You know what I mean,” he said. He pulled a PADD out of the bag he’d stuffed under the seat and fiddled with his screens. “Did you already fill out your preferences for your post-grad posting?”

“No,” Leo said.

“Good,” Jim said in a serious voice. “I gotta run some analyses on how we can align our choices.”

Leo looked at Jim closely as he shuffled through the questions. “Jim,” he said in a soft, but firm voice, “you have to know that the chances of us getting a posting on the same ship are pretty slim.”

The look that Jim shot him was absolutely mutinous. “Not if we reduce the variables appropriately.”

Leo shook his head. “Jim,” he said in sharper tone, “the number of Medical posts is a helluva lot smaller than just about any other track, and they tend to turn over less often.”

“We’re going to be on the Enterprise,” Jim said firmly. “Together.”

Leo was starting to get exasperated. “You know damned well that Pike didn’t promise that,” he said with a growl, and then narrowed his eyes at Jim. “And if you manipulate the postings in some way, they’ll figure it out and kick both of our asses out.”

Jim’s eyes were hot with anger. “Actually, Pike has made it very clear that he wants both of us with him,” he said, “and if I did manipulate anything, they’d never fucking find it, which isn’t the point, since I’m not going to. We just have to keep on doing what we’re doing, and make sure that our choices line up.”

Leo shook his head at Jim’s naivete, then cursed himself as he caught the edge of disappointment that was hiding behind Jim’s blue eyes even as he put his most bland expression on like a mask. “I’m not saying that isn’t what I want, Jim,” Leo said in a low voice. He leaned toward Jim and put a hand on his forearm, feeling the tension that Jim had sought to hide. “I’m just saying that we have to be realistic – everybody wants to be on the flagship. The competition is going to be fucking fierce.”

Jim’s expression was still mulish and intense. “All the more reason to make sure that our choices line
“Jim …” Leo began.

“Don’t, Bones,” Jim said. “Just … don’t.”

Don’t what, he found himself wondering over the course of the next few weeks. ‘Don’t say it aloud and jinx it’, ‘don’t push me’, ‘don’t contradict me?’

Jim had returned to what Leo now thought of as his typical habit: every few days he would sneak into Leo’s bed, but there was a twist this time, and it wasn’t that Jim had taken to showing up at the hospital to pull Leo into the on-call room or a stairwell to kiss him breathless. As the weeks wended on, he’d found himself awakened in the middle of the night with Jim feigning sleep, and knew that he’d been watching Leo, trying to figure him out or memorize him, or … something. He knew the difference between feigned sleep and when Jim was honestly aslee — and it wasn’t just the change in his breathing that clued him in, or the expression on Jim’s face — he’d seen Jim in the throes of unpleasant dreams enough to know that sleep didn’t always ease his expression, that Jim’s active brain was still working overtime even while he was at rest. But lately, when Jim was really asleep, he’d gotten into the habit of wrapping himself around Leo. Unsurprisingly, he had the strength of a python. More than once, Leo had found himself running his hands through Jim’s hair, trying to soothe him, trying to get him to ease up enough so that he could turn over, or go to the bathroom, or just get out of whatever position Jim had contorted him into.

Those nights, he swore that what Jim had meant was ‘don’t leave me,’ which made sense, even if he wasn’t willing to articulate it. Jim had been left behind by a lot of people.

And damn it all, Leo didn’t want to be one of them.

As the weeks went on, he grew more certain that his small gestures of affection were the ones that were the most confusing to Jim, used as he was to dealing with people in an explicitly sexual manner. The thing was, Jim had never approached him that way. He’d always been incredibly tactile, yes, and he seemed to have the lack of regard for personal space that Leo associated with certain tribal-based cultures, but he’d watched Jim seducing enough women and men to know that he didn’t do it with touch. He did it with his eyes, with a look that smoldered and promised the recipient all sorts of wicked delights. He did it by licking his lips, and standing a certain way, by leaning in and letting the tension between two bodies build, inciting curiosity. He did it by challenge, by being the cockiest bastard on the planet, pun absolutely intended, daring the recipient to take him on, to see if he was as good in bed, or on the ground, or up against a wall, as he thought he was. Leo’d seen him do it again and again over the past couple of years, but he’d never seen that directed at him. Even when Jim grabbed him and kissed him, forceful as he often was, as passionate as he always was, there was none of the artifice of seduction about it. There was want, yes. There was flirtation, too. But there was also an element of truth in it that let him know that he was kissing Jim, and not any of his masks.

But Leo picked his times more deliberately, more intimately, kissing Jim slow and sweet and full of smoldering passion when they were alone, making room for the possibility of something bigger than a fast fuck in a dark corner. He made a habit of kissing Jim in ways that weren’t necessarily romantic. One night when Jim had gotten up to leave the nearly deserted mess and go to Xeno-Linguistics Club Meeting, Leo’d turned his head and brushed a quick kiss against the inside of Jim’s wrist when he’d dropped a hand on his shoulder to say goodbye. The gesture had been unconscious and without
thought, although he'd relished the sweep of heat that he saw on Jim's skin, the way his chest had heaved under his uniform tunic. They were all such small things, displays of simple affection — and sometimes it broke his heart to see how they were received, because Jim's reactions told him that his gestures were novel and unknown to him. Leo'd been broken a hundred ways by life's cruelties, but he'd never wanted for that, never not known what it felt like to be cherished by someone. He'd had it, and had it taken away, but he couldn't remember a time when he didn't know what it felt like to feel real love in another's touch.

He knew that he was confusing the hell out of Jim, but he wasn't being cruel or mean. If Jim wanted to fuck him now, he wouldn't push him away, but it was Jim that was holding back, and Leo the one seducing him by degrees.

One night, after he'd been roused from a sound sleep by Jim studying him, he'd slung an arm over Jim’s waist and simply leaned over without thought and pressed a kiss to the corner of Jim’s mouth. Only half of Jim’s face was visible from where he’d buried it into the pillow, but Leo swore that he saw a sliver of blue before Jim dropped his lid back down. He hadn’t even tried to control the curve of his cheek, although most of his smile was hidden. Leo smiled himself and pressed a kiss to Jim’s temple before he fell back asleep.

He hadn’t been awoken by Jim’s staring for the rest of that night.

That first time had been impulsive, but now whenever Jim woke him up, either from staring, or from holding onto him like he was the world’s biggest, gruffest teddy bear, he’d kiss him, or peel one of his hands away from his body and press a kiss to his palm, holding Jim's hand until his grip on him eased up.

Jim's obsessive behavior wasn't just confined to the nighttime hours. If Leo never heard another goddamned word about the fucking Kobayashi Maru as long as he lived, he would be a happy man. Jim was determined, positively determined, to prove that there was a way to beat the unwinnable scenario sim, and he’d been relentless in his determination to get his chance at a second try. So, when Leo's comm chimed with an incoming text when he knew that Jim was at Command trying to talk his way into the test again, he swore even before he flipped it open. Because either way, it was going to mean more talk about the goddamned Maru. Again.

KM at 1630. Be there. I know you're free.

"Damn it, Jim," Leo grumbled, startling a passing intern.

"The name's Tyler, sir," he said nervously, throwing Leo a hasty salute.

"As you were," Leo growled before he stalked away to file his updates on today's cases.

Goddamned Starfleet. Win or lose, this was going to be a bitch of a day.

Chapter 32

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One thing Leo knew after two years of getting drunk with him was the many moods of James Tiberius Kirk, the drunken edition. In fact, if he looked at it dispassionately, which honestly would have to wait for a time when he wasn't half in the bag himself, he knew they'd spent too much of their time together drunk off their asses -- although the incidences of that had really fallen off after their first six months at the Academy, as they'd both found their footing, their focus, and honed their ambition. Still, he'd seen Jim drunk and giddy, drunk and horny, drunk and morose, drunk and reflective, drunk and belligerent, and his least favorite, the combo platter, i.e., when Jim was just drunk enough to rapidly cycle through all of the above.

What he was seeing tonight, however, in light of Jim's second failure at the Kobayashi Maru, was Jim drunk and fucking spoiling for a fight. Not with him so much, because when Jim got into this kind of mood, a verbal tongue-lashing wasn't really what Jim was looking for, and he didn't think Jim would ever get angry enough at him to hit him or for Leo to reciprocate. No -- any physical confrontation would devolve really swiftly into fucking, there was no doubt in his mind -- because any physical frustration that Jim had with him was about getting into his pants, or getting Leo into his.

But that wasn't quite what Jim was after tonight, anyway. When Jim got into one these moods -- and it had been a long, long time since he'd been in one -- he sought out bullies and idiots like Cupcake, guys who could back up the copious bullshit they spewed with fists like hammers, giving as good as they got until Jim, whippet-thin but fueled by a wellspring of childhood rage that no run-of-the-mill bully could ever hope to match, turned the tables on them and beat them into the ground, no matter the cost to himself.

Leo'd barely been able to talk Jim into going to Finnegan's, where at least there was a well-stocked medkit behind the bar, because he'd fucking seen to it himself, what with Jim's predilection for getting his pretty face punched. Leo was very fond of that pretty face, and he had a vested interest in seeing that it remained that way. He also knew that Liam kept a phaser or two behind the bar, and that he liked Jim well enough to ensure that whatever happened wouldn't go too far, even if that meant that he stunned Jim along with whomever else was fighting. Leo only hoped that it wouldn't come to that tonight, but even he knew better than to put much stock in that wish. Jim'd been pretty much silent since they'd come off the simulated bridge and stripped out of the ugly-ass jumpsuits that they'd had to wear. Even his jokes about the fleet getting off by making them appear in costume had failed to rouse a response from Jim. His fixed smile was there for all the other viewers, but Leo could see that he was deep within himself, in a dark and ugly place. He wondered if Jim would ever actually explain why defeating this test mattered so much -- he'd accepted the fact that Jim had real issues with the teaching of passivity and acceptance of defeat, but there was something personal, something important in how Jim felt about this stupid exercise that Leo couldn't quite get his mind around.

Once back into his reds and out of the view of anyone who'd been in the sim with them, Jim's smile had slid off his face to be replaced by a dark scowl as he made a break for the paths that led off campus and into trouble. Leo, of course, had followed with a wary expression of his own and a sigh, and an internal reminder to be as patient with whatever the fuck was going on in Jim's twisted psyche as Jim had been with his own foibles.

Rome wasn't built in a fucking day, after all.

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Leo reminded himself of that thought as he watched the chairs upend and Jim's head snap up and over toward the fight that was happening nearby. Goddamnit. No one had fucking risen to Jim's bait all night long, so now he was going to throw himself in between two knuckleheads who were getting
into it over a girl, from the looks of it.

"Jim …" he was talking to the empty air, as Jim had already vacated the space next to him. He sighed and got up from his seat, quelling the urge to announce to the uncaring room at large that he really was too damned old for this shit when he was brought up short by the fact that Jim had yet to throw a punch.

"He's not fighting," Gaila said to him, her voice holding wonder. He'd seen that she was at the bar, but she'd uncharacteristically chosen to stay away from them.

"No, he's not," Leo said, reflecting some of that back at her.

"But he's furious," Gaila said in a confused tone. "He really, really wants to hit something, or fuck somebody." Her blue eyes cut over to his.

"I know," Leo said to her calmly, but with an edge of his own. He really, really didn't need anyone else interpreting Jim's moods for him. He might not be able to smell them on him like she did, but his Jim-sense was pretty goddamned refined, thankyouverymuch.

"He's angry with me, you know," Gaila said.

Now Leo did look over at her with surprise, looking away from where Jim had placed one hand on the chest of one of the two combatants and was trying to talk him out of punching the other one's face in. "What would make you say that, darlin'?" Leo asked curiously. He'd assumed that she was staying away because Jim in a black mood was the kind of thing only those experienced with black moods, like Leo, could bear.

"I wouldn't help him with the Maru," Gaila said. "And he should have known better than to ask."

Leo had no idea what she was talking about.

She shook her head at his expression. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Just that Jim forgets sometimes that I have to be more careful than everyone else. There's not a lot of trust for my people here."

Leo opened his mouth to refute her, knowing full well how Jim had defended her honor from that fuckhead Mitchell over the summer, but the sound of a fight breaking out made him swivel his head back to where Jim was sagging from evidently having been hit in the head with a bottle by the young woman. "Damn it!" he swore, moving to Jim's side, Gaila forgotten as an all-out brawl began to consume Finnegan's.

He ended up back-to-back with Jim, fighting all comers, noticing Gaila perched on the bar watching as he and Jim battled their way to the front door and made their escape into the foggy San Francisco night.

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"That was awesome," Jim said for at least the twentieth time as they stumbled along the sidewalk.

Occasionally, Leo would turn and fruitlessly try and hail a cab, even though they were almost all the back to campus. He could only imagine what they actually looked like as he glanced over at Jim, whose lower lip was swollen to twice its normal lush size. He had an obvious abrasion on his right cheekbone, and another one resolving under his left eye and he was favoring his left side. The fog had slicked Jim's hair to his skull; Leo's hair was stubbornly falling in his eyes, and he had no idea which was worse, the sweat that had turned cold in the dank night air, or the veneer of moisture that they'd been coated with as they pushed their way through the fog.
"Bones," Jim said, brushing Leo's hair out of his eyes and peering at him with that particularly kind of drunken intensity that tried to pass for focus, "you still with me, man?"

"Right here, kid," Leo answered, wrapping fingers around Jim's wrist. He doubted that Jim realized that he'd left his hand on what was threatening to be a spectacular bruise on Leo's cheekbone. He lapped at his lips and tasted blood. He was pretty sure it was from his nose, which had taken a good shot, although he didn't think it was broken.

"Y'r nose is bleeding, Bones," Jim said, wiping with gentle but clumsy fingers gone cold in the damp. The cold felt good against his overheated skin.

"C'mon, Jim," Leo urged, pulling Jim's arm away from him and up and around his shoulders. "Let's keep moving before we turn into Cadetsicles."

Jim honest-to-God giggled at Leo's words as they began to move in the direction of the campus again. "You were awesome, though, Bones," Jim said. "I know you don't like to fight, but you're so much better at it now." His pride was obvious in the tone of his voice, not to mention the feigned punches he was throwing with his left hand. "Ow."

"I think you bruised your ribs, Jimmy," he said absentmindedly, towing them across the empty street and through the gate into campus, watching the light flash from red to green as their comms were registered.

"Technically, it wasn't me who bruised them," Jim pointed out with drunken precision. "It was that big, really ugly guy."

"Which one was the really ugly one?" Leo asked with a smile, watching as Jim pursed his fat lips comically, seriously contemplating the question.

"Well, the other guy was just kind of regularly ugly," Jim said thoughtfully, "but the really ugly guy, Bones? He had a lumpy skull," Jim ventured this observation with distaste, waving a hand as he declaimed. "I get that some guys don't want to use the hair stimulators and all, you know, bald pride or whatever, but you shouldn't shave your head if you have a lumpy skull," He shrugged. "My personal opinion."

Leo had to stop himself from laughing out loud at the serious manner in which Jim was rendering this opinion. Sometimes, usually when the kid wasn't trying at all, he was absolutely fucking adorable. "I see," Leo said with gravity.

Jim nodded, and then looked at Leo with serious blue eyes that were focused on him. "I don't like it when people hit you in the face, Bones."

"That makes two of us, kid," Leo agreed. "I don't like it when people hit me in the face, and I'm not real crazy about when people hit you in the face, either."

"The girl started it!" Jim said. "Did you see that, Bones? Here, after my whole shit day, I was trying to be all reasonable and shit and keep those shitheads from breaking up Liam's bar, and …" he trailed off, wide-eyed. "And she hit me!" He concluded in an outraged tone.

"She wanted them to fight over her?"

"Yes!" Jim said incredulously. "Ugly and Uglier. What the fuck was up with that?"

Leo keyed his way into the dorm entry and Jim shivered in the blast of heat from the change in environments.
"Man, what a day," Jim rambled on. "I hate that fucking test."

"Yeah?" Leo asked, trying to keep Jim talking as they rode up to his floor.

"Yep," Jim said. "It's stupid." He brooded as the floors flashed by and then stalked out the door to Leo's room, keying the entry in himself. "Can I take a shower, Bones?" he asked, already starting to peel off his clothes. His tunic made a sodden noise as it fell behind him on the floor.

"Lemme fix you up first," Leo said, watching Jim toe off his shoes.

Leo did the same, but he hung up his tunic and threw a hanger at Jim, which he caught one-handed without even turning his head. Even drunk as a skunk, the kid's reflexes were superb. He went into the bathroom and carefully washed his hands, only to bump into Jim standing right behind him. "You need to use the head?" he asked, startled.

Jim shook his head. "I gotta wash my hands," he said, swaying slightly, "so I can fix you up."

Leo cocked his head at him. "You gonna get your M.D., now, kid?"

"Funny Bones," Jim said, pushing past him. "Maybe I will, just to piss you off. But tonight, you can tell me how to fix you up."

Leo raised his eyebrows at Jim's words and Jim chuckled as he bent over the sink, washing his hands carefully.

"I could hear the eyebrows, Bones," he said, glancing over his shoulder, and then bobbing his head as he confirmed their rise. "Nice!"

Leo rolled his eyes and went out into the main room.

When Jim came into the room, he sauntered over to the bed and plopped down on the edge, patting next to him. Leo sat down and faced him, and Jim pulled his legs up and sat in a modified yoga pose.

"Show off," Leo groused.

"Miss Elizabeth knows what she's doing, man," Jim said, crowding up against Leo. "Ow, fuck Bones," he complained as Leo put a finger on Jim's ribs, while watching the tricorder readings come up.

"Bruised," Leo confirmed. "Not broken."

"Still hurts," Jim groused. He was studying Leo as he ran the regen over his ribs. "Is your nose broken?"

"No," Leo said.

Jim's focus on him was unaltered, although Leo wouldn't venture a guess as to what was going on in his head. "You know," Jim said suddenly. "My dad flunked the Maru."

Leo looked up in surprise at the sudden change in topic. "He didn't flunk it when it counted, Jim," he said carefully.

Jim huffed out an impatient breath. "You think so?"

Leo stared at him, but didn't say anything in answer. Jim's expression had morphed into one of brooding, and he picked up the tricorder and went to scan Leo. "I'm not done, Jim," he said sharply.
"Pike agrees with you," he said. "But you know, it begs the question about what the predictive value of the test is."

"Why does it matter so much?" Leo asked him, as the regen beeped, signaling it was done with the basic damage. He moved it up to Jim's lip, then thought better of it, as Jim began to answer him.

"Because," Jim said sullenly.

Leo shook his head and moved the regen back down to Jim's mouth. "Be quiet for a minute," he ordered. Jim studied him as the machine began to repair the damage to his lip. "Maybe you need to read up on Don Quixote," Leo said, taking advantage of the enforced quiet.

Jim rolled his eyes in answer, his long fingers moving restlessly, moving from Leo's hand to his arm, outlining the muscles in his forearm.

Leo felt his respirations kick up a notch in response to Jim's caresses. "Jim," he said warningly. "Focus."

Jim's lips tried to resolve into a smirk, his eyes reflecting the twinge of pain that his actions caused, but his fingers continued to stroke up Leo's arm, while his other hand came up to play with the hair at the nape of Leo's neck, his long fingers cool and determined at the top of Leo's spine as he pulled Leo's head closer.

Leo struggled to keep his eyes open, and to keep focused himself. Jim was really drunk, too drunk to carry out whatever his fingers were promising. Maybe.

"Bones," Jim said in a whisper, his voice a rasp. The swelling had diminished on one side of his mouth, making him look distinctly lopsided.

"Shh …" Leo answered, as Jim pressed his forehead against his. "I can't see what I'm doing, kid," he said, his own voice a whisper. He kept the regen pressed to where he thought Jim's mouth was, as he felt the ghost of a kiss next to his mouth.

Jim hummed in response, but pulled back, his eyes hot and heavy-lidded. "Do your worst," he said in a languid voice.

Leo shook his head, as much to clear it as anything else, and locked eyes with Jim as he repaired his mouth. As soon as he moved the regen away from Jim's lips, Jim leaned in and kissed him, his tongue slipping in to tangle lazily with Leo's. They kissed for long minutes, until Leo pushed Jim back from where he'd crowded up against him. "C'mon, Jim," he said, his voice broken and aching. He kept the hand that had found its way to the back of Jim's skull in place as he ran the regen over the abrasions and bruises that marred Jim's face. The whole time, Jim watched him with a hooded expression, waiting until the machine beeped and Leo pulled his hand away.

"Your turn," Jim said, watching him carefully.

He picked up the tricorder and Leo shook his head. "Lemme see your hands, Jim," Leo said huskily.

Jim laid a hand across the palm that Leo held out, pressing his forehead against Leo's again as he regenerated first one, then the other, of Jim's fine-boned hands. Jim's fingers were longer than Leo's, the skin fairer and the bones seemingly more fragile, but Leo could feel the strength in them as he held them, one after the other.

When Leo clicked off the regen and went to drop Jim's hand, Jim didn't let go, but deftly turned it over, revealing the abrasions that bloomed on his own knuckles. "Fix it," he said, and watched as
Leo began to run the regen over the reddened skin, watching as the angry weals turned pink and receded. He bent his head and kissed Leo's knuckles. "The other one," he ordered, fumbling for Leo's left hand. He watched intently as the new skin appeared. "Doctor magic," he mumbled drunkenly.

"Hmm …" Leo said quizzically. "Jim, you know it's simulation at the basal …"

Jim laid his fingers over Leo's mouth. "You've got no sense of romance, Bones," he said, then laughed and traced Leo's quirked eyebrow with his fingers.

After Leo shut off the regen and displayed his knuckles for Jim's inspection, he sat in uneasy silence when Jim pushed him back against the pillows and ran the regen over the bruises on his face.

Jim smiled at him, an uncharacteristically soft smirk on his face. "You really, really hate being the patient, don't you, Bones?"

"I just prefer that my doctor," he sketched the air quotes behind Jim's back where he couldn't even see them, because somehow Jim had worked things around so that he was sitting astride Leo's lap. And even the clammy damp of their pants, which neither of them had managed to take off, hadn't served to keep his cock from reacting to being pressed so closely to Jim's, "actually have some degree of medical training."

"Afraid I'll ruin your pretty face, Bones?" Jim said with a slur, dropping the regen next to them on the bed and moving in even closer.

One of Leo's hands found its way to Jim's face and stroked over the pink of his newly healed lip. "I ain't the pretty one, Jim."

"I disagree," Jim said with drunken certainty.

When Leo opened his mouth and kissed Jim, he could taste the iron and alcohol on his palate, and it made him shiver. He ran his hands up under Jim's black undershirt, feeling the play of muscles in his back as Jim shifted and pressed against him, his hand pressing down and over Leo's ass, pulling him so that he could get a better angle to grind against him. He felt Jim sigh as he broke the kiss, pressing his face into the bend of Leo's neck and sucking.

"I'm kinda fucked up," he mumbled against Leo, nipping at his neck.

Leo tamped down on his desire at Jim's admission, and went to move away from Jim, but he wouldn't let go.

"About you," Jim continued, wrapping his arms around Leo's back and holding on tight. "I'm kinda fucked up."

"Jim?" Leo asked.

Jim was quiet against him for a moment, and then he bit him, hard. "About this," he said, and his voice was angry.

"Damn it, Jim!" For once, Leo let the frustration that was fueling him burst out and he pushed Jim back hard and met Jim's belligerent glare. "What the fuck?" His neck was throbbing angrily, and he was beyond confused and just fucking tired of the two-step they were doing. "Don't pretend like this is all me," he growled at him.

Jim's glare was resentful and he wondered how the fuck it always came back to this, over and over
again in his relationships. How he was always the one who loved more and got burned – with Jocelyn, with Jessica and now, fuck it, with Jim. Wasn’t he supposed to have learned all his hard lessons about this kind of shit?

"I should go," Jim said, and there was a kind of danger in his tone, a note of challenge despite the fact that he was swaying drunk.

And for once, Leo didn't try and coax him otherwise, didn’t persuade him, or sweet-talk him. Fuck it. He let him go. If Jim was going to run, he was going to run. Let him run and fucking get it out of his system, and if he wanted to, he goddamned knew where Leo was. He could come back.

Leo sat on the bed and watched Jim put his boots back on, shove his arms into his damp tunic and he did nothing to stop him, just sat there with a scowl on his face regenerating the bite while he watched him.

It was just coincidence that he flung the regenerator at the closed door after Jim disappeared through it.

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Chapter 33

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As the hours turned into days and then into weeks, Leo worked on convincing himself that he was all right, that he wasn’t suffering the kind of phantom pain that he’d read about in medical journals documenting a syndrome that was common among those who’d lost a limb. He’d known all along that Jim was stubborn, and he knew that the argument that Jim was having inside his own head was something that he’d have to resolve himself. He’d been a fucking fool to think that he’d be able to seduce Jim Kirk, the king of the one-night stand, into something that felt a lot like love. Jim didn’t want to be in love, he didn’t want to feel love – he’d said so from the very beginning, hadn’t he? – he should have just left well enough alone, should have pushed back against Jim when he’d kissed him that very first time in the meadow and asked him what the fuck he was playing at.

Because when all was said and done, Leo was the one with the broken heart, and probably alone in that, too, just like how he was the one all alone in the too big goddamned bed in his room.

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He wasn’t going to spend his time pining for what he’d lost, or what he’d almost had to be accurate, but it was galling that he couldn’t even talk to his best friend about how he’d been burned. When he’d lost Joce, he’d been in a similar situation, but only because he’d lost his father in the weeks before, not because he and Jocelyn had been such great friends by the end of it all.

Actually, now that he contemplated it, they hadn’t been all that great friends to start with. And contemplating was what he was doing. He was not brooding.

Or being a moody bastard, as Gram would most likely say.

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“You look like crap,” Patty said bluntly.

Leo scowled at her.
“OK, you look like very good crap, but you look like crap,” she paused, looking him right in the eye in her well-practiced psychiatric way. “What’s up?”

“The amount I’m lifting, by many kg,” Leo said smartly, raising his arm to show off his newly developed musculature. There was no need for him to cop to the fact that he was either working out or running himself ragged every damned night so that he could sleep for a few short hours – because he wasn’t going to resort to booze. And he wasn’t avoiding Jim by going to the Officer’s Gym, either. It was nicer, and the machines were in better shape. The fact that there was no chance that he was going to run into Jim there was simply coincidental.

“What happened?” Patty asked with warm sympathy, and Leo saw the sincerity in her eyes. “You were so happy for a while there.” Her tone was wistful.

Leo quirked an eyebrow at her words. He didn’t think he’d been particularly smiley, or anything, and said so.

“You looked relaxed,” Patty said. “There was a sparkle in your eye.” She looked at him. “Not that there isn’t something there now,” she said, “but it’s more like a flame, like a banked fire. You’re furious.”

“He walked out on me,” Leo said quietly. “Did what I was always afraid he was going to do, and pulled a runner.”

Patty nodded. “What happened?”

“Fuck if I know,” Leo said, dropping his voice so the nurses at the table next to them in the break room couldn’t overhear. He picked at the dinner he’d bought in the cafeteria with little appetite. “He flunked the fucking Maru again, got drunk off his ass and was spoiling for a bar fight, real old school destructive shit for him.”

Patty nodded, encouraging him. “And?”

Leo shrugged. “And nothing. First he surprised me by *not* getting into a fight with some shitheads – he actually put himself in the middle of a situation and tried to defuse it –” his voice still held wonder at that, and Patty smiled, “but one of the participants took umbrage at his peacemaking and well, we fought our way out of the bar.”

“*We*?” Patty’s eyes were wide.

“You think I was going to stand by and watch him get beaten?” Leo grumbled. “And it was fine. It was a garden-variety fight, nothing special, nobody got hurt bad, and I thought that he got it all out of his system. We went home, and it was fine, in fact, it was better than fine, and then … it wasn’t.”

Patty was watching Leo carefully. “Did you reject him sexually?”

“Me?” Leo asked. “No. I was worried that he was too drunk to really know what the hell he was doing, but he’d wrapped himself around me …” he trailed off. “Let’s just say I was willing to be convinced.” He blinked once or twice, and swiped at his bangs. “No. He was the one who changed his mind. Started acting like I was the one who’d been coming onto him, like I was the one who was pushing things forward.”

“And you hadn’t?”

“Nope,” Leo drawled, crossing his legs. “Well. My approach was different than his. He wanted to be like it always was for him, you know, hot and dirty, all the time – not that I object to hot and dirty,
just that I wanted something real, something that connected.”

“Ah …” Patty said, breathing out.

“Yeah,” Leo said. “All right, maybe I was pushing, but I was being honest about what I wanted, OK? Because we both know that’s the only way things were ever going to work. If you lie from the beginning, well, eventually that’s all you get left with.” Patty’s eyes were troubled. “Patty?”

She looked up at him, and he could see the guilt in her eyes.

“Aw, fuck me,” he said. “Shohreh?”

“Don’t worry,” Patty said, “I’m not going to give you any advice about how to deal with Jim,” she laughed, but it was dry. “She called me a couple of weeks ago, all remorse. It was her anniversary, you know.”

Leo nodded. “And she’s miserable,” he said.

“Yep,” Patty answered brightly, but in a brittle tone. “She’s lying to herself every day, and she hates it and she just needed a friend she said, and … I’m an idiot.”

Leo sighed and covered her hand with his. “We’ll have an Idiots Club, you and me,” he said.

Patty smiled sadly. “Do you think he’s afraid of failing?”

“Huh?” Leo asked.

“I’d rather talk about your problems than think about my own,” Patty answered softly.

“I don’t think he ever failed at anything until the Maru,” Leo said. “He doesn’t believe in no-win situations, remember?”

Patty nodded, but her eyes were contemplative. “Everybody’s failed at something,” she said, “whether or not they’ve admitted it to themselves.”

Leo thought about Jim, about how he’d brought up his father just before the mood had abruptly changed. “Hmm …” He shook his head. “You know what, Patty? I’m tired of trying to figure other people out. I just … I can’t do it anymore.”

She was quiet, watching his face.

“I need to focus on something else,” he said. “What did you think about my idea?”

“The paper?” Patty asked, pulling out her PADD. “It looks great,” she said thoughtfully. “But I don’t think you should submit it as a paper.”

“Huh?”

“When I was reading it,” Patty murmured, “I thought that you should make this your dissertation, finish that degree in psych,” she smiled as Leo gaped. “Get some more initials, Leonard H. McCoy, M.D., PhD, FACS, Fellow, blah, blah, blah. You could just put a little squared sign after your M.D./Ph.D.”

“But …”

“It’s your choice,” Patty said, “but the truth is you’ve done all the coursework, and if you changed
the paper’s focus to analyze methodology of treating astrophobia, and opened the door for longitudinal studies … you see what I’m saying?”

“Jesus, Patty,” Leo said. “I’m already doing the Path fellowship in combination with Xenoanatomy.”

Patty quirked an eyebrow. “Since when?”

“Well,” Leo answered shortly.

“Why Pathology?” she asked, looking at him intently.

Leo sighed. “Because,” he said slowly, “if you’re going to be the CMO, you have to be qualified to perform autopsies.”

“Jim’s CMO,” Patty said quietly.

“I don’t need my follies pointed out, Patty,” Leo said lightly, but there was a hard edge to his tone.

“I wasn’t doing that, Grouchy,” Patty said, squeezing his hand. “So, that means that you’re going to be an M.D. to the third power?” she asked with a grin.

Leo rolled his eyes and ignored her. “You got any ideas about who would take me on at this late date?”

She looked at Leo speculatively. “You’re seriously thinking about doing it?”

“I’ve got nothing else to do,” Leo said with a tinge of acid.

Patty nodded sadly. “Yeah,” she said. “Let me see what I can do.”

Leo nodded and then swallowed the bitter dregs of his coffee.

Rank had its fucking privileges, and it was time that he availed himself of them. That’s what he told himself as he sat down to another relatively solitary dinner in the Officer’s Mess. It wasn’t that he’d seen Jim one too many times in the distance, hitting on some long-legged mini-skirt wearing classmate. He was being political, and prudent.

He was fucking growing up.

“Leo,” Gram’s voice on the comm reflected her concern. “You look so tired.”

He shrugged. “I’m not sleeping well, Gram,” he said. There was no point in lying to her about what was going on – if he’d kept it from her, she’d have just asked about Jim with a knowing smirk and he’d have blown a gasket at her innocent remark. “But I’m trying,” he emphasized. “I’m not running myself into the ground. I’m just …”

“Heart heavy,” she said, her eyes were troubled. “He hasn’t vidded me back, you know. He wrote me a note, but it’s so easy to be blithe in print. If he had to look me in the eye …”

“Don’t push him, Gram,” Leo said. “Whatever’s going on with him, he’s got to be the one to figure it out.”
Gram’s hand was resting at her neck, as she played with the pendant of her necklace. “And you haven’t seen him at all?”

“No up close,” he admitted. “But … I’ve been going out of my way to make myself scarce.”

“Oh, Leo,” she said, “do you think it’s wise to make it so easy for him?”

He smiled bitterly. “I believe that I was thinking of myself, Gram,” he said. “I can’t watch him just work his way through the class list.”

“Oh,” Gram said with a sigh. “I’m sorry, Leo. I’m worried about you both, I admit.” She shook her head. “That boy.”

“That’s the problem right there, Gram,” Leo said. “He’s young.”

“He’s not a teenager. And it’s not his youth that’s the problem. He’s been on his own for a long damned time and he’s used to doing things the way he wants. He made decisions about how things were going to be and you shook him up.”

Leo stared at his grandmother through the vidscreen. “How do you know that?” he asked.

She shrugged her elegant shoulders. “McCoy men are true to type in many ways,” she said. “And that includes some of your choices. Let’s just say that based on a lifetime of knowing McCoy men, and having a passing familiarity with being the choice of a McCoy man, I can surmise without knowing the details. I just worry about you, Leo. I worry that you’ll be too proud and too angry to give a little.”

“Me?” Leo said. “I’ve been the one bending all along!”

Gram smiled sadly. “It’s never even, Leo mine,” she said. “Don’t be so angry that you miss your chance. He wouldn’t have fought you off so hard or run so far if you really hadn’t gotten inside his shell.” She looked at him steadily. “Trust me on that one, Leo.”

Leo sighed, knowing that she was right. Goddamnit.

Gram had been disappointed that he wasn’t coming to Georgia for Thanksgiving, but he couldn’t see himself enjoying the holiday with Ted. The problem was, he couldn’t see himself enjoying it with Jim, either. He ended up stopping in at the Officer’s Mess with a PADD full of data, to find himself being waved over to a table by Harrison Yu and Paul Barresi. Harry’s focus on him was entirely of a speculative, considering nature, so much so that Paul had elbowed him to get him to join the conversation.

They kept to professional or general topics after he was introduced to their friends, including a woman he recognized from the Psych Department. Eleanor wasn’t an officer, but she was back on track after taking a few years off. Like Leo, she was divorced and rather than spend the day alone had chosen to come to the Mess, although she was a guest. They chatted and it turned out that she knew Patty.

Their conversation was lively and interesting, not unlike his interactions with all of the members of the party. If it felt hollow to him, lacking in Jim’s wit and easy brilliance, he knew that he was the only one feeling that way. Luckily, most of the group were scientists, and the conversation was technical and engrossing, requiring focus that kept other thoughts at bay. Eleanor was curious about his thesis, and he was grateful for her insight into his project as well as her assessments of his
committee. She was farther into the process than he, and knew all of the players in the department in a different way than he did, since psych was her field.

He’d passed an enjoyable meal, thanked Eleanor for her time, and gone off to the gym to work off the food and the stupor, purposefully not thinking of Jim and how he’d spent the last couple of Thanksgivings, only returning to his room when it was full dark. His comm was silent and messageless, and he thought about sending a text to Jim, but passed on the idea again.

Jim knew where he was.

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When his comm had gone off the next week with a ring that indicated a personal message, he couldn’t help the way his heart leapt up and then beat hard with worry at the unknown number. By the time he answered it, he’d convinced himself that Jim had done something foolish and that he was being called to pick up the pieces, but he was wrong on all points. It was Eleanor, asking him to coffee.

The truth was, he wasn’t much interested, but he couldn’t see the point in saying no, so he didn’t.

They met in an off-campus coffee bar, in a neighborhood that he didn’t typically frequent in his travels with Jim. He caught sight of himself in the window before he went in to meet her, and almost started at the image. He’d always been in good shape, but he was in the best shape of his life at the moment, looked broad-shouldered and small-waisted, fit. If only he could make himself smile, get the grooves of worry out from between his eyes, he’d look really good. He sighed, and swiped at the bangs that never seemed to stay put, and opened the door.

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Ellie, as she preferred to be called, was the perfect mix of bitter and amenable. She’d been pretty clear with Leo from the beginning that she wasn’t interested in any kind of permanent relationship. She’d had that, and lost it, after a baby and infidelity. They talked through their histories from the vantage point of people who’d made the ultimate commitment and gotten burned, but unlike Leo, she wasn’t willing to try again.

He’d thought, at first, that it was just too soon for her. She’d only been divorced for a few months she’d told him, as she swept her long blonde hair back up into a tightly controlled chignon at the back of her head, sitting at the vanity in the hotel. She never took him to her apartment, where he might interact with her child, and at 35, she wasn’t going to come back to his dorm room with him — which was fine, because if he’d had her in the bed that he’d shared with Jim and dreamed of Jim in still, he would have felt more like he was cheating than he already did. No, their assignations happened in hotel rooms, after dinner and drinks, very grown up, very holovidlike, very … businesslike.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t getting off, and not like she was shy about telling him what she wanted, but it was bloodless. He’d always had passion, even with Patty, when there hadn’t been real love. But this … this was about utility, about servicing the body’s needs in a calculated way, relieving tension, giving nothing.

He’d thought that he’d feel better, if not good, thought that he’d burn off some of the ache of the unrelieved want that he’d been feeling so long for Jim, that connecting to another person would be preferable to the dissatisfaction of his hand and his wistful imaginings of how things could have gone, but hadn’t. Besides, it wasn’t like Jim was holding himself back any, so why should he?
But the truth was that beyond the instant of oblivion that orgasm provided, the whole thing was far more hollow than masturbation in some ways. He’d pretty much decided to tell Ellie their arrangement was over one morning before Christmas when he came home and flopped down on his bed. He intended to rest before he started his day and figured out how to break up with a woman that he wasn’t really having a relationship with, when a familiar scent rose from the pillow he’d dropped his head down upon. He turned his nose to confirm the smell of Jim, to revel in the fact that he’d been by, and to hope that he’d felt a pang at the realization that Leo was out somewhere, in someone else’s bed. He had no doubt that Jim had figured that fact out. He might be keeping away from Leo, as much as Leo’d been keeping away from him, but he had no doubt that Jim knew exactly when every shift of his began and ended, when he was in class or not.

He ignored the pounding of his own foolish heart at the idea that Jim had been here waiting for him.

It didn’t mean that everything was all right.

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He ended things with Ellie two days before Christmas, feeling equal parts the heel and relieved at her easy acceptance of the situation, coming home late that night after stopping by the gym and beating the crap out of the heavy bag. He’d shrugged out of his jacket and toed off his shoes, ordering the lights to 50% as the door whisked closed, only to turn towards his desk and find himself confronted with a red ribbon-bedecked bottle, next to the Christmas tree that he’d had to re-pot at the end of the summer, its nacelles gleaming red, mocking him. The tree usually resided on the windowsill next to the sink in his tiny kitchenette, where it could get the full benefit of the Western-facing windows, and it hadn’t walked itself to his desk, or brought that bottle with it.

"Damn it, Jim," he uttered under his breath, helplessly searching the surface for the note that wasn’t there, nor on his comm. He sat in his desk chair and stared at the tree until it was time to go to work again, wondering what the fuck it all meant in the end. He was miserable, and alone, and goddamnit, he missed Jim more than anything, more than he had ever missed any other soul in this universe or in any other.

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He scared a crapload of interns over the course of the next 24 hours, berating them for mistakes that any intern would make instead of teaching them what it meant to be a good doctor. Half the time he was looking over his shoulder for the blond head that he knew wouldn’t be appearing.

Jim had already made his move, half-assed though it might be.

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Christmas morning, after a night of restless sleep and dreams that he refused to contemplate much less recall, he packed the bottle of booze that he’d bought for Jim in a box, along with the last three of Horatio’s journals that Jim had never gotten around to reading. He tucked a note under the flap of the top one that read simply:

Jim,

I thought that you might want to know the rest of Horatio’s journey.

Always,

LHM
He refused to consider how many versions of the note that he'd written and discarded before he decided on that simple sentiment, and went by Jim's dorm on his way to work, and left the box with the RA on-call. She told him that she hadn't seen Jim for a couple of days, but she'd make sure that he got it, and the other box that was waiting for him.

Leo knew it was from Gram, and he nodded and thanked her around the sudden lump in his throat, wishing her a happy holiday before he walked away and went about his day.

He was not thinking about last Christmas, and how in retrospect, it seemed perfect in its imperfections.

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It began the day after Christmas.

Traditionally, that was the day all the newsfeeds and the vid-mags began their drumbeat of the countdown to the New Year, endlessly rehashing the events of the ending year and making ridiculous predictions for the one not yet born. But 2258, it seemed, was a new year with Special Significance, so special that it stilled the desire to look back at the year just past.

It was just after the grey, dreary early winter dawn that Leo heard the first story. He was standing at the Nurse's Station making notes on post-surgical treatment for one of his patients when he heard a voice talking urgently and not quite making sense. The unctuous voice of the newscaster cut in while he wrote, only half-listening, to the breathless announcement that after 25 years, Starfleet was releasing some new audio of the Kelvin disaster, including some of the last known words of its hero, George Kirk.

Leo had swung around to look at the vidscreen in shock, his mouth dropping open as an Admiral appeared on the screen, fat and smug in his braided and ribboned dress uniform. "Many of us believe that the solemnity of the occasion, and its importance in our history, has been lost over the years," this Admiral Howlett opined. "So we felt that in recognition of this particular anniversary, a further reminder of what was lost by the acts of an unknown madman was appropriate. We need to be reminded that our freedom does not come without a price."

And Leo, knowing full well that the price that was exacted was not paid by anyone in Starfleet Fucking Command, felt himself suffused with rage and helplessness, realizing that what he'd just heard was George Kirk speaking to his wife about their newborn baby boy.

"Jim," he said, not even realizing until his lips had formed the word that he'd actually named one of those who'd paid. "God, Jim …" he breathed out, hoping against hope that wherever he fucking was, he was out of the reach of this travesty, of hearing his parents last, private communication with each other heartlessly broadcast to a universe always spoiling for gossip, especially if it was tragic.

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He commed Jim that night, his voice tight with anxiety and gruff with care. "Jim," he said, "I know that we haven't spoken in a while, but I need you to call me. Call me, Jim."

The response from Jim's comm came immediately, but brought no relief.

Gone sightseeing. See you in 2258. JTK

"Damn it, Jim," Leo said, and it was a near thing to stop his hand from impulsively smashing his comm at the sight of his blithe away message.
He was deep in the midst of a troubled sleep when the bleep of his comm brought him sharply awake and he stumbled to his desk in the dark, ordering the lights on, momentarily blinded himself with the flare of lights from Jim's Christmas tree.

*I'm OK, Bones* was all it said.

The onslaught began the next day, as soon as Leo arose and keyed into his fleet mail.

*Lieutenant McCoy, Worldwide News understands that you're a very good friend of James T. Kirk's. We're interested in talking to him and getting his take on this important anniversary. If you'd be willing to connect us with him, we'd certainly make it worth your while …*"

*Doctor McCoy, the *fleet Press Officer requests that you call him by 0900 to discuss the whereabouts of Cadet Kirk. We need him to be available for press opportunities as we get closer to Remembrance Day. If you are aware of his present location, you must disclose it to Commander Beardsley immediately …*

*Lieutenant McCoy, *Time* would like to talk to you about your friendship with James T. Kirk, the son of the Kelvin hero. Please contact our editor at …*

And on, and on, and on. Leo had never been so happy to be unaware of where the fuck Jim actually was. Even if they shot him up with the most potent alien truth serum, he had no fucking idea, and for that he was actually grateful.

Amidst all the crap in his inbox, there was one comm, buried at the bottom.

*Leo, I saw the news and my God, those vultures. Call me, Gram*

That one call he returned, although he walked off campus and used a line at Finnegan's, while a glowering Liam stood behind the bar and watched the crowd. He'd already rousted three reporters before Leo'd shown up, and it was only 20:00 on a Sunday night.

"McCoy!" He was tensed and ready to swing before he turned around and saw that it was Harry Yu that was hailing him. "Those motherfuckers," Yu said when he got close to Leo, his black eyes snapping with rage. "Have you been getting press calls?"

"I'd like to know who the fuck set them on me," Leo growled.

"C'mon, man," Yu said, "it's not like it's a secret that you guys are close."

Leo nodded, hoping that he'd kept the flinch from being visible.

"Do you know where he is?" Yu asked bluntly.

"Nope," Leo said.

"Good," Yu said. "Expect a summons from Command, if you haven't already gotten one. Some fucker showed up at my office to interrogate me — he denied that's what it was, but, bullshit — about my Assistant Instructor's whereabouts. I told him that I had no idea where any of my staff went on their holidays, and he asked me for a list of people who might know."
Leo looked at him, lips pursed.

"I couldn't not say your name, man," Yu said apologetically. "He knew who you were, anyway."

Leo sighed and nodded, then clapped Harry on the back, turning around and heading to the hospital. With three days left until the New Year, the press calls were getting more frequent, more insistent. He'd not returned a fucking one.

Throughout the day, he found himself the subject of increased scrutiny, caught nurses and doctors whispering when they thought his head was turned. Surprisingly, it was Rick Jindal who told him that the staff had been questioned about when they'd last seen Jim at the hospital. There was something in the way Jindal hesitated when he said Jim's name that let Leo know that he'd figured out exactly whose name Leo had begun to say that night, nearly two years gone now -- but his eyes were compassionate when he said, "I told them that Jim hadn't been around for weeks now, and I know several others said the same. I can't say that they were happy to get that answer, Leonard."

Leo thanked him, offering his hand, and found himself pleased when Rick took it. He saw Patty from a distance, and her expression when she glanced his way was hot with anger. There was a way that she tilted her head that let him know that she, too, had received a visitor, and her eyes promised that she'd tell him all about it when she got the chance.

When he finally got the chance to leave the hospital, he found himself being pulled into stairwell. He'd hoped it was Jim, but it was Subie, Raji and Sen, all flushed with anger and worried about Jim.

"It's disgusting, man," Raji said, and it was clear that he was speaking for all of them. "I mean, who cares what I think about what Kirk might be thinking? It's totally ridiculous. They make it like they're all interested in Jim, when all they want is some dirt, some juicy story. Even Cupcake told them to fuck off and he can't stand Kirk."

Leo's eyes were at his hairline as he listened to Raji, usually the most quiet of the three friends, ranting.

"Anyway, McCoy," Raji said, "you tell Jim that nobody in the KFF is taking their bait, and that he should keep staying low until this blows over, but if he needs anything -- diversions, comm cover, anything -- we'll do it."

"That's a promise," Subie said solemnly, and Sen nodded. They all whacked Leo on the back like Jim always did to them, before they disappeared down the stairwell not even waiting for his response, trusting that whatever was going on, he was in cahoots with Jim, that they were in this together.

Leo sat down on the stairs and ground the heels of his hands against his stinging eyes, wishing that their innocent assumptions were at least a little true.

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"Pike?" Leo was startled at the Captain's sudden appearance in the waiting room. No simple interrogation was to be his fate. He'd been summoned to appear in front of the Admiral himself.

"How's Jim?" Pike asked curtly. His eyes were snapping with anger, their grey sharp and incisive.

"I dunno," Leo said.

"Good man," Pike said. "Believability is important."
Leo raised his eyebrows at him, and Pike scrutinized him.

"Ah," he said. "Jim's learned that plausible deniability is best backed up with factual deniability, I see."

"One of your lessons?" Leo asked blandly.

"Too basic for my taste," Pike said, as a Lt. Commander appeared at the door to summon Leo. He looked as if he was about to protest when Pike moved with Leo, but a glance at the Captain's face stopped whatever protest he might have been going to utter. When Leo stepped into Admiral Howlett's office, Pike was right behind him.

The moon was dark, but the sky was clear the night of Remembrance Day, the air cold and crisp. For once, the ubiquitous winter fog had held off, and although Leo worried that it would make him too visible to whomever might have followed him, he hoped that the elaborate subterfuge that he'd planned with the assistance of Jim Kirk's few true friends would provide him the cover that he needed as he contemplated the hill in front of him.

After a day full of morbid spectacle that Leo had watched unfold with a thoroughly jaundiced eye, but a closed mouth and a hopefully neutral expression, he'd gone to Finnegan's for a drink, standing first at the bar where he was visible, before he moved into Liam's office to change into the clothing that Irina Federova had smuggled in via the oversized backpack that she always carried. Even with the 25th anniversary activities completed, and the hope that the spectacle surrounding it would ease off, Leo hadn't wanted to take any chances. Liam Finnegan had not only agreed, but been more than happy to provide the necessary cover. Anyone monitoring Leo's comm signal would believe that he was still in Liam's office, not that he'd ducked out the back door and into one of the recycling trucks that was hauling empties across the Bay Bridge. He'd been let off in the darkness long before that point, at one of the side entrances to Golden Gate Park. He'd started his long walk through the darkness, trusting that he was right, believing that he'd find Jim here, at the top of a hill that Jim had taken him to long ago, observing his own remembrance of the day.

He had nothing but instinct to guide him, the sense that Jim, wherever he'd disappeared to these past couple of weeks, had ended up here, not on the highest hill in the park, but the one farthest away from the city lights and with the best view of the stars. He pulled his dark watch cap down over his head, hoping that he wasn't going to end the evening bleeding out in San Francisco General, even as he trusted that Subie was watching the signal from the clean comm that he was carrying. Leo wound his way up the hill steadily, his apprehension gradually being outweighed by the sense of rightness that he felt before he actually was able to discern Jim's long form sitting on the hill, watching him, his bright head uncovered in the cold night air.

"Bones," he said, his voice gone raspy from the temperature, or disuse. He watched Leo quietly as he walked toward him. Jim was wearing jeans, and the leather jacket that had been his companion long before Leo, knees raised and arms braced over them, long fingers clasped loosely between. As Leo got closer, he could see that Jim was wearing the sweater that he'd knitted for Horatio more than a decade before, and the sight of it gave him an unexpected sweet surge of pleasure.

"Kid," he said, by way of greeting.

"You found me," Jim observed.

Leo flipped him one of the flasks from his pocket as he continued to approach him. "That was the plan, wasn't it?"
Jim caught it, watching him with his fathomless eyes, midnight blue in the low light, a mirror of the dark sky above them. "Wasn't sure you'd know the plan," Jim said, turning the flask over in his hands and looking at it before he looked up at Leo again. "Wasn't sure you'd care to figure it out."

Leo pulled his jacket down before he dropped down on the grass beside Jim. "You shouldn't underestimate me, kid," he said, and turned to look him in the eye.

The ghost of the smile that Jim had worn since Leo'd first been able to discern his lone figure on the hill caught fire and lit up softly, curving the lines of Jim's angular face. "No," he said quietly. "I guess I shouldn't." He leaned toward Leo, bumping his shoulder against Leo's broader one.

"You're welcome," Leo said to him. "Drink up."

Jim's smile bloomed even further.

"It's a long fucking walk home," Leo observed. He paused before he added, "Happy Birthday, Jim."

Jim nodded. He was still smiling, but his voice was tight when he said, "One for the history books, huh, Bones?"

"Fuck 'em, Jim," Leo said. He raised his flask, and waited until Jim did the same. "To writing our own history."

"Amen," Jim said wryly, tipping his flask up.

The bourbon warmed Leo's throat, and burned its way through the lump of unspoken words that had been caught there for weeks. When he dropped his chin back down, he felt Jim sling his arm over his shoulders like he always had, like the weeks of silence and strangeness had never happened. He turned his head and looked at Jim, who had tilted his face up to look at the stars with an expression of dreaming contentment. He sat there, with Jim's warmth next to him where it belonged, and watched the stars shine over the city.

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**Chapter 34**

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Jim Kirk was up to something, that much Leo could tell. If he occasionally wished that his ‘fleet-Mandated psi tests had shown higher scores in clairvoyance, rather than empathy, well, that was only human of him, wasn't it?

Because Kirk was definitely up to something, and damned if Leo knew what the hell it was. He was doing that thing, Jim was, where he talked all the time, as if filling up all the spaces in the conversation would keep Leo from asking him what the fuck he was up to, or what the fuck was happening between them. And when Jim wasn't talking, and even sometimes when he was, Leo would catch that expression on his face when Jim was looking at him, the one that he'd seen early one morning when he'd awoken to find Jim sitting in his desk chair, watching him while he slept.

The first time he'd seen that expression had been the year prior, when he'd gone to Pike's office to collect Jim for dinner and found Jim seriously contemplating the chessboard that stood between the two men. The chessboard wasn’t a surprise, more like SOP for Jim and Pike, but it wasn’t the standard board that Leo'd gotten used to seeing. Jim had told him that Pike had challenged him to a 3-D chess match, and Jim had found learning the newer game system intriguing and energizing. That wasn’t a surprise, either — Jim was inordinately fond of puzzles and games of strategy. Jim had gone
on and on about the game and the alterations of rules that Leo did not know or care to learn about, but he'd enjoyed the light in Jim's eyes, the happiness in his expression, the spark that it all brought to his being. That night in Pike's office, he'd sat and watched the gears working in Jim's head as he contemplated the board, wondered why he was taking so long to make a move when he typically was able to make decisions rapidly and incisively, as if he were more supercomputer than human. Instead, it had taken Jim an hour to make his move -- long enough for Leo to drink a glass or two of Pike's scotch and long enough for the expression on Pike's face to fade from bemusement at confounding his favorite pupil to a gradual understanding that Jim was going to prevail in the match that he'd smugly assumed was won. Because when Jim finally made his move, there'd been a light in his eyes that announced the truth before his lips formed the word, "Check." They'd never gotten to dinner that night, as Jim had explained, point by point, why he'd discarded each of the potential gambits Pike proposed and some that he hadn't thought of, explaining why each would have resulted in his eventual loss of the game, sometimes dozens of moves away. It had been a dizzying realization for Leo to actually comprehend how much tactical information Jim could amass, retain and spin outward. And he'd never forget the expression on Pike's face when Jim had casually mentioned that in some respects he found the 3D variation of chess easier than the standard variant.

So, it was disconcerting to see that same expression on Jim's face when he was regarding him, the one he reserved for a problem so complex that it actually challenged him. Jim was trying to puzzle him out, like he was the Kobayashi Maru or any other enigma, and he was cycling through possibilities and outcomes.

If only Leo could make Jim understand that some things, love chief among them, were always a risk, and that there was no way to account for all the variables, all the possibilities, not really. It was about faith, about putting your faith in another.

It was always a crap shoot.

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Maybe he's been an asshole.

All along, Leo's been thinking of things, this thing between him and Jim, like he's the teacher and Jim's the student. Fuck it, no, like he's the doctor and Jim's the patient. Like he can teach Jim what it means to be loved, to be in love, and heal him.

But now that he was thinking more clearly, he could see this for the arrogant presumption that it was. Because the truth was that what he knew about love would fit into a thimble. Behind him, in the not-so-distant past, was the wreckage of his own failures, some of it still smoldering. He'd loved, and he'd lost, each and every time. Sometimes, he'd chosen to walk away, sometimes he'd been left. There wasn't a goddamned thing that he could point to in his past that made him any more of an expert in love, other than his own ego, his own romantic ideas of what could be if Jim would just change, just conform to his ideas of how things should go.

And if anyone had approached him like that, had approached him like he was the one who needed schooling? He would have told them to fuck off. He was just like every other person in the universe – he wanted to be loved for who he was, as he was. But what he demanded for himself he wasn't willing to give to Jim. All along, he'd held to the notion that he was Jim's friend first. But a friend, a true friend, saw you as you were, foibles and contradictions, lumps and bruises, and they accepted you as you were, galling parts and all.

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It wasn’t like he was spending all of his time dwelling on the situation between him and Jim. He was
too goddamned busy for one thing. If he was going to be up and out of the Academy on Jim’s
timeline, he had one more semester to accomplish his goals. With his first draft of the dissertation
analyzing the therapeutic modalities for curing astrophobia due before the end of January, and a full
courseload of finishing up all the bullshit requirements about regulations that he’d put off, he was
occupied much of his time. With Jim’s brutally accelerated schedule and his thesis for tactical due on
the same timeline, he was much in the same boat.

Leo actually found himself studying, or working with Jim nearby, which cut down on their
conversational opportunities, while allowing them a neutral environment to get used to being around
each other again. Still, the regrets and the second-guessing of his own behavior were inevitable,
especially while he was working on his thesis. He couldn’t help but think about how patient Jim had
been with him through all the weeks of shuttle flights, how he'd pushed and prodded, but never once
acted superior to Leo. He'd asked Jim for his help, and Jim had given it freely, taking Leo's request
seriously. It had, he realized, been a truly loving gesture of friendship that he'd just taken for granted,
as his due.

He felt humbled, and a little shamed when he thought of it, now.

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"Dr. McCoy," the voice addressing him was decidedly feminine, with a hint of whiskey in it that was
almost seductive. Almost, because Leo’d never found intending to be seductive particularly
seductive.

Leo turned from where he'd been annotating the chart of a Cadet with a bad electrical burn, and was
surprised to see who the owner of the whiskeyed tone was. "Dr. Dehner," he said, hopefully keeping
the surprise out of his voice. He glanced back at the chart in his hand, wondering if the Cadet was
one of her patients.

"You are a very interesting person," she said, her voice just shy of a purr as she looked him right in
the eye.

As the opening for professional conversations went, it was highly unusual, and as much as Leo tried
to school his expression and his curiosity, he knew that it was a useless gesture. He'd heard of
Elizabeth Dehner, of course, didn't know anyone at Starfleet Medical who hadn't. She was the
reigning wunderkind of the Psychiatric Department, a gifted clinician who'd qualified by her early
twenties, and whose psi gifts, if the rumors were true, were the highest ever recorded. There were
those on the staff who had grumbled about those findings, and dismissed her, and her work, because
she had an unfair advantage over other less gifted psychiatrists, but Leo wasn't one of them. She'd
had to qualify, just like every other M.D., and psychic or not, no hocus pocus had helped her pass
the boards.

Still, for as much as he'd defended her in the past, he was surprised to find himself unsettled by her
actual presence, by her blatant regard of him. Something in her cool, dark blue gaze made him feel
like he was under a microscope, like she really could see right inside of his head, but all he said was
"Oh?"

Her smile widened at his simple statement. "Yes," she breathed out, one long-fingered hand pushing
the sharp wedge of her light hair away from the pronounced jawline that added to her appearance of
determination. She reminded him, God help him, of Jim Kirk. "I've read the early draft of your
thesis," she said lightly. "I hope that you don't mind that Dr. Horvath shared it with me?" The pause
was momentary. "Your subject is relevant to some of my work. I did wonder, however, why it was
that you'd so easily discounted the literature on guided imagery work done under the influence of
some of the psychoactives currently being used therapeutically."
Leo's eyebrows had raised at her words, and he no longer sought to hide his surprise. "My thesis is analyzing psychological modalities," he answered evenly. "As such, I'm not qualified to judge psychiatric interventions, Dr. Dehner."

"Mmm …" she murmured, and then added, "Liz," in a correcting tone. "But with your background," she said, "you could just have easily qualified on the psychiatric track."

"I'm a surgeon," Leo said bluntly, "looking to expand my qualifications for an eventual posting as a CMO. My academic work here is in support of that aim, and the generalist tendencies that such a posting would require."

"In fact, though," Liz -- no, Dr. Dehner -- answered, "ships are in need of qualified counselors as well, and there is no reason that a CMO could not also serve in that role."

"With all due respect, Dr. Dehner," Leo said, "I'm not interested in embarking on another lengthy rotation just to add another qualification to my CV. The psych degree will be functionary, at best, until -- and this is an if and when situation -- I find the time to complete a practicum. My intent is not to become a practicing psychologist, but to add to the literature at hand on a topic of particular interest to me personally."

Dr. Dehner had cocked her head to one side while he was talking, and she appeared to be listening to what he said, albeit on a deeper level than his words. "Very interesting," she breathed out. "I sense that you're not willing to be swayed by my reasoning, Leonard," she said. "I must tell you that I find that disappointing. I believe --" and here she paused and moved a bit closer to him, laying a hand on his arm "- that you are particularly well-suited to my field." She studied him very closely. "Yes," she said thoughtfully.

Leo resisted the urge to swallow that her nearness brought on, an almost claustrophobic sense of closeness that had little to do with her actual physical proximity. He felt encroached upon in a way that he could not describe as the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and the adrenaline dumped into his system. "As I said," he said, striving to keep his tone even. "I'm not interested."

"I do see that," she said surely, and Leo had to fight the urge to shake her hand from his sleeve, despite the two layers of fabric that protected his skin from her touch. "But I hope to persuade you to a different course at some point. I will," she said, and he felt the edge of creeping predation, of menace, in her words, despite the musical tone of her voice, and her ultra-calm mien, "be following your career ..." She smiled. "With great interest."

She removed her hand from his arm and smoothly walked away from him, her fleet uniform skirt brushing against him as she passed by. He suppressed a shudder, and tried to refocus his thoughts.

"So," Patty's voice said from next to his elbow. "What did the great Elizabeth Dehner want with you, Leonard?"

He heaved out a sigh at the welcome voice, the warmth and utter humanness of Patty Stefanakis. "Patty, darlin'," he said. "I take back every argument I ever forwarded in regard to that woman."

Patty's green eyes regarded him with tender sympathy, and not a hint of the smugness they could rightly have held, the warmth of her gaze refreshingly unlike Dehner's unsettlingly cool blue one. Whatever resemblance she'd had to Jim had been only the most fleeting of physical ones. There was nothing in those frosty eyes that was remotely Jim-like.

"You have every right to say 'I told you so', darlin'," Leo said to her.
Patty shook her head at his words. "No," she said ruefully. "In this particular case, there's no need for that. Seeing her and hearing about her work just can't tell you how she is in person."

"I think," Leo said, "that I've met alien species that were less alien than she is." He paused, searching for a way to describe her. "She's just not …"

"She has a God-like affect," Patty said incisively. "It's almost like her ability to sense emotion has made her less sympathetic to humanity's foibles. Instead of giving her insight, it's granted her superiority and remove."

"Yes," Leo said, turning to face Patty fully. He only now realized how quiet the floor had become around him while Dehner had been there, as if she'd had a dampening effect on everything around her. "That's it exactly."

Patty nodded, lips pursed. "Your thesis must be very good," she said, and Leo raised his eyebrows.

"Horvath has been singing your praises," she said, "and Dehner? She's very ambitious."

"She thinks I should be qualifying in psychiatry," Leo said sarcastically. He honestly didn't believe that he should set himself up to fix anybody else's psyche. He looked down at the PADD in his hands, and knew that he was better off trying to fix those things that were more tangible. Tangled nerve endings, that was more his speed. "Hogwash," he finished harshly.

Patty smiled. "You could be a marvelous psychiatrist, Leonard," she said teasingly. "Or neuroscientist."

He rolled his eyes, adding up the rotations that would require. "No," he said firmly.

"But just think how much longer you'd have to stay here at 'fleet Medical," Patty said teasingly. "With all that time, I'm sure that you and Liz," she put undue emphasis on the name, "could really get to know each other."

Leo let the shudder that he'd been holding in out in one short head-to-toe twitch before he reined himself in. "No way," he said firmly.

"That's my boy," Patty said and stood up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek. "Stay strong."

She walked away with a bit of a sashay in her step, her white coat swaying over her practical trousers.

He smiled wryly and tried to refocus on the work at hand.

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His first thought when he turned around and stared at Jim after he’d passed the Kobayashi Maru was to wonder what the fuck he had done. Because sitting there in the Captain’s chair like he’d been born for the job, Jim hadn’t been wearing his serious assessment face, but the smug jackass one that meant that he essentially held the simulation and its creators in contempt. He had, of course, expressed that contempt in the way he knew best how to exemplify: by any means possible.

For the first time, Leo wondered if Jim realized that one of the many possible reactions of his tilting at windmills, his proving that he really was smarter — or more treacherous — than the Kobayashi Maru’s designers, was his being ousted from the Academy onto his all-too-goodlooking ass. He’d probably have blistered Jim’s ears with his thoughts on the subject, if he believed that Jim was even listening to what he had to say, but stubborn jackass that he was, aside from the smug, Jim had just insisted that he’d done nothing but prove that with innovation, a no-win scenario can be altered.
Right.

Like Starfleet would fucking welcome *that* lesson.

From a Cadet.

He’d warned Jim, he had. And unlike Patty, he was not above saying ‘I told you so’, albeit in a different format, when he’d first laid eyes on Commander Spock at Jim’s hearing. But when it had all gone to hell and they’d been mustered and sent out in a hectic rush to answer Vulcan’s distress call, he’d had second thoughts, just like he always did with Jim. And in that split second when he realized that passing the Maru had resulted in Jim being grounded, he found himself incapable of just turning around and walking away. He could say that he’d done it because Jim had never not supported him, even when Leo’d doubted that he was worth supporting, but that wasn’t the truth.

The truth was he couldn’t fucking do it. He couldn’t be just one more person to leave Jim behind. He couldn’t get on the *Enterprise*, of all fucking boats, without Jim Kirk at his side, not even for what was probably going to end up being some bullshit milk run. Because the truth of the matter was that he never would have been able to get on that boat without Jim, one way or the other.

But that wasn’t really the uppermost thought in his mind. He didn’t *want* to go anywhere without Jim Kirk, especially not up into the black, and not because he was afraid.

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At Leo’s urging, Jim had roused enough while they were on the shuttle to see where they were going, but Leo had been unable to tear his eyes from the sight of the starships clustered together at the space station for long. He’d only ever seen them from a distance, on all the milk runs and the sims that he’d gone on, and there just wasn’t the adequate scale to comprehend how truly massive they were. He’d known the ships were huge, of course, but to see the *Enterprise* from a shuttle viewscreen, next to the *Farragut* and the *Hood*, was something else entirely. They were magnificent, and Leo felt awe at the sight and surprise at his own visceral reaction to them. They were beautiful, all of them, and reassuring somehow, with their mass, and their sleek, fleet designs. Part of him could not believe that they were real, and that he was there among them. He tried to memorize the moment, and felt a sharp pang that Horatio hadn’t lived long enough to see this day.

Jim belched from the seat next to him, and said in a near whisper, “Horatio would have loved this, huh, Bones?”

He turned away from the window to smile at Jim’s expressing his own thoughts, but Jim’s expression was more of a grimace. He leaned over and put his forehead against Leo’s shoulder and let out a small groan, while Leo rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s just a vaccine, you big baby,” he whispered into the crown of Jim’s head. Trust Jim to have the most severe reactions to the simplest things.

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He had a few moments of real anxiety about what the fuck he’d done when they got on the *Enterprise* itself. Evading Spock had been fairly easy, and he figured that he’d be able to keep Jim away from the bridge for the duration of the trip. Once they got to Vulcan, if there was going to be a search and rescue, he figured that Pike would be happy for an extra set of hands. He had his first real qualms when he’d stowed Jim in secondary Medbay, thankfully sedated, which was the perfect state for him for the time being. He changed into his newly-issued science blues, only to find himself confronted with an additional stripe on the end of his sleeve.
He’d stomped out of his newly-assigned quarters to complain, only to find himself turning onto the same corridor as the Captain himself, with Puri, the CMO. The men appeared to be going over a list of the provisions that had been laid in for all possible medical matters. The flagship had some of the finest operating theatres flying, as well as a more than adequate complement of regeneration technology, and basic supplies.

Leo threw a hasty salute at both of his superiors, and found himself apologizing after the introductions had been made and his assignment, to run the secondary MedBay, had been confirmed. “Sir,” he addressed Captain Pike, “I apologize for being out of uniform.”

Pike looked at him askance.

“I’ve been issued the wrong rank, Captain,” Leo said. “I was actually on my way to rectify the matter before I reported back to Medical.”

Pike flashed the wolfish grin that even Leo recognized was rarely used. “There’s no mistake, Lieutenant Commander,” he said blandly.

Leo’s eyebrows raised.

“All personnel have been issued the rank that they’ll be assuming upon their graduation. Assuming, of course, that you don’t do anything to jeopardize your standing between now and then.”

Leo could only wonder at how pallid his smile might be at the moment. “Thank you, Sir,” he said gruffly, looking down at the stripes that he knew would probably only be his for this one mission.

“No arguments today, Lieutenant Commander?” Pike said sardonically.

“I’m thinking that the rescue should take precedence, Sir,” Leo said, while Dr. Puri looked confused.

“Indeed,” Pike said, and his expression sobered. “Whatever’s going on sounds very troubling, at least from the early reports. We’ll see what’s what when we drop out of warp and rejoin the rest of the ‘fleet in …” he consulted his chrono, “seventeen minutes. I trust you’ll be ready, gentlemen?”

This time they both saluted, and then Leo strode off to the secondary Medbay. Jim should wake up just before they reached Vulcan, as he’d planned.

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He’d really thought that Jim was crazy.

Well, he’d hoped that Jim was crazy, that he was just … wrong about what he expected to find when they dropped out of warp at Vulcan. But the absolute terror that he felt when they dropped out to find themselves adrift in the wreckage of their sister ships, those ships that he’d just marveled at, was indescribable. He found himself hanging onto the railing behind the Captain’s chair as the pilot, that kid Sulu, negotiated them up and down and around like he was driving a vidcar in some game, not navigating through the remnants of their classmates and colleagues from the Academy.

God.

Their classmates and colleagues. Leo could feel his heart pounding in his throat at the thought, and he looked over at Jim, clinging to the railing next to him, an uncharacteristically grim expression on his face as he watched the bridge viewscreen. This time, Jim took no satisfaction in being right, and Leo had to agree. He could feel the ship taking hits as they wove through the field, and then God Almighty, Leo’s hair stood on end as they were faced with the immense dark overwhelming
unknown of the Romulan ship. He looked over at Jim again, knowing that Jim’s darkest dream had come true. The ship, the one that had killed George Kirk and shattered Jim Kirk’s world, had been lying in wait in the black, all those years.

Jim spared him one seering look before he followed Pike off the turbolift, and they parted direction, to see each other who knew when.

Leo shook his head to clear it as he ran down to the main Medical bay to join them as they received casualties, either from the Enterprise, or God help them, from the derelict pieces of their sister ships. Somehow, he doubted that there’d be any pods to rescue – there’d been no time to order a general evacuation, he thought with a shudder. Five minutes ago this had been a rescue mission, eight ships sent to Vulcan to aid the planet in whatever way they could. Now there was one ship left to serve what was left of their force, and the escape pods that were streaming from Vulcan, the ones that managed to avoid the malevolent intent of the unknown Romulan ship that was determined to destroy Vulcan. God.

He turned the corner toward Medbay at a dead run, and ran straight into chaos, the doors opening onto fire and death and destruction. Personnel were running everywhere, and panic was the order of the day. He barely had a chance to brace himself before the main bay took another hit, and he began yelling for Dr. Puri.

“He’s dead,” the nurse to his right said. He was relieved to see that she looked frightened, but that she was functioning, loading supplies into a cart for easy movement.

“Chapel?” he asked curtly, trying to recall her name.

“Christine Chapel,” she snapped back, “RN, NPH, Head Nurse and Lieutenant. McCoy?”

“Leonard McCoy,” he shot back, “And God help us all, Acting CMO.”

She nodded. “Orders, sir?”

“Casualty assessment?”

“The most severe injuries were in the part of the bay that is currently on fire,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the din. “Whoever isn't dead has already been moved. My nurses are moving the other patients to the secondary bay, and we’re working on supplies.”

“Good man,” he barked, ignoring the glare. “Hey!” He yelled to gain the attention of the Cadets who were fluttering to and fro in a panic. Most of them were still interns, and all of them were fairly terrified of Dr. McCoy. “Get your asses in order, now! We have patients in the other bay and we need to be prepped to receive casualties from the fleet as well as the planet. Fan out from where you’re standing now and make sure that you take every item that might have any value and transport it to what is now the prime bay.” For an instant, the shell-shocked interns, medics and technicians stared at him. The nurses were already moving and continued on. “Move!” He barked. “This is war, people, and you are Starfleet professionals and medics. Go!” The group scattered, but this time with purpose, with the exception of one young man who seemed to be in shock.

“Doctor,” Leo snapped.

"Pak," the young man answered in a faint voice. "I'm Dr. Pak."

"Why are you just standing there, Dr. Pak?” Leo said in a low voice.

"My wife …" he said faintly, and Leo looked at him with compassion. "My wife was on the
Leo nodded, but kept his face stern, trying not to think of all the husbands and wives and lovers that were never coming home, trying not to think of Jim diving down to the drill suspended above Vulcan with barely anything to shield his all-too human body from impact, other than his eye, his aim, his luck and his balls. "Your wife a doctor, Dr. Pak?" he asked.

"Yes," he said, still in that same bewildered tone.

"You think that she's over there drifting, waiting for a rescue, or you think that she's trying to get as many patients stable as possible so that she can beam them over to us when we're ready?"

The young man's eyes widened at McCoy's words. "I … I dunno, sir."

"That's right," Leo said. "So until you do, you do what you were trained for, and you gather some supplies and you get downstairs so that when the casualties do come, you're ready for them. Just like your wife would want you to."

"Yes, sir," Pak said, swallowing convulsively. "Right away, sir." He hurried away from Leo.

"Yessir," Leo echoed as it sunk in that he was in charge. He let the despair take him over for one minute, then he moved into the most damaged part of the Medbay to scan Puri and the other dead, recording their IDs via their comm badges and checking to ensure that there was no one left alive before they abandoned the bay. "Helluva way to become CMO," he said under his breath. "Jesus God."

The damage was worse the closer he got to outer hull, and he tamped down his own distress as he moved purposefully, trying to avoid the fires and shoving equipment back toward the main Bay. One of the techs came and joined him, moving to get some equipment on the far wall, the one closest to the exterior, when the Enterprise took a hit far too close for Leo's taste. It knocked them both to the deck, but Leo sprang immediately to his feet, watching in horror as the cracks in the wall that connected to the hull began to show. He knew that the breach was too severe, and that the ship would self heal by sealing that piece of the Bay off. He yelled to the tech, but either he didn't understand or he was too disoriented from the battering they'd gotten to move in the correct direction. Leo watched helplessly as the tech ran to the section of the ship that was going to be sealed off outside the Enterprise, powerless to save him as the clear aluminum swept down and bolted itself cleanly to the surface, before the ship jettisoned the damaged section as it buckled and began to shred from the force of the vacuum. Leo could clearly see the hapless technician's face for just an instant before he was swept off into the void of space, and then he turned and ran back into the Bay as the Enterprise shuddered from another blow.

“Move out, move out, move out!” Leo yelled to the remaining staff. Whatever was left to salvage in this bay would have to wait until the current firefight was over. They had to move on and save who could be saved. He only stopped to take a comm from the Acting Captain, that pontificating ass, who primly told him what he already knew before he cleared the bay and sealed it for later reopening. Then he was pelting over the deck to the secondary bay, his only thought to get through this minute and the next, and to hope that Jim was doing the same.

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Chapter 35  

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If he had known how things were going to turn out, maybe he’d have spent less time studying the regs, and more time working on crisis management techniques, but that was hindsight.

Right now, Leo was up to his ass in alligators, trying to treat patients in a Sickbay where supply carts were strewn everywhere, blocking access to cabinets that contained supplies they needed. More importantly, the chaos impeded efficiency, since they’d all been trained to expect supplies to be in certain places and a delay could mean the difference between life and death for a critically ill patient. But there was no time to reorganize in the middle of a crisis. They’d just have to wait for a breather and then sort things out. Until then, they’d have to improvise.

If they fucking lived that long.

"Incoming!" he yelled as the bay doors split open to reveal one wounded kid being supported by another. Behind them, he could see corpsmen and medics with stretchers, and he triaged and assigned teams as Chapel stood right next to him, barking out bed assignments.

"Chapel," he said quietly, when they had a minute. "Who are the weak links?" He had his own ideas, at least about the personnel that he’d worked with planetside, but there were folks here who were between assignments while they waited for the Enterprise to be ready to fly, like Chapel.

She looked up at him, narrowing her eyes before answering. "Beds 5 and 8," she said, and Leo glanced at the teams that were there. Because they were unknown to him, and hell, because one doc was more jittery than the next, he’d assigned them patients who would probably only requiring basic patching up, but he’d double-check their work just the same.

"I'll go make sure there are no head injuries being misdiagnosed," she said, and he found himself breaking into a smile despite the situation. Chapel looked startled.

"I like you, Chapel," he said.

She raised an elegant eyebrow, but her blue-green eyes were cool. Christine Chapel was exceptionally beautiful with what he assumed was long blonde hair piled into an elaborate style on her head. He was sure that she’d fended off her share of passes in the workplace, no matter what the regulations said about such untoward behavior, but that was certainly not what he meant.

"Don't go reading too much into that statement," Leo growled. "I'm not asking you to marry me." Reflexively, his right hand came up to touch the ring on his left minimus, and he noted that her eyes had caught the movement. "No offense."

"Divorced, right?" Chapel said.

Now it was Leo's eyebrows that drew down in a frown. She was right sassy, this Christine Chapel. "I'll take that as a yes," she said tartly, starting to move past him. "Oh, and McCoy?"

Leo was already on his way to Bed 1, so only glanced over his shoulder. "M'Benga," she tilted her head toward Bed 3. "Your best." He smiled and kept moving. He already knew that, but he was glad to see that the Head Nurse’s assessment matched his own.

He read the stats from the kid in biobed before he barked out the request, "Report!"

"McCoy?"

Leo glanced down at the familiar voice and startled. "Raji?"
"Jeez, am I glad to see you," the kid sighed, reaching out his hand, which Leo took.

"Report," he snapped again to the doctor at the bedside.

"Ensign Rajphanthongsy was in a Jefferies Tube above the Engineering deck repairing a circuit when the Enterprise took a hit."

Leo whistled. "I guess that explains the ladder-shaped dents on your head, Raji."

The kid smiled at him. "I'm OK," he said. "Fix me fast, though. We got a lot of work to do."

Leo studied the kid's readings. "You'll be here for a good half hour, Raji," he said, taking the hypo from the doctor standing next to him, and dosing the kid to ensure that there was no cranial swelling or bleeds. "You rest while we get you all fixed up, and we'll get you back to work as fast as is safe for all of us." He signaled for another hypo and dialed up a dose of painkiller for the kid, who was still small for his age. "You come aboard with Sen and Subie?" he asked casually, trying not to betray the anxiety he felt in asking the question.

Raji's face immediately fell. "No," he whispered. He squeezed Leo's hand reflexively and Leo squeezed back. "They're on the Farragut."

Leo had enough real life practice with tragedy to not overtly react, so he made his face stern, commanding, and more assured than he felt. "We don't know anything yet, Raji," he said. "Until we do, let's not borrow trouble."

Raji nodded, blinking rapidly a few times, but seemed to relax at Leo's words, and dropped his hand.

Inside, Leo was reciting the list of KFF names in his head, his heart sinking. Subie and Sen weren't on the Enterprise. What about Federova? That sweet kid had already been through so much. Jesus. It would break Jim's heart if those kids were dead.

*Shit.*

It would break his heart.

Raji broke into the dark spiral of his thoughts. "Hey," he said softly. "Did I hear our fearless leader's name on the comm?"

"You did," Leo said with a grimace. "He's off doing something entirely foolish and really dangerous – just how he likes it."

"He was top of the class in orbital diving, McCoy," Raji said. "You know that."

"That's right," he drawled. "The more ridiculous and potentially lethal the skill, the better he was at it."

Raji nodded with a smile. "Hey! Is that your class ring?" he pointed at Leo's hand where it was crossed over his chest. "They sized it wrong, huh?"

"Something like that," Leo said gruffly. He ran a hand over Raji's head. "I'll be back, kid, but I gotta check out everyone else."

Raji nodded, and Leo patted him one more time before he turned away, trying not to see how small and scared the kid seemed on the biobed.

Goddamnit.
"Fuck!"

"Damn it, Jim!" Leo hissed. "Keep it down! You want to announce our presence in here? Maybe I should get a sign that says 'Stowaway!!' with a big, flashing arrow?"

Leo had hovered by the door of the bay that they'd ducked into while Jim changed into the purloined clothes he'd bullshit out of the Chief Supply Officer by telling him that he'd lost weight and needed another set of pants and an undershirt. He was still wearing his reds, and was planning to change into his blues after he'd dosed Jim to pass out on a biobed while the antidote worked its magic on his system.

He turned around to see Jim bobbing and weaving like a drunk as he fought to change his clothes while one-eyed and dizzy. He made quite the picture: his red tunic dropped on the floor, one boot off, his white undershirt rucked up and caught on a chain that he was struggling with and had clearly broken. Leo caught something as it fell from the chain toward the ground.

"What's this?" he asked, turning over the Academy ring curiously.

"My dad's ring," Jim said blearily. "Fuck."

"Never seen you wear it," Leo said, holding out the ring to him as Jim struggled to pull the shirt over his head and pull the chain out of it at the same time.

"I don't," Jim said. "My mom gave it me a long time ago and sometimes I – Fuck!" He caught the chain clumsily as it fell.

"Give me that!" Leo hissed. "I'll sort it out, you get dressed."

"Wore it for luck today," Jim's voice was muffled as he pulled the new black undershirt on over his head.

"You knew that the hearing was about you?" Leo asked angrily.

Jim shrugged and bent over to get his other boot off, narrowly missing taking a header to the floor as Leo caught him by the shoulders. "Thought it might be. Didn't think it was gonna be that bad," he muttered crossly.

Leo had sighed, fiddling with the cheap chain, which broke in another place as he tried to knot it back together. "Well, you'll have to wear it now," he announced, handing it back. "This chain's a goner."

Jim nodded absentmindedly, hopping into his pants, and then contradicted himself by saying, "No, I'll lose it. It's too big." He spun the ring on a finger to prove his point, then shoved his feet into his boots, bracing one hand on Leo's shoulder as he did so.

Leo stepped in to ensure his balance, and then startled when Jim straightened and grabbed his hand, sliding the ring onto the smallest finger of his left hand. "You keep it for me, Bones," he said seriously.

"Oh no, Jim," Leo said. "That's … It's your dad's ring."

"You keep it safe for me," Jim said surely. "I want you to." His blue eyes were earnest, despite the haze of fever in them.
Leo opened his mouth to protest one more time, but stopped when Jim simply said, "Please, Bones."

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Leo found himself twisting the ring on his finger whenever his hands weren't otherwise occupied.

He wondered what the fuck was going on outside the Enterprise. He hadn't had time to stop and listen to the comm chatter coming from the Bridge -- between getting burned patients mending, regenerating broken bones and reinflating lungs or supervising the same, he was too busy. The ship occasionally jounced, but it seemed to Leo that these weren't weapons hits. He grimly supposed that the hits were the result of being pelted with debris from the ships that had held their classmates. The very idea made him queasy.

It wasn't that there was no comm chatter that was directed toward him -- damage reports and requests for aid were regularly called into him, and he mustered corpsmen and teams to go get the injured. Even so, the number of wounded and injured arriving at Sickbay had continued to decrease, allowing them to get the bay into some semblance of order and to inventory what they had. As time went on, though, he could not help but notice that they had yet to receive more than a few injured crew members from the other ships. Whatever weapons this Romulan ship had, they were goddamned powerful, and the damage they'd done had been utterly fucking lethal.

The ship jounced again and he swore and stalked to the comm, "McCoy to Bridge," he barked into it.

"Uhura here."

"Uhura? Darlin', do you have the conn now?" Leo couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "Where the hell is Spock?"

"He's gone down to Vulcan," she said in an even tone, but there was an edge of strain in her voice that let him know that she was upset.

"I thought there was no – did Jim get that thingamagig shut off?"

"The plasma drill," Uhura said automatically, but he could still hear her worry. "And we have reason to believe that you'll be getting survivors from Vulcan any moment."

"What about the fleet, darlin'?" Leo asked quietly.

"I'm hailing anyone and everyone, Doctor," she snapped.

"I'm sure you are, Nyota," he said reassuringly. "The team is back from the drill then?"

"Jim and Sulu, yes," Uhura said, her voice quavering. "Not Olson."

"Fuck!" Leo covered the comm, and looked over to see that Chapel was listening. "Chief Engineer," he said.

She nodded grimly. "I know."

The ship shuddered suddenly, differently from the way it had other times and he heard Uhura inhale sharply.

"Uhura," he said. "What the hell was that?" He could hear her breathing over the line, heavy and harsh. "Uhura?"
"Wait," she said faintly. "Oh, God."

"Uhura, I'm coming up there," Leo said.

"No," she said, and he could hear the shock in her voice. "Vulcan," she breathed out.

"Vulcan what, Uhura?" he asked, raising his voice. Around him, the bay became quiet as the medical staff and patients alike strained to hear what was going on.

"Vulcan is gone," Uhura said.

"What?!"

"Vulcan … Vulcan is gone," Uhura repeated. "They – that ship – they've totally destroyed the planet."

He could hear the shocked inhales of everyone around him. "Uhura," he said firmly, "that's not possible."

There was absolute silence from the other end of the comm, and he could hear the noise from the bridge clearly, the shocked shouts and the calls for readings.

"Evidently it is, Dr. McCoy," Uhura said blankly.

And in the instant, as his mind tried to assimilate what he'd heard -- that a planet of billions of people, and hundreds of millennia of history and culture, was simply gone -- all he could think was that Nyota Uhura had sounded just like Spock.

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The sound of one of the nurse's disconsolate weeping was suddenly loud in the utter quiet of the sickbay, after Leo let go of the button that had linked them to the sounds of chaos from the Bridge. He stood there staring at Chapel's shocked face, reasonably certain that he looked as stunned as she clearly was. They both twitched when the comm buzzed and said, "Transporter Room to Sickbay. Prepare to receive survivors from Vulcan immediately."

"Clear beds!" Leo barked. "Ambulatory should be moved out to Rec Room 6, as we discussed. And …" His order to send medics to the Transporter Bay was never issued, as the door whisked open and he saw Jim, walking slowly with his shoulders back, his bright head tilted toward the elegant older woman on his arm. Jim was murmuring to the woman in what Leo knew to be Vulcan, although it was a language that Leo had never learned. He felt his breath catch at the thought of that, of one of the most ancient languages of the known universe, one of the primary languages of diplomacy and negotiation, potentially being lost — just another in an incalculable list of ways that the universe had been altered in an instant.

He tore his eyes away from the Vulcan elder to look at Jim, noting that he didn't look too banged up, but that he clearly needed attention, then looked behind him to assess those Vulcans that they'd brought in with them.

Jesus. There were so few of them.

"Bones?" Jim said, stopping in front of him. "I'd like you to meet Ambassador T'Pau." Jim's eyes were gleaming significantly at Leo, but it wasn't like he needed the emphasis on the name. He doubted there was a Terran who'd watched the news for the past fifty years who didn't know who T'Pau was, and if they didn't, they weren't worth knowing.
"Ma'am," Leo said. "I'm Dr. Leonard McCoy, Acting CMO of the Enterprise," Jim's eyes widened at his words. "Ready to aid you and your people however I may." He paused, deliberately trying to find the words, as he looked into T'Pau's dark eyes that gave him no hint of her emotions. "I cannot hope to express myself clearly enough, given the circumstances under which we meet, but I offer the condolences of everyone here in Sickbay over the destruction of your homeworld. It is an unfathomable loss."

T'Pau's eyes looked from one eye of his to another, searching for what he could not say. "We accept your condolences, doctor," she said finally.

"Ma'am," Leo said, "Please step this way." He directed her to one of the beds, and Leo noted Jim's moue of pain as he helped her step on a stool to get up to the high biobed.

He flicked his eyes over at Chapel. "I'm on it," she assured him.

He spoke to the other members of the Vulcan party, and saw them settled on biobeds. One of the most elderly was clearly reeling, as much from a blow to the head as from the grievous shock he'd suffered, and Leo spent some time with him, ensuring that he was appropriately treated and oriented to where he was.

When he looked up at one point, Chapel was herding both Jim and Sulu to biobeds despite their protests, and he was grateful for both her professionalism and intransigence as she refused to take no for an answer.

When he was assured that everyone that needed help was receiving it, he made his way to Jim's bed, taking in his hunched posture as the regen worked on his ribs. "Jim," he said quietly, "lay back down so that the cartilage will reform correctly."

Jim startled, but lay back after a second's hesitation. While he waited for the adjusted regen to beep, Leo read the PADD to see that Jim had had his glenohumeral joint realigned, fractured metacarpals in both hands regenerated once – although they'd need more treatment later on -- and various contusions treated. He had some cartilage damage to his rib cage from a blunt force or impact injury, and some truly spectacular bruising of his chest that Leo set two more regens on.

"Bones," Jim said, and his tone was bleak. "Do you know what happened?"

"That those Romulan bastards destroyed Vulcan?" Leo said acidly, keeping his voice pitched low. "Yes."

"When they beamed up the High Council," Jim said, "it was because Spock had gone down to the planet to get them."

"Damned irresponsible of him," Leo growled. "Leaving the conn in the hands of children during a crisis."

"Bones," Jim said quietly. "He went to get his mom."

Leo startled. He knew that Vulcans, no matter how emotionless they seemed, took their family bonds just as seriously or perhaps even more seriously than other cultures. He looked around the bay with open interest for a woman that he could identify as Spock's mother, but nobody looked at all appropriate. "Where …"

Jim laid a hand on his arm, and Leo turned back to him. "He had her," Jim said softly. "He had both his parents and the Council and then ... I don't know what happened, Bones, but she wasn't there when they beamed up."
"Jesus," Leo said with feeling.

"Yeah," Jim said, swallowing hard. "He was … Bones, he was still reaching for her like he could catch her when he rematerialized."

"Jesus, Jim," Leo said again. "That's just … Jesus, the poor kid."

Jim nodded, using his hand to scrub his face, looking weary and bothered. "We failed," he said harshly.

"Jim –" Leo began.

"No," he said. "We got the drill off, but it was too late. Maybe if Olson hadn't been such an …"

"Jim –" Leo said forcefully, crossing his arms across his chest. "We've still got to get ourselves out of this mess. Focus on what we can do, not what we can't change."

"Attention all hands," it was that Russian kid speaking again, and Leo noted that his voice had a tremor. "We are receiving escape pods and shuttles from the planet Vulcan. We have no word on casualties — " his accent made that hard to decipher, "but Sickbay should prepare to receive."

"Corpsmen! 3 teams to the shuttle bay." Leo yelled. "M'Benga, go with them and assess."

"Simpson!" Chapel said from nearby, and one of the nurses turned from working on Sulu to join M'Benga.

"Nothing from the fleet," Jim said.

"Not yet," Leo said firmly.

"It's been too long," Jim said in a whisper.

"Don't say that," Leo said, putting a hand on Jim's chest, looking around to see if Raji had been shipped out to Rec Room 6. He didn't think he could take Jim asking about the KFF just yet.

Jim wrapped his fingers around Leo's minimus, idly turning his father's ring. "Doesn't make it any less true for not being said, Bones," Jim said to him, looking up at him from under his long lashes.

"Jim …" Leo said helplessly, voice hushed.

"Bridge to Dr. McCoy," the voice from the comm was cool and affectless. Jim let go of his hand and sat up, dislodging the regenerators and following Leo to the wall unit.

"Captain Spock," Leo said into the speaker. "I'm so sorry."

"Yes," Spock said, and paused. "Thank you. Dr. McCoy, we are receiving troublesome transmissions from the Narada."

"The what now?" Leo asked.

"The Romulan ship," Spock said steadily. "We can see Captain Pike's life signs."

Leo activated the viewscreen above the comm.

"I believe that they indicate that he is under a significant amount of stress."
Leo read the signs grimly and had to concur. "Yes," he said shortly. "It's impossible to know what exactly is occurring, but if I had to venture a guess, I'd say that he was being tortured."

"My thoughts exactly," Spock said. "We will continue to monitor the situation while we formulate a strategy."

"I've got to get back to the Bridge," Jim said.

Leo didn't even bother to argue with him. "I'm going with you," he said, pressing a hand against the comm. "Sickbay to M'Benga," he said firmly.

"Yes, sir," M'Benga answered.

"Report back to the main Sickbay immediately," Leo said. "I'll be on the Bridge if there's anything that I need to attend to." Then he turned and followed Jim, who was already running to the turbolift.

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Chapter 36 

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James Tiberius Kirk was an arrogant asshole.

Correction. He was an impulsive, arrogant asshole.

Now, if Leo could only convince himself that the impulsive, arrogant asshole wasn’t fucking right about everything that he had said before Spock had pulled that little maneuver that had knocked him out and then exiled him to the frozen wastes of Delta Vega.

And he shuddered to think what trouble Jim would get himself into on that rock, but even more he struggled with the notion of Jim having been left behind.

Fuck.

It was just wrong, and putting aside the complicated web of love and lust and friendship that he felt for Jim, he knew it, with a deep down certainty. Jim might be a pain in the ass, and he was most certainly insubordinate and obstinate, but God help him, he was the best stallion for this particular horse race, and goddamn Gram for having put that idea in his head all those months ago.

Leo stomped around Sickbay and thought about how much more trouble he’d get into for going back up to the Bridge and smacking that smug Vulcan in the mouth. Imagine the nerve of the Acting Captain calling Leo away from taking care of sick people, his own people, to congratulate Leo for having not stood up for his best friend when he was acting like an unruly adolescent. That fucking asshole. He brooded as he listened to M'Benga give his report about their new Vulcan patients, unsure which of the fucking assholes that occupied his thoughts that he meant.

No matter what, though, he couldn’t shake the feeling of dread, of wrongness that he’d felt when Spock had committed the Enterprise to a course setting for the Laurentian system. The image of Jim sitting in the Captain’s chair, with that speculative, assessing expression on his face was burned into his memory. Spock had cut Jim off before he had finished his case, while he was still thinking out loud. Spock probably had his good points, but he was one of those by-the-book guys who didn’t understand or respect instinct. Hell, Spock was probably busy writing Jim up for insubordination to add to the honor code violations he’d already charged him with.
He sighed, and M’Benga looked at him in surprise, so he dismissed him, taking the PADD of info from his hand.

Spock had asked Leo for his honest assessment, but Leo knew that he didn’t really want or need it, just wanted to make his point about who was really in charge of the boat that they were on.

Fuck it. If he was lucky, which you know, truthfully, he usually wasn’t, maybe Jim and he would have adjoining cells in whatever brig he ended up serving time in for having smuggled the impulsive, arrogant asshole on the ship in the first place.

Of course, if Leo hadn’t done that … he wouldn’t even be having this thought, or any of the ones that he’d had since they’d dropped out of warp.

If he hadn’t smuggled Jim aboard the Enterprise, his atoms would be scattered across the stars, or sucked into the void where Vulcan had been, merging with it, and the crew of the other seven Starfleet ships.

Leo swallowed hard and tried not to think of their colleagues and friends, perhaps injured and alone in the derelict ships, left abandoned when they’d gone to warp, tried not to think of Pike, and how bad his signs had looked the last time they’d seen them.

God.

Leo forced himself into the present, looking at the sedated woman laying on the biobed instead. She’d lost her husband and her child, and probably everyone she’d ever known or loved when her planet, her *planet* had been destroyed. The losses that she’d suffered had been staggering, and some part of him couldn’t help but feel that perhaps she would have been better off dying herself. But she hadn’t. She was here, this T’enev, and he was going to do his best for her, his best to help her live, although in all honesty, he wasn’t entirely certain how long that life would be. They were all of them adrift on this ship as their compatriots who might be trapped in the derelict remnants of what had been so much of Earth’s Starfleet forces.

Leo’s heart clenched in his chest when he thought of what Jim had said on the Bridge, that the Romulan ship was headed to Earth to destroy it, and how a rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in the Laurentian system, was exactly *not* what they should be doing, but he schooled his expression into a scowl to keep the anxiety from his expression, conscious as he was of the staff eyeing him with wary curiosity. He took report from Chapel of the few injured that they’d been able to rescue from the broken starships and excused himself to his temporary office, ordering the privacy shields up to give himself a moment to think. He stalked around its small confines like a caged animal, and tried to reason himself out of his dread. The shelves behind the desk held the few items that the late Dr. Puri had brought aboard, and his eye was caught by the holo of his wife and his adolescent children, all smiling, healthy and beautiful and alive together, in front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Leo’d never been to Paris, or Rome. So many of Earth’s great cities he’d never seen, not to mention the Grand Canyon, or Machu Picchu. He’d always just assumed that he’d have time to do all those things. And now …

Jim Kirk might be an impulsive, arrogant asshole, but he *was* a tactical genius – a fact even Pike had acknowledged more than once. But Pike had also declared his faith in Commander Spock by making him the XO – that had to count for something, right? Pike was a canny, cunning bastard, who’d elbowed and schemed and worked his ass off to get to be the captain of the Terran flagship. He knew what he was doing.

But he’d listened to Jim, and Jim had been right. Again, goddamnit.
Leo kicked the small recycler across the office into the wall, enraged at his powerlessness and confusion, wondering if they’d survived the battle at Vulcan only to become long-distance witnesses to the destruction of Earth. Because if he had to bet money on who was right in this situation, there was no way that he was going to pick that green-blooded bastard over Jim. He twisted the ring on his finger and willed himself to calm down, willed himself not to think of everyone back on Earth that was at risk if Jim was right. Gram. Patty. Just two of hundreds of millions of people that were far too precious to lose.

He sat down at his desk and buried his head in his hands, pulling a little on the strands of hair as he did so.

Damn it, for once, please let Jim Kirk be wrong.

Because, if he was right, God help them all.

Leo was out in the main Sickbay, feigning an air of calm and professionalism that he didn't feel even remotely when the intruder alert sounded over the general comm. He handed the PADD for an injured crewmember from the Antares off to Chapel with a muttered “What now?” and stalked off to the Bridge to find out what fresh hell they'd gotten themselves into.

In retrospect, even as he stood there gaped-mouthed, watching the replayed image of Jim Kirk running through Engineering with an unknown water-logged guy hard at his heels, he knew that he should've known better than to ever count Jim Kirk as down and out. Jim had always maintained that he didn't believe in no-win situations. He believed in subversion, in fighting with everything he had, in using whatever was at hand, and not giving in, no matter how high the odds were stacked against him. Evidently, this subversion included everything up to the goddamned laws of physics – to Jim Kirk, they were just another set of rules that he’d somehow figured out how to beat -- since he’d been able to accomplish the unthinkable and beam onto the ship while it was moving at warp speed.

And suddenly, there Jim was, large as life in his black undershirt and uniform pants, his face showing the faint marks of bruising -- just like when Leo had realized exactly who he was all those years ago -- striding back onto the Bridge of the Enterprise like it was his birthright, like he was leading his Security escort and not in their custody. And he was not the least little bit cowed, not by armed guards, Spock’s thinly-veiled and somewhat menacing curiosity, or by the rest of their confusion.

No. Jim Kirk had a plan, but damned if Leo knew what it was, and his confusion only deepened when Jim, who could teach a master class in being a smug, insubordinate bastard not only refused to answer Spock’s questions, but began to goad their Acting Captain about the loss of his mother and his home planet. And yeah, Leo had seen Jim be a lot of things over the years, but one thing that he'd never thought Jim capable of was out-and-out cruelty. Leo couldn't hold back his astonishment as he watched Jim lay into Spock using only his words, even though his white fists were knotted where he’d pressed them next to his long thighs, betraying the tension that he must be feeling, the tension that his eyes, and his tone and his posture never betrayed as Jim continued to batter Spock verbally.

Jim hectored and he pressed and he pushed and he berated Spock until the man finally, finally snapped in a way that Leo would never have believed a Vulcan could, his long arms a blur as he raised them against Jim, who didn't swing back once, just countered and dodged and defended, despite the fact that his human strength could not hope to offset the fury of his far stronger and thoroughly enraged opponent. And Leo just stood there, stunned and helpless and completely useless while Spock choked Jim to halt the flow of his invective until Spock’s father stopped his son from killing Jim, by simply saying his son's name.
Leo moved in the space between one word and the next, intending to do something, although fuck if he knew what exactly he'd do, except to tell the shaken Vulcan to stand the fuck down, when of all goddamned things to have happen next, the bastard resigned to him, citing chapter and verse, because he was still, despite everything that had just happened, playing by the book. And then Spock staggered off the bridge, and Leo thought that Uhura, whose heart was so clearly in her eyes, was going to follow him again, while Jim choked and gasped, trying to catch his breath and Jesus, this was mutiny and what the fuck were they going to do now?

Before he could even register what he was really saying, Leo had said as much to Jim, only to have Sulu inform him, all of them there on the Bridge, that Jim was now the Captain, as Pike had made him the First Officer before he'd left the Enterprise. And Jim staggered to the chair that he'd looked so right in before, still hunched over and gasping a bit, and bit off a sarcastic retort to Leo before he hailed the crew and told them that he was in charge, and goddamnit, if he didn't order them about and back toward Earth, and … Leo should have known, really.

Jim Kirk always had an ace up his sleeve, and another one in his shoe.

Jim Kirk always had a plan.

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Except when he fucking didn't.

Because after his all decks broadcast, full of confidence and authority, it became goddamned apparent that Jim didn't have a plan, other than saving the Earth, and getting Pike back. So after the course was set, he opened up the floor for discussion and they were all talking and arguing, Sulu and Uhura and that kid Chekov, who Jesus, he didn't even look like he shaved for God's sake, but Jim was taking them all seriously, like they were an actual command crew and not a goddamned bunch of kids who had even less experience with these situations than he did.

And Jesus, if they were the last best hope that the Earth had, what the fuck did that mean?

Chekov was arguing some mathematical point about Sulu's idea for coming out of warp unseen, which was integral to getting the slip on the Romulan ship, who'd otherwise blast them out of space the minute they appeared, which Leo'd pointed out more than once. And it wasn't like he wanted their plans to fail, because Christ, if they were going to save their planet, then stealth was critical, because the rest of the plan seemed to involved infiltrating the ship and getting their hands on a smaller vessel hidden inside that Jim was insistent held the red matter, which was evidently what had destroyed Vulcan. And about how he'd found out all this information he was maddeningly inspecific, much to Leo's consternation.

That Chekov kid had gone off to do some calculations on the board nearby, to prove his point in theory, at least, and they were still arguing about the efficacy of using one of the gravitational rings around Saturn as cover when suddenly Spock, of all goddamned people, showed back up on the Bridge and threw down with Jim's crazy scheme, signing off on the calculations that the seventeen year old helmsman had made.

And Jesus God, that was their plan, right there. Spock and Jim were going to go into the belly of the beast, sent there by the crazy Scot that Jim had found on that desolate iceball of a planet next to the galactic barrier that Spock had marooned him on, and that … was the plan. Jim was going to get Pike, and Spock was going to make a suicide run with the ship that held the red matter, and they were going to do it, or die trying.

God help them all.
It was a fucking suicide mission, that’s what it was, and he’d be goddamned if he stayed on the Bridge and listened to them all making plans and calculations for something that he feared was doomed to failure. He went back down to Sickbay, claiming to need to ensure that the operating theatre was ready, feeling Jim’s eyes on his back as he left the Bridge. It was all bullshit. If he’d read Chapel right, she’d had everything ready to go from the minute they shoved off, but he couldn’t just stay there on the Bridge and be near Jim knowing damned well that, after everything, this could be their last few minutes together.

The hell of it was, he knew there was no other choice. They could not leave Earth to the fate that he was convinced awaited it, they had to do something. They had to try. And it wasn’t like Jim was denying the potential danger of what they were trying to do. If anything, Jim’s explicit announcement to all hands that this was a do-or-die mission was the most frightening thing of all. Jim had calculated all the odds, and the risks, and he was still going to do it. They had no choice.

But that didn’t mean that Leo had to goddamn like it.

The sound of the door whisking open from the front of the bay wasn’t a surprise, nor was the sound of Chapel’s surprised, “Captain?” and then her directing Jim back to where he was re-checking the perfectly stocked bins and shelves in the operating theatre. It was busy work, and he knew it, but it gave him something to do with his hands, something that seemed more affirmative than adding notes to charts of people who might be dead in twenty minutes.

“Bones,” Jim’s voice was raspy, and a little broken, but there was an edge of determination in it that was new to Leo.

He turned and looked at Jim, who was standing in the doorway staring back at him and felt a pang at the sight. Jim wasn’t leaning, he wasn’t flirting, he wasn’t exuding the smug confidence or charm of the past hour or so. He looked, inexplicably, as if he had aged in the past few hours — matured in the short time since Leo had smuggled him onto the ship. It couldn’t all be assuming the mantle of leadership, shouldering the burden of command that had done it. Maybe it was knowing that they were all potentially minutes from their death, or from the unthinkable level of death and destruction that they’d already seen today. He watched Jim as he moved across the bay to him, his face serious. There was something in his eyes …

“You coming down here to save me the trip to check you over?” Leo said to forestall Jim speaking.

Jim stopped in front of him, and looked him in the eye, his bright blue eyes calm despite the crisis that they were facing. His eyes flicked down before they came back to his face, and Jim searched his expression for a second, then took a step back and heaved himself up onto the biobed at his back. “OK, Bones,” he said quietly, then he just waited.

Leo couldn’t figure out what Jim’s mood was exactly, and found himself hesitant. It was only when he went to get a tricorder that he realized that Jim’s glance had flicked down to his hands, that he’d been unconsciously twisting the ring that Jim had given him hours before. He fiddled unnecessarily with the scanner, moving over to stand in front of Jim. “I wouldn’t be at all surprised if your hyoid bone was fractured,” he said drily, trying to keep things conversational, and looking down at the tricorder and not at Jim. He was just too damned beautiful, and Leo felt too brittle with all that had happened, all that was yet to come.

He felt the hand land on his hip softly, just around the time that he registered that Jim had moved to
the edge of the bed, caging Leo’s lower half loosely with his legs. Leo looked up in time to catch the twinge of pain on Jim’s face that the action provoked. “Jim…” he warned.

“Bones,” Jim echoed, without a hint of his usual smirk.

His unoccupied hand came up to catch the back of Leo’s neck, and Leo felt the inexorable pull between their two bodies, felt himself tipping right into Jim, urged by his hands and his legs, by the force of the gravity he exerted simply by being. He caught himself before they kissed, pressing his forehead against Jim’s but refusing to come in any closer.

“Don’t you dare,” he said to Jim harshly. “After all this time, don’t you fucking dare kiss me again, just to kiss me goodbye.” He could feel that he was trembling as he said the words, half-adrenaline, half-rage, could feel Jim shaking his head no, against his brow.

“No, Bones,” Jim said, in that quiet serious voice. “I’m not.”

Leo drew his head as far back as Jim would let him, which wasn’t far, but was enough so that he could look him in the eye. He was clutching the tricorder so hard in his hands that it hurt, but it kept him from putting his hands on Jim. Jim’s face was open and earnest as he looked at Leo, not flinching at all from the close inspection.

“Bones,” Jim said in his broken voice. “I promise.” He tilted his head toward Leo’s again, rolling his forehead against his. He took his right hand off Leo’s hip and pried Leo’s fingers off the tricorder, spinning the ring on Leo’s minimus. “I promise, Bones.” He drew back again and looked Leo in the eye. “This is going to work.”

Leo looked at him helplessly, wondering at how he could be so sure in the face of such unspeakable odds. “Ji—“

“Shh …” Jim said, leaning in and nipping a too brief kiss at his lips.

Leo felt the touch of Jim’s lips against his like an electric shock that jolted him into action, turning whatever objections he’d had into ash. He dimly felt himself discarding the tricorder to the side. God, he wanted to believe him, wanted to believe Jim when he said he was coming back.

“Just … Bones,” Jim whispered, and wrapped his arms around Leo’s shoulders and upper back. He opened his mouth up against Leo’s again, rolling his forehead against his. He took his right hand off Leo’s hip and pried Leo’s fingers off the tricorder, spinning the ring on Leo’s minimus. “I promise, Bones.” He drew back again and looked Leo in the eye. “This is going to work.”

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“Just … Bones,” Jim whispered, and wrapped his arms around Leo’s shoulders and upper back. He opened his mouth up against Leo’s and devoured him, as Leo slid his hands across Jim’s slender waist and down over the curve of his backside, pulling him closer, pouring all the love and longing he’d ever held back into the kisses he gave Jim now. His hands wandered all over Jim’s back, memorizing, claiming him. Even the need to breathe was no incentive to stop. He and Jim broke apart and came back together, their kisses moving from hard and heavy to sweet, and back again. Only Jim’s choked off gasp of pain when Leo tilted his head too far got his attention, but when he tried to break away, Jim wrapped him up in his python grip and wouldn’t let go.

“No, Bones,” Jim said, chest heaving against Leo’s. “Don’t … don’t go away yet.” He buried his face in Leo’s neck and just breathed him in, his wiry frame a heavy, reassuring mass of muscle and bone against Leo’s.

Leo ran a hand from the base of Jim’s head down his spine, feeling the shivering that Jim was trying to contain.

“Jim?” he asked, starting to get concerned.

“It’s been a really bad day,” Jim said into his neck, and Leo choked back the totally inappropriate laugh that wanted to burble out of him at his words. He could suddenly feel how close he was to
hysteria.

“No shit, Jim,” he said bluntly, but there was no anger behind his words.

“It’s gonna get better though,” Jim said surely, and Leo turned his head trying to see his face.

“Jim,” he said sharply. “What do you mean?”

Jim shook his head. “Nothing.”

“Jim …” Leo said again. “Tell me.” He ran soothing hands down Jim’s back and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “And let me check you out for real. You’re going to have to go soon.”

“I’m fine, Bones,” Jim insisted.

“Bullshit,” Leo shot back. “That hobgoblin would have killed you if his father hadn’t said something.”

Jim stilled at his words.

“And why were you being such a prick?” Leo demanded. “I know you didn’t believe a goddamned word you were saying.”

He felt Jim exhale a puff of breath against his neck, and then he nodded. “No,” he whispered, and pulled back a little so that Leo could see his downcast expression.

“That wasn’t just payback for him being an asshole to you about your father at the hearing earlier,” Leo said. “You were trying to provoke him.”

Jim nodded.

“To get command?” Leo asked, scanning Jim’s throat, and then hypoing the swollen tissue as gently as possibly. Jim’s larynx was slightly dislocated, and he was going to be bruised to hell and back, but luckily, the hyoid was intact.

Jim looked up at him from under his lashes with a speculative glance, and then squared his shoulders. “Bones,” he said seriously. “You can’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you.”

“Jim,” Leo said grimly, “chances are better than average that I’ll never have a chance to do so.”

“Stop it –” Jim ordered. “This is going to work!”

They stared at each other for a few seconds, then Leo dropped his eyes, setting the regenerator at a vibration level that would allow him to gently manipulate Jim’s larynx back into position. “This is going to hurt a little, Jim,” he warned. “Swallow hard – now!”

Jim swallowed and grimaced, blinking his eyes against sudden tears that faded almost as swiftly as they appeared.

“Tell me,” he ordered back in his own command voice.

“I wasn’t the only one on Delta Vega,” Jim said.

“I know,” Leo said, “Mr. Scott–”

“Listen, Bones,” Jim said. “I got chased into a cave by this –” Jim’s hand flailed, “-huge ice … bug.”
“Huge ice bug?” Leo asked incredulously. He scanned Jim’s body suspiciously. “Roll up your pants leg,” he said with a frown.

“It was hungry,” Jim said. “Anyway, there was a guy in the cave.”

“Scott?” Leo said puzzled, wincing at the whip-like bruise around Jim’s calf. “Fuck, Jim. Ouch.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “No, it was Spock.”

Leo stood up abruptly and scanned Jim’s head.

“Knock it off,” Jim said. “It was Spock.”

He bent to set the dermal regenerator to work on Jim’s leg. He doubted that there’d be enough time for it to heal him completely, but at least it was a start. “Keep talking,” he said.

“It was an answer to what’s been going on,” Jim said. “Why the technology on that Romulan ship is so advanced.”

“Jim,” Leo said, setting another regen to work on the fingers that Jim had minor frostbite on. “Are you telling me that this Spock was from the future?”

“Like the ship,” Jim said, smiling at Leo that he’d gotten it.

“You are fucking kidding me,” he said, knowing full well that Jim wasn’t. “How can he come from the future?”

Jim made a face. “I’m not really sure that it’s our future, exactly,” Jim said thoughtfully. “In the timeline the old Spock came from, he was being chased by that Romulan ship, and he got pulled into a wormhole made by the red matter on his ship.”

“Why was he being chased by the Romulans?” Leo asked, running the regen over Jim’s long fingers.

“Because they blamed him for the destruction of Romulus,” Jim said.

“What?!” Leo almost dropped the regen in surprise.

“He didn’t do it, Bones,” Jim said, “but he couldn’t stop it from happening. He tried, but …”

“He failed …” Leo said.

Jim’s eyes had a faraway look in them. “He showed me all these things, Bones,” he tapped his temple and then Leo’s.

“He melded with you?” Leo asked, shocked.

Jim shrugged. “We were friends where he came from.”

Leo stared at him.

“Don’t look at me like that, Bones,” Jim said. “You were his friend, too.” He got a thoughtful expression on his face. “In fact, when he died once, he put his soul inside you until his body could be recreated.”

Leo’s mouth was hanging open. “You are making that up,” he said.
“Nope,” Jim said, clapping Leo on the shoulder. “Deal with it, man. In the other timeline?” He held two fingers up and together. “You were like this.”

Leo showed him his own finger, the middle one, and Jim laughed. “So he told you what to do then?”

Jim shook his head. “No. He told me that I needed to get back on the Enterprise, that I’m supposed to be the Captain, and that I have to save Earth.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “Jesus, Jim,” he said with feeling. “What the fuck’s on your agenda for tomorrow?”

Jim laughed and glanced up at the chrono, then leaned forward, pressing his forehead against Leo’s. “I gotta go, Bones,” he whispered.

“Jim,” Leo said around the sudden thickness in his throat.

“I gotta, Bones,” Jim said again. “There’s no room for failure here,” He spread his hand out over Leo’s shirt, smoothing his science blues down and over his chest, leaving his hand over Leo’s heart. “But I’ll be back. Believe it,” he said.

“I want to, Jim,” Leo said quietly, wrapping his left hand around Jim's. “I do.”

Jim raised his other hand and touched the ring on Leo's finger. "That other Jim Kirk," he said haltingly, his eyes downcast, "his father lived to see him become Captain of the Enterprise."

Leo felt his heart clench at the thought. "Jim," he said surely, "in any universe, your father would be proud of you." He raised Jim's chin with his free hand and looked into Jim's eyes, seeing the shadow that lurked in the serene tones of blue. "That, I know as surely as I'm standing here." He tipped forward and kissed Jim once more, slow and sweet. He squeezed his hand, then took a step back, knowing that he had to do it. "I'll see you when you get back," he said, investing his words with certainty. Leo bent down and took the regen off Jim's still bruised leg.

Jim smiled at him, then rolled down his pants leg and stood, shoving his foot back into his boot with hardly at wince. He stared at Bones for one more instant, then walked away, stopping at the door at Sickbay to turn around and throw him a salute before he disappeared behind the sliding door.

And if Leo's thoughts resolved themselves into something that resembled a prayer for the next little while, he didn't think that any God that might exist would blame him.
Chapter Notes

The last part of *Switch* continues from Part II, the Battle for Earth in February 2258, and continues on through the movieverse and beyond, with an epilogue set ~ January of 2259, seven months into the *Enterprise*'s first five-year mission. It begins with Chapter 37 and is ~ 172 pages long.

Chapter 37

Leo just stood there blankly, blind and deaf to anything except the constant mantra of ‘please,please,please’ that was repeating on a loop in his consciousness, that one word substituting for all the longer supplications that he meant: please keep Jim safe, please let this work, please don’t let the Earth be destroyed, pleasenotJimnotGramnotPattynomorenotevenTedpleasenotJim. The Red Alert alarm that had begun to blare two minutes after Jim had left only underscored the rhythm of his heartbeat’s refrain.

He had turned away from the door at some point, and was staring, unseeing, into an open cabinet when he heard the soft tread behind him.

“And now we wait,” Christine Chapel said thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Leo answered her, looking at the chrono. It hadn’t even been five minutes since the last time he’d seen Jim.

“Do you think it’s going to work?” Chapel asked softly.

Leo turned to look at her, seeing the fear that lay underneath the question, but mostly seeing Chapel’s resolve. She was made of stern stuff, this woman. “It has to work,” Leo said quietly.

“Yes,” Chapel echoed. “But can a group of green kids pull it off?” She shook her head, and looked down, sighing.

“I trust Jim Kirk with my life,” Leo said surely.

Chapel raised her eyes back to his and looked at him with a shrewd expression on her face. “Rumor has it that you’ve entrusted all of our lives to Jim Kirk.”

Leo kept a lid on his temper, which was always ready to flare, but even more likely to do so under the circumstances. “If it weren’t for Jim Kirk,” Leo said firmly, “we wouldn’t even be having this conversation. We’d either be dead, or drifting in a debris field somewhere, waiting to die.” He couldn’t quite keep the shiver that idea provoked contained, but his voice never wavered.

Chapel held his eye the whole time he spoke, not flinching at his words. “Remind me to thank him when this is all over.”

“Chapel,” Leo said, “when this is all over, we’re gonna sit our asses down and have us a big ol’ drink.”
That statement actually wrung a wry smile out of Chapel, who leaned forward to say, “McCoy, if we live through this fucking disaster, I’ll show you where Puri used to stash his hooch.”

“Well, now …” Leo drawled. “That’s the spirit.”

Chapel tilted her head. “Is that cornpone accent the real deal or what, McCoy?”

Leo raised an eyebrow in umbrage. “Compone?” He huffed at the very idea. “Leonard Horatio McCoy,” he said, extending a hand. “Ole Miss graduate, and proud son of Georgia.”

“Christine Marie Chapel,” she said with a smile, shaking his hand. “Stanford, and Big Sky country.”

“Montana?” Leo was surprised. “Hmm…never been there.” But he was sure, somehow, that Jim would like it.

“Let me know when you go,” Christine said acerbically. “I’ll tell you where not to stay. Now,” she said briskly. “Are you going to stop mucking up my cabinets?”

Leo was about to protest when one of the biobed alarms went off, and he and Chapel both turned as one and left the operating theatre to return to the main Sickbay. He wasn’t surprised to see that the alarms for the bed occupied by the elderly Vulcan that he’d been the most worried about from the get go. The man had lapsed into something like a fugue state, the deep shock that he’d had seemingly too much for him to handle, but Leo knew that there was more to it than that. The connections between Vulcans were so complex -- their touch telepathy, the way they built life bonds -- it wouldn’t surprise Leo if the elder had lost a mate, siblings, children. He wondered if Vulcans felt the psychic equivalent of pain when those bonds snapped or went so suddenly, irrevocably silent.

The elder in question was grey under the brown of his skin, seemed to have withered in the time that he’d been on the Enterprise. There was something reminiscent of a rictus of pain about his expression, although by human standards, he looked only like he was concentrating overly hard while he dreamed, small and defenseless, laying on his back. He was not unattended. As Leo and Chapel stood at the end of the bed helplessly watching the fluctuations in his life signs, T’Pau and three others stood with their hands on their compatriot. All was silence, but the weight of unheard conversation was heavy in the air. T’Pau’s ancient eyes opened and fixed on Leo and he was momentarily surprised that she knew that he was present, that she could see beyond the meld that she must be involved in with her colleague, or perhaps, friend.

“He must make his choice,” T’Pau said with an air of finality about her words. “There is nought that thou canst do here, healer.”

Leo stared at the Vulcan matriarch, wanting to protest her words but helpless as to what to suggest. He was painfully aware that the intricacies of Vulcan psychology were beyond his ken, but to stand by and do nothing contravened every principle to which he adhered. "Is there no way to make him understand that the universe cannot lose more of your people?" he asked. "Too many have already been lost."

"We do what we can," T’Pau said, after a long moment of silence. "But that loss is what motivates the desire to no longer be." She held Leo's eye for one instant longer, and then turned her head, dismissing him as she returned to her work.

Leo sighed, and turned to Chapel with a nod as they withdrew from the end of the bed.

"God," Chapel said, in an agitated voice. "This is all so …" she shook her head. "I hate feeling so helpless." She walked away from the bed and went to check on the other nearby patients who had
been disturbed by the exchange.

Leo worked his hands open from where they'd been clenched into fists, feeling the same rage and helplessness that Chapel did. If there was a God, he hoped that Nero would be damned for all eternity for what he'd done.

He began to cross the Sickbay to Puri's office when he felt something, not like a downshifting of the velocity of the ship — the inertial dampeners made that impossible to discern — but a distinct change in the sound around him, a sudden lack of the consistent hum that was like the living heart of the great beast that was the Enterprise. He was heading toward the comm in the wall when the speakers in the ceiling sparked to life.

"Attention all personnel," the smooth voice said, "this is Lieutenant Sulu. We are now in position in orbit around Saturn and have changed status to silent running to avoid detection. We remain at red alert. Maintain battle stations. Sulu out."

Jim.

Leo hurried into Puri's office, and pressed his hand to the comm. "McCoy to Bridge," he said urgently.

"Uhura here," the comm officer answered. Her mellifluous tone had an edge to it that McCoy could not help but notice.

"What is the status of the Captain and Commander Spock?" Leo asked, his heart in his throat.

"Unknown," Uhura answered tensely. "They were beamed aboard the Narada successfully, but we have no further knowledge of their whereabouts."

"No comm signal?" Leo asked, trying to keep the panic from his voice.

"No," Uhura said. Her voice was almost a whisper, and there was a quality to it that made Leo know for a certainty that Spock, of all men, was her love.

"Keep me posted, please," he answered her, not caring that she was as likely to hear and correctly translate the raw edge in his own voice. What did it matter now, anyway?

She murmured her assent and he broke the connection between them, dropping into the desk chair and placing his elbows on the desk and his head in both hands. God.

The bits and pieces of prayers that he hadn't uttered for better than two decades swirled into his consciousness unbidden, bringing memories of his mother, and her low, sweet voice as she instructed him and his sister in the appropriate forms of thankfulness and praise. She was so close in memory, so dear, that he had to stifle the moan at the nearness of her, here where he teetered — all that he knew teetered -- on the brink of destruction. It had been his mother, with her ready smile and certitude in the goodness and rightness of the universe, that had been the driver behind their church attendance, ensuring that they were there of a Sunday morning, all scrubbed up and well-dressed, ready to learn the lessons and to be the living face of God.

In the dark time that followed her death, David McCoy had abandoned all traditions of church attendance, adopted as they had been by a man wholeheartedly in love with his wife and all of her quirks. His Daddy had been like Horatio, like Leo himself, a man who believed that God was far too vast to be contained in the ideas of some Terran church. David had been more charitable than Horatio in his views on the faithful, believing that some people needed rules to live by, and a moral standard that they could point to. Horatio believed that if one only conformed to standards of what he
deemed decent behavior because of a belief that it would bring an ultimate reward, that it was a false righteousness, that a true man or woman lived by a moral code of rectitude because to do otherwise was unthinkable. Living or dying was not a reward for a just heart or hand, or a punishment for evil deeds. It simply was, and there was no bargaining that would make it change. Life could be harsh and cruel but beautiful, too, and there was no guarantee that there would be a balance between these things, no promise that had been given that all would be well.

Leo knew these things, believed in them, had seen them play out in his life over and over, even as he knew that he had set himself opposite Death in every way possible. Every broken body that he wrested from Death's cold grip was a victory, the vanquishing of the enemy that had stolen mother, father, and his only sister from him, the enemy that would take everyone that he'd loved or ever would love, ultimately. He'd accused Jim of being Don Quixote once, but the truth was that he far more resembled that hero of fiction. Death was his windmill, unconcerned with the crazed man running at him to stop what was, after all, elemental.

But as much as he railed, as hard as he fought every day to keep the vow that Death would not break him, would not defeat him, he knew that if Jim died — God — if Jim were already dead — that he would be as lost as that elder out on the bed in Sickbay, preferring to drift away to nothingness than remain here, alone in a world where the sun, the sun, had flamed out and gone dark. If Jim died, even the comfort of home would be lost to him, and not just because Georgia and all of his past would cease to exist except in memory.

If Jim died, they would all be lost, but none so much as Leo, who would be adrift alone amidst the cold, cold stars.

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He remained at the desk, frozen except for his racing mind and pounding heart for what seemed an eternity, until without warning, he heard the hum that was the sound of Enterprise's vast engines buzzing like the lifeblood of the ship had been restored. Leo stood up from his seat in surprise, knocking the chair over behind him.

"Uhura?" He didn't even bother with the niceties of address, the protocol that had been drilled into them.

"Spock captured the ship with the red matter," she answered him breathlessly. "And went to warp, as per the plan. We're following the Narada."

"My God," Leo answered, his skin prickling. "Earth?"

"Safe!" Uhura answered triumphantly. "Spock disabled the drill over the Bay."

"Our bay?" Leo interrupted her.

"Yes," Uhura said.

"Those fucking bastards," Leo growled.

He heard Uhura's intake of breath. "Fire, fire, fire," he heard her say.

"Got 'em!" Sulu said.

"Jim?" Leo asked hopefully.

"No," Uhura said regretfully, "the missiles that they'd aimed at the ship with the … Oh, God." The
catch in her voice was so sharp that Leo knew without a doubt that Spock had begun his suicide run at the Narada, and he wanted to scream at the top of his lungs. Where was Jim?

"Oh, God, ohgodohgodohgodohgod …" Uhura began to speak in a language that Leo didn't know, but if he had to bet, he'd wager on Vulcan.

"C'mon, c'mon," he could hear Sulu's voice faintly as Uhura continued to whisper her prayers. "Where are you?"

"Enterprise, now!" Jim's voice was clear and strong and so goddamned beautiful that Leo could have wept. Jim's voice was urgent until it was cut off.

"Oh, God," Uhura said, her breath coming out in pants.

"Uhura?!" Leo was poised for flight.

"They've got them!" Uhura's voice was full of tears, but Leo was past caring, past listening and had let go of the button, was already out of his office and halfway across the sickbay, flat out running.

"Chapel!" he yelled. "Corpsman! Transporter room, now!"

He didn't even look over his shoulder to see if they were following, wasn't deterred when the ship pitched and shuddered as the Enterprise took hits from the desperate Romulans, or from the impact of the small ship full of doom as it exploded against the Narada. He didn't care, just swung around corners skidding into walls while all hell broke loose, until finally the transporter room doors were in front of him.

"Jim!" The word was torn out of him at the sight of Jim stepping down from the pad, bruised but smiling, and not bleeding from anywhere that was visible. Leo heard the sound of Chapel and corpsmen coming into the room right after him, just after he registered that not only was Spock there, but -- goddamnit -- Jim was holding up a far worse for the wear Captain Pike. He'd been halfway reaching for Jim when he realized how severely Pike was injured and he went to take him from Jim's grasp, relieved and reassured as Jim's arms went around Pike and onto him eagerly, grasping his shoulder and giving him a shake. Jim was saying something in his raspy voice, but Leo couldn't really hear him above the din that was surrounding them. It didn't matter. Jim was here. Jim was safe.

"Chapel," he snapped. She'd remembered to bring her scanner, at least, but was scanning Spock as he tried to leave the room with Jim. He had no doubt they were headed back to the bridge.

"Stretcher!" Chapel bellowed, focusing the attention of the corpsman as she braced Pike up on his other side.

"We got you, Captain," Leo said in a low voice to Pike, not liking the man's waxy pallor in the least. "We got you, just relax." He helped the corpsman and Chapel get Pike onto the stretcher and then barked at Chapel for a reading while they rushed back to Sickbay.

"Puri?" Pike asked through gritted teeth.

"He's dead, Captain," Leo said. "I'm sorry."

Pike closed his eyes for a second with a grimace and they rounded a corner, nearly knocking over an ensign running in the other direction. "McCoy," Pike said breathlessly, obviously in pain. "Centaurian slug."

"Jesus H. Christ," Leo said with feeling and Chapel centered the scanner above Pike's sternum, and
it began beeping like a possessed fucking thing. "Don't you worry, Chris," Leo said to Pike. "I'm gonna get that fucker out of you."

They crossed the threshold of Sickbay in such a flurry of activity and noise that even the Vulcans looked startled. Around them, the ship shuddered and jarred, obviously locked in battle with the Romulans.


Chapel was giving similar orders to her second, while the corpsmen had brought Pike into the theatre. Nurses were cutting the uniform off of him efficiently and bringing up the privacy shield while the one minute countdown to the sterilization sequencing began.

"Out!" Leo ordered. "Computer," he said, "belay sequence for an additional sixty seconds. Chapel," he informed her, "I'm turning him over."

She nodded, while Leo reconfigured the table to turn Pike up and over, using gravity holds to keep him in position while the surgical surface below him split in two and repositioned itself at the front of his body. At the apex of the controlled arc, the ship shuddered in a way that caused the robot arms to withdraw all surgical tools back into their sterilizing bays.

"McCoy!" Pike yelled from the hole in the bed. "Don't knock me out!"

He looked up at Pike, suspended in the air. "Captain," he said surely. "I've got to get that thing out of you."

"Believe me," Pike said to him urgently. "No one wants you to get that fucker out of me more than me, but … if this is it, I don't want to be unconscious when it happens."

Leo stared up at him. "He's gonna do this, Chris," he said surely. "Jim stopped him from getting to Earth, and he's going to send that crazy bastard to hell."

Chris smiled at him wryly. "Regardless," he said. "I want to know what's happened before you knock me out."

Leo pursed his lips before he answered. "Captain or no captain, you've got three minutes, max, before I override your ass, Pike," he said. "Computer: operating table light 4 at 250 percent. Operating table at 60 degrees." He watched as his orders were followed, and then shielded his eyes to ensure that the high intensity light was shining directly on Pike's spine from C1 to T1, or almost. "Adjust table to 62 degrees," he ordered, and then watched as the light covered the whole area.

Pike sighed. "Thank you," he said.

Chapel scanned the area and then pulled the scanner arm out and displayed the picture on the vid screen. "The slug is quiet," she said. "Seemingly stunned by the light."

"Don't thank me," Leo answered Pike. "That fucker's going to figure out that it's still trapped pretty soon and start gnawing on your spine again."

Pike looked like he might vomit at the idea, but whatever he might have said was lost when the ship shuddered in a particularly violent way, and then made a noise, almost like a heart-rending groan of pain. Leo could hear things breaking in the outer bay, and he and Chapel both immediately crossed arms under Pike in case the bed decided to let him go.

Chapel stared at Leo with a totally exasperated expression on her face.

"Are you talking about the ship?" Leo asked him incredulously.

Around them, the ship groaned and shrieked, and Leo could hear the sounds of things buckling, and he wondered dispassionately why he wasn't more worried, why the very idea that the ship was coming apart around them wasn't more upsetting to him -- but there was only one answer to that, and Leo knew that he was just a few decks away, doing everything he could to ensure that they'd live through this.

Pike's expression was wistful. "Her maiden voyage," he said ironically.

"Now listen here, Pike," Leo said testily, as the ship continued shaking, making those godawful pained noises, "you know damned well that Jim would rather gnaw his own arm off than put a scratch on your baby."

For just one instant after he said the words, the ship was utterly still. Then, despite the inertial dampeners, despite all of the ballast controls that had ever been invented, the ship rolled as if riding a massive wave up one side and down the other before Leo was cognizant, for an eyeblink, of moving at incredible velocity until the ship's systems caught up with whatever had happened and adjusted for it.

"Jesus Christ," he said with feeling from where he'd ended up on the floor.

Chapel, whose elaborate hairdo had already been knocked askew by their dash to the transporter room, blew one long curl out of her eye from where she'd ended up, flattened against the wall. "It's a good thing you weren't operating yet," she said bitterly, then added, "I'm pretty sure that I've got a thoroughly impressive ass bruise."

Pike looked intrigued by the very idea, and Leo couldn't help but raise an eyebrow as Chapel saw Pike's interest and flushed pink while she pulled pins out of her hair and twisted the long fall of it into a simpler style. Pike's eyes never wavered from her while she did so.

Leo heaved himself up from the floor and was just about to ask the computer to hail the Bridge when Jim's voice, rasping but true, came through the speakers. "Attention all hands," he said. "This is Acting Captain James T. Kirk. The Romulan ship has been destroyed. I repeat, the Romulan ship Narada has been destroyed, and the threat to Earth and to other Federation worlds has been neutralized."

Leo closed his eyes and sent a silent prayer of thanks to whatever God might be listening, while Jim continued speaking. "This victory has not been achieved without a cost, in friends, colleagues, teachers, and spouses. But our losses, as horrific as they are, are nothing compared to the loss of the planet Vulcan. What we have done today in saving other planets from its fate cannot allay that loss. I know," Jim continued quietly, "that you want to stop and grieve, but we must soldier on and repair the damage that the Enterprise has sustained while we await orders from Starfleet." Jim paused. "You have served with honor, each and every one of you, from cadet to experienced hand, and I know that you will continue to acquit the decision that Captain Pike made in choosing you to serve on the flagship while he remains in Sickbay under the able care of the Acting CMO, Leonard McCoy. On Captain Pike's behalf, I commend you all for your service. It is my privilege to serve with you. Kirk out."

There was silence for a few seconds after Jim's announcement ended, and then Pike said, "Captain
Kirk," like he was rolling the words around his mouth. He looked over at Leo, while Chapel surreptitiously thumbed at her eyes.

"That's right," Leo said proudly.

"It does sound right," Pike said with something like wonder, shaking his head at the very idea. "So young …" He held his hand out to Leo, and Leo shook it, knowing that this was Pike's way of saying that he was forgiven, by him at least, for having smuggled Jim aboard. "Do your worst, Doc," Pike said wryly. "I know my girl is in good hands."

"Thank you, Captain," Leo answered him, and then nodded to Chapel, who had the hypo ready to render him unconscious. He watched as Pike's eyes unfocused and then dropped closed, the lines of pain that had marred his features easing as he lapsed into blessed unconsciousness. He tucked the hand that he was still holding next to Pike's torso as he ordered the bed to lower.

"Computer," Leo said firmly. "Secure the theatre and begin the sterilization sequence in sixty seconds. Begin recording on my mark, and bring up the files on Centaurian Slugs."

"Working," the computer assured him in her cool voice, counting down.

"All right Christine," he said to Chapel, already pulling off his blue shirt as they headed for the privacy screens to strip and get sterile. "Let's go on a bug hunt."

He heard the soft huff of her laugh before he stepped into the sonic stream, alive, and ready to fight Death and win, one more time.

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Chapter 38

Leo was pretty sure that it had been hours since he'd raised his eyes from the surgical field other than to roll his neck or take an instant to consider what needed to be done to Pike's much-maligned spine. The damage from the slug was as bad as he feared it might be, although Pike was one tough bastard - of that there was no doubt. Once he'd gotten him open, Leo was amazed that Pike had been able to be upright for the brief time that Jim had held him propped up. Getting the slug out had been an adventure that he hoped wouldn't soon be replicated. Despite the fact that he was a man who had waxed admiringly about the complexities of adaptive evolutionary stratagems and their elegance, he was usually referring to metaphorical bugs of some sort or another, not actual critters. Seeing that insect burrowing its way toward the base of Pike's brain had triggered a repulsive reflex that was nearly primal, although he'd managed to tamp it down. He and Chapel had first paralyzed the slug, then eased it off of Pike's spinal tissue, trying to minimize further damage to Pike's battered central nervous system while removing it.

Leo'd spent most of the hours he'd been operating re-grafting the nearly completely severed nerves, until he was confident that they'd repaired what could be repaired. The downstream damage to Pike's spine, however, was particularly worrisome. The excreta that the slug had discharged as it digested Pike's nerve tissue had been caustic, decimating centimeter after centimeter of the myelin sheathing that provided the conductivity for nerve impulses from Pike's brain to his extremities. This was a source of uncertainty in regard to his future mobility, at least for the short term. As frustrating as it was for a healer like Leo, there was only so much acceleration of the healing process for certain kinds of tissue that the regenerators could accomplish. Unfortunately, the two that still required the most long-term regenerative techniques were both central to the conductivity of the nervous system. If Pike were lucky, the regenerators would be able to regrow both the myelin and the deep fascia in their entirety, although it was likely that he might suffer from a kind of diffuse neuropathy for the rest
of his life. If he were unlucky, the pins and needles sensations that might have plagued him otherwise would go largely unfelt, along with much of his body from the chest on down. Leo wasn't prone to hubris about his skills as a surgeon, but he did believe in luck. He was lucky that Jim had found Pike and got him to Leo exactly when he did, and he was lucky that he hadn't been operating on Pike when whatever the hell had happened to the Enterprise had taken place. He only hoped that his luck — or was it Jim's? — would shelter Pike from a worse fate, but for that, only time would tell. As it stood right now, however, Pike would be unable to assume command of the Enterprise in a meaningful way. Hell, he wouldn't be able to sit up for a good couple of weeks, and he'd be spending hours each day in regenerating chambers once they were back on Earth, whenever that might be. Here on Enterprise, they'd have to make do with what regenerators they had.

Leo stepped back from the operating bed and shook his cramped muscles out before he focused on closing Pike up, being careful not to step through the field that hugged their portion of the operating room. On the other side of the table, Chapel stretched as well, her scrubs similarly blood-spattered.

"Closing?" she asked him.

"Yeah," Leo said, nodding and then added with a sigh. "I think we've done what we can."

"Don't sell yourself short," Chapel admonished him. "That was some damned fine work, McCoy."

He smiled across the bed at her. "You're no slouch yourself there, Chapel."

Her answering smile was wry, but she nodded with her chin to the bed behind him and Leo looked up at the vidscreen above him. "Yeah," he said. "I'm going there next."

Even in its second best Sickbay, the Enterprise had been designed to deal with the kind of disaster they were in the midst of. Both M'Benga and another surgeon named Fleury had been operating on their own patients, surgeries that Leo'd been able to monitor via the screens set up for such an eventuality. Fleury had scrubbed out and was dealing with her patients in Recovery while attending to others in the main bay, but M'Benga was on his fourth patient in a row, a recent emergency arrival. Unless Leo had missed his guess, she'd come from Engineering where some sort of disaster had resulted in her arm nearly being severed.

"I wonder what the fuck has been going on out there," he said, focusing on sealing Pike's spine while Chapel handed him instruments and made sure the field was clear.

She shook her head. "Your guess is as good as mine," she said. "But we're still here."

He nodded, answering with a murmured. "Can you take it from here?"

Chapel looked up at him sharply. "You don't want to call for Fleury?"

He looked her in the eye. "It's not necessary, is it?"

"No," she answered levelly.

"M'Benga needs me more," he said succinctly, and finished closing the derma before he handed it off to her. When Chapel nodded, he stepped back out of the containment field and stretched up and out, running through some postures that Gram, bless her heart, was responsible for ingraining into his very being. He rolled his neck and shoulders and groaned, knowing that he couldn't take too long for this respite when like a déjà vu, he realized that Jim was watching him from the observation space that was half a deck above the operating theatre. Starfleet liked its observation spaces, whether real or virtual, or on the ground and in the ether. Jim was leaning against the clear aluminum, the weight of his body braced on his forearm. He was hunched over in that way he had when he was sheltering
hurts and fighting exhaustion. He was bruised everywhere that Leo could see above the dark line of his turtleneck -- his face and his throat in particular. Leo felt his own throat close in sympathy and knew that his expression reflected the concern he felt. He had no doubt that Jim wouldn’t consent to see any of the other docs aside from him, and knew that Jim had pushed himself past the point of endurance for the sake of their young and inexperienced crew. It wouldn’t do to have both of their Captains in beds in Sickbay, but from the look of Jim, that was exactly where he should be. Leo might not be able to do anything about that right at the moment, but there was no reason for Jim to be unnecessarily worrying about Pike. He pointed at Pike, and mouthed "he's OK" to Jim in deference to the cameras that were recording, but the haunted, exhausted expression on Jim's face did not ease as he solemnly stared at Leo, although his mouth twisted into something that resembled a smile.

Jim's attention was drawn away from Leo by his comm, and he turned away to answer it while Leo watched his worrisome behavior, trying to figure out what was wrong. He stripped off the scrub shirt and wiped the sweat and blood from his chest and his arms, noting that Jim's eyes had returned to him as he did so. He stepped into the sterilizing area, untying the tie on his scrub pants as the privacy shield began to rise, making sure that he got Jim's dad's ring off of it and back on his finger before the scrubs went to the sanitizing laundry. He just caught a glimpse of the faint smile that lit Jim's face, despite his haunted eyes, before the shield came up and obscured him from his vision.

When the privacy shield dropped again, Jim was gone.

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It was almost a relief to be confronted with burns and cuts when Leo was finally out of surgery, not to mention having the world around him returned to its normal scale without the distortion of the magnifiers that made the kind of microsurgery that he’d been doing possible. Still, he didn’t think that he’d be hungry for anything that resembled spaghetti for a while, not to mention crawdads or any other kind of bug-like crustacean. His stomach growled at the thought of food, and he realized that it’d been hours since he’d last eaten, and that had been a tube of the nourishment paste used to sustain folks like him in crisis situations. He wondered how long it had been since his staff ate or slept, not to mention the rest of the crew. He looked at the chrono and then blinked and looked again, unable to believe that it had been just shy of 24 hours ago that he’d come aboard the Enterprise.

Jesus. He took the PADDs that needed reviewing into his office. 24 hours and three sets of scrubs – he couldn’t see putting back on his somewhat grimy uniform after all of the anti-microbial treatments he’d been through, and he had no idea if the laundry operations aboard were actually functioning. After all, they were only supposed to be going on a short hop. He sorted through the PADDs grimly. Mortality reviews, death certificates and autopsy requests predominated although he knew that he should be grateful that there were little more than two dozen, considering the day that they'd all lived through. Still. He needed real food and a damned strong drink, neither of which he was likely to get. He'd settle for information about what the hell was going on, but he wanted it from the horse's mouth, bruised and broken looking as it currently was, preferably while he was treating him.

“McCoy to Bridge,” he said, pressing the panel on his desk.

“Sulu here,” the helmsman said, and unless Leo missed his guess, the kid hadn’t been to sleep yet.

“Where’s the Captain, Lieutenant?” Leo asked. He knew better than to hope that Jim was off-shift or resting somewhere.

“He’s down in Engineering,” Sulu said wearily.

“Spock?” Leo asked, not wanting to talk to the bastard, but willing to follow the chain of command, at least for Jim’s sake.
“With the Captain,” Sulu answered. Leo sighed, but Sulu kept speaking. “There’s a lot of damage to the ship, Doc,” he said, then paused. “How’s Captain Pike?” His voice had dropped, like he was trying to keep their communication private, but Leo could hear the sound of activity on the bridge break off, as if everyone up there was listening.

“He’s doing just fine,” Leo said easily, not prevaricating in the least. He could see Pike through the clear walls of his office, with a regen wrapped around his upper spine and neck as he lay on his stomach, fast asleep. “He came through surgery like a champ.”

“That’s great,” Sulu said warmly. “Really … that’s great.”

Leo listened to his repetition with narrowed eyes. “How long you been on-shift, Sulu?”

“Um … since we came aboard?” Sulu answered him. It was clear that he had no idea how long ago that had been.

Leo sighed. “Is Uhura still up there?”

“Yes, Doctor,” she answered him, clearly monitoring the channel.

“Goddamnit.” He’d taken his finger off the comm, to cut off their hearing. “Chekhov, too?”

“We’re all here,” Sulu said. “What do you need?”

“You’ve been on duty for 24 hours,” Leo said.

“So have you, Dr. McCoy,” Uhura said tiredly.

“I’m trained for this kind of thing,” Leo answered, knowing full well that he was nearing his endurance limit by his rising level of ire.

Uhura sighed. “There’s just been too much going on,” she said, and Sulu murmured in agreement.

Leo broke the connection after a cursory sign-off, then got up from his chair and called for Chapel.

“You bellowed,” Chapel said in a wry tone. Like Leo, she was still wearing her scrubs, although her hair was now arranged in a braid that fell to the middle of her back.

“I did,” Leo answered, “Sorry. We need to start rotating folks off-shift,” he said reasonably.

“Good plan,” she said. “What’s the ETA on when we get back to Earth?”

“Goddamnit,” he said. “I have no fucking idea. I’ll get you an answer ASAP, but assume that it’s going to be a couple of days.”

Chapel shook her head. “I think we’ll be damned lucky if it’s that short.”

He squinted at her. “Speak,” he said.

Chapel put a hand on her hip at his order, and he made a hand-waving motion that could be interpreted as an apology. She sniffed, but spoke. “Rumor has it that we were thrown halfway across the quadrant by the explosion of the Narada.”

Leo gaped at her.

“Also, that we’ve got no warp capacity.”
“Fuck me,” he said, already on his way out of the office to find Jim.

“No thanks,” Chapel said cheerfully as he simultaneously glared at her and tried not to laugh.

On second thought, he returned and took one of the tricorders and a field kit.

“McCoy!”

He turned around again and made an impatient “What?” gesture.

“You will let me know what you find out, won’t you?” It was clear that this was not a request.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

She nodded, then turned her attention to Chris Pike, still fast asleep on the biobed.

Leo strode out into the hallway and into quiet chaos. Quiet because everywhere he went, crewmen were working on something — sparking conduits, panels open to expose the guts of the ship, legs sticking out of Jefferies Tubes — they were grim-faced and focused on their work. And every one of them, from the rawest Cadet to the oldest hand, looked fucking exhausted.

“Goddammit,” he said aloud, drawing the attention of a few crew members.

“Doc,” one of them said, “How’s Captain Pike?”

“He’s doing great,” Leo said with assurance, but then noted the way the man was holding himself. “Ensign …?”

“Lima, sir,” came the automatic answer, which was followed by a painful looking attempt at a salute.

“Ensign Lima,” Leo said sternly, running the scanner over him. “Don’t make me come back here with corpsmen who’ll sedate your ass and bring you back to Sickbay. You’ve got two fractured ribs. You finish what you’re doing and get down there. I’ll tell Nurse Chapel to expect you in no more than 30 minutes. You do not,” he said menacingly, “want to make a liar out of me.”

The crewwoman next to him was smirking.

“Don’t smirk so hard there, Ensign …”

“Yao,” the woman answered confidently.

“That burn on your hand needs first aid, too,” Leo said in a no-nonsense tone, opening his kit and cleaning the area gently before he dressed it. “You will report to Sickbay at the end of your shift, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“All right then,” Leo said, moving on. All in all, it took him the better part of an hour to make it down to where he needed to turn off to Engineering, and he’d commed Chapel twice to tell her to prepare for walking wounded.

“Goddammit!” he said to no one in particular after he signed off for the second time, marveling inwardly that he’d managed to get himself on a boat full of injury-denying idiots like Jim Kirk. He rounded the corner to where the corridor to Engineering should have been, and only then, when he
saw the sealed off route and the evidence of the fire beyond it, did he realize how much damage the ship had taken. "Christ on a hoverbike!" he swore, turning toward the lower half of the man wriggling out of the nearby Jefferies Tube. "Jesus Christ, Cupcake!" he said, hurrying over to the huge young man in the torn red shirt with the massive contusion on his head.

"McCoy," the kid said with a thin smile.

"You look like shit," Leo said gruffly. "Why haven't you gotten your ass to Sickbay?"

"No concussion," Hanlon said. "I scanned myself."

Leo's face was set in a scowl. "Didn't I warn you about you and medical judgment once before?" he growled, scanning him.

"I did my first responder training," Hanlon said tiredly. "I can read a tricorder. Besides, at the time, putting out the fire seemed like a bigger priority."

"And your lungs show the evidence of that," Leo said, scanning the kid. "You need to be treated, just like the other idiots I've encountered on my way here."

Hanlon nodded, "I'll go in a minute," he said, then hastened to add, "do you know how Kaplan is?"

"No idea, kid," Leo said and thought for a minute. "But I don't recall the name on my fatalities list."

Hanlon blew out a breath. "She was pretty badly burned," he said.

"Check with Chapel when you get to Sickbay," Leo ordered, "and before you go, tell me how the fuck do I get to Engineering?"

"OK," Hanlon said, pointing to the tube he'd just come out. "Go in straight for thirty clicks and then take the second left, and …" he was watching Leo's face. "Oh, fuck it, it's easier to just show you, c'mon."

Leo slung the medkit around his body and frowned, but waved a hand. "Fine," he said gruffly. "But you show me and then you turn right back around."

"Yessir," Hanlon said with a hint of his usual brash sarcasm, crawling back into the tube. "You come to get the Captain?"

Leo could feel his eyebrow raising even as he followed Hanlon. "By Captain, you mean Jim Kirk?"

"I do," Hanlon said, without a hint of a flinch in his voice as he swiftly turned a corner.

"Never thought I'd see the day …" Leo said.

"Me neither," Hanlon's voice floated back. "But I'm not going to deny that he did a hell of a thing today."

Leo couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he said nothing, focusing on following Hanlon in the half-light of the Tubes. The environmental controls were set very low, and the air was close and somewhat fetid, and warmer the closer they got to Engineering.

Hanlon punched open a hatch and clambered out, holding the door for Leo. "Doesn't mean I want to marry him, or anything."

"Duly noted," Leo said drily, dusting himself off. He looked at Hanlon for a long moment, then held
out his hand. "Thank you, Ensign," he said.

Hanlon hesitated for an instant before he took the proffered hand. "Doctor," he said, shaking it.

"Now get your ass to Sickbay," Leo said firmly.

Hanlon's mouth quirked into a smile. "He's over there," he said, pointing with his head. "Looks like a good wind would knock him over, but you'll probably still have to cold-cock him to get him to lay down." He started to turn toward the tube, but then said casually. "I could take care of that for you."

Leo smiled. "For auld lang syne, or something?"

"I'm pretty sure I still owe him one," Hanlon said.

Leo pointed at the tube with his thumb, and started moving to where Cupcake had indicated.

"Comm me if you want to take me up on it!" Cupcake yelled.

Leo looked over his shoulder to see that Hanlon had crawled back into the tube before he continued into the big bay. The whir of machinery was loud in the bay, but he could hear voices above the din, as crewmen yelled to each other and swore viciously at uncooperative machinery. The smell of soldered metals and synthetics was strong, and here and there, he could see the arc of sparks as things were welded or repaired. Jim, Spock and their erstwhile Chief Engineer stood at the center of the chaos obviously engrossed in a conversation. As he got closer, he could hear the excited voice of the Scotsman over the din as he postulated an idea that Spock immediately shot down.

"The chances of that unorthodox solution working are precisely 1,235:1," Spock said in his cool affectless tone.

"What are the chances of you coming up with a better idea?" the Scotsman shot back and Leo found himself grinning as Spock raised an eyebrow.

Jim stood between them, looking at the oversized lighted panel in front of them with a considering expression on his face. "I don’t know, Spock," Jim said thoughtfully. "It’s unorthodox, but I think there’s a germ of a good idea in there."

Jim went to cross his arms over his chest, and then thought better of it, only the slightest moue of pain crossing his face, but Leo noticed that Spock was aware of his discomfort as Jim planted his hands on his hips and shifted his stance, looking for a comfortable position. The bruises on his face and neck were even more prominent than they had been when Leo had last seen him, and the line of Jim’s jaw was particularly stark against the black of his shirt as he looked down.

"Hail, hail," Leo said sardonically.

"Bones," Jim said with surprise. "Is Captain Pike OK?"

"He’s just fine, Captain Kirk," Leo drawled, loud enough so that the folks around them who were eavesdropping could hear. "He should be awake enough to take report from you in a few hours."

"That’s great!" Jim said enthusiastically.

Scott, meanwhile, had noticed their lurking listeners. "Back to work you lot!" he yelled. "As if there’s nought to do here with the dear lady in such a state!"

Leo raised an eyebrow at Scott’s description of the Enterprise, only catching himself when he saw
that Spock was doing the same thing.

Jim’s tired eyes had begun to twinkle with mirth, and although he was thrilled to see the light return to Jim’s eyes, if Jim made a smartass remark comparing him to Spock, he might have to hypo his ass, Captain or not. Or maybe he’d seriously consider taking Cupcake up on his offer. He wouldn't want to damage his hands, after all.

“Speaking of which,” Leo said, cutting off any further conversation. “Someone want to tell me what the fuck is going on?”

Spock’s other eyebrow raised at Leo’s language, and Leo would swear that he pursed his mouth ever so slightly. “To what are you referring?”

“I’m referring,” he growled in Spock’s direction, “to the fact that I’ve been in surgery for the better part of a day, and just spent an hour patching up crew members that should have sought treatment long ago, but … they all tell me that they’ve been too busy, putting out literal fires and whatnot. Not to mention that I had to climb here through the bowels of the ship after I saw that corridor.”

"We'll have that fixed in a jiff," Scott said earnestly. "'smostly cosmetic, and a wee bit of a pain in the ass for the work around, but you can go out up the top without going through the tubes."

Spock looked like he was going to protest the 'in the jiff' remark, so Leo hastened to speak up. "Well, that'll be better on my knees, so I thank you, but my point is that you've got an exhausted, somewhat traumatized bunch of kids trying to fix up a boat that clearly needs getting to Spacedock. No offense, Mr. Scott," he said, to forestall the Engineer's outburst.

Jim sighed and scrubbed one of his hands across his face before he ran a hand over his head and rubbed his neck. Leo found himself itching to whip out a tricorder at clearly seeing the damage to Jim's knuckles and fingers. "The thing is, Bones," Jim said quietly. "We are nowhere near a Spacedock."

Leo nodded. "How far away are we?"

"At warp, it would be the better part of a day," Spock answered. "But considering that we are currently without warp capacity, and that we are suffering from significant damage that is likely to be adversely affected by higher rates of speed, the nearest Spacedock is five Earth days away."

Leo nodded again. Jim's gloomy expression had told him that the situation was as bad as Christine had feared.

"And that Spacedock," Spock continued, "is inadequate for a ship the size of Enterprise."

"The point, Mr. Spock?" Leo said curtly, reminded of interns who were more interested in impressing their classmates with their breadth of knowledge on a topic, and lost focus on the actual patient needing care.

"Under optimal circumstances, and without a tow from one of the ships currently en route from the Laurentian system, approximately 7.65 Terran days."

"Thank you," Leo said, baring his teeth in a mocking smile. "And why," he said to Jim, "are we not expecting a tow from someone else in the fleet?"

"They're assuming defensive positions at key points along the Neutral Zone," Jim said quietly.

Leo nodded, considering the new information.
"We'll be fine, Bones," Jim said, "they're not likely to come out here."

Leo looked at Jim with a puzzled expression on his face. "I have no doubt that we're doing as well as we possibly can, Captain," he said firmly. "My concerns are about this crew, who've been working flat out for far longer than they should without adequate rest or food."

Jim looked startled at Leo's assertion.

"What are the provision levels like?" Leo demanded of Spock.

"Good," Spock answered. "The ship was stocked with the idea that a stay at Vulcan -" Leo detected only the tiniest pause in Spock's speech before he continued "- might be necessary or that we'd be required to provide disaster relief."

"So the mess is operational?"

"I would assume so," Spock said.

"Let's not assume," Leo growled. "We need to make sure that it's up and functional, and announce shift rotations for meals, and then rest."

"Lieutenant Commander," Spock said smoothly, "surely staff going offshift can take an MRE with them to quarters for the time being."

"It's Doctor," Leo said firmly, "and that is not an acceptable plan. The crew needs to be together, to share the communal act of a meal, to talk and remember and take solace from knowing that they're not alone. With all due respect for your own losses, I doubt that there's a person aboard this ship who didn't lose at least one person that they loved today."

Jim's expression was somber, his eyes fixed on something over Leo's shoulder. "You're right, Bones," he said quietly. "Make a shift schedule," he said to Spock, "I'll take the last meal."

Leo looked over his shoulder while Jim's focus was off him, and noticed Raji up on one of the catwalks above them. Fuck. "I was actually thinking that it would be best if you take the first meal shift, Captain."

Jim shook his head. "I'll be present at all the meals," he said quietly, "but I won't eat until the last one."

Leo’s brows drew down in consternation. This was exactly not what he wanted to hear from his banged-up, exhausted friend. He opened his mouth to say something, but was cut off by Spock.

"I'm sure that the crew will appreciate the sign of respect, Captain Kirk," Spock said smoothly.

"They deserve no less," Jim said firmly, and Leo sighed, hoping that he could make Jim eat something between now and then, but recognizing that it was likely to be a battle that he was going to lose.

"Tradition?" Leo asked, hoping that there wasn’t any more to it.

"The Captain doesn’t eat or sleep until the crew has," Jim said simply.

"Traditionally, it is organized by rank, with the lower ranks being served first. In other words, the entire command crew should rightfully go last," Spock said.

From Jim's shrug, Leo knew that he would be the last person to eat or to rest, unless Leo could do
something about that. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes or pinch the bridge of his nose, and thought strategically instead. Traditions were all well and good, but most of the crew was not beaten to shit the way the Captain was. The Captain should actually be in Sickbay, and although he did not want to undermine Jim’s command in any way, he could not authorize Jim staying on duty for much longer, lest the ship be left without a Captain yet again.

"With all due respect, Captain," Leo said, making his move. He kept his voice low. "I would suggest that Commander Spock take a break now, attend the last dinner break, and return to the bridge for the remainder of the beta and gamma shifts." Spock looked like he was about to object, so Leo kept talking, throwing out the carrot. "I understand that this is highly unorthodox, but unless I am grossly mistaken, the Commander has no injuries that need attending."

Spock nodded to indicate that this was true.

"But considering the day that you have endured, I'm willing to bet that a period of meditation would be restorative," Spock's expression did not change one iota at Leo's statement. "I'm also assuming that the Bridge crew would eat on the last shift. Is that correct?"

Spock tilted his head to indicate assent.

"I believe that it's important that the Bridge crew spend some time together, in light of the collective experience that they've shared," Leo paused, and looked from Jim to Spock. "In fact, I think that there are members of that crew that would specifically benefit from Commander Spock's presence."

Both Jim and Spock looked surprised by Leo's assertion, but Spock's surprise had an assessing tone as he stared at Leo. Yes, you ass, he thought, I am talking about your girlfriend. God help her.

"Also," Leo continued, turning his attention back to Jim, "if you consent to come off shift after the last dinner break and rest, Captain, I'll be able to render some necessary first aid in privacy. You'll be fresh and ready to resume command come Alpha tomorrow."

Leo didn’t need to know Spock very well to know that he had recognized the validity in the plan.

“I concur with Lieut -- Doctor McCoy’s plan, Captain,” Spock said.

"No time in Sickbay," Jim said in a bargaining tone, his voice pitched not to carry.

"Done," Leo said, knowing a deal when one was struck. "Mr. Scott," he asked. "Are you willing to work out a shift schedule for your staff?"

"Oh, aye," he said, "the lads and lassies here will work better with a good supper in them, and as long as I can get a sandwich, it'll all be good, but ..." he hesitated, "there has been damage to crew quarters."

Jim nodded, considering.

"If I could make another suggestion," Leo said.

Jim waved a hand tiredly.

"I think that berthing assignments should be sorted out for the comfort of crew members, and a blind eye turned to any fraternization matters," Leo said frankly.

Spock's eyebrow was raising to its hairline. “That is an extremely unorthodox suggestion, Doctor,” he said.
"It has been a hell of a day," Leo said quietly, "and people are going to have to double up anyway. I'm not saying that you make such assignments officially, merely that you recognize that social creatures require companionship, and not just in the dining hall. It's an essential component of mental health."

Jim nodded, but there was a ghost of a smile on his face. "So noted," he said wryly.

Leo raised his own eyebrow in a challenging fashion at Spock, who visibly tamped down further objections, then excused himself back to Sickbay.

"I'll see you in the mess, Captain," he said to Jim, waiting to move until he saw Jim's nod.

Leo was relieved to see Jim sitting on the edge of his bed when he came into the bedroom of the cabin that he'd been assigned before he'd been elevated to CMO, even though the sight of Jim sitting, still and forlorn with elbows on knees and head in hands, was breaking his heart.

"When you said that you were going to eat last, I mistakenly took that to mean that you were going to eat in the mess, Jim," Leo said quietly. He'd watched as Jim had moved from table to table, talking to and reassuring crew members, praising them for a job well done and urging them to eat, bringing food to those who needed encouragement, clapping shoulders, talking and listening. Leo knew that Jim had done the same during both of the earlier meal periods, because he'd checked in on the crew himself, in between organizing the shift rotations for medical personnel with Chapel, and ensuring that his own staff was housed and fed before he signed out for the night.

"Not hungry, Bones," Jim said softly, not moving from his despondent position.

Leo sighed and put the clean clothes and toiletry kits that he'd cajoled out of the kid filling in for the CHOP on the shelf outside the bathroom that he shared with a still on-duty M'Benga. "C'mon, Jim," he said to him quietly, running a hand over his hair. "You'll feel better after you clean up." Jim leaned into his caress, pressing his left side up against Leo's thigh.

"So tired, Bones," he said, exhaustedly.

"I know, Jimmy," Leo said, continuing to soothe him the way he'd wanted to for hours. "But you're one big walking bruise, and I hate to tell you, but you smell like the hind end of a donkey."

Jim's chuckle was faint, and a little watery, but there. He turned his face into Leo's hip and sniffed. "You smell like hospital," he observed.

"And clean laundry," Leo said, stepping back and shrugging out of the new blues that he'd gotten from the erstwhile chief, leaving him in just his black undershirt and pants. "I'm not sure that the laundry will be able to salvage that shirt."

"'s'ok," Jim said, "I can't lift my arms to get it off anyway, so I'll just wear it into the shower."

"Hell you will," Leo said, reaching over him for the medkit. He pulled out a scissor and held Jim's head still, making a cut at the back of the shirt and then using the blade to neatly slice it in two.

"Kinky," Jim observed drily, but Leo was too busy wincing at the state of Jim's ribs and his back to make a rejoinder.

"Jesus, Jim," he said, after he carefully pulled the shirt off his arms. "You really are one big bruise." He crouched down in front of him to get at his boots.
"Yeah," Jim said. He looked at Leo briefly, then dropped his head forward onto Leo's shoulder, resting his weight on him as Leo wrestled with his boots and pulled off his socks.

"C'mon Jim," he said, placing a hand on the back of his neck and kissing his jaw. "Help me a little here."

Jim sighed and leaned back slightly to look at him. "You ruined my history-making shirt," he groused, but it seemed mechanical, like he was trying to act normal.

"They can sew it right up the back for the Jim Kirk Exhibit at the UFP Pavilion," Leo said lightly. "Can you stand up for me?"

Jim huffed scornfully but stood, still leaning heavily on Leo. "Oh," he said, looking down as Leo unbuttoned them. "Are you finally getting into my pants?"

Leo smiled and gave Jim's right buttock a squeeze as he pushed his pants off, then thought better of it when the flinch that provoked looked a lot more like discomfort than pleasure. "Sorry," he said, bending to gently lift Jim's feet out of his filthy trousers. He hid the tender smile that seeing Jim's scrawny legs always provoked, even now when they were as beat to hell as the rest of him, and stood up only to have Jim press up against him.

"Don't apologize," Jim ordered in a weary tone from where he'd hidden his face against Leo's neck.

"Can you get in the shower by yourself?" Leo asked.

"In a minute," Jim muttered, still leaning. His hands had come up to cover Leo's hips, but trying to raise his arms higher had only resulted in stifled hitches meant to mask the pain.

"What're you doing?" Leo asked, running a hand through Jim's hair again. His scalp seemed to be the only place that wasn't bruised, except maybe for the soles of his feet.

"Improving my mental health by seeking solace in companionship," Jim said languidly.

Leo chuckled and tugged at the hair at the back of his scalp. When Jim moved his face to protest, he kissed his bruised lips gently, tasting Jim's exhaustion before he sighed against him. "C'mon now, Jimmy," he said gently. "Get in the shower and clean up."


Leo chuckled and kissed him again, trailing kisses over his bruised cheek as Jim shifted and then moaned in pain when he twisted his sore neck trying to reach Leo's mouth. "You'll get some more solace after you brush your teeth," Leo said, stepping back but keeping hold of Jim. "Go on."

Jim grumbled, but shuffled across the room to the bathroom. Now that he was no longer acting the part of the Captain for the crew, he was walking like a man far older than his years, and Leo shadowed him, unsure of how steady he truly was.

"There's a tub," Jim said with awe when the lights came on.

"Which you are far too grimy to get into," Leo said with a smile, switching the room status to occupied, in case M'Benga or perhaps a guest wanted to access the facilities.

"Bones …" Jim protested.

"Shower," Leo answered firmly. "There's water and everything, but I want you to run a sonic, too --
it'll kill anything that's brewing."

Jim pursed his lips as if to argue, but he sighed instead, stepping toward the cubicle as Leo turned to go back into the cabin. When Leo heard the water come on, he tossed Jim's laundry down the chute and moved his boots to the end of the bed, then slipped out the main door, headed to the mess.

When he got back to the room, Jim was back on the bed, seated in the same despondent position that he'd been in before. This time, however, his hair was darkened by the water, his bruises stark against the pallor of his fair skin, the full expanse of which was only hidden from Leo's view by the blue sleep shorts that he'd procured for him.

"Hard for you to solace me when you're on another deck," Jim said casually. He took a breath in and sniffed, raising his head to look at the covered bowls in Leo's hands. "Bones …" he protested.

"It's soup, Jim," Leo said. "You can just drink it right down and get your vitamins." Not to mention that he'd fortified them both with protein powders and calorie extenders that would be tasteless, but nourishing. "The meds I'm going to give you will work better if you've eaten."

"Bones …"

"Please, Jim," Leo said to him quietly, crouching down in front of him. "Just drink it."

Jim's weary blue eyes searched his. "I can't promise to drink both of those," he said.

"You pick which one you want," Leo said. "Plomeek or chicken?" At the word plomeek, something in Jim's expression cracked and became jagged.

"You got me plomeek?" he whispered.

"I made sure it was on the menu tonight," Leo said. "Comfort food."

Jim's laugh was watery. "It's the most boring comfort food ever invented," he said, but he reached for the bowl and Leo uncovered it, putting the chicken soup on the nightstand as he reached for his tricorder.

He was watching Jim as he sipped at the warm broth, seeing the warm flush return to his cheeks as he did so, even though the hands around the bowl were faintly trembling. Leo worked as swiftly as possible, strapping regenerators to Jim's ribs, his knees, his shoulders, and trying to keep his sighing to a minimum at the damage he was uncovering: strains, fractures, and misalignments everywhere he looked.

"Going to be hard to sleep with all that crap on me," Jim said thickly. "It's like bugs crawling under my skin." He stiffened suddenly. "Pike?" he asked.

"He's doing great," Leo said. "No bugs."

Jim nodded wearily, his head over the cupped bowl and the dregs of the soup that were in it. Leo watched in silent sorrow as a tear dropped into the bowl.

"Jim …" he said, kneeling down in front of him.

"All those people," Jim said softly, staring into the bowl, but Leo knew that he was seeing the empty space where Vulcan had been, all that had been destroyed by a madman's vengeance. Leo wiped the tears from his cheek gently, more unnerved by Jim's silent weeping than he would have been by an outburst.
"I know, Jim," Leo said.

"The KFF, Bones," Jim said in anguish, and his hands gripped the bowl so hard that Leo eased it from his hold and wrapped himself around him.

"Shh …" Leo soothed. He felt the hot wash of tears on his neck, the curl of Jim's fists against his back, and he held on, despite the fact that the regens were cutting into him and being displaced.

"My kids," Jim said brokenly, and Leo felt the shudder that ran through him from head to toe, and pulled Jim in tighter, kissing his temple and his brow, feeling the tears rising in his own chest at Jim's grief.

"I know, Jimmy, I know," he said thickly, wiping at his own eyes, and trying to push away the knowledge that so many people -- so many young people -- that they had known were dead and gone in an eybblink. He held on until he felt Jim's body become lax, then stood, pulling Jim up with him as he turned down the covers.

"Bones," Jim said, his tone hazy and confused. "Did you sedate me?"

"No," Leo said surely. "You're just totally exhausted." He swung Jim's feet up onto the bed and adjusted all the regens back into their proper positions before he covered him, taking time to set some new ones on his hands and his neck, and then hypoing him with some muscle relaxants.

"I won't even be able to take a piss," Jim complained.

"Do you have to?" Leo asked, surprised, "or are you just grousing?"

Jim smiled, eyes closed. "Grousin'," he said sleepily.

Leo bent forward and kissed him. "Shut up and go to sleep, boy," he ordered.

"Where you goin'?" Jim asked, starting to wake up.

"Nowhere," Leo said, toeing off his boots, and stripping off his pants and undershirt. He crawled up the other side of the too small bed and slid under the covers on his side, shifting Jim so that he was practically laying atop him, his back resting against Leo's chest. "Lights off," he ordered the computer, and blinked as it complied and the unfamiliar room became pitch dark.

Jim murmured and shifted against him, trying to find a more comfortable position, then settled. He let out one long, whistling sigh that sounded something like his nickname for Leo, and fell blessedly asleep, his battered frame relaxing and becoming a somnolent weight against Leo, holding him down, anchoring him to the bed.

Leo bent his arm up to stroke it through Jim's hair and leaned forward, kissing the join of Jim's neck where it flowed gracefully into his shoulder. "I'm going nowhere without you, kid," he promised Jim. Then he closed his eyes, and let his breathing match Jim's as he tumbled after him into sleep.

Chapter 39

"Bones …"

Leo smiled at the sound of Jim's voice, which didn't sound nearly as exhausted or broken as it had. There was a note of urgency in his tone, but Leo was comfortable — actually, now that he was waking up, he was aware that most of his body was 'asleep' from Jim's weight impeding his circulation.
"Bones, man," Jim said again, "I am totally serious here. I haven't wet the bed since I was three, but if you don't let go of me and get this crap off me, we're going to be revisiting those days in maybe three minutes, max. And I know some guys like that sort of thing," Jim continued, poking at Leo's ribs with his elbow, "and usually I'm all about broadening my horizons and 'hey, whatever floats your boat', which is key, because floating is exactly what we're going to be doing, so wake UP!"

"Jim?" Leo asked as he began to comprehend Jim's words. He realized that he had a death grip across Jim's upper chest, effectively pinning him down. He didn't need to examine his subconscious impulse too hard to understand what that was about after the day they'd had.

"Bones!" Jim said with relief. "I have got to take a piss, now!"

Leo struggled against Jim's weight to sit them both up. "Fucking Starfleet and their fucking non-fraternization rules," he groused. "Like people are going to sleep alone on goddamned five fucking year missions, even if they give them these child-size beds. It's an invitation to back trouble, I'll tell you what. Fuckwits."

"Good morning, sunshine!" Jim said cheerfully. "Please hurry the fuck up."

Leo swung numb legs over the side of the bed, and stumbled around to the other side where Jim had already risen to his feet and was bouncing on the balls of his feet in impatience.

"Faster, Bones," Jim said, holding out his hands so that Leo could free him from the regenerator mittens that covered them entirely.

As soon as Leo freed his hands, Jim bolted past him and into the head. Even from behind the closed door of the room, Leo could hear Jim's groan of relief as he relieved himself. Leo smiled wryly and stretched out, trying to work the kinks out of his back and the blood back into his extremities. He glanced at the chrono, noting that it was a few minutes before 0600, which was more than acceptable. He estimated that Jim had gotten a good 7 hours of sleep, although that would depend upon how long he'd been trying to rouse Leo from his own stupor. He yawned and ran through a few postures as he heard Jim washing up.

"Don't get the regenerators wet!" he yelled at the door.

"Yes, mom," Jim said, coming out of the bathroom, looking far more relaxed. "I wasn't going to get in the shower with them on, you know." He rolled his eyes as Leo approached him with the tricorder and scanner, but stood still while Leo perused the read-out, his lips pursed. "Do I pass?" he asked smartly.

Truthfully, Leo would have been completely happy to relegate Jim to another seven hours of bedrest so that he could heal more of the damage on his back, but he knew that wasn't going to happen. He had to think strategically. "You'd tell me if you were pissing blood, right?"

“Like the tricorder wouldn’t?” Jim sassed him.

Leo raised an eyebrow. “I'm willing to let you go back to duty today, Jim,” he began, then hastened to continue as Jim started to talk. "But only if you're not going to do anything too strenuous," he stressed. "No sliding under the reactors in Engineering to help Scott out — your back is a mess. No lifting anything heavier than a couple of kg — your ligaments are still beat to shit. No squatting for any period of time."

Jim was scowling at him. "So, I can sit around?"

Leo tilted his head. "Sitting might not be the most comfortable thing either, Jim," he said with a
smile, "although I'm sure that as Captain you've got a shitload of reports to read and to write."

Jim's scowl deepened.

"As a bonus, you can stride around and look captainly," Leo said.

"Funny man, Bones," Jim said. "You have a cruel streak, you know that?"

Leo patted him on the cheek. "Don't sweet talk me when I'm still half-asleep, sugar," he said, relishing Jim's surprised laugh. "You can have the first shower after I get you out of this gear, but I expect to see you back here tonight, at a decent hour, so I can see to the rest of what's ailing you." He'd left his hand on Jim's cheek as he stared Jim in the eye. "Deal?" He waited until he saw the acquiescence in his blue eyes before he made a move to unstrap the rest of the regens.

"Deal," he said begrudgingly.

"And we're eating breakfast together in the mess before you go to the Bridge," Leo said, kneeling down to unstrap the regenerators from Jim's knees.

Jim was smirking down at him. "You're giving me all sorts of ideas here, Bones," he said.

Leo rolled his eyes at him. "Don't write checks your ass can't cash, kid, and I mean that literally in your case -- your aft side is still one big hematoma."

Jim's eyes were twinkling with laughter. "What does that even mean, Bones?" he asked. "Who the fuck writes a check these days? You talk like you're 300 years old."

"Jim, one more day like yesterday, and I'll feel like I'm 300 years old," Leo grumped, but regretted it immediately when he saw the shadow come into Jim's blue eyes. Fuck. When wouldn't he learn to leave well enough alone.

The wall console whistled for attention, a second before Spock's voice said, "Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Goddamnit," Bones said. "I didn't mean that he should stay on shift all goddamned night, stubborn green-blooded asshole. I thought he'd hand off the conn."

Jim was already at the wall console. "Kirk here," he said.

"Captain," Spock said, "I'm sorry to disturb your rest."

"I was awake, Mr. Spock," Kirk said. "What's up?"

Leo moved to Jim's side and continued unstrapping regens, listening.

"Our current position has yielded some intriguing sensor data," Spock answered.

"In what way, Spock?" Jim asked, far more patiently than Leo would have.

"I'm unwilling to hypothesize without more data," Spock said, "which we are unable to collect without a change in our current course."

"Understood," Jim said, although his expression was tight. "I'll be on deck in less than five. Kirk out."

"Jim, what the fuck?" Leo erupted, standing up.
Jim was already on his way to the shelves where clean clothes were stacked. "I have no idea," he said. "Whatever the fuck it is, it's clearly rattled Spock."

"And you could tell that because…"

Jim shrugged, pulling the black undershirt over his torso. "Couldn't you hear it?" he asked. He seemed honestly surprised.

"No," Leo said bluntly. "What I heard was him being deliberately obtuse."

"Over an open channel," Jim pointed out, pulling up his socks, and stepping into his pants hastily. He shoved his feet into his boots, and stepped into the head, brushing his teeth as Leo followed him, watching him dash his face with cold water after he'd spit.

Leo handed him a towel, his own expression grim. Jim's shoulders were rigid with tension. "How close to that black hole are we?" he asked.

Jim shook his head. "I really don't think that they could have come back from that, Bones," he said, "but … I don't know. And we're not that close. We're closer to Vulcan —" he stopped short and corrected himself, quietly. "Where Vulcan used to be."

"Jesus, Jim," Leo said softly. "What now?"

"I don't know," Jim said, his voice rising in irritation. He turned to leave the room, stopping himself before he went through the door. "I'll comm you when I know something." He turned and looked at Leo, then came back toward him in a rush, kissing him, then drawing back to look at him. "Bones," he said in his nonchalant manner that was anything but, "you don't actually think that I'm sweet, do you?"

Leo leaned forward and kissed him again, but only smiled at him enigmatically.

"Bones," Jim said, grumbling a little, but there was a flush on his neck, and his cheek. "Seriously. Captains are not sweet. Besides, anybody who’s met me would totally disagree with you." He turned to walk out the door of the cabin, waving a hand dismissively. "Ask around."

Leo smirked and watched him walk away. He would bet money that Jim had been an extraordinarily sweet boy because even when he was being a total dick, he reverted to his basic sunny disposition in fairly short order. Jim Kirk had been meant to be a happy man. Maybe in some other universe, perhaps the one that other Spock had come from, he had been one. "Eat some food today, asshole," he yelled at Jim's retreating back. "And comm me and tell me what the fuck is going on."

Jim waved before he left the cabin, not looking back again.

Leo sighed and set the regenerators to charge, and then stripped and got in the shower, hoping that this damned day would be shorter, and less painful than yesterday had been.

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He’d commed M’Benga to let him know that he was coming on shift early so that he could be ready to give report, and settled down to a quiet breakfast in the mess reading his PADD with patient updates while he ate a nourishing but boring breakfast. He put his tray up he strode into Sickbay, not surprised that Chapel was already there as well.

“Dr. McCoy,” M’Benga said. He looked tired, but not ground down.
“Dr. M’Benga,” Leo answered. “How was the night?” He waved for the man to go ahead of him to his office, but was hailed by an already awake Pike, who managed to tear himself away from breakfast with his head nurse.

“McCoy,” Pike said. “What’s going on out there?”

Leo raised an eyebrow at Chapel, who met his eyebrow with nary a flinch or change in her expression. “Would you like me to page Kirk for you?” he answered Pike.

“I’d like you to answer my question,” Pike said, his tone deceptively mild.

Leo nodded and gestured at Chapel to release her side of the bed. “Let’s go for a ride, Captain,” he said, rolling Pike toward his office. “Jabilo, I’ll be with you as soon as possible,” he said to his associate.

Chapel followed them into the office with Pike’s breakfast and left again, seeming moderately put out to do so, even though Leo had already shared what he knew with her the night before.

“I don’t know what our current status is,” Leo began. “Spock commed Jim forty minutes ago to get him to come up to the bridge to look at some ‘intriguing sensor data’,“ Leo sketched the quotes in the air, “and I have no idea what that’s about.”

Pike was listening carefully. “What do you know?”

“We suffered heavy damage when the Narada was pulled into the black hole, some from struggling to break free of the gravitational well, some from the fight before, some from the debris breaking off the Narada itself.”

Pike nodded. “Bottom line?”

“Jim can tell you what decks have damage, but the biggest problem is the engines,” Leo said.

Pike raised an eyebrow.

“Evidently, they jettisoned the warp cores –“ Pike whistled long and low “-and detonated them to kind of surf the blast wave away from the black hole.” Pike looked stunned.

“Are you kidding me?”

Leo crossed his arms over his chest. “Why the fuck would I kid you about that?”

Pike stared at him. “I can’t even … who thought of that?”

Leo shook his head. “No idea.”

Pike stared at him.

“OK,” he conceded. “Jim, probably, but you haven’t met the engineer he found on that ice ball that your First Officer marooned him on.”

“Marooned?” Pike repeated incredulously.

“Marooned,” Leo said firmly. “As in knocked him out cold and shoved him into a pod and sent him out there onto Delta Vega after Jim disagreed with what Spock wanted to do.”

“I see,” Pike said carefully. “And how did Jim get back on the ship?”
Leo spread his arms wide. “On that one, he’s gonna have to tell you, because I have no fucking idea, except that engineer, Scott, has something to do with it. So, like I said, it might have been Scott that proposed detonating the warp cores.”

Pike was clearly taking in all that Leo had said. “Do you have any idea what the odds are of that working?”

Leo turned and went around his desk to sit. “For that one you’ll have to go to Spock,” he said. “I’m a doctor, not a theoretician.”

Pike rolled his eyes. “So, where are we?”

“I’m not sure exactly,” Leo said. “Jim said that we’re closer to where Vulcan was than the black hole made by the Narada, more than a week from the nearest Spacedock big enough to take us, and it’s questionable whether or not we could be towed at warp with the damage we took.”

“Christ,” Pike said, rubbing his face tiredly.

Leo watched with displeasure as his readings showed the increase in stress. “Chris,” he said. “I’d rather have you wait and talk to Jim, rather than get half answers from me.”

“Unacceptable,” Pike snapped, raising his head from the bed where he should be laying still, and flat on his back. “I may not be on the bridge right now, but I’m still Captain of this ship!”

Leo looked him in the eye, not saying a word. He might be a hardass, but unless Pike really pushed it, he wasn’t going to point out the obvious: that Pike was in no shape to be the Captain, and that it would be Leo who would make that determination, if he challenged him.

Pike dropped his head back against the biobed with an exhausted exhale, turning his face away from Leo. “Am I going to walk again, McCoy?”

Leo stood up and crossed to the bed, waiting until Pike turned to look at him. “I can’t give you an unqualified yes to that question,” he said clearly, “and not because I’m prevaricating. That slug did serious damage, and the regeneration of your nerve systems will be long, even once we’re back dirtside and you can do more intensive sessions in a chamber. But I promise you that I did the best I could for you, Chris.”

Pike was watching him intently. “You think he found me in time, don’t you?”

Leo smiled. “I would never put a goddamned thing past him, Captain.”

The comm on his desk bleeped and Jim’s voice came through it. “Bridge to Sickbay.”

“Speak of the devil,” Leo said, hitting the button. “Yes, Captain?”

“Bones,” Jim said, and there was a tone in his voice that he couldn’t quite get a grasp of. “Long-term sensors have picked up what might be derelict pieces of the fleet.”

Leo felt the back of his neck prickle. “Life signs?”

“Impossible to detect from this far out,” Jim said. “It’s going to take us a couple of hours to even get to that point.”

“What do you need me for then?” Leo asked, puzzled.

“Can you take any more incoming?” Jim asked.
Leo sighed, looking at the bed census. They were already crowded with the loss of the primary ‘bay, and they had limited space in the makeshift morgue that they’d set up. “We’ll deal, Jim,” he said.

“Bones?”

“Nothing,” he said. He wouldn’t burden Jim with a decision that was rightfully his, although he noted that Pike’s sharp eyes had seen the list that he was looking at.

“Kirk,” Pike said.

“Captain!” Jim answered with pleasure. “How’re you, sir?”

“Just fine and dandy,” Pike said in his acerbic way. “Any chance I can get a report out of you?”

“Absolutely! On my way,” Jim said. “Kirk out.”

“How many?” Pike asked softly.

“27,” he said gruffly. “One of the Vulcan elders died last night.”

“I thought so,” Pike said. “The privacy curtain was drawn, but …”

Damn it, maybe he should have stayed on duty. Leo stared at the list in anger.

“I doubt that there was anything you could have done, McCoy,” Pike said, after he allowed Leo some time to brood. “The lifebonds …”

“Yeah, I know,” Leo said gruffly. “T’Pau already gave me the same song and dance. It doesn’t make it a damned bit easier to see a healthy man will himself to death.”

The door to Leo’s office whisked open and Jim bounded in, coming to a halt when he saw Leo’s face. “Bones?” he asked.

“Tolok died early this morning, Jim,” he said bluntly.

“Damn,” Jim said softly running a hand through his hair and then down the back of his neck, flinching when he hit a sore spot. “Even T’Pau couldn’t …” he drifted off, seemingly lost in thought, and not for the first time, Leo found himself wondering exactly how much information he’d gleaned from his meld with the older version of Spock.

“No, Jim,” Leo said. “He’d pretty much made up his mind.”

Jim seemed to come back to himself suddenly and looked at Leo with sharp eyes. “Bones,” he said firmly. “You are not blaming yourself for this, are you?”

Leo was aware of how closely Pike was paying attention to their interaction. “I’m never going to like losing a patient, Jim,” he snapped. “Don’t expect me to.”

Jim’s gaze was still watchful, but he seemed appeased by Leo’s words. “OK, Bones,” he said quietly. He turned his attention to Pike. “You look much better, sir.”

Pike’s response was as dry as the desert from which he hailed. “You can’t imagine how pleased I am to hear your medical assessment, Dr. Kirk,” he said. “Now, tell me what the hell happened from the time I left this ship to go to the Narada.”

Leo squeezed Jim’s trapezius muscle as he started to move on by him. “Y’all don’t need me for this
“part,” he said cheerfully. “I think I’ll go be all doctor-y and shit.”

Jim’s expression was slightly wistful as he turned his head to watch Leo go.

“And Jim?” Pike said, drawing Jim’s attention away from Leo gathering materials from his desk.
“Don’t leave anything out.”

“No, sir,” Jim said to Pike.

“Marooned?” Pike asked Jim.

“Um … well,” Jim hedged. “I might have been a bit insubordinate.”

“Is this the part where I look shocked?” Pike asked, as the door whisked shut behind him.

Leo was up to his elbows in some poor bastard when the call from the Bridge came hours later.

"Computer," he instructed, "patch the communicator through." He nodded to the nurse that had been assisting him. “Cause of death is verified as thoracic trauma.” Simpson nodded.

"McCoy here," he answered, when the communicator beeped to indicate that it was live.

"Bones," Jim said. "We need you on the Bridge."

Leo sighed and stepped back from the table. "Acknowledged, Captain," he said. "I'll be there as soon as possible. McCoy out."

"Get a few corpsmen in here and get this area ready for surgery ASAP, Simpson," he said to the nurse.

"Yes sir," she said.

He could see the weariness in her eyes and her posture.

"Good job, by the way," he tossed over his shoulder as he stepped into the sanitizing spray, stripping down and discarding the blood- and viscera-spotted scrubs that he’d been wearing, making sure that he grabbed George Kirk’s ring off the tie before he did so. He hastily pulled his uniform back on — he had no intention of letting the Bridge crew know that he'd been performing autopsies for the past few hours, so he took the extra time to change before he headed out through the main 'bay.

"Chapel," he called, already moving to the door. She appeared at his side, looking ready for whatever battle was coming next. "He called," he said tersely, looking over her shoulder to where Pike lay, clearly listening, his expression taut. "Are we ready?"

"As we can be," she said reasonably, handing him a PADD with current patient status and locales.

"Thanks," he said, not breaking stride. "I'll comm when I know anything." He addressed this to Pike as much as to her.

The lift was occupied when he entered it, a fact he only realized when he looked up from the PADD after calling for the Bridge.

"Called you too, then, did he?" The Scot still seemed as cheerful as he'd been the night before, although if he had to guess, Leo would bet that he hadn't slept since then.
"Yeah," Leo said.

"Montgomery Scott," the engineer said, extending a hand.

"Leonard McCoy," he offered, shaking it as the door opened, and they stepped out onto the bridge.

"Bones," Jim said. It was clear that he'd been pacing around the bridge like a caged lion. "Scotty!" He clapped the Scotsman on the back, radiating energy and impatience. "Spock, can you update them?"

"Certainly," came the answer. "At 0400 hours, Ensign D’Amato reported receiving unusual sensor data from the region of the quadrant proximate to where Vulcan had been until yesterday’s actions."

Next to Leo, Engineer Scott blinked and shuffled his feet.

"I was called back to the Bridge for an analysis, and saw that the data points correlated to an area of space where Lieutenant Uhura had recorded unusual activity from her station before she went off shift," Leo turned to look behind him, but Uhura's stoic visage was focused on Spock. Beyond her, much to his surprise, he saw the figure of Ambassador Sarek, who nodded an acknowledgment before he returned his attention to his son. "Captain Kirk ordered a modest course correction which afforded us better data, and we were able to posit that we were picking up the energy signatures of debris from the fleet that came to assist the planet Vulcan. However, with only impulse engines at our command, we have only presently progressed to the point where we can verify what we posited. On screen," Spock ordered, and Chekov pressed some buttons on the view screen to display several pieces of the shattered starships.

"Dear God," Scott said next to him.

Jim had crossed to stand behind his chair, leaning on the back of it, and Leo could see from his posture that he was in pain, not only from his injuries but also from the stress of his impatience with their slow progress.

"Any life signs?" Leo asked, cutting to the chase.

Jim shook his head in frustration. "Possibly," he said. "But the ambient radiation coming off the debris is so high that's interfering with a clean signal."

"How high?" Leo demanded, and Jim tossed him a PADD from his chair that he caught. He frowned at what he read. "It's a long shot that anyone is still alive, Jim," he said, flipping from screen to screen, Scotty reading over his shoulder.

"Scotty," Jim said. "What about our own shields?"

"We have containment, Captain," Scott said surely. "But we'll have to exert caution as we approach, especially as we cannae just warp away. Are these levels what you're extrapolating based on the current readings?"

"Yes," Chekov answered at the same time as Jim. "Sorry, Captain," he added in his heavily accented English.

Jim waved him off. "We're expecting to have concrete data within the hour."

“Good,” Leo said. “I don’t have to tell you that how we’d choose to get folks aboard, if there are any, would need to be adapted depending upon those levels.”
Jim nodded.

“I’d also advise that if we do find any life signs, that we need to scan thoroughly as we may need to beam not just the being but their immediate surroundings to Enterprise.”

Jim swung around to look at Leo in surprise.

“Aye,” Scotty said softly next to him, looking at the screen. “That might be wise since we won’t know what kind of a state they’re in.”

Leo watched the comprehension cross Jim’s face, as Spock began to speak.

“Precisely,” he said. “They may be trapped in a way that requires a surgical intervention to safely extract them.”

Behind Spock, Chekov suddenly looked very young and very green, and Sulu’s eyes had widened. Leo watched as Jim glanced around and took in the stricken expressions of many of the crew.

“There’s no need for us to postulate without further data,” he said firmly. “Dr. McCoy and Engineer Scott are clearly preparing for all eventualities.”

“Yes sir,” Scott said with assurance, and would have continued on, if Jim hadn’t continued speaking.

“Why don’t you gentlemen confer, and when we have any new information we’ll ensure that it’s sent to both of you, right, Lieutenant?” Jim looked over at Uhura.

“Absolutely,” she said firmly.

“All right,” Jim said, dismissing them both. “Until then.”

“Captain,” Leo said, and Jim turned. “One other thing.”

“Bones?”

“Rumors are running rampant about our change of course,” Leo said bluntly, and Jim’s eyes shifted to Scott.

“Oh, aye,” he said. “’tis true. And some of them are quite ghastly.”

“Noted,” Jim said with a nod, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’ll make an announcement when there’s something to say.”

Leo nodded, and joined Scott at the turbolift. Jim’s eyes remained fixed to Leo’s until the bridge turbolift doors closed, and even across the distance Leo could see the haunting mixed with hope.

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Alpha shift had turned into beta, but most of the Bridge crew had opted to stay on as they had gotten closer to the debris field. The results had been discouraging for the command crew, and when Leo had gone up to see what progress they were making he could see the grief etched on faces both young and old, alien and human. Scan after scan had revealed no life signs as they circled the area of debris, and as the hours had wended on, Leo could see how many hopes had been pinned on finding someone alive. Even the news that many of the escape pods from Vulcan had reached Delta Vega and that the Enterprise was to collect and transport those refugees had not pierced the tension.

When the comm had finally come from the bridge to Leo’s office, both Leo and Pike had received
Jim’s ebullient, “We found someone!” with relief, although Pike's relief had a note of satisfaction in it that was different than Leo's. Leo knew that Pike had argued long and loudly with the Admiralty about the Enterprise’s veering from its assigned course. He had to give Pike credit for tenacity. His first tack had been to argue that in the absence of other fleet support that the Enterprise was merely completing its mission to aid and evacuate Vulcans. When that argument had failed to sway its listeners, Pike had argued that leaving Vulcans stranded on a ice planet was cruel, and possibly dangerous, considering the fragile mental state of those who had lost everything. He also implied that with the Vulcan High Council aboard the Enterprise, it would be diplomatically prudent for them to do all that they could for the survivors of the genocide. He’d finally received grudging assent, after which Pike had said to Leo, "Later, when it turns out this was a good idea? They'll fucking claim that it was theirs."

Of course, Leo was also pretty certain that Pike wanted to go and get the older version of Spock himself -- although he'd kept the existence of Spock's elderly doppelganger from the Admiralty, and had sworn Leo to secrecy on the subject as well. And how they were supposed to keep the younger version of Spock from meeting his older alternative incarnation, God only knew.

And God help them all with two Spocks aboard, Leo thought as he checked the seals on his radiation protection suit on last time.

“I still say that you should be staying out of this, Jim,” he said to his erstwhile Captain. “You’re nowhere near your full strength.”

“Bones,” Jim said reasonably. “I can still think tactically, even if you won’t let me do anything. Besides,” he said quietly, activating the seals on his own suit. “It looks like you’ll need the help.” He flicked his eyes over at some of Scotty’s underlings, all of whom looked impossibly young to him. Beyond them, he could see Cupcake suiting up with a similarly grim expression.

“All right, y’all,” Leo said to the group. “We’ve got three life signs in the section that’s being transported. With unknown spectrums of radiation emanating from the portion of the ship that we're transporting in, we’re following hazmat protocols until we know what we're dealing with. This is a medical operation. That means,” he said sternly to the non-medical personnel, “that you touch nothing, and nobody, until I say you do. We got that? Who’s on fire suppression?” A few hands were raised. “All right then.”

Leo looked at Jim. “Mr. Scott,” Jim said into the wall comm. “Are we ready?”

“Give me two minutes, Captain,” he said. “Radiation controls are on, but Mr. Chekhov and I are doing a wee bit of calculus yet. We’ll be transporting the others to this room first, and I’ll comm ye when we’re sending you that bit. Scott out.”

“Kirk to Bridge,” Jim said next.

“Bridge here,” Spock answered.

“All decks broadcast, Mr. Spock,” Jim said.

“Connected, Captain,” Spock said smoothly.

“Attention all hands,” Jim said, his eyes going slightly unfocused for a moment before he looked at Leo. “This is Acting Captain James T. Kirk, speaking on behalf of Captain Pike. As some of you know, we have diverged from our plan to return to the Beta-Prime Spacedock and are on a mission of mercy. We are currently en route to Delta Vega to pick up evacuees from the planet Vulcan who have sought refuge at the small Starfleet base there. However at 16:30 SFT, our sensors detected life
signs on a derelict portion of one of our sister ships. A rescue effort is just about to commence. We cannot say what the outcome of this effort will be, but I know that I speak for all of us when I say that as we serve together, we could not leave anyone behind while we had a chance to do otherwise. I know that your hopes are with us as we make this attempt. Kirk out.”

A silence had fallen over the shuttle bay while Jim spoke, and Leo saw a number of people, even the most battle-hardened medical staff, turn away when he finished, all suddenly very interested in fixing their helmets. He supposed that he could have made some sort of crack about Captains being sweet after all, but it hardly seemed appropriate given the circumstances, even if it were true.

The silence ended with the sound of a voice over the comm unit at Jim’s wrist. “Captain,” Scott said, “we’re starting to transport to the main transporter bay. Prepare to receive in the shuttle bay in approximately three minutes.”

“Acknowledged, Scotty,” Jim said. “And this operation is now under Medical’s command.”

“Helmets!” Leo barked. “Lock ‘em, and everybody line up out of the target zone.” He pointed to the line on the floor, then inspected the group in general. “Ensign, activate,” he ordered the Engineer in a shielded comm area. The ensign gave Leo a thumb’s up as Leo checked his shielded tricorder to make sure that it was operational. He walked back down the line and stood next to Jim, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet with nervous energy. “Remember what I said, Jim,” he said in an undertone.

“I’ll be good, Bones,” Jim said.

“Doctor McCoy,” Scott said, “we’re locked onto the section that you designated.”

“Understood,” Leo said. “Energize.” He watched as the white swirls of energy began to resolve into a nightmarish scenario of sheared metal and synthetics, some still smoldering. Two figures were visible huddled within the center of the area, one sheltering the other from whatever had been above them.

“Fire suppression,” Leo ordered, stepping up with his tricorder, his boots sliding on the purple and red blood that had commingled on the deck of what had been the Farragut, and grabbing onto a swaying pole that was jutting from one of his patient’s legs. From the look of it, she’d been impaled by a piece of a catwalk that had pierced her thigh and pinned her to the deck. If she’d been human, she’d already be dead, but a combination of her divergent circulatory system and providence had saved her life. Still, she’d have to be transported directly to Sickbay attached to the railing, and it was clear from the purple blisters that covered her legs that she was severely sick from radiation poisoning. “Somebody hold this steady,” Leo barked and Jim stepped up, as did Cupcake.

Leo scanned the figure who was huddled over the Orion, cradling her against his semi-recumbent body and shielding her face from view, grimly noting the blistered hands, almost as livid as his cadet reds. The kid had a severe concussion, a broken wrist, and dehydration, but was surprisingly okay, despite the fact that he was practically dead from radiation poisoning. “Hang on there, kid,” Leo said to him quietly. He’d been narrating the details to Chapel while he assessed, and now he spoke to the team. “I’m going to separate these two,” he said to them. “You need to hold that railing steady,” he said to Cupcake, since Jim had already moved away to shadow the medical personnel that we were waiting to catch the Orion girl. He could tell from Jim’s anguished expression that he was hoping against hope that this was one Orion girl in particular.

He and a corpsman gently shifted the human cadet away, and the Orion girl tilted backwards into the corpsman’s waiting hands, and Leo heard Jim suck in a breath and make a wounded noise. Even with her green skin peeling and marred by purple blisters, Gaila’s lovely features were obvious.
"Bones?" Jim was able to load so much meaning into one word.

"She's really bad off, Jim," Leo said bluntly, scanning her. "I'm gonna need to transport her immediately." He dropped an indicator in Gaila's lap. "Nurse, switch places with Cup- Hanlon there and steady that railing. Everybody else except the corpsman needs to step out. Scotty, send them directly to Surgery. Chapel?"

"Go ahead," she answered.

"Radiation protocols, although it appears that it's GSR and not weapons. First case. I'm transmitting now." He stepped out of the range of the transporter, and turned to the second patient without looking up at Jim, who was breathing incredibly harshly. "Jim?"

"Jesus, Bones," Jim said, sounding like he was going to cry.

"What?" he asked impatiently, scanning the patient.

"Bones," Jim said, quietly. "I think that's Sen."

Leo looked at the kid's swollen face in surprise. "I'll be goddamned," he said. He dropped the second indicator in his lap. "He's gonna be fine, Jim," he said surely.

"Really, Bones?"

He looked up at Jim's stricken face, his blue eyes still fixed on Sen's misshapen and blistered features. "Positively, Jim. Step out," he said to the team. "Chapel."

"Go," she said.

"Minor injuries, but major GSR exposure. All protocols enforced."

"Understood."

"Scotty," Leo said, "send the second indicator to the hot room, please."

"Aye, Doctor," he said, and Sen disappeared from their view.

"C'mon now folks," Leo said, "there's somebody else in here." He began shifting panels aside looking for the third figure. Behind him, he could hear Jim on his comm as Cupcake moved to work alongside him, shifting debris.

"I see a leg," Cupcake said, pointing.

"Kirk to Uhura," Jim said from behind him, his voice shaken.

"Jim?" Uhura sounded frightened.

"It's Gaila, Nyota," he said quietly.

Leo could hear her Uhura's sharp inhale. "Move that panel now," he ordered. "Gently."

"Is she ..." Nyota's voice was quavering.

"She's alive, but it's bad," Jim said, swallowing. "It's bad."

A woman's torso became visible, but from the way she was laying, Leo was fairly certain that she'd
been crushed under a lot more debris than they'd moved out of the way. "Carefully," he said. He scanned her body, catching only the faintest of life signs, and cursed himself for not finding her sooner. The corpsmen moved the panel away from her upper torso and revealed that her head and one of her hands had been free in a pocket created by the falling debris. She was holding a tricorder.

"Damn," he said under his breath.

"Who is it, Bones?" Jim asked. He could hear him moving behind him.

"It's Elizabeth Dehner," Leo said, shaking his head, wondering if there was anything he could do for the woman. The debris that had mostly crushed her had insulated her from the worst of the radiation poisoning, although she had not escaped that, either. He sighed, going to drop an indicator on her lap, but relatively certain that he'd be unable to save her, only make her comfortable for what was likely to be her last minutes alive. What he was not expecting was for her to open her eyes and stare at him, her eyes appearing oddly silver in the light of the shuttle bay. He blinked in surprise as her hand reached out for him and he felt a surge of tremendous energy before the world went white around the edges and he was falling.

The last thing he heard before he felt his body hit the deck was Jim's anguished voice yelling, "Bones!"

Chapter 40

Leo was unconscious for an instant, although the respite from the surge of pain that had short-circuited his systems was blessed. There was something … a kind of knowing that crept into his mind before he lost all control, and he felt it, like an echo in his consciousness, as he became aware again.

"Mr. Scott!" Jim’s voice was sharp, authoritative in a way that Leo had not heard it before. “I thought that there were no power sources in this section of the ship.”

“That’s right, Captain,” Scott said.

Leo tried to make his mouth work, only then becoming aware of the blood in it. He reached up a hand, intending to spit into it, only to bat at his face ineffectually, hidden as it was behind the shield of his forgotten hazmat helmet. Right. He caught himself just before he expectorated, swallowing the lump of blood and saliva.

“Bones?” Jim’s voice still had that uncharacteristic thread of panic in it, and as Leo looked up at him, he realized that Jim had picked him up from the deck and was holding him in his arms. He could hear the fan on Jim’s helmet running, even as he noticed the fogging of the respiration on the inner shield. Jim’s chest was heaving against his arm and back, his eyes wide and wild.

If Leo hadn’t already been well and truly shocked, that might have maybe done the trick. Jim Kirk, the man who had concocted an almost suicidal plan to save Earth without batting his pretty eyes, was absolutely fucking terrified. Leo felt a swell of love that was warm and encompassing – at the same time that he realized that he felt something else warm and encompassing.

“Goddamnit,” he said. His bladder had let go when he’d been shocked. He wondered how humorous Jim would find his current situation.

“Bones!” Jim said with relief in his voice, looking in his eyes as one of Leo’s staff scanned him.

“Captain?” Scott asked over the comm.
“Bones is OK,” Jim said, in a far more relaxed tone. “He’s complaining and everything, but I still want to know what the fuck happened here.” The last was said with a hard tone, making it quite clear that this was an order, and not a request.

“How’s Dehner?” Jim asked a corpsman.

“She’s dead, Jim,” Leo said, struggling to sit up so that the urine wouldn’t run up his back.

“What?” Jim asked in confusion.

“She’s dead,” Leo said surely.

“She is,” the corpsman confirmed.

“And she just shocked the shit out of you before she went?” Jim asked.

“Well,” Leo drawled, knowing that the medical staff had to know what had happened anyway. “Not the shit, exactly.”

Jim’s eyebrows disappeared into the covered part of his helmet. “Bones!” he said, eyes twinkling.

“Bones!” he said, breaking out of Jim’s embrace to stand, wincing as he felt the liquid running down into his boots. “The irony is not lost on me.”

“Static electricity?” Scotty said suddenly over the comm.

Leo took the tricorder from the corpsman to look over Dehner’s results.

“From what?” Jim answered, without missing a beat. “The materials in here are insulated to prevent just that kind of thing. Besides, Bones was wearing boots that wouldn’t have conducted a charge from the deck.”

“It came from her, Jim,” Leo said assuredly. “But you’re right — no galvanic charge should have been able to pass from her to me, especially in this suit.”

Hanlon piped up from next to Leo. “That’s how it looked to me, too, Doc. I swear I saw a spark jump from her to you. Plus ..” he hesitated. “Did her eyes look weird to you?” Leo turned around to look at Cupcake. “I know I was farther away than you, but … they just didn’t look right.”

“Bones,” Jim said. His hands were on his hips as he listened, his face somber.

“I agree,” said Leo, “although I couldn’t tell you what the hell it was – reflection, cataracts from the electrical shock.” He shrugged. “Maybe on autopsy.”

Jim didn’t answer, seemingly absorbed in thought.

“Jim?” he asked.

“Isn’t she — wasn’t she -” Jim corrected himself, “-that psychiatrist with the unbelievably high psi scores?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Leo said, wondering how the hell Jim knew that.

“And that’s a kind of energy, right?” Jim asked.
“It doesn’t carry a charge, though, Captain,” Scott answered from his comm.

“Hmm …” Jim said thoughtfully. “Not as far as we know,” he said.

“Jim,” Leo said, “they’ve been measuring this stuff almost since back in the day of the EKG. I’m sure someone would have noted if there was an electrical discharge associated with the heightened brain wave activity.”

Jim nodded like he was listening, but continued to stare down at Dehner’s body. “Maybe it only happens when they die.”

“Jim, that’s …” Leo thought that over, surprised. “I don’t know what that is, exactly,” he said bemusedly, amazed at how Jim's mind worked. “Or how we’d figure that out.”

“Well …” Jim said, “something happened.”

“Aye,” Scott said over the comm. “And I’m for keeping that section in isolation and in situ for a wee bit while we try and figure out what.”

“She’s …” Leo began.

“Oh, I know what ye said, Doctor,” Scott said, “and the other lad there, but until we have some sort of confirmation that it wasn’t the surroundings, I’d rather not have other people working in there. Just in case.”

“I concur,” Jim said.

Leo opened his mouth to say something, but stopped himself. Elizabeth Dehner was beyond his care, and it wasn’t like anyone on the Enterprise would be disrespectful. “Fine,” he said, noting that Jim looked relieved. “I need to get to Sickbay, anyway.”

Practically as soon as he finished saying the words, he heard the Engineer say, “Locking onto your comm now, doctor and sending you for decontam,” and the world was swirling sparkles of white light around him.

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Clean and dry in new scrubs, Leo strode into surgery to check on the most severely injured of the patients. He stepped into the sanitizing spray and strapped on a face shield before he went to Gaila’s bedside, watching M’Benga deftly repairing some of Gaila’s veins. “How’s the damage?” he asked.

“The radiation poisoning is severe,” M’Benga answered. “we’re going to have to wait to do most of the repair work when she’s had more treatment. Her bones are still breaking down — she won’t tolerate a regeneration, or even a graft.”

“Stem cell infusion?” Leo asked.

“At least 24 hours away,” M’Benga answered. “She’s pretty hot.”

Leo nodded, and stepped out of the containment field and into the spray before he stepped into Fleury’s field. Her patient had a crushing chest injury on top of radiation poisoning, and between shattered cartilage and frayed lung tissue, she had a mess on her hands. “Transplant?” Leo asked.

Fleury’s expression was grim. “We’ve got to get there first, boss,” she said.

Leo looked over the field. “You’ll do it,” he said surely. “Need a hand?”
Fleury’s eyes flicked to his face, and she looked amused and gratified. She’d been a battlefield surgeon for at least a decade, but a new CMO was an unknown quantity. “Not unless you’d like to join in,” she said, making it clear that he’d be welcome if he did so.

“Well,” Leo drawled, watching her sweep lung tissue for fragments of pulverized cartilage. “You do look like you’re having fun there and all, but … I’ll pass.”

“The offer’s open anytime, sir,” Fleury said, smiling openly as she continued working.

“All right, then,” he said. “Comm me if you need me.”

“Will do,” she answered.

Leo stepped out and through the spray and into the anteroom for another decontam before he went into the hot room where the isolation beds were reserved for the most critical patients. “How we doing, Simpson?” he asked.

The nurse turned around at his approach and handed him a PADD with readouts. “Pretty good, sir,” she said. “They’re hot, there’s no doubt, but the damage could be a lot worse.” She gave him relevant details about the bed’s occupants, noting that the woman in the third bed had a skull fracture and a minor brain bleed. “Nothing that can’t be fixed, but she’s at least 24 hours from the stem cell infusion, and I worry about brain damage with our inability to regenerate right now.”

Leo nodded, lips pursed as he studied her readings since Lieutenant Keenan had been admitted. “Engineering,” he said. “Is that where they were?”

Simpson shrugged and shook her head. “No idea, sir. I thought it was the shuttle bay.”

“Hmm…” Leo said. “We’ll keep a close eye on this one, Simpson. The others?”

“Cadet Sen is a third year,” Simpson said, shaking her head. “He’s irradiated, of course, and that’s impeding healing his broken wrist, but other than that and a concussion, he’s going to be fine. I think he’ll need limited stem cell therapy.”

“That’s fine,” Leo said, peering through the isolation hood to look at Sen who was already looking more like himself. “And these two?” he looked at the readings of the remaining filled isolation beds.

“Jihesh is a Jihari,” Simpson answered, pointing at the Saurian being. “She’s a bit more resistant to the radiation than a humanoid, but not much. She’s confused, but she should be fine.”

“Standard fertility re-establishment protocols, I’m assuming,” Leo said.

“Absolutely,” Simpson said firmly. “For everyone. Our last patient is one Lieutenant Jovanovic. Other than the radiation sickness, he doesn’t have any complaints. He seems to have gotten through the whole ordeal with nothing more than a few bumps.”

Leo nodded. “Good,” he said. “Other than Keenan, and the two in surgery, I’m relatively unconcerned. Fleury’s patient,” he said, and Simpson checked the list on his PADD and pointed, “Ensign Heke will be in critical condition when he gets in here, and Lieutenant Gaila won’t be much better.”

Simpson nodded.

“All right,” Leo said, handing back the PADD and heading out to re-sanitize in the anteroom and head back into the main Sickbay. “Let me know when Gaila and Heke make it to the hot room,
Leo reviewed the patient census from the wall console while he waited for the sanitizing cycle to end. There’d been no more deaths since he’d last checked, although there was serious concern for T’enev, who remained in Sickbay, and was mostly silent and still, nearly catatonic, despite all efforts of the staff to reach her, not to mention that of the Vulcan elders. Leo sighed.

“Attention all hands,” Jim’s voice over the comm was serious and sober. “This is Acting Captain James T. Kirk reporting that we were able to rescue six of our colleagues and friends from the Farragut. Lieutenants Gaila, Heke and Keenan, Ensigns Jihesh and Jovanovic and Cadet Sen are all being treated in Sickbay. In addition, we have welcomed more than 100 evacuees from the planet Vulcan aboard, and I thank those of you who have changed accommodations to ensure the comfort of our guests.” Jim paused, and the signal bleeped to let Leo know that he was through the cycle. “I am sorry to report we do not expect to bring any additional beings aboard at this time. After a thorough examination of sensor reports, Captain Pike and I have reluctantly concluded that it is time to turn our course toward the Beta Prime Spacedock.”

Leo sighed and stepped out of the anteroom. He knew this had to be killing Jim, not to mention Pike — eight of his peers were dead, a generation of Captains that were supposed to ascend to the admiralty, not to mention the brace of officers and all the crew under them that had been trained to replace them. It was most of a generation of Starfleet personnel.

“Before we leave this sacred space where so many that we knew and loved died, however, we are going to set a marker, and yes, it is a beacon for the ships that will come after us to retrieve them and bring them home, but it is also a symbol of how we remember, how we are promising that we will not forget – not them, or Vulcan. I ask that if you can, you stand with those of us on the Bridge as we launch this beacon, and for a full moment of silence before we leave this place.”

Leo stepped out of anteroom into the hushed Sickbay. Those who could stand were doing so, shoulders back and chins raised defiantly in some cases, although Leo could see tears streaming unchecked down more than one face.

“On my mark, Mr. Sulu,” Jim said quietly. “Launch.”

Many of the staff in Sickbay, Pike included, saluted. From somewhere behind him, Leo could hear the sound of someone crying, and he swallowed, feeling the sting in his own eyes as everyone around him was still and solemn.

“As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.” Jim recited, his voice harsh but true.

Leo could hear him swallow before he said. “From *For the Fallen* by Laurence Binyon. The beacon has been set.” He paused. “Thank you all.”

People didn’t immediately move back to the work they had been doing before the moment of silence, but stood, heads bowed, lost in thought. When Leo turned, he was unsurprised to see that many of the staff were hugging, not just each other, but the patients. From across the room, he caught the eye of Chris Pike, who was holding onto the hand of a young man whose head was down on Pike’s bed as he sobbed. He didn’t need to look twice to realize that Pike had probably called Pak over before the ceremony to tell him privately that there was no chance that his wife had survived the Farragut’s
destruction. Christine Chapel was hovering nearby with a hypo in her hand, but Pike shook his head at Leo, running his hand compassionately over the young doctor's head, and Leo nodded in understanding. A sedative would only postpone the grief that Dr. Pak would surely be feeling for a long time to come.

He strode across the room to Pike’s bedside, snagging an unoccupied chair from another bed and pushing the grieving man down into it. Then he activated the privacy curtain when Pike flicked his eyes upward. Leo stepped out of the curtained off area and began to move to his office, noting with some surprise that the T’enev had turned in her bed to face the sound of Pak’s crying, her eyes open and seemingly focused for the first time since she’d been admitted to the Sickbay. Leo shared a questioning glance with the Vulcan elder who stood by her bed, noting that he seemed almost worried by what was most likely an unseemly display on T’enev’s part.

Leo shook his head and continued into his office. He preferred to see it as progress.

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Hours later, in the middle of the night assigned to the ship, Leo got up from his desk to see for himself how the patients in the ICU were doing. Sen was expected to be released to a bed in the main bay for regeneration and fertility therapy sometime in the next twelve hours, and Jovanovic was even farther along than he was. The other four, however, including the Saurian female, were still in danger.

Leo was heading to get into the gear necessary to go into the room when he saw Nyota standing at the window across the way, staring into the isolation room, her arms wrapped around her middle as if she were hugging herself. He stopped and changed direction, coming around the long wall that would lead him to her, and was surprised when he heard Jim's voice. He couldn’t hear exactly what Jim was saying, but his tone was meant to be reassuring.

He rounded the corner in time to see Nyota spin and face Jim, the long tail of her hair airborne as she moved. “Do not!” Nyota said firmly, her tone loud. “Don’t even say her name to me, Jim Kirk!”

Leo was taken aback by the level of fury in her voice, and the stricken, guilty expression on Jim’s face.

“I’m sor-“ Jim began to say.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Nyota said, staring up at him, her back rigid. “I don’t. Maybe she’ll forgive you, but I don’t have to. She cried, Jim.”

Jim’s eyes widened in such a way that Leo thought that he might be going to cry as well, but he swallowed hard and didn’t say anything.

“Congratulations,” Nyota said scornfully. “Great job.” She turned back to face the window into the hot room, looking suddenly haggard.

Jim moved as if to put an arm around her, but Nyota put a hand up and pushed against his chest.

“No,” she said firmly. “Just leave me alone.”

Jim ran a hand through his hair, looking like that was the last thing he wanted to do, and then pressed a hand up against the glass of the hot room before he turned and nearly bolted for the door.

Nyota closed her eyes as the doors whisked closed behind her and pressed her forehead against the glass, her shoulders beginning to shake.
“Nyota, darlin’,” Leo said, coming up to stand next to her.

“I heard you coming,” she said, wiping her tears. “And before you say anything — he deserved that.”

Leo looked at her closely, and saw that she meant it, even though she did feel badly. “What can I do for you?” he asked her, because there was clearly a story to tell, and he’d much prefer that Jim be the one to tell him.

There was a long pause, and Leo watched her reflection in the glass as Nyota struggled to form the words. “Tell me she’s going to be all right,” she finally choked out.

Leo sighed and wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders and Nyota let him, dropping her head against his chest after a few seconds, so Leo wrapped his other arm around her, too. “Nyota, darlin’” he said, “she is strong and she is young, and there are people here,” he gently emphasized, “that love her. Now, if you press that button right there,” he raised a hand to indicate which one, “you’ll be talking right to her, and you can let her know that you’re out here waiting for her. Will you do that for her?”

Nyota straightened out of his embrace and wiped the tears from her cheeks. She nodded briskly. “Yes,” she said. She looked up at Leo. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to go check on her now,” he said, and she nodded again and he turned and walked away, heading back into the anteroom. “McCoy to Bridge,” he said into the comm while he waited for the signal that he was clear to get back into his hazmat gear.

“Ensign Richie here, Doctor McCoy,” came the response.

“Is Captain Kirk on the Bridge?” he asked.

“No, he’s not,” Richie answered. “I thought he was in Sickbay.”

“He was,” Leo answered, “but he’s gone now.”

“Ah,” said the Ensign. “Then I’d check Engineering or comm him directly.”

“I’ll do that, thank you,” Leo said, stepping into the sanitizing spray. “McCoy out.”

Leo had ended up spending more time in the hot room than he’d intended, tweaking the treatment of the four most troublesome patients. He was reasonably certain that the Saurian female was going to do much better with the adjustments to her isolation unit, but was worried about both Keenan, who was showing signs of a potentially compromising brain injury, and Heke, who was just a mess. About Gaila’s progress he was feeling a bit more sanguine. She was still critical, but she was right on target for where she should be.

He turned to give Nyota an encouraging gesture, and was not truly surprised to see that Spock was standing next to her as she kept her vigil, murmuring into the speaker that fed into Gaila’s unit. Spock had the air of a man who’d been rousted from his bed, although not a hair was out of place, and there certainly wasn’t a pillow crease on his face. His expression was as alert as ever, but there was something that told Leo that Jim must have woken him and told him to get his ass down to Sickbay. Perhaps it was just a momentary fracturing of the façade that had hidden his exhaustion — God knows they were all so tired that they could sleep for the week it was probably going to take them to get to the Spacedock. In any case, Spock had nodded fractionally at him when he gave a ‘keep going’ gesture to Nyota, while Nyota’s smile had been nearly blinding. She flashed it at Spock before she
turned back to the speaker with renewed energy and Leo had been surprised by the look of softness that had crossed Spock's features as he looked at her.

"I'll be damned," he said aloud into his helmet. The hobgoblin did love her.

"Sir?" The night nurse was looking at him with concern, glancing from the PADD in his hand to the bed and back.

"As you were, Ritter," Leo said. "I've been on a damned long time, and I was talking to myself. Comm me if there are any changes that need looking after."

"Yes, sir," Ritter said. "Good night, sir."

Leo looked back at Spock and Uhura as he began to make his way across the hot room, but Spock's expression, whatever it had been, was no longer in evidence. He shook his head. "Will wonders never cease," he murmured, then stepped out of the hot room to begin the sanitizing cycle anew.

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Jim wasn't answering his comm, and Scotty, who clearly still hadn't been to bed, said that he'd been by and left more than an hour before. Leo had threatened Scotty with hyposprays and forced sedation unless he agreed to rest, and finally received the man's begrudging promise before he'd continued his search.

Leo had considered going back to his room after the Bridge had turned up similarly empty, with the exception of the skeleton crew that ran the ship in the deepest hours of the night, but didn't think that Jim would have gone back there alone. Pike was asleep, and Leo had no idea what name they'd finally decided on for the elder version of Spock that he had yet to meet. Somehow, he doubted that Jim would have gone there for solace. No. It was more like his boy to brood, to find someplace solitary to lick his wounds.

He studied the ship's layout looking for the kind of hiding places that would appeal to Jim, hoping against hope that wherever he'd gotten to wouldn't involve Leo having to crawl through Jefferies Tubes. The gyms were a possibility — but Leo remembered that Jim had said that he'd preferred running in the Engineering section of the Farragut — something he doubted that he'd be doing in the beleaguered section here on Enterprise. And it occurred to him suddenly that the losses on the Farragut were personal and real to Jim. He'd spent ten weeks on that ship, with Captain Garrovick and his crew.

Leo sighed, and found where the observation decks were on Enterprise, going to the large forward one first only to find it empty, before he realized that Jim was more likely to be looking back at the space they were leaving behind, where Vulcan had been, where so many had died. He moved the length of the ship more swiftly then, surety giving his tired footsteps a burst of fleetness as he hustled from lift to corridor and from deck to deck.

The ship was mostly quiet at this hour, although he was surprised to see the number of Vulcans wandering the corridors. He greeted them politely, but none of them, not even those in groups of twos and threes, seemed inclined to speak any further with him. Even with their stoic facades, and their habitual placid expressions, they seemed lost to him — but perhaps he was projecting, seeing what he wanted to see and translating it into a more emotional affect.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the door whisked open to the smallest aft observation deck. The lights were off, but the viewscreen was not shuttered, and Leo could make out Jim's dark figure leaning against it, his head turned, he was sure, to look in the direction of the graveyard they'd just
"Jim," he said quietly.

"Found me, Bones," Jim answered after a moment's pause. He was voice was thready with exhaustion and regret.

Leo walked over to the observation window, noting the secondary hull below them and the gleaming nacelles beyond that.

"How are they?" he asked.

"Sen should be released into the main Sickbay tomorrow morning," Leo said.

"And Gaila?" Jim asked, finally turning to look at him.

"She's holding her own, Jim," Leo said. "She's got a tougher fight because she was hurt worse, but she'd doing better than I had expected."

Jim searched his expression for any hint that Leo was soft-pedaling things, but he stared back without flinching, arms crossed over his chest.

"OK," Jim breathed out, turning back to look at something far in the distance. The only sound in the room, aside from their breathing, was the hum of the engines below them. "They're all dead," Jim said after a while. "Garrovick and Ameixoeira," he paused. "Gonzo. Wiz." His voice dropped. "Gary."

"Yeah," Leo said. "I expect so."

Jim shook his head, a half-laugh escaping him. "You know, Pike challenged me to do better than my father did, did you know that?"

"No," Leo answered, wondering at the sharp turn in the conversation.

"That was his recruiting speech to me – that my father saved 800 lives in the twelve minutes that he was Captain of the Kelvin, and I was so determined," Jim said. "To prove that I could do better."

"Jim," Leo said, puzzled. "You saved billions of lives yesterday."

"Did I?" Jim asked bleakly. "Vulcan is gone. The Farragut, Hood, Antares, Armstrong, Wolcott, Newton, Truman and Mayflower …" he drew in a breath and shuddered, "gone."

"Jim," Leo said, "you did what you could."

"By any means possible," Jim said with blithe sarcasm.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm not even supposed to be here," Jim said.

"Yes," Leo said, beginning to see where this was going. "Yes, you are."

"No," Jim said.

"Pike," Leo emphasized, "said that the Enterprise was your assignment."
"I know," Jim said, turning his face back to the stars. "But the only reason I'm here is because of you." He turned to look at Leo. "You changed history by bringing me aboard."

"Jim," Leo said, half-exasperated and totally exhausted. "I brought you aboard because you were supposed to be here."

Jim nodded. "That's what Spock, the other Spock, said, too. That the universe would try to heal itself, to make things be as they should be."

Leo shook his head to refute the argument, knowing full well that the universe hadn't swayed him to bring Jim aboard, no matter how large his own desires were.

"But the fact remains," Jim said, raising his voice to stifle Leo's protest, "that I should have been back on Earth because of what I did." He shook his head ruefully. "This whole fucked up chain of events," he said, "it's all one long loop of causality," he looked at Leo, "all dependent upon me being an asshole." He laughed, short and harsh. "Which, by the way, I'm really, really good at."

"Jim …" Leo said, not knowing where to start with whatever the fuck was going on here. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"The Kobayashi Maru," Jim said. "Did you figure out how I did it?"

Leo stared at him. "You altered the parameters of the exercise," he said slowly, quoting back his own language to him.

"I hacked it," Jim said clearly. "I hacked it. But the security was too high, so I had to hack an account of somebody who had the clearance to get me to the sim."

"Gaila," Leo said, as the penny dropped.

"Yep," Jim said. "Gaila. You know I asked her to help me, and she said no." He turned toward the window again, and Leo watched his reflection on the glass. "So. We didn't speak for a while. You know me, Bones, I'm good at cutting people out, right?" Jim nodded bitterly at him before turning back to the glass. "And then, when I needed a little intel to get me over a hump in the hack, I started hanging out with her again, you know," Jim shook his head at himself. "So I was in her room the night before the test, and I'd gotten the info that I needed from her, because I'm a sly bastard, and then …"

Leo didn't need a road map to know where things were going, and he felt a little sick at the idea. He knew, of course, that Jim had been obsessed with cracking the Maru, but he hadn't actually thought that he'd have gone this far.

"She told me that she thought she loved me, Bones," Jim said, spitting out the words. "You know, we used to talk about love, she and I, because what Orions call love is not what Terrans call love, and she was trying to understand it." He laughed. "Like I fucking know, right?" He glanced over at Leo. "Anyway. She said it, and I immediately tried to divert her," he made a face, "and then Uhura came home and she made me hide, and that, Bones, that is how I found out about the Klingon attack — hiding under Gaila's bed after I'd used her."

There wasn't anything that Leo could say to that, and he wasn't about to try.

"After I won," Jim said, rounding his mouth over the word like it tasted horrible, "Gaila came to see me." He turned and looked at Leo again. "I think I would have felt better if she'd just punched me, or kicked me in the balls, or something," he said. "But she said to me, 'I thought you were my friend'," Jim's voice cracked a little bit on the last two words. "She said, 'I told you that I loved you, because I
thought you were my friend, and we weren't allowed to have friends, because a friend would be your peer, and I wasn't allowed peers."

Leo's eyes were filling with tears, despite himself, and he knew that Jim could see them.

"Then she said that I wasn't her friend, because Uhura had explained to her that a friend loved you for who you were, and that someone who loved you wouldn't do to her what I had done," Jim said with finality, "And then she told me to stay away from her."

"Jim …" Leo said. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't waste your sorry on me," Jim said. "I'm not worth it."

"Jim …" Leo said, reaching for him.

"No," Jim said, blocking him. "No." He shook his head and then turned and determinedly walked away.

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Leo had sat there for a long time and stared at the stars as they streamed past, thinking about causality and fate and choice and the capriciousness of it all. Then, he'd dragged his weary bones down to Sickbay and checked on his patients one last time before he'd returned to his silent and dark cabin and laid himself down to attempt to rest.

But his mind whirred with all the knowledge that he'd gained, and he worried, unable to commit himself to sleep. He lay there instead, floating in grey restlessness until he heard the snick of the door to his quarters, and opened his eyes.

When they'd adjusted, he could see the shadow of Jim's figure in his room, standing there like a dark ghost, his fists clenched at his sides. He knew he should get up, and try to heal at least the physical hurts, the ones he knew he was capable of doctoring, but instinct told him that it was the surest way to drive Jim back into wandering the halls, or whatever he'd been doing for the last few hours. Instead, he flipped the covers back in invitation, sliding over to make room for Jim, the action coming naturally to him after all this time.

When Jim spoke, his voice was infinitely more weary than it had ever been. "I don't deserve your friendship, Bones," he said quietly.

Leo held out a hand in answer, and after a moment, heard the sound of Jim's boots hitting the deck, and his shirt and pants following. He crawled into the bed, facing Leo but trying, at first, to stay separate from him, still denying himself the solace that he craved. But Leo, mindful of Jim's bruises and his brittle weariness, carefully pulled him into his arms. He felt the shudder that ran through Jim's frame as he accepted the comfort that Leo was offering, hiding his face against Leo's neck.

"Jim," Leo said quietly. "That would only be true if you wouldn't admit that you'd done wrong, and if you didn't regret it."

Jim made a noncommittal noise as Leo tucked him in closer, pulling the covers up and over him like a shield, but he wrapped his arms around Leo and held on.

"Horatio told me a long time ago that the difference between a good man and an evil one is the humility to admit your sins, and the willingness to not commit that particular wrong again." Leo kissed the top of Jim's head. "Assholes don't tell the truth, Jim. They hide it. They deny it. They lie and make excuses."
He could feel Jim, tired as he was, summoning up a counterargument, so he ran a hand down his back carefully and continued talking. "Go to sleep, Jim," he said. "Whatever needs to be put right will wait until tomorrow. I promise."

Chapter 41

It wasn’t really a surprise to awaken in the morning and find Jim gone, while the alarm on his comm blared to tell him to get up. He had a dim memory of Jim leaning over him to kiss him, more sensory impression than anything else — the press of a tender, sweet kiss and the sound of his voice shushing him back to sleep — but he wasn’t sure if it was a dream or reality. Leo lay there, arm bent up under his head, musing, until the alarm blared for the second time and he had no choice other than to get up and deal with his not-so-little problem before he began his day.

It was -- again no surprise -- the same not-so-little problem that he had had to deal with every damned day since he had met Jim Kirk, damn him. And maybe it was the lack of sleep or the level of stress, but goddamnit, if the universe was conspiring to do anything, it was to keep Jim Kirk out of his bed.

Well, not exactly out of it, but goddamnit, not in it for the right goddamned reasons.

And he was well and truly fucking sick of it -- almost as sick as he was at the touch of only his own hand, again.

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The last place he had expected to find Jim was in his erstwhile office in Sickbay, sitting next to his desk and eating breakfast with Pike. He drew up short as the door whisked open, almost tipping his orange juice over on his tray in surprise at the sight.

"Jim!" He said, almost stupidly.

"Bones!" Jim parroted, an answering flush on his cheek.

Pike, still supine on his biobed and eating his oatmeal in neat spoonfuls, looked distinctly amused. "Pike," he said, pointing to himself, before he added, "And now that we know who we all are, let’s talk," his voice wry and dry as dust.

Leo stepped through the door and walked over to his desk, putting down his tray and the stack of PADDs that he’d been handed by Fleury as she’d given him report. "What’s going on?" he demanded, noting that Jim looked shifty-eyed in a way that he only associated with trouble.

"The Potemkin is on its way to tow the Enterprise to Spacedock Beta Prime," Pike said.

Leo looked at Jim squirming in his seat and then raised a quizzical brow at Pike over the rim of his blessed cup of coffee. "And?" he asked, not seeing how this good news required the kind of summit that they were having.

"Which means we’ll be back on Earth in less than 48 hours," Pike continued.

Leo nodded. He was a doctor, not a goddamned astronavigational whiz, but even he could figure that out. "And?"

"Which means that we’ll all be debriefed within the next 72 hours," Pike said.

"Ah," Leo said, starting to get what was going on. "I’ve always assumed that there was going to be
some kind of comeuppance for my actions, Captain,” he said to Pike.

Jim looked absolutely stricken at Leo’s words, but before Leo could even finish his thought, Pike said, “I fail to see how bringing an ailing patient aboard is anything other than an appropriate action for a physician,” in a voice so hard and quiet that it might as well have been made of stone.

“How dare you?” Leo asked, putting down his cup of coffee.

“My understanding,” Pike said with the same steely certitude, “is that you’re Mr. Kirk’s primary physician and that his immune system is known to be …” he looked over at Jim “unusual. Having noted Mr. Kirk’s symptoms, your decision to bring him aboard for treatment was unorthodox, but not inappropriate.”

There was a long pause while Leo and Pike just stared at each other.

“Bones,” Jim began in a low voice, and Leo opened his mouth to speak, but Pike cut them both off.

“Do you know how many medical personnel died in the past 48 hours, McCoy?” Pike asked.

“Captain …” Leo began, but he caught the PADD that Pike flipped at him and felt his eyes drawn to the list as his heart sank at its length.

“Jesus …” he said in sorrowful wonder.

“There are more than 300 names on that list, McCoy,” Pike said, “everything from corpsmen and techs to the most highly skilled nurses and doctors. We lost people who were exemplary from every medical specialty that exists, including research and psychology.”

Leo’s mouth was dry as his eyes ran down the list, his eye stuttering to a helpless stop over certain names -- Esfahani, Shohreh … Jindahl, Ricardo … O’Brien, Brendan … Spencer, Bradley …. He must have made a noise because he felt Jim shift his chair closer to him and put a hand on his back.

“There wasn’t another way to make your point?” Jim snapped at Pike.

“Jim,” Leo said, feeling a little ill. “I knew, I guess, I just …” He looked up at Pike. “I know a lot of these names. You knew I would.”

“Yes,” Pike said firmly. “Because every single name on that list, every single name on all the goddamned lists there are now, represents more than just the loss of a colleague, friend or foe,” Pike said. “We’ve lost a generation of talent.”

“Starfleet, you mean?” Leo asked acidly, bitter about seeing even that asshole Spencer reduced to his job duties.

“No,” Pike said, “you’re not getting it. Most of what we do here in the black is service. We don’t just patrol the borders. We go to planets in need and we stop their plagues. We bring them food and medicine and we stay and administer it.” Pike was utterly sincere. “What happened two days ago? That’s a once-in-a-lifetime thing, thank God. And whatever aims Starfleet proper has for new sources of energy, or strategic alliances, the real day-in, day-out work that any starship does to save a world is through disseminating inoculations, and knowledge.”

“A humanitarian and peace-keeping armada,” Jim said quietly to Pike. “That’s what you said to me in Riverside.”

“It’s not just recruiter bullshit,” Pike said fiercely. “It’s the real work. The diplomatic corps can claim
whatever it wants, but I know that in more cases than not, there would have been no chance of negotiations working if not for the contact made by a starship crew that came to render aid. What we do is important. We save lives, yes, but we make them better by proving that we’re willing to share what we know.”

“Words versus deeds,” Leo said drily.

Pike looked impressed. “A man of science and literature, Dr. McCoy,” he said archly.

Jim laughed. “I think Factis non verbis is still inscribed over the doors of some medical schools, Captain.”

“Yeah, well,” Pike said, “clearly, Fac et excusa should be your motto. Maybe I’ll get you two matching t-shirts that say it.”

Leo laughed, while Jim scrunched up his brow, parsing. “Do it and excuse … oh I get it … make your apologies after.”

“Basically,” Pike said, looking at Leo significantly.

“That had been my intention, Captain,” Leo said.

“Yes, but your intention also included coping to something that I don’t want you,” he said, holding up a hand, “to confirm to me.”

“Plausible deniability,” Jim stage-whispered from next to him.

“What makes you think,” Leo said angrily, “that Starfleet Medical Command is going to buy Jim suddenly developing symptoms to …”

“Don’t tell me!” Pike said. “And you know what, that’s your problem. Selling it. I’m telling you right now that you throwing yourself on some proverbial sword for the sake of honesty is exactly the wrong thing to do. You acted on instinct,” Pike said, then conceded, “impulse, maybe. Whatever motivated you to do that has turned out to be right. You trusted your gut,” Pike paused. “I’m telling you to trust mine on this matter. Starfleet cannot afford to lose another CMO.”

Leo started.

“Oh yeah,” Pike said. “Make no mistake, McCoy. When this is all over, and the blustering and the awards are done? Your performance the past couple of days has ensured that you’ll be a CMO. Period.”

Leo scratched his head, while Jim grinned at him.

“And smiley over there is likely to get his own command out of this, too, despite the fact that he was a stowaway.”

Jim’s smile got impossibly larger, while Leo shook his head. “That is completely insane,” he protested. “We haven’t even graduated yet!” He pointed at Jim. “He’s only 25!”

“Thanks for the support again, Bones,” Jim said heately.

“Damn it, Jim —” Leo began, but their escalating argument was interrupted by Pike’s ear-piercing whistle.

“Wow,” Jim said, shaking his head and pressing a hand against his ear while blinking. “My sinuses
are clear now, thanks."

"McCoy," Pike said. "Do you remember what I said about being a hard-headed realist?" He waited for Leo’s nod. "Well, here’s the cold hard reality: the Enterprise, under the command of Acting Captain James T. Kirk, pulled off a daring mission that saved not only Earth, but the rest of the Federation from Vulcan’s fate."

Leo’s eyes widened.

"Oh yeah," Pike said. "Nero had no intention of stopping with Earth. He intended to destroy every last major UFP power to ensure that the Romulan Star Empire would reign supreme, and unchallenged."

"Jesus H. Christ," Leo said, running a hand over the back of his neck and feeling the gooseflesh. He turned and looked at Jim, who did not look at all surprised. "You knew that?"

Jim shook his head, once, and said, "I didn’t know, but … it seemed logical."

"From a fucking crazy man’s perspective!" Leo said.

"Well, he was fucking crazy," Pike said. "And his actions have real, far-reaching consequences." He waited until Leo nodded. "Now, I happen to think that you two insufferable idiots are a damned good team," he said with finality. "So don’t fuck it up with misplaced nobility, McCoy," he said. "Expiate your goddamned sins by doing what you were trained for." He stared at Leo.

"OK," he said begrudgingly.

"OK," Pike said. "The way I figure it, part of your penance will be serving with the charming Captain here."

"Hey!" Kirk said, before clapping his hands together and bouncing up from his chair. "Speaking of the charming Captain, I gotta go to Engineering and then to the Bridge."

"Mmmhmm …" Pike said. "We’re not through talking, Kirk."

Jim visibly deflated for an instant before he stopped himself.

"But I trust you’ll be working on your report until we speak again," Pike said meaningfully.

"Yessir," Kirk said.

"Good," Pike said, clapping his own hands. "Now roll me out of here so McCoy can do some work."

Leo did his best to focus on what had happened in the scant hours that he’d gotten some sleep, although his mind and his eye kept drifting to the lists of the dead that had been downloaded to his PADD as well as to Pike’s.

Shohreh.

He wondered how deep the well of grief created by the irrevocability of Shohreh’s death would reach inside Patty. It wasn’t like he was unaware of the deep pain that the relationship had already brought to Patty’s life. It had been bad enough when Patty had tried to come to terms with the fact that Shohreh was married and therefore out of her reach. But even despite the marriage, there had
been this back-and-forth that had existed between them in the past few months, and Leo knew that Patty had hoped, although she had never voiced it, that Shohreh would finally become courageous enough to claim the truth, to name what existed between her and Patty as love. But now … all hope was dead, cold and scattered amidst the stars.

And Rick. Leo found himself looking over the lists of names, wondering if the man that Rick had been seeing was on the lists as well, or if he was waiting, shattered, back at the Academy like so many others who'd been left behind. All those men and women who’d gotten messages from friends and lovers saying that they were going out for a short run on what should have been a simple mission of mercy, the kind of thing that Starfleet excelled at, according to Pike.

God.

He had no right to feel pain at Jindahl's passing. They'd barely been friends after their one night together had ended so badly, but … no one on those ships had deserved the fate they'd received. No one. The capriciousness of it all, of who had lived and who had died, was nearly as astounding as the finality of it was. It was, as Jim had said last night on the observation deck, one long loop of causality held together by so many small actions, none of which had been grounded in nobility, really. Not that he didn't love Jim, but it was his own selfishness, his desire that had moved him to go back and get Jim. There might have been a sense that he had to, but one that wasn't borne of any kind of prescience. He was no psychic, after all, just a man who knew that Jim had been left behind too many times in his life and he had been determined not to be just one more who'd left.

He sifted through the screens morosely, refusing to stop at the overall list of the dead, instead focusing on his attention on what he had yet to do. T'Enev had passed another night without much rest, and was still refusing all efforts on the part of her visitors to talk, or get out of bed. There was really no medical reason for him to keep her in Sickbay, but nowhere else for her to go with her mental state as fragile as it clearly was. All of the Farragut personnel were in the main bay, and with the exception of Lieutenant Heke, all were out of critical condition. Gaila was currently undergoing her second reparative surgery, and although Leo believed that she’d more than likely need a third, she was still doing better than expected.

The list of the dead had only had one more name added to it in the past few hours, the not unexpected addition of Elizabeth Dehner. She’d been transferred to the makeshift morgue that had been set aside for that purpose while she awaited autopsy. Proximal cause of death was listed as trauma, secondary to the crushing injuries that she'd sustained, but there’d been no official autopsy begun, which wasn't too surprising. Neither Fleury nor M'Benga were qualified to do one; and even McCoy's own status awaited certification. He pressed a hand to the comm and called Engineering.

"Scott here," the voice came almost immediately.

"Mr. Scott," Leo answered. "I trust that you actually did get some sleep during the overnight shift."

"I did, Doctor," he answered cheerfully. "I just got back on a few minutes ago."

"Mmm …" Leo said, not sure if he believed the man. "I see that Dr. Dehner was released to the morgue."

"Was she now?" he said, and Leo could hear him shifting things around. "Well, there was no more surges of electrical activity from that piece of the Farragut," he said. "And it was cleared environmentally as well, so …"

"I see that," Leo said, "but I was wondering what happened to the tricorder that the doctor was holding onto."
"Hold on a minute," Scott said. "Now, it says here on my lad's notes that he sent the tricorder up to the Bridge as per the Captain's orders."

Leo nodded. "Was there a data download?"

"Not in Engineering," Scott said. "My understanding is that it was going to be examined by Communications."

"Thank you," Leo said. "McCoy out."

He sat there for a minute longer, wondering if he should comm Uhura, then stood and walked purposefully out of the bay, intending to begin at least a cursory exam of the body. He'd look for answers his own way.

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By the time Leo returned to Sickbay in the late afternoon, Gaila was in a biobed with her leg elevated, a wan looking Sen sitting at her bedside.

“McCoy,” he said quietly.

“Sen,” Leo said with a smile. “I’m not entirely sure that you should be upright there, Jivi. You’re still looking a little unsteady.”

Sen smiled faintly at the use of Jim’s nickname for him. “I’m OK,” he said. “Just a little tired.” He held up his arm to display his osteoregenerator. “All things considered, I’m really lucky.”

“You are,” Leo said thoughtfully. “I’m sure it wasn’t easy.” No matter how much control he’d gained over his own aviophobia, the idea of Gaila and Sen in that derelict piece of the Farragut -- flipping end over end in space, inertial dampers gone or malfunctioning, with no ability to communicate and knowing that they were running out of air and time -- was absolutely terrifying, and represented every worst fear that he’d ever had.

“No,” Sen practically whispered, his free hand stroking over Gaila’s green skin. “Gaila made it better, at first. She kept telling me that we’d be fine, even after …” Sen’s eyes were haunted and he stopped abruptly. “Is she dead?”

Leo cocked his head and stared at him, resisting the urge to whip out his tricorder. “You’re not talking about Gaila, are you?”

”No,” Sen said. “I’m talking about that doctor.” He shivered.

“What happened, Jivi?” Jim’s voice behind him was quiet.

Leo looked down and noted that he was carrying a particularly banged up tricorder. “You’re not talking about Gaila, are you?”

”No,” Sen said. “I’m talking about that doctor.” He shivered.

“What happened, Jivi?” Jim’s voice behind him was quiet.

Leo looked down and noted that he was carrying a particularly banged up tricorder.

“Kirk,” Sen said. “Gaila kept talking about you.”

Jim blanched a little at Sen’s words, but Leo didn’t think that the kid had noticed. “Oh yeah?” Jim asked casually, putting the tricorder down on one of the side tables near Gaila’s bed.

“Yeah,” Sen said. “You were like the only thing we had in common, for a while, other than, you know, the whole dying together thing.” Sen traced Gaila’s knuckles.

Jim nodded. “You guys were in Engineering?”
“We were on our way there to help out when it all went down,” Sen said. “We were still a few minutes from coming out of warp, and they had a short in one of the consoles down there, so Gaila and I were sent down to assess and fix it.”

“OK,” Jim said.

“And then, I don’t know,” Sen said. “I mean, we turned a corner and there was that doctor, and she was arguing with this other guy.”

“Gary Mitchell,” Jim said, and Leo looked over at him in surprise.

“I guess,” Sen said. “I didn’t know him. But he was going on and on about how they had to get off the ship. They were standing in front of one of the escape pods.”

Jim nodded.

“And he must have activated the pod, because somebody from security came around the corner from the other way and said ‘hey!’ and he must have shot him with a phaser, because the guy in the red shirt was just dead, and Gaila grabbed me, and then he turned around to look at us and …” Sen shuddered. “He looked human, but he must have been an alien, because he had these silver eyes, and …”

Leo signaled Chapel and she came over to his side with a hypo full of sedatives.

“Jivi?” Jim squatted down in front of the kid. “Jivan?”

“That doctor, she got in front of him and they were arguing about, I don’t know, destiny,” Sen looked at Jim and the words came out faster. “It doesn’t make any sense because it was like I could hear them in my head and all of a sudden I knew that the Farragut was going to be destroyed, and he was thinking about you, Jim, and the Enterprise, and that he should be in charge of the ship, not you, and that doctor was yelling at him, and trying to hold him back and there was silver light everywhere and it was like we were frozen, and then the door opened into Engineering, and the guy at the door was yelling and then there was another phaser blast or something and that guy flew backwards and his chest was smoking and that doctor shoved Gaila and me into the room and then everything started blowing up.”


Sen shook his head. “Everything was exploding,” he said, sounding exhausted, “and we could hear people yelling on the comm, and things were falling and I heard Gaila scream and I grabbed her and covered her and then more things fell. I don’t know, Jim. There was fire, and people screaming, and then it was quiet and I woke up and Gaila was crying.”

“And where was the doctor?”

Jivi shuddered. “She was behind us, under a bunch of stuff. I … I don’t know the Jihari’s name, but she went over to try and move stuff …” he shook his head, “and there was a scream and that doctor told us not to come near her, but she laughed when she said it, and it was … it was … weird. And then she was talking to herself for a long time. Gaila sang to me so that we couldn’t hear her because she was scaring us.”

Jim nodded. “She was talking into her tricorder,” he said.

“I guess that makes sense,” Sen said, shrugging. “I guess.” He looked up as Jim stood back up, wincing, as his battered ligaments straightened. “Do you know what happened?” He was addressing
the question to the both of them.

“You know that the fleet was attacked when it dropped out of warp,” Jim said.

“Yeah,” Sen said, eyes filling with tears. “I know now. Raji came to see me.” He looked up at them, blinking his eyes. “I still don’t understand what happened with the doctor and that other guy.”

“We don’t know yet,” Jim said carefully. “But whatever it was, it’s over now, right, Bones?”

“Right,” Leo said, wondering what the hell was on that tricorder. “She’s dead,” he said to Sen.

“OK,” Sen whispered. “When’s Gaila going to wake up?”

Leo looked at the biobed readings, and then down at his PADD. Gaila should have been showing signs of coming back to consciousness already, but there weren’t any. “She’s had a hard couple of days, Jivan,” he said to the kid. “It might take her a little bit longer to wake up. Why don’t you go to your bed and get some sleep? I promise we’ll wake you the instant she comes to.”

Sen looked from Gaila to Leo and back again. “She was so nice to me,” he said softly. “She told me stories and sang songs,” he smiled. “She told me funny stories about you, Kirk. Even though she was really hurt the whole time.”

Jim's smile was twisted at the edges, but Leo didn't think that Jivan noticed.

"C'mon now, Jivi," Leo said, hauling the kid up from his chair. "We'll put you on the bed right next to Gaila, OK?" He settled the kid on the bed, and pressed a hypo to his neck. "Go on to sleep, now," he said, brushing the glossy dark hair back from his brow.

Jivan sighed and fidgeted restlessly for a minute before he crumpled into sleep.

Leo pulled up the blanket, and turned back to Jim. "You want to tell me what the fuck is going on here?" he asked in a fierce whisper.

Jim indicated his office with a tilt of his chin, pushing him in that direction and snagging the tricorder from the table next to Gaila's biobed. He hesitated at the privacy curtain around Pike's biobed, but a scowl from Chapel stopped him from moving further in that direction.

"He's sleeping, Captain," she snapped.

Jim nodded and followed Leo into his office, pacing around the small space as if collecting his thoughts.

"Jim?" Leo asked.

"What are your findings from the autopsy, Bones?" Jim asked, running a hand through his hair.

"She died from being crushed," he said shortly, coming round the desk to stand in front of Jim with his arms crossed. "What did you expect I'd find?"

Jim nodded. "Any anomalous findings?"

"Not for her, no," Leo answered.

"Meaning?"

Leo shrugged. "Her brain architecture was slightly off standard," he said. "But any overdevelopment
in key areas was mostly consistent with what was known about her abilities."

"Mostly," Jim said, licking his lips.

"Jim —" Leo said impatiently.

"Gary Mitchell tested higher than she did on the psi scales," Jim said.

"No," Leo said, "that would have been documented." He went over to his console and gained access to the fleet medical database, calling up the records. "He tested high, yes, but not higher than she did."

"He told me that he purposefully responded inappropriately," Jim said.

"That's not -- Jim, that's not how the tests work," Leo said. "His brainwave activity would have been recorded even if he gave a wrong answer."

"He claimed that it could be fooled," Jim said staunchly.

"What does that have to do with this?" Leo asked in frustration.

Jim drew in a breath. "Dehner said on her recording that she knew that she had to go out with the fleet, that she volunteered to go."

"OK," Leo said. "So what? A lot of people volunteered to fill the posts of staff who weren't able to report back in time."

Jim nodded. "Yeah, well, she said that she'd had a dream that she had to get out to the edge of the universe, near the galactic barrier."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Oh God, that crap again."

"So you've heard the rumor?"

"Oh please," Leo said, "it's pseudoscience at best, Jim, and if anything, the Narada ending up here proved that there was no validity to those notions. I think it's on par with the oldtime sailors who thought that'd they fall off the edge of the Earth that they assumed was flat."

"Well," Jim said. "Dehner said that when they got closer to Vulcan, when they passed by Delta Vega, that she felt a shift in her abilities, and that she knew that she had to get off the Farragut and get to the Enterprise."

"And you're saying Gary Mitchell felt it, too?"

"She said he did," Jim said, "and that she became aware of him and that she tried to reason with him, telling him that they should go warn Garrovick and the others, but that he argued that they were already dead, and that 'they had an imperative'" Jim sketched the quotes in the air, "to save themselves."

"But Sen just said that they met them by an escape pod," Leo said. "And you know, I met her once, and she didn't strike me as being particularly altruistic."

Jim nodded. "How did she strike you?"

Leo thought for a moment. "Cold," he said. "Lacking in empathy, I told Patty she lacked humanity."
Jim laughed a little. "Alien," he said, under his breath.

"So you really think they were trying to save themselves, trying to get to Enterprise?"

"I think …" Jim said, sounding tired. "You know that, uh, old Spock is here now?"

"I assumed as much," Leo said, feeling a shiver of foreboding. "Are you telling me this happened before, in his universe?"

"Not exactly," Jim said, "but yeah, enough of it happened that it's pretty fucking weird. And it ended the same way, in almost the same place, although Dehner and Mitchell both died on Delta Vega. And I was the one who got shocked, not you."

"Jesus Christ, Jim," Leo said. "I hate this kind of shit. I refuse to believe in predestination."

Jim shook his head again, "I don't think that's what this is," he said, and Leo could see him searching for the words. "It's like the universe is a deck of playing cards," he said, "and all the cards are there, but they're shuffled differently this time, dealt in a different way." He opened his hands wide. "Spock says that things are different this time."

Leo stared at Jim. "And you believe him?"

Jim looked at him. "We're here, all of us, on the Enterprise, like we're supposed to be, but none of us got here the way we got here in his universe."

"Yeah, well …" Leo said. "That might all be true, Jim, but who says that his universe was the right one? Look how things turned out in his timeline — Romulus destroyed there, Vulcan destroyed here. From where I'm standing, right here," he said with emphasis, "I'm not sure his insight is any more helpful than his actions may have been. Whatever his intentions, what he did punched a hole through space-time."

Jim looked at him, wide eyed, but he had a considering expression on his face.

"I'm thinking he ought to be a little more circumspect about sharing what he thinks he knows. This isn't some goddamned science experiment, Jim, where we compare results," Leo said fervently. "This is real life. Our real life."

The silence in the room was broken by the whistle of an incoming comm. "Kirk here," Jim said, still staring at Leo.

"Captain," Spock's voice said, "Captain Benaka of the Potemkin would like to speak with you."


"He know about his doppelganger yet?" Leo asked.

Jim shook his head.

"You can't keep that kind of thing a secret forever, Jim," Leo said. "I just wonder how he's going to feel when he finds out."

Jim nodded thoughtfully, picked up his PADD and left.

Leo rubbed his eyes as the characters on the PADD began swirling in front of him and looked at the
chrono. They had maybe 24 hours until all the patients would be transferred to the Spacedock medical center, and the paperwork that had to be completed was nothing short of daunting. He stood and stretched, looking out through the observation window to where it was quiet, the lights set on low. Gaila had begun to show signs of returning to consciousness around the time that Jim had arrived to eat a late dinner with Leo, and which Pike, much to Chapel's chagrin had insisted on attending.

Pike had received Jim's findings about Dehner and Mitchell with the same level of incredulity that Leo had felt, but with a series of far more pointed questions that had only ceased when Leo had concurred with an interrupting Chapel's assessment that Pike's fluctuating brain chemistry was going to have a negative impact on his own healing process. He'd hypoed the protesting Captain into insensibility and the last that he'd seen of Jim, he'd been returning to the bridge to deal with his own paperwork.

Now however, Gaila's bed was bracketed by two figures: Sen, who'd fallen asleep with his head on her biobed, and Jim, who was quietly working on a PADD on the other side of it.

Leo sighed and ran through a few postures to crack his back, then went out onto the floor to try and get Sen back into bed.

As he passed by the head of Gaila's bed, he noticed the elevation in her brain activity and stopped.

"Gaila?" he said, bending close to her ear so that she could hear him. "Gaila darlin', can you open your eyes for me?"

He heard the intake of breath from Jim, and heard the sound of the PADD clattering on the floor as Jim put it down heedlessly, standing up on the other side of the bed. He looked up at Jim, seeing the anguish in his face.

"Say something, Jim," he urged.

"I don't think she want to hear from me, Bones," he said, barely taking his eyes off the Orion's face.

"Gaila?" Sen said sleepily.

Leo looked down at him. "She's waking up, Jivi," he said surely. "Keep talking. C'mon, Gaila darlin'" he said to her. "There's a lot of people here waiting to see you open those pretty eyes."

Gaila stirred in the bed, her brow wrinkling.

"That's it," Leo coaxed, "wake up and tell me where it hurts so I can fix it."

Gaila murmured something, and Jim answered her in her own language, his voice low and reassuring.

Gaila shifted in the bed, and winced distinctly as she moved her leg.

Chapel appeared on the other side of the bed, hypo in hand.

"Hey, Gaila," Sen said happily, holding her hand. "We're on the Enterprise. Wake up."

Leo reached out a hand for the hypo. "Chapel, have someone comm Lt. Uhura that Gaila's waking up, would you? C'mon now, Gaila," he said. "Jivi's right here, and so's Jim, and Nyota's on her way."
Gaila's eyes blinked open and then closed as she struggled up to consciousness. She murmured something again, and Sen looked up at Leo helplessly, but Jim answered her, speaking Orion, Leo was sure.

Gaila shook her head a little and opened her eyes again, seeing Sen. "Jivi," she breathed out, squeezing his hand.

Jivan smiled and laughed a little. "I'm right here, Gaila," he said. "Just like I promised."

She smiled, and pulled her other hand out from under the covers, reaching in Jim's direction and Leo watched as Jim took her hand tentatively, but with his whole heart displayed on his face. "I told you," she croaked out to Jivi, licking at her dry lips. Leo turned to get something for her to drink, but Chapel was already there, handing him the swabs.

"Here you go, darlin'," he said, giving her a swab.

Gaila sighed gratefully, looking up at him. "I told you," she said again to Sen, "that if he was on the Enterprise, that my friend Jim," she turned her head and looked at Jim, who was biting his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, "would find us so that his Doctor could fix us. Hello, Doctor," she said to Leo, who smiled back down at her.

"Hello, darlin'," he said to her warmly.

Jim picked up Gaila's hand and pressed a kiss onto the back of it and then the palm, before he dropped back down into his chair, and put his head down on the side of Gaila's bed, his shoulders heaving. Over Jim's back, Leo could see T'enev paying attention to everything that was happening.

Gaila rubbed a hand on Jim's back, clumsily patting at him.

"You were right," Sen said, smiling with tears running down his face. He bent forward and kissed her cheek. "I shouldn't have been so scared."

Gaila blinked and Leo could see her grip Jivi's hand. "I was scared, too," she whispered. "I was …"

She began to tremble, and Leo shushed her, reaching to pull the hypo out of his pocket. He barely registered the sound of the door whisking open before Nyota appeared at the end of the biobed, sleep-mussed and wild-eyed, her uniform slightly askew, like she'd just pulled it on over her head and run down the hallways to Sickbay. She took in what was happening, and without even blinking, crawled right to the head of Gaila's bed, carefully avoiding Gaila's legs. Leo realized that she was barefoot; he found her bare feet oddly vulnerable without her kick-ass boots.

Gaila sobbed at the sight of Nyota, reaching for her and turning into her embrace as Nyota encircled her friend and spoke to her softly, tears streaming down her face as she settled Gaila against her smaller frame. Leo felt the sting of tears in his own eyes as Nyota kissed Gaila's forehead and stroked her hand through Gaila's red curls like a mother holding a child. She was crooning something to Gaila, and Gaila nodded, her cheeks wet with tears as she held on.

Jim had raised his head from the bed, and was wiping at his eyes with the heel of his hand as Gaila murmured something to Nyota and she looked from Gaila to Jim.

He shook his head as if to negate what Gaila had said, but she repeated it again, looking exhausted.

"Jim," Nyota said, but her tone firm but not unkind, "my sister said thank you."

Jim looked like he might start crying again, but he managed to choke out. "You're welcome," before
he started to stand.

"Don't go yet," Gaila murmured, and Jim dropped back into his seat like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Actually, darlin'," Leo said. "Everybody needs to clear out in a couple of minutes." Nyota's glare was fierce and unflinching, but Leo wasn't much cowed by her. "Jivi needs to get back into bed, and Jim needs to get back to the Bridge," Jim nodded, the relief plain in his face. "And you need to get your rest. Miss Nyota can stay with you a few minutes longer if you promise to relax and go to sleep."

"I promise," Gaila said, with a hint of her usual cheekiness.

"All right then," Leo said, "say goodnight boys," he said sternly to Jivi and Jim, then turned away to go to T'enev's bed.

The Vulcan had watched the entire scene play out at Gaila's bed avidly, and he wanted to know what it was that she was seeing. "T'enev," he said to her plainly. "How can I help you?"

She looked up at him, making full eye contact for the first time in the days since she'd come aboard. Her expression still held that same stoic passivity that was so characteristic of the Vulcans he had known, but there was something more in her eyes, something that was almost … greedy. And now that he'd seen it, he realized with a shock that she was envious at the way that they had shed their grief, the way they shared it, because even with the near constant companionship of the elders at her bedside, she was alone.

And Leo felt something inside of him crack wide open at the thought of her pain, and he let her see it, he let her feel it and he could see, in the subtle widening of her eyes, that she did hear him, that she did feel the extent of his grief for her, and her people.

"Oh, darlin'," he said to her quietly, for once remembering the right words, even if he did not know the language. "I promise you, we grieve with thee. We do." He held her gaze until T'enev's dark eyes began to flutter shut and he urged her to lay down, pulling up the covers over her as she fell into sleep. He glanced at the elder next to the bed to find himself being regarded with a sharp, considering glance but he said nothing. His methods might never meet with their approval, but T'enev was his patient, and he would treat her the best way he knew how.

He turned back to Gaila's bed to find Jim and Jivi gone, and Uhura humming, with a fast asleep Gaila in her arms. He thought about rousting Nyota back to her own bed, but decided that what he was seeing in front of him was healing enough. He pressed the hypo to Gaila's neck and Nyota's eyelashes fluttered open as she looked up at him. He put a finger to his lips to indicate that she shouldn't speak, and said softly, "Just for a little while longer, darlin',". Nyota smiled at him and nodded, then dropped her head back and continued her humming.

Chapter 42

When Leo raised his head from the pile of paperwork at the sound of the door to his office whisking open, the expression on Christine Chapel’s face was far from happy. And just in case he had any questions, the hands planted on her hips were a further clue as to her state of mind.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Seriously, you’re not my type,” Christine growled, as Leo raised a brow. “And while I appreciate compassion as much as the next person, need I remind you that the Orion Lieutenant is still in fairly
serious condition?"

“No,” he muttered, getting up. “I just got caught up in my paperwork.”

“Something I could do if it weren’t for the fact that I can’t get a goddamned clear reading on one of my patients,” she scolded.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, going out onto the floor. “Why didn’t you just roust Uhura yourself?”

Chapel’s smile had a truly evil edge. “And take the pleasure away from you?” she asked. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Besides, it was your bright idea.”

Leo turned his head and saw that Pike was awake, and not surprisingly, smirking. “One word out of you and I’ll hypo your ass,” he said crossly to Pike. “And why are you awake?”

Pike shrugged while Chapel fussed with the covers on his bed.

Leo rolled his eyes while Pike smiled. He went to deactivate the privacy screen around Gaila’s bed, only to stop short when Commander Spock appeared at the foot of the bed, his arms behind his back.

“Commander,” he said, and then knowing why the man was there, but feeling a need to cover his surprise, blurted out, “is the Captain on the Bridge?”

“He is nearby,” Spock answered. “In his ready room, reviewing Mr. Scott’s preliminary analysis of the repairs necessary to the ship.

Leo looked over his shoulder, but Pike seemed to be absorbed in conversation with Chapel. “I see,” he said. He opened the curtain to reveal Gaila and Nyota, fast asleep. “There’s a pretty picture,” he observed with a smile, looking from the women to the confused tangle of readings at the head of the biobed.

“Yes,” he heard Spock agree. Even more astonishing, he turned to find Spock looking at the two women with an uncharacteristically soft expression on his face. He was even more taken aback to see that Spock had laid a gentle hand on Gaila’s uninjured foot. His other hand was holding a pair of kick ass boots -- women’s boots. “It is a wonderful picture.”

Before Leo thought to open his mouth to try and rouse Nyota, Spock had moved to her side of the bed and leaned over her, breathing out a single word, his voice a low susurrus of sound, as he ran his index and middle fingers over the same fingers of the hand that she had draped over Gaila’s side. Leo felt his skin flushing. He was familiar enough with Vulcan customs to know that he was witnessing the equivalent of Spock waking Nyota with a kiss, and he shot a glance to where T’enev slept, amazed that Spock would be so public with such an intimate display and thinking that Jim had been more correct about Spock’s potential emotional compromise than he had given him credit for at the time. T’enev slept on, but although the elder at her side was hooded, his face in the shadows, arms tucked into long sleeves, Leo had no doubt that he was neither meditating nor sleeping, but closely watching everything that was going on at Gaila’s biobed. He felt an uncharacteristic swell of protectiveness, and tried to tell himself that it was only Nyota's privacy that he was bristling about — but knew that it was untrue. Spock, gallling bastard that he was, was part of everything that had happened to them in the past two days. They were all of them inextricably bound together now, and Spock’s gestures of friendship and affection to the two women on the biobed, both of whom were dear to Leo, had forged another link of commonality between him and Jim’s First Officer.

Nyota smiled as she turned to look up at Spock, dark eyes blinking awake. She kissed Gaila's forehead before she slipped her arm out from underneath her head, wincing a bit at the rush of blood
that came back into the limb. The smile that she gave to Spock as she placed her hand atop his palm and let him effortlessly raise her to a sitting position was meant for his eyes only. Leo busied himself running a scanner over Gaila as Nyota swung her legs over the side of the biobed and stretched upward and arched her spine like a cat, since continuing to observe then felt like such an intrusion.

When he looked up again, Uhura had released her hair from its loose ponytail and was rebinding it, and Spock was nowhere to be seen. He was puzzled until Spock straightened up from where he’d obviously been putting the boots on Nyota’s feet.

Well, then ... Leo had to admit that that was right gentlemanly behavior, the kind of service that one should do for one’s beloved, and it continued to improve his opinion of the green-blooded hobgoblin. Maybe he wasn’t a total bastard after all. Arrogant, yes. But perhaps not irredeemable.

Nyota put her hand on Spock’s offered palm as she jumped lightly down from the table, his unoccupied hand coming up to steady her at the waist, although she was all grace and no hesitation, just as she had been when she’d climbed atop the biobed to hold onto Gaila.

“How’s she doing, Leonard?” Nyota asked, turning around.

Spock stood at her back but a step away from her with his arms clasped behind him as she asked the question, his expression betraying his interest in Leo’s answer. Even though he was no longer touching Uhura, there was something in his posture that referred to her, as if he were in orbit around her. Leo, who knew a little something about personal stars, found himself smiling—not only because his early observations had proven to be true, but because he’d also thought that what he’d observed might be one-sided regard, and he was happy to be wrong.

“Well,” he said, waiting for the readings to settle down now that Gaila was alone in the bed. “She’s looking good,” he said. “She’s got a ways to go, and she might yet need one more surgery, but she’s going to be fine, Nyota.”

Nyota’s smile was wide and immediate, her face beatific with happiness. She turned and looked at Spock, and for a second, Leo thought she was going to throw her arms around him, but she didn’t.

Spock’s face retained its characteristic Vulcan stillness, but there was a quirk to his lips that was enough of a telling response to Nyota’s joy. Leo had the impression that even without words, and without touch, that Nyota and the man he was now sure was her lover had had an entire conversation. Spock held a hand out to motion Nyota in front of him and she moved with a dancer’s grace around the end of the bed, stopping only to lean up and press a kiss to Leo’s cheek. "Thank you, Leonard," she whispered to him, then moved to join a waiting Spock.

There was not one thing about Spock’s expression that changed when his eyes moved from Uhura to look at Leo, but he got the message all the same, the one that said that one kiss is all you’re getting, without Spock having so much as raised an eyebrow.

Leo raised his own in answer and tried to convey a return message of try not to be a total jackass, hobgoblin. He shook his head and turned back toward his office after they left, as Chapel came to get a clean download of Gaila’s latest readings. Pike’s eyes were shuttering bemusedly as he passed and Leo stopped to check him out before he returned to his paperwork, feeling the hooded regard of the watcher at T’enev’s bedside on his back.

+ Sickbay had been quiet for a couple of hours while Leo dealt with the virtual mound of paperwork that was involved in turning over his charges, both the living and the dead, to the care of the medical
staff at the Spacedock. The lights had been turned down in the main room, and the windows in his area had been polarized so that he could see out into the bay without the brightness of his erstwhile office disturbing his charges' sleep. In the peaceful atmosphere, the sound of his door whisking open sounded unnaturally loud.

He spoke without first raising his head, continuing to check off categories with his stylus. "How's T'enev doing, Ambassador Spock?"

The hooded figure stopped in his approach to his desk, and Leo raised his head, watching in surprise as a rueful smile crossed the ancient Vulcan's face as he pushed his hood back.

"You recognized me," he said in a sure, deep voice, his eyebrow raised. "Fascinating."

"Not as such," Leo said, getting his first look at the man, and finding new sources by which to be confounded.

The elder Spock cocked his head to the side. "Meaning?" he asked.

"Contrary to what people might believe of me, y'all don't look alike," Leo said slowly, noting the twinkle in this Spock's eye. "And you … now that I see you, look a mite different than what I expected."

"And yet, you knew that it was I who was sitting next to T'enev's bed," Spock said, still standing, until Leo remembered his manners toward his elders and waved him to a seat. Spock sat down, taking the offered seat with the slow dignity that came with extreme age.

"Well," Leo said, not bothering to not look at him, now that he had the opportunity. "My temperament tends toward the observational," he drawled, "-- a professional habit, you understand. And you've been the only visitor to T'enev's bedside so determined to remain unrecognizable."

The Vulcan nodded slowly, his dark eyes taking in the details of the office. From the look of him, Leo assumed that he was a century and a half, younger than T'Pau and yet … he looked older. Perhaps this was an effect of his human heritage, or perhaps, Leo thought with a pang of sympathy, the events of the past few days had aged him.

"But even so," Leo continued on slowly, cataloguing the face of the Vulcan in front of him, seeing the structure that underlay the age, "I do believe that if I were somehow able to procure an image of you at the same age as the Commander Spock that just left here a few hours ago, and compared that image to his, that I would not see a man that looked like his identical twin. In fact, I'd imagine that although there'd be a resemblance, that brothers or maybe cousins would be more likely my guess of the relationship between the two of you."

"You are different as well, old friend," Spock said softly, the emotion so evident in his voice that Leo felt his hackles rise.

"I'd say hooray for noticing," Leo said, "but that would seem a bit crass."

Once again, he was surprised by the soft smile that crossed the Vulcan's face at his words.

"Your counterpart explained to me that it was the habit of humans from your region of Earth to eschew an insult before they leveled one. A clever ruse that allows one to say what one wills while retaining a veneer of innocence," Spock explained. "It pleases me to see that this, at least, remains a constant of your personality."

Leo stared at the man across the desk from him. "So, you're no longer holding to your theory that..."
we, the you that is here now and the I that sits across from you, hail from the same universe -- the universe that you told Jim would try to heal itself and return things to their proper order?"

The expression on the Vulcan's face was shrewd but wise at the same time. "Jim confides much in you," he observed.

"And your Jim did not?" he asked, then hurried on, not sure if he wanted to know the answer to that particular question. "This Jim," he said, before clarifying, "my Jim, has been my best friend for years now."

"So I have gathered," Spock said, tucking his hands into his sleeves, dropping his head into the cowl of his robe for a moment. "The meld, of course, conveys information in both directions."

Leo held up a hand to forestall the sharing of whatever confidence this Spock wished to share with him. As always, whatever secrets Jim Kirk had to tell, he'd rather be told by Jim.

Spock ignored him and spoke on. "But I admit that I did not dwell on that information until after your Jim Kirk had left Delta Vega."

"Meaning?"

"As you have already surmised, Doctor," Spock said. "I came into this … situation believing that it was just that, an altered timeline of the universe from which I had come."

"And now?" Leo said, pressing for the answer that Spock seemed reluctant to give.

"Well …" he said, with a shake of his head, "what is now? As a concept of time, or otherwise, to me? I am … out of my time," he said heavily. "And had thought, had hoped, unwisely it seems, that I was still within my universe." He looked up at Leo. "Considering the experiences that I had when I served on the Enterprise, I should have known better. The possibility of alternative universes, some vastly different than the one I knew as reality, had already been shown to be factual. But none of those other experiences involved such a massive time shift."

Leo felt a true pang of sympathy. "How much time?" he asked.

"129 years, from my perspective," Spock answered. "Although the black hole through which the Narada erupted opened 154 years ago in your timeline."

"The Battle of the Kelvin," Leo said, nodding.

"There is so much that is confounding about the experience," Spock said, and Leo snapped his mouth shut on the retort of how much of an understatement that was, letting the older man speak. "From my perspective, I entered the black hole first and appeared here two days ago, after a trip of mere seconds. From the perspective of those here, in this universe it was an additional 25 years after the appearance of the Narada. The knowledge that time is relative as a theory has a far different impact when played out in reality in such a way."

Leo nodded, his head reeling. "I can … I was going to say I can only imagine, but I'm afraid that I can't actually do so." He paused. "So, you believed that the appearance of the Narada had changed your timeline, in your original universe, and now … you no longer do. Why?"

The Vulcan looked at Leo seriously. "The Jim Kirk that I knew was born in Riverside, Iowa in March of 2233," he said. "His parents were in Starfleet, yes, but they did not serve together on the same starship until his early adolescence."
Leo pushed the chair back from his desk and regarded the man across from him. He wondered if the phrase early adolescence was code for 'when Jim went to Tarsus', but did not ask the question. He found that he respected this dignified man's desire to protect the privacy of the man he'd known, and clearly loved, as Jim Kirk. "So it was already different, even before the Narada appeared. Therefore, you have traversed into my universe."

"Yes," Spock observed. "And although I recognize you as Leonard McCoy, it is as you observed of my counterpart here, in that if I were somehow able to produce an image for you of he that I knew as Leonard McCoy, you would see for yourself that despite similarities of speech and affect, there are subtle but real differences in your physical selves that are not explainable by the fact that you are younger than the Leonard McCoy that I first met. The same is true for this Jim Kirk."

"I'm sorry, Ambassador," Leo said quietly after a moment.

The elderly gentleman smiled ruefully. "You should not feel sympathy for me, old friend," he said, "what has come to pass is much my fault."

Although Leo had certainly felt that this was true, and implied as much to Jim, he found that he could not help but feel differently when he actually considered all that this man had lost. "Your intention was altruistic," he said surely. "Jim told me that you were trying to prevent the destruction of Romulus."

"Yes," Spock said his voice heavy with irony. "My life's work, in the universe that I left behind, was to bring about a reconciliation between the Vulcans and those from whom we had been parted so many millennia ago ..." his voice drifted off. "I plotted, and I schemed, the kind of plans," he said to Leo in a confidential tone, "of which my Jim Kirk would have approved." His eyes drifted away from Leo. "Or perhaps not. Perhaps I needed Jim's tactical genius, which I have sorely missed, to avoid this catastrophe of my own making." He looked back at Leo. "A spectacular fuck-up, I think Jim would have deemed this."

The bark of laughter that broke from Leo's mouth was one that he tried to quell immediately, but it broke the heavy air of confession and regret that had been cast over the room. He should have known by the advanced age of the man in front of him, but still, hearing Jim referred to in the past tense -- knowing that there was a universe in which the Jim Kirk who'd had the happy childhood his Jim had been denied, but had maybe still ended up on Tarsus, before he captained the Enterprise and then died -- hit him hard.

The curve of Spock's mouth was softer but more ironic this time as he spoke again. "I would not have you curb your laughter, Leonard," he said. "Even if you are not my Doctor McCoy, I have missed that laugh these past few years."

Leo's brows drew down at his words. "Past few years?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

"An imprecision on my part, perhaps explicable by the number of years I've lived, or simply more evidence of the influence of my human friends on my mode of expression. The number is actually 15.4 Terran years, as they were measured in my universe, although we should by no means assume that the length of years, or passage of time is analogous in both timelines, considering the other hypotheses that have been proven false in the past days," Spock said with the kind of crisp precision that he'd heard his counterpart use more than once already. "However, I can say with some assurance that your counterpart was remarkably long-lived for your species, although he firmly denied that he was descended from the augmented remnants of Terran genetic engineering."

"So, the Eugenics Wars happened in your universe," Leo said, stunned. "Keniclius existed."
"Yes," Spock said slowly. "He did. And more than that, I probably should not say."

"You've become more circumspect," Leo observed.

"I have," Spock agreed. "Things are … similar," he said slowly, "but they are not the same, and it is appropriate that I exert a degree of caution in influencing outcomes, do you not think?" Spock's head had turned as he spoke, and Leo noted that he was looking at Pike, who was sleeping deeply on his biobed.

"You knew Captain Pike in your universe," he observed.

"I served as Captain Pike's officer for more than a decade aboard the Enterprise," Spock said quietly. "Long before you or Jim ever came aboard."

Leo knew that there was much more to the story, but decided to listen and not press.

"His fate here," he continued, "seems both more kind and more ironic."

"Bittersweet then," Leo said.

"Yes," Spock agreed.

Leo indulged his curiosity then. "How is it that you were able to keep your presence here in Sickbay hidden from your counterpart? I was of the understanding that the psychic connections between Vulcans would make that impossible."

"A shrewd question," Spock said, "worthy of your counterpart, and somewhat more politely posed than his would have been."

Leo raised an eyebrow, and the elder Spock smiled softly.

"The easiest answer is that I, like my counterpart in this universe, am particularly gifted in psi abilities, but I have the advantage of another century's practice at shielding my thoughts," he paused. "The diversion was made all the more easy by my younger self's general disdain of the Elders of his home planet. As you observed, he has decided to behave as if he does not care for their opinions, as if the hurtful words and prejudices shown to him, as they were to me, have not had an effect on him or the choices he has made. He has, I admit, taken a somewhat different path than I did."

"Disdain?" Leo was astounded.

"He would never characterize it as such," Spock said, "but that is the best emotional construct with which it can be named in your tongue."

"Spock went to Vulcan to retrieve the Elders from the surface," Leo protested, even as he found it odd that he, of all people, was defending Spock's behavior during the Battle of Vulcan.

"Spock went to Vulcan to retrieve his mother, first and foremost," the elder Vulcan said, his voice ringing with a quiet authority. "And I am heartily sorry at the outcome of that task. My own excellent mother lived far longer." He seemed on the verge of saying something else, but stopped himself, looking around the office, his eyes lighting on the holos that were not Leo's. "You were not appointed to the role of Chief Medical Officer on this version of the Enterprise," he said. "Who was your predecessor?"

"Yashvir Puri," Leo answered.
The Vulcan tilted his head. "He is unknown to me," he said. "Do you know a doctor named Mark Piper?"

Leo shook his head and picked up his PADD. "No," he said. "But I can check and find out where he is, or was, serving."

"That will not be necessary," Spock said. "What about Philip Boyce?" he asked.

"Dr. Boyce is the head of Starfleet Medical," Leo answered.

"Fascinating," Spock said. "Things are different, and yet, there are some constants."

"Jim likened it to a deck of cards," Leo said. "All of the players from your universe, but shuffled and dealt differently."

"A crude, but incisive metaphor," Spock said with a smile. "And yet, all of you here on the Enterprise in command posts, so young and untested, are as before. The constants."

Leo could not quell his curiosity, and asked, "So, you and your Nyota?"

A shadow crossed the Vulcan's expression. "She was a friend," he said slowly. "A great friend of my life, my youth, but no ..." he said softly. "Not as here."

Leo felt a sorrow behind the words that he chose not to explore, but instead acknowledged with a slow shake of his head.

"Things, as you rightly observed, are not the same here is this universe." He looked at Leo for a long moment, and then asked delicately. "May I ask after your family?"

Leo stared at the Vulcan for a beat, but then gave an answer that he hoped would not lead him to regrets for a life that was not his. "My parents are both dead," he answered slowly. "My mother died when I was a boy, as did my sister. My father died three years ago. I am divorced, and have no children." He stopped himself from adding more to the answer, but saw a flash of something in the Vulcan's eyes.

"I see," Spock said, then paused. "I grieve with thee."

Leo searched the Vulcan's eyes but saw nothing beyond that simple fact. "I grieve with thee, Ambassador Spock," he said slowly, "for all that you have lost." He wondered then, if there were children that this Spock had left behind, and a spouse, lost in a warp of time and circumstance that was both unfathomable and suddenly, horrifically, wrong to him.

The answering smile on Spock's face was not wholly unexpected by now, but considering the circumstances, seemed slightly out of place. "One of the constants of any Dr. McCoy," he said slowly, "is surely the compassion that is so characteristic of your true self, despite the demeanor that you have so carefully cultivated. You proved that with your ability to reach T'enev, and I knew then that you were still unalterably yourself, Leonard. I cannot tell you how much comfort that notion brings me." He stood up. "You have much yet to do," he said cryptically, "and I shall leave you to it." He turned and walked toward the door, then stopped. "One last observation — a clarification, in truth. In my time, and in the other universes to which I have been," he paused, but did not expound upon that amazing statement other than to say, "there is always a Kirk, a Spock, a McCoy, an Uhura, a Scott, a Chekov and a Sulu together aboard the Enterprise. Or should I say, when there is not, no good can come of it?"

Leo felt the hair on the back of his neck rising.
"There are others, too, but you seven comprise a particular nucleus, a family of choice, my Jim Kirk once called it," he said. "And even though they are lost to me now, I shall take pleasure in seeing what you, my old friends made young in a different guise, accomplish together." His smile was soft and loving, Leo was sure of it. "Good night, Leonard," Spock said. "It has, as ever, been remarkably pleasing to speak with you again, whatever the circumstance."

Leo sat stock still, struck dumb for an instant, while the Ambassador drew his hood back up over his head. He was almost to the door when Leo, compelled by an impulse that he could not deny, stood up and spoke again. "Spock," he said, waiting until Spock turned. "In this universe, my family calls me Leo."

"Indeed?" Spock answered, tilting his head. "Fascinating." He looked at Leo for an instant longer. "Good night then, Leo." He inclined his head as he said this, his ancient eyes sparkling with warmth.

"Good night, Spock," Leo said.

Then the door whisked shut and he dropped back into his chair, and stared at the walls blankly for a few minutes, shaken.

His whole life, he had mused on other universes where other Leonard McCoys lived, considering the notion that there was only one physical universe as scoff-worthy as the belief that Terrans had had hundreds of years ago that they were singular and unique as sentients in the galaxy. The more scientists and seekers learned about wormholes and the potential for temporal rifts, the more they discovered about subspace, the more he had believed in the real potential of inter- or extra-dimensional universes. But even admitting that as possibility could not begin to capture the experience of meeting someone, sitting and talking to a being that had lived a whole other life with another Leonard McCoy, another Jim Kirk — to observe that being watching himself live another life — it was breathtaking and strange and astounding.

It's not that he'd ever not believed that there were other Leonard McCoys somewhere beyond his understanding. It's just that it had become a mental shorthand of his, a notion that he'd had -- particularly when things were bad -- that if he could, he'd switch into one of those other lives, one of those other universes where things were undoubtedly better for his other self.

He'd never once really considered that there was a true possibility of doing so, or of how devastating it could be to the one who moved from one reality to the next.

Leo placed this hands palm down against his desk, reassuring himself of his physical solidity, of the rightness of his place here and now in this world, this time, this life with all of its horrors and tragedies. He was where he belonged.

Wasn't he?

Leo was not made to suffer existential crises, at least not alone. He had the stifling sense for a few panic-stricken moments that everything that he knew was a mirage, that he was the one in the wrong universe, the one where Jim was dead and gone, and he knew that he was exhausted and neurotic and mistaken, but he still he couldn't shake it. A few more minutes of perturbation and disturbed thoughts were more than enough for him to sync his PADD up with his console, grab his stylus, slide his medkit over his shoulder just in case and leave Sickbay, in search of Jim.

The patients were sleeping and Chapel acknowledged him with a nod before she returned to her own work. He was sure that M'Benga was somewhere in the back of the bay, along with Fleury. There
was no point in trying to sleep when there was so much to do, especially since once they transferred their patients, they'd be free to sleep the rest of the way back to Earth.

He passed into the quiet corridors of the Enterprise, noting that there were a number of crew who were roaming the halls, some obviously still on shift or on task, others just roaming. He noted faces where he did not know names, which was more often than not, unfortunately.

He exited the turbolift and entered the Bridge, surprised to not recognize a single face of the crew members that were present.

"Lieutenant Commander?" a yeoman by the door asked, saluting.

"McCoy," Leo answered. "Is Captain Kirk in his ready room?"

"Yes, sir," she answered. "Just across the hall."

"Thank you," Leo said, and then added, "as you were," when he realized that the crew was still at attention.

The door chime had even finished sounding when the door was whisking open. "Yeah," Jim said, not looking up. A cup of hot coffee steamed at his elbow.

"Coffee?" Leo asked. "Where'd you get coffee?"

"Bones," Jim said in surprise. "You want a cup?" He waved his stylus in the direction of a carafe and mugs on the coffee table in front of the couch.

"Jim," Leo said, "this is very civilized for you."

Jim grunted out a wry smile, and finished writing his sentence, then turned to tap at the keyboard in his desktop. "Yeah, yeah," he said. He finished his thought while Leo poured himself a cup of coffee, then looked up at Leo, blue eyes weary.

"You all right there, Jim?" Leo asked, making his way to the chair in front of his desk.

Jim sprawled backwards in his chair, long legs thrust into the open space below his desk. "Funny, Bones," he said, taking a sip of his coffee. "I was going to ask you the same question."

Leo put his PADD down on the desk, and shifted the chair so that when he sat, he could fit his legs alongside Jim's. He slouched into it and put the mug on his chest and bent his head, blowing on the liquid to cool it before he took a sip.

"Bones," Jim said, nudging Leo's left knee with his own left knee, "you're stalling."

Leo stared at Jim, his Jim, and wondered what the other Jim Kirk had looked like. He tried to picture him with green eyes, or brown, to make his jawline less sharp, but found that the idea made him feel slightly ill. Jim Kirk with his eyes the color of a perfect, warm June sky, with his honey-colored hair and elegant long limbs and expressive hands -- that was his Jim Kirk.

His Jim Kirk was currently smirking a little as Leo studied him, and he wondered if that was a characteristic of the type, if all McCoys were sarcastic and all Kirks were smartasses.

"Spock came to see me," he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Yeah," Leo said. "It was weird."

Jim nudged him with his leg to keep him talking.

"I dunno, Jim," he said. "I wanted to be mad at him, to hold him responsible for all the death and ruination, but …" he shook his head.

"I know," Jim said, leaving his leg next to Leo's. "It sounds stupid to say he didn't mean to do it, but …" he looked up at Leo. "He didn't."

"But that's the thing, Jim," Leo said. "How do we know that this isn't the way things are supposed to go in this universe?"

"Bones, you don't believe in predestination," Jim said wryly.

"But I believe in causality," he said steadily. "I believe in Newton's Third Law. What if what we do in this universe not only affects the reality that we perceive, but other realities we don't?"

"Jesus, Bones," Jim said, rubbing at the back of his neck. "When you go existential, you go all out." He paused, deliberating. "But Spock used the red matter, something physical, to create the wormhole."

"And what exactly is red matter?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Jim said. "Although I will tell you that it does not exist – " he corrected himself, "- has not yet been discovered or extracted or … something here."

"I tend to think," Leo said, "that its existence should be a closely held secret. After all, if it existed there …"

"It exists here," Jim said grimly. "And I agree about the secrecy, as does Pike. You might want to … omit your knowledge of it in your debriefings."

"Understood," Leo said, sipping his coffee and feeling better, more human, more real by the minute, despite their conversation. The weight of Jim's leg against his was warm and known and grounding. "What're you working on?"

Jim blew out a breath, puffing his lips. "Retrofit requests," he said. "Based on what Scotty asked for. You would not believe," he said to Leo, "the unfucking surreal number of forms that need to be filed."

Leo lifted up his own PADD and shook it at him. "The people repairs also require ridiculous amounts of paperwork. Speaking of which, I never got you for that second round of regeneration."

"Get me when we're on the Potemkin," Jim said. "I honest to God don't have the time until then."

Leo sighed, slipping his tricorder out of the case and leaning forward to scan Jim, who rolled his eyes at him. "Jim," he said accusatorily, "you didn't eat anything today."

Jim looked modestly surprised, then squinted at him. "Did you?" he asked in a no-nonsense voice.

Leo sighed and went over to the food slot, calling up some chicken soup for the both of them. When it appeared a few seconds later, he brought the covered bowls over to the table and handed Jim's to him.

They toasted each other with the bowls, and went back to their work, legs slowly migrating back
toward the other's under the desk, as companionable as they'd been on those long nights that they'd studied in the past, the only noise Jim's occasional grunts when Leo nudged him to remind him to eat.

"Bones," Jim said, after he'd tilted his bowl up to get the dregs of his soup. He showed the empty bowl to Leo with an 'OK, Mom?' expression on his face. "Does that mean you think that you changed history in all the universes?"

"Huh?" Leo said, scooping up the last of his soup.

"You changed history," Jim said slowly.

"How you figure that?" Leo asked, puzzled.

"You brought me aboard," Jim said.

"Are you still stuck on that?" Leo asked.

"Yes, Bones," Jim said seriously. "I'm still stuck on that. But that doesn't answer my question."

"Was it serious?" Leo asked. "cause I'm thinking that if I have the same general character traits, which Spock said I do, then I'd pretty much always do the same kinds of things, right? Like he said, and Jim this was weird, that in all of the universes that he knew of that we were always on the Enterprise. Which I guess means I'm always a doctor."

Jim nodded. "That makes sense. He told me that I'm supposed to be the Captain." His expression was brooding.

Leo decided to shake Jim out of his mood. "Did you know that Spock and Uhura are a couple?"

Jim looked up at him in surprise. "You mean our Spock, right?"

"I may have to object to that characterization there, Captain," Leo drawled out. "Especially since I think I may like the older Spock better. And you knew?"

Jim was laughing as he nodded. "Bones --" he held up a hand in a motion that indicated that he was swearing. "They kissed in front of me."

Leo nodded.

"What!?" Jim said. "Man, they are totally indiscreet."

"Jim," Leo protested, "it's just hands. Most people wouldn't even notice --- what?"

"Not hands," Jim said, "lips."

Leo raised both eyebrows.

"Although I'm pretty sure tongues were involved, too."

"Jim …"

"I am serious," he said, talking over Leo's protest. "Scotty was there, you can ask him."

"Wow," Leo said.
"Hands …" Jim scoffed. "Please. Although, you know, he did have one of his hands kinda low on her …"

"Jim," Leo said. "This is your crew you're talking about." Jim's console bleeped. "Also," he continued, "I'd like to point out that Spock will kick your ass from here back to Earth if he hears you talking like that."

"Oh," Jim said, smirking, "like you're going to tell him? Kirk here," he said into the console.

"Captain," Chapel said, after identifying herself. "Captain Pike is awake and has some questions about the Engineering Report."

Jim sighed and scrubbed his face with his hand, looking exhausted, but before he could speak, Leo said, "Chapel? Who the fuck gave him a PADD? And why is he awake at …" he looked for a chrono.

"0530," Chapel said drily, then he could hear muffled voices, as if she had her hand over the comm. "Captain Pike has instructed me to tell you to quote 'Watch your fucking language for once and that's an order' unquote."

Chapel was really having too much goddamned fun at her job. He scowled at a smirking Jim as the voices on the other end of the comm were muffled again.

"He has also further stated that quote, 'Captain Kirk should get his ass down here now, and bring him a cup of coffee'."

"No coffee," Leo said firmly. He could hear Pike's muffled protest but knew that he wouldn't be getting any coffee out of Chapel, either.

Jim finished syncing the data to his PADD. "Tell the Captain I'm on my way, Nurse Chapel. Kirk out." Jim stood up and eyebrowed Leo. "What's up with Pike and Chapel?" he asked, moving toward the door.

Leo grimaced and swallowed his now cold cup of coffee before he slung his tricorder over his shoulder and picked up his PADD and followed Jim out the door. "I haven't caught them making out, it that's what you're asking," he said acerbically.

"Yet," Jim tossed over his shoulder with a smile, pushing the button for the turbolift and then turning back to waggle his eyebrows at Leo. "If you ask me, it's just a matter of time." He smiled and stepped into the occupied lift, greeting the crewman before saying, "Coming, Bones?" in a voice that was just a tad too sweetly mocking to be anything other than completely dirty.

Leo ignored him and stepped into the elevator, nodding to the crewman. He fixed his eyes determinedly on the deck counter as they moved, and fervently hoped that somewhere, in some universe, Leonard McCoy was getting laid.

Goddamnit.

Chapter 43

Leo couldn't remember the last time he'd been so tired, but honestly wasn't sure he'd be able to sleep. Absently, he tried to recall the long-term biochemical effects of a hyper-adrenalized state, but kept getting stuck on PTSD and anger. He couldn't say if the former state would apply to him, but he was absolutely positive that the latter certainly did, although truthfully, he was by and large a relatively grumpy bastard. But in this situation, it wasn't just him who was short-tempered because
there was no doubt in his mind that Jim, Scotty, Pike and -- God help them all because he certainly was a scary motherfucker when he was angry -- Spock met that criteria.

Come to think of it, Scotty might meet the psychosis threshold, what with his state of near apoplexy as it had become clear that the Spacedock and Central Fleet Engineering were in agreement that the Enterprise could not make the jump into warp in its current state, even while being towed. Scotty’s heated insistence that the Enterprise would hold together in the jump to warp had been overruled. It was understandable — the Fleet hadn’t just lost life, but an extraordinary number of ships — so the Central Fleet’s concern about the structural integrity of its newest and largest flagship was understandable. Besides, although Leo was a doctor and not a structural engineer, even he understood that the forces exerted on the ship when it had been struggling to break away from the black hole had been of a magnitude never before measured. In the end, Scotty had been left to mournfully plea, “Oh, my lady,” when Jim and Pike had finally accepted that they were not going to change anyone’s mind.

Unlike Scotty, Leo had known that arriving at Spacedock would mean that he would soon be leaving his patients behind. What he hadn’t counted on was how wrenching it would be to transfer the Farragut crew who were still recovering. Gaila had been stoic, but the whispered conversations between her and Nyota had been marked with tears on both sides, and Leo had had to fight with himself to not insist that she continue on to Earth with them, despite knowing that it was neither regulation nor true medical necessity. He had stated that he believed that Gaila’s recovery would be expedited by her proximity to her friends, especially considering the traumatic circumstances of her injury and rescue, but Gaila’s own history of resilience had hampered his ability to carry that argument. Gaila had chosen to leave everything that she knew behind once before to achieve her freedom — in view of that, a separation of a week’s time was considered negligible.

Even Spock couldn’t manage to sway the CMO of the Spacedock, a Denobulan doctor who seemed impervious to his arguments and appearance. Privately, Leo believed that Spock had thought that a Vulcan making a plea for the Orion to stay with them would be positively answered. After all, Dr. Ploss had originally argued that T’enev should stay at Spacedock as well, but allowed herself to be swayed by what was left of the Vulcan High Command when they had insisted that separating her from their group would not only be illogical but possibly detrimental, given her tenuous emotional state. However, what had swayed Dr. Ploss in T’enev’s case would not work in Gaila’s. Frankly, Leo had been stunned that Dr. Ploss hadn’t had contact burns from the weight of Spock’s smoldering gaze upon her after he saw Nyota’s tears.

The change in plans had also meant that it was necessary for the entire complement of the Enterprise’s personnel to be transferred over to the Potemkin for the return to Earth. Even with casualties, the crew that needed to be accommodated was more than twice what was already aboard the Potemkin, which meant that Leo was currently stumbling his way toward the shuttle bay where cots had been set out for the Enterprise crew to rest for the time they’d be aboard. Captain Benaka of the Potemkin had offered to house the command crew in better quarters than the rest of Enterprise’s staff, but Jim had barely glanced at the other senior officers to ascertain their position before he’d refused the offer. Starfleet was big on preservation of rank, but after what they’d been through in the past few days it was probably better that the Enterprise crew remain together, even in crowded quarters.

Leo only hoped that Jim would make it down to the shuttle bay at some point. He’d noticed how the crew responded to Jim, how they seemed to stand a little taller in his presence, the way that Jim could make tired faces brighten with a word or a smile. All the potential that Leo had seen -- so long ago it seemed now, that first day that he’d seen Jim with the KFF -- was being realized. But Scotty wasn’t the only one who would feel adrift now that they were no longer on the Enterprise. Without work to occupy their hands and minds, darker thoughts and bigger sorrows would seep in. Leo had known
that it was only a matter of time, that once the crew got back to the Academy and separated, returning to empty dorms or God help them, empty homes, that the grief would begin to set in. Starfleet had lost so many people already, but … there were bound to be a number on the Enterprise who had survived but found themselves incapable of making the trip out into the black again.

Even with the shuttle bay lights on low, there was a hum of noise when Leo crossed the threshold. Crewmen were laying on cots, but there was very little sleeping going on from what Leo could see. Instead, Leo saw earnest conversations taking place between cots that had been pushed together so that they could hold more than two people. He noted crewmen sitting on the floor next to a friend in a bunk, talking in low voices. In the middle of the bay, a large card game was going on, with six or seven participants and several onlookers. Smaller games were being played elsewhere, even as some crewman lay on their bunks and read, others wrote letters or in journals. Even worse, some crewman just lay there, perfectly still, eyes opened but unfocused.

Leo walked by the loose rows of Enterprise personnel, acknowledging the stray ‘hey Doc’ from weary personnel with a nod. He had to resist the urge to stop and scan certain of them, knowing that they’d all been triaged at Spacedock earlier, and that many had already been referred to counseling. Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all his responsibility, or the worry that he felt at the sleeplessness and the haunted expressions that he saw.

He stopped and strode through the rows of crew members when he saw Uhura’s long ponytail hanging over the edge of a bed. She was curled on her side away from him, with her eyes closed, but the buds in her ears made it clear that she was most likely still awake, and listening to something. Still, he hesitated, almost turning away before she rolled onto her back.

“Leonard?” she asked, her tone sounding worried.

“Just checking on you, Nyota,” he said gruffly. “You were upset the last time I saw you.”

Nyota smiled softly, her long lashes closing over her eyes for a second before she looked up at him. “Thank you,” she said softly. “And thanks for trying.”

“Just doing my job,” he said. “I only wish they would have listened to me.”

“Me, too,” she said in a soft voice.

“She’ll be fine, Nyota,” Leo said quietly.

Nyota nodded. “I know,” she said softly. “After everything that’s happened, I know that my reasoning is illogical, but I feel like she’d be safer if she were with us.”

Leo nodded. “Darlin’ that’s a completely understandable point of view, and maybe it’s not as illogical as you think. After all, we survived something that most of the people we set out with didn’t.”

Nyota’s luminous eyes were thoughtful. “I know,” she said, “but we were on the Enterprise then, too.”

“Lieutenant,” Spock’s voice had an edge to it that Leo couldn’t quite identify, but nonetheless heard. “Is all well?”

My God, why didn’t the green-blooded bastard just say ‘is this man bothering you?’

“All is well, Commander,” Nyota said serenely.
“Do you require more blankets?” Spock asked.

Leo had crossed his arms over his chest in perturbation at Spock’s ridiculous posturing, but now he raised a hand to hide a smile behind it. Nyota had been lying on the bed with the covers piled on her lower legs, but now that she was sitting up, leaning back on one hand, her ridiculously short fleet uniform exposed quite a bit of her smooth toned thigh.

“I’m fine, Commander,” Nyota said, raising an eyebrow. “But thank you for being thoughtful.”

“Of course,” Spock said smoothly, his hands clasped behind him. It was clear that he had no intention of going anywhere while Leo was near his lover.

For the first time in days, Leo really could have laughed out loud. In fact, he felt the ragged edge of laughter threatening and knew that if it broke out that he’d be crying, too, so he quelled it with a scowl. “Where is the Captain, Spock?” he asked. Then clarified, “Kirk,” at Spock’s raised eyebrow.

“He should be concluding a communication with Starfleet Command within the next hour or so,” Spock said.

Leo sighed. “I hope that he can get a little sleep before we get back planetside,” he said. “I can’t imagine what kind of a clusterfuck that’s going to be.”

Spock’s eyebrow raised even higher. “My understanding of that particular term is not precise,” he said. “To what aspect do you refer?”

Leo shook his head. “Spock,” he said grimly. “Every news organization in the universe is going to want a piece of us.” And Jim, he thought, Jim especially.

Spock nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I expect they will. But I would also expect that Starfleet will keep them away from us.”

Leo looked from Spock to Uhura and back again in amazement. “Spock,” he said slowly. “George Kirk’s son defeated the madman who killed his father, and saved Earth from Vulcan’s fate. There’s no way that Starfleet isn’t going to want to play that story up. Hell, I thought they were relentless last month when it was the 25th anniversary of the Kelvin’s destruction, but that? That’s going to seem like a picnic compared to what we’re in for.” Nyota was seriously considering his words. “The press is going to be all over us,” he said. “You and Jim most of all, Spock.” He put a hand on the man’s shoulder briefly. “You better prepare yourself. Nyota,” he said turning to the younger woman, “it’s always lovely to speak with you, darlin’.”

He moved through the rest of the command crew to an empty bunk on the periphery that already had his gear on it. Raji and Sen occupied two of the nearby cots, and they watched as he shucked his boots and laid down. “You guys should try and get some sleep,” he said, keeping his tone kind but firm.

“Kinda loud,” Raji said, but he lay down.

Leo thought about how quiet it was likely to be back on campus and had to suppress a shiver. He pulled the blanket up to his neck and rolled over onto his side. “Just give it a shot,” he said. “You’ve maybe got an hour to get some shut eye before we’re back dirtside.” He closed his own eyes.

“Is Jim onboard?” Sen asked.

Leo opened his eyes. “He’s on a comm,” he said.
“OK,” Sen said, laying down and closing his eyes.

Jim Kirk, lucky charm, Leo thought, watching both Raji and Sen settle down after having heard that reassurance. Then he closed his own eyes again and willed himself to sleep.

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When he opened his eyes again, Jim was leaning with his head against his knees, eyes incredibly blue over the black fabric, watching him. God, he looked exhausted.

“Jim,” Leo said, clearing his throat. “You gotten any sleep in the past 48?”

Jim shrugged, but he didn’t answer otherwise.

“We almost dirtside?” Leo asked, stretching.

“Yeah,” Jim said, voice muffled.

Leo squinted and looked at him. “Your back bugging you, Jim?”

“Pike made the doc upstairs put a regen blanket on me while we were talking,” he said, sidestepping the question neatly.

“Good idea,” he said. He’d swiped one of them from the Enterprise himself earlier, for just that reason. He scratched at his chest and flipped open his comm to see the time, drawing down his brows in consternation. “Why the fuck are we still in transit?” he asked Jim in a low growl.

Jim reached out a hand and snagged the end of Leo’s cot, pulling it toward the bulkhead he was braced against. He turned so that his back was to the cot, and then tilted his head in Leo’s direction.

Leo pushed the pillow over so that if Jim put his head back, it wouldn’t be resting on the bar of the cot. “Jim?” he asked, sure that he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“We’re still in transit, Bones,” Jim said flatly, “so that we’ll be back on Earth just in time for the morning news on the East Coast of North America.”

“Goddamnit,” Leo said. “Those motherfuckers.” He looked up and even in the low light of the shuttle bay he could see that Spock was awake and unless he missed his guess, listening to their conversation.

“Yeah,” Jim said. He let his head fall back heavily and scrubbed a hand over his face.

Leo’s hands itched to touch him, to do something to soothe him, but he was conscious of their lack of privacy. He was, in fact, hyperaware of the fact that there were hundreds of people around them, all of whom had comms with vid capacity. He wasn’t concerned about the Enterprise crew, but even in the low light, it was obvious that there were more people wandering around this section of the shuttle bay than there had been previously, all of them seemingly trying to get a glimpse of Jim’s bright head. Leo scowled at the thought, remembering how Jim had gone to ground just weeks before to avoid the glare of publicity over the Kelvin’s 25th anniversary. He wouldn’t be able to do the same thing this time.

“Jesus, Jim,” Leo said, curling as close to Jim as he dared. “This is going to suck, isn’t it?”

Jim’s blue eyes gleamed at him in the half-light, a bemused half-smile curling his generous lips. There were still faint rings of bruises around his eyes and on his throat. “And not in the good way,
Bones,” he agreed, trying for levity. He stared at Leo for an instant longer, his eyes bleak.

“Just rest for a few minutes, kid,” Leo sighed. “At least until we get there.”

Jim’s eyes dropped closed and he smiled again, but he was quiet until the ship’s broadcast about them docking at San Francisco High was announced.

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It was strange to be back in his Cadet reds, stranger still to see so much of the command crew returned to them as well. It made them look younger somehow, reminded Leo of exactly what had been accomplished, and what had been lost.

They’d been standing outside the Potemkin’s transporter room for well over an hour while the crew was beamed down in shifts. The command crew would be the last to go down, and although Jim had argued that Captain Pike should be the very last one to beam off the ship, he’d been overruled by Dr. Boyce, who was understandably anxious to see how his longtime friend was doing. Pike and T’enev had beamed down first, and then they’d been lined up in the hallway with some PR apparatchik who’d beamed up to scrutinize them. The apparatchik, whose name Leo had already forgotten, had pissed Leo off by stopping Leo from running a regen on Jim’s face, stating that Jim should stay as he was for ‘verisimilitude’.

Leo, who had waited to start regenerating Jim’s bruises until the only members of the crew left were those that he trusted, had bristled at the word, pointing out that it wasn’t verisimilitude when it had actually occurred, but from the puzzled frown on the Commander’s face he could tell that he hadn’t been understood. It was extremely galling, to say the least. Besides, they were going to be beamed down into an area with only Starfleet personnel before they’d be allowed to go to where their families, and the press would be. The press wouldn’t be allowed to actually interview them at this time, but they sure as hell would be allowed to take video of happy family reunions, to record what should be private, between spouses, and parents and children. He was half-hoping that Gram wouldn’t be waiting for him, but knew that she would weather whatever would happen. His other half was grinding its teeth at the idea that Jim would most likely not have anyone waiting for him in the family waiting area — other than Gram, that was.

When Commander PR Drone had been distracted by his constantly buzzing comm, the Bridge crew came to tell Jim that the senior staff was intending to wait for him in beam down area.

“We’re going to walk out of there as a team,” Sulu said firmly, Chekov nodding next to him.

“Besides,” Scotty said, “the more of us there are, the harder it’ll be for them to get to ye and Mr. Spock. The Security boyos are going to wait for us, too.”

Jim had looked from face to face of the group around him, his eyes stopping on Spock and then on Leo, as if seeking their approval.

“I think it’s a fine idea, Jim,” Leo said.

“I concur,” Spock said.

A ghost of a smile appeared on Jim’s tired face, but behind it Leo could sense the surprise that he felt but wasn’t showing. “Thank you, Mr. Sulu,” he said to the earnest young man who’d presented the plan.

“No sir, thank you,” Sulu said emphatically. He held out a hand. “I hope that we have the chance to serve together again, Captain.”
Jim smiled honestly then, and shook the Lieutenant’s hand, clasping him on the shoulder. As Leo watched, the remaining members of the Enterprise that were aboard lined up to shake hands with a clearly touched Jim, before the next group was called into the transporter room.

Jim was silent, leaning against the wall while the next few groups were called in.

“What’re you thinking about, Jim?” Leo asked.

“Debriefings,” Jim said, then looked at Leo before dropping his eyes to his hands. “The press.”

Leo began to fidget with the ring on his finger, only consciously realizing what he was doing when he saw Jim’s gaze slide over to his hands. He realized with a start that he should give the ring back but before he could even voice the thought, Jim started speaking again.

“What happens next,” he said.

“Pardon?” Leo asked.

Jim turned toward him so that his back was to Spock, Uhura, Scotty, Chekov and Sulu. Leo heard the echo of the elder Spock’s words as he realized with a start that the nucleus, the family that he had described, were those standing closest to them.

“That’s what I’m thinking about,” Jim said slowly, “what happens next.” Jim’s eyes were incredibly blue in the bright light of the Potemkin’s halls and there was something in the way he said the words, so deliberately, something in the way his lashes dropped over his eyes when he looked down at his father’s ring on Leo’s hand before he looked up at him again, that made Leo almost need to catch his breath.

He searched Jim’s expression, seeing his seriousness and his sincerity, but damned the circumstances that continuously seemed to be conspiring against them.

Jim’s eyes dropped to regard the ring again, just as Commander PR Drone, clapped -- literally clapped at them like they were five year olds -- to get them to go into the transporter room. “All except you, Commander Spock, and you Acting Captain Kirk,” he said in an obnoxious tone.

“What?” Leo asked, clearly irritated. He could smell Uhura’s perfume, and knew that she’d appeared by his side.

“You five,” he waved his hand dismissively, “beam down now, and then the Commander and the Captain will beam down last.”

“I recognize that there are only six stations on the transporter pad, Commander Ellsbridge,” Spock inserted smoothly, before anyone else could speak. “But protocol decrees that the Captain should be the last person off the ship.”

“But this isn’t his ship,” Commander Ellsbridge said with a toothsome smile, “so that doesn’t necessarily apply here. Besides, you and the Captain were the team that defeated the Romulans, so…”

Leo didn’t think he’d ever seen Jim’s back so stiff. “The entire team was integral to the success of the plan,” he said. “We formulated it together, and we all had our roles.”

“I’m sure,” the Commander said airily, dismissing Jim’s protests. “Nonetheless, you and Commander Spock will beam down together, at the end.”
“I believe,” Spock said, “that we were told that only Starfleet personnel will be waiting for us upon our immediate arrival.”

“Yes,” the Commander said. “And?”

“Then I fail to see the point in breaking the protocol,” Spock answered.

Jim’s smile was grim. “So that they have a story to tell in their press releases, right, Commander?”

His smile was patently false in return. “It’s all about presentation,” he answered. “And it’s an order from the Admiralty.”

“For the love of —” Leo began to say in protest, but he followed the others as they stomped into the transporter room, Spock and Jim trailing behind. They stood side by side behind the work station on the Potemkin and watched them swirl away. Jim’s expression was the last thing he saw before the white overtook him, and he carried the weight of his tight miserable appearance with him as he rematerialized a blessed eyeblink later.

He was still shaking himself out when he moved into the waiting area outside the transport bay and heard, “Leonard!” and turned to find himself with arms full of Patty Stefanakis.

“Oh, thank God,” she was saying over and over as she hugged him. He could feel her trembling against him and he bent down so she could kiss him, which she did, clasping his head in both of her hands. “Thank God, thank God, thank God.”

“I’m fine, Patty,” he said to her, and she drew back and looked at him, her face covered with tears.

“I sincerely fucking doubt that, my friend,” she said, “but you are alive, and that is all I care about.”

She let go of him, and before Leo could offer his condolences about Shohreh he was surprised to see Harry Yu standing right behind her, but even more so when the huge man engulfed him in a hug and picked him right up off the ground.

“Jesus, McCoy,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

“How’s Paul?” Leo asked, when he could breathe again.

“He’s fine,” he answered. “Upset. He wanted to come, but he's on duty.”

Leo nodded, and was about to ask after other colleagues when he heard Yu exclaim, “Jim!” The crowd of Starfleet personnel broke out in applause at the sight of Jim, and Leo watched him walk through the crowds, looking uncomfortable in a way that was probably only obvious to him, as people shook his hand and patted him on the back and told him that he was a hero. At least they weren’t touching Spock, who was radiating a serene yet clear message of ‘don’t fuck with me’.

Jim looked relieved when he saw Leo and moved through the crowd toward him, giving Leo an absolutely clear view of the utter shock on Jim’s face when Patty launched herself at him and wrapped him up in a hug. The expression on Jim's face went from closed to touched as Patty cried, holding onto him and whispering, “Thank God you’re all right, Jim.” She pulled back from him and smiled tremulously, looking at him. “I was so worried about you.”

The smile that Jim flashed her in return was sincere and heartfelt — Leo could tell that Jim hadn’t expected being appreciated for simply being alive, that he was expecting more of the hero worship to which he’d already been subjected — and Leo only turned around when he heard a sound of protest from behind him after something metallic hit the ground.
“Oh, I’m sorry,” Cupcake was saying to somebody who was clearly a member of the PR team, and had been holding a holovid recorder until Cupcake had knocked him over. “That was so clumsy of me. Let me help you up.” Another red-shirted crewmember that Leo recognized from the Enterprise moved over to help Hanlon and somehow they both managed to step on the camera.

Leo had to give Hanlon credit, the boy was surprisingly nimble for his size, and clearly could think on his feet. The hapless videographer scowled as he collected his shattered equipment, and cleared the room with an assistant, muttering about getting other cameras from the outside press area.

“Not bad,” Yu said in low voice right next to Leo’s ear.

Leo shook his head in wonder, turning back to see Patty wiping her eyes and stepping back from Jim. The crowd of strangers had thinned out as the phalanx of Enterprise crew who had waited for Jim and Spock to appear had managed to circle them and keep outsiders from getting to close to their Captain. Here and there, Leo saw a few faces that he recognized from the Academy, instructors like Harry who'd used their clearance to get into the room.

“Jimbo!” Yu said, picking up Jim in a bear hug and squeezing.

“Harry!” Leo roared, “his ribs!”

Jim was laughing, though, his face flushed and happy. Still, he bent over a little and braced his hands on his knees when Harry put him down, and Leo couldn’t stop himself from hurrying over to scan him despite Jim’s protests.

“I find that I approve of the doctor's solicitousness,” a voice said from behind him with a kind of oily affect that Leo could not help but recognize. “After all, I'm going to need you in tip-top shape for the next few days.”

"Excuse me?” Jim said, still catching his breath as he straightened up. “Admiral?”

“Howlett,” the man practically purred, and Jim blanched, even before he added with satisfaction, “And this time, Mr. Kirk, you will not be able to escape me. You owe me, and you owe Starfleet, and I intend to see that you pay.”

There was something so smugly self-satisfied about Howlett's tone, and all Leo could think about was the misery on Jim's face that night on the hill outside San Francisco, and the idea, the idea that Jim owed Starfleet anything when he had saved the lives of every single being on this planet ... for the first time in his life, Leo understood what it meant to be so infuriated that you saw red, because a wash of color flared up in his peripheral vision as red as the Cadet uniforms around him, or the blood of the human injured and the maimed that he'd tried to heal, and he just ... the scanner was still in his right hand when he clenched it as he turned, so without conscious thought he hauled off and threw the punch with his left arm, feeling a kind of satisfaction he'd never before felt when it connected solidly with Admiral Howlett's jaw and his head snapped back as he fell to the ground.

Howlett lay on the floor but pushed himself up to a sitting position unsteadily, rubbing at his jaw, his eyes furious and snapping. "I'll have you in the brig for that, McCoy. I owe you that much."

He pulled his hand away from his jaw as he spoke and Leo could only note with satisfaction, despite his pounding heart, that there was a discoloration from George Kirk’s ring. And God help him, he liked seeing that, felt a deep pleasure at knowing that he'd been able to throw that punch, maybe for
the both of them in some way.

"I don't think so," a voice said from behind him, and he heard and felt Jim's intake of breath at the cool, measured tone, feminine but with an edge like steel.

He turned with Jim, and even without an introduction, he would have recognized the woman walking toward them in Science blues for who she was. Jim's jawline was an echo of hers, the set of the eyes the same, even though their color was a darker and more stormy blue.

"Commander Kirk," Howlett said, waving off Ellsbridge's hand and standing up, pulling his shirt over his ample belly. "I can hardly see how this would matter to you, but you have no authority here."

"Really?" Winona Kirk said, coming over to stand next to her son and Leo. She looked at Jim for a long instant, her mouth softening into something not quite a smile.

"Mom …" Jim said in a tone of voice that Leo had never before heard him use.

Winona Kirk laid a hand on her son's arm. "Trust me," she said to Jim in a voice so quiet that Leo was sure that only he and Jim had heard it. In profile, mother and son resembled each other even more strongly with their willowy frames and stern jawlines. Leo watched as Jim's eyes flicked back and forth over his mother's, the set of his brow telling him that trust and his mother weren't necessarily compatible notions in Jim's mind. Their silent communication lasted for a few seconds longer, and then Winona turned back to Howlett and spoke in her clear, cool voice. She left her hand on her son's arm.

"And how is it, Admiral Howlett," she said, "that this is none of my business?"

Howlett straightened up from where he'd been dusting off his pants, lifting his jaw. "It's assault on a senior office," Howlett said simply. "Open and shut."

Leo watched as Winona's eyes narrowed and turned from the developing bruise on Howlett's face to his hands. He saw the faintest ghost of a smile flicker over her face as she focused on the ring on his left hand, before she returned her attention to Howlett and said. "I hardly think that anything you'd have to say is going to carry any weight after I submit copies of all of the messages you left for me in January to the Admiralty," she said clearly. "All the hectoring and the bullying -- the threats," she emphasized, "of what you would do to me, of the stories that you'd make sure were released, if I wouldn't consent to interviews about the 25th anniversary of my husband's death."

Howlett had stopped fussing with his pants. "There's nothing on those messages that I'm ashamed of," he said.

"Really?" Winona said. "Not even the one that you left me after I begged you, I begged you, not to release the tape of my husband's and my last conversation?"

Leo was standing close enough to Jim that he could feel Jim's muscles hardening, hear his respiration increasing and becoming harsh. He didn't need to glance down to know that Jim's hands were clenched into fists, and he put a hand on Jim's back, glancing over to where Harry Yu stood. One nod let him know that Harry was ready to intercede if things got worse.

Howlett appeared to be carefully considering what to say next, and Leo noted that his attaché Ellsbridge looked more than a bit discomfited by Winona's words.

"I heard later," Winona said evenly, "that there were other members of the Admiralty, members who'd served with my husband, or me, or our fathers," she stressed, "who were unhappy about the
release of those tapes. Now," she said with a cold smile, "exactly how unhappy do you think they'll be when they hear you threatening me, the widow of one of Starfleet's greatest heroes, and the mother of another?" She paused and took a step forward. "I think," she said, "that when I tell the Admiralty why I did it, that they'll believe that I was entirely justified in hitting a senior officer who threatened me in such a fashion."

Howlett laughed. "That won't work," he said.

Winona Kirk flipped open her comm and scrolled backwards with an air of nonchalance.

"There's no need — " Howlett began.

Winona smiled and pressed a button. "Commander Kirk," Howlett said in a snide voice, "you know there really is some very interesting reading in your personnel file — not to mention that of your son. I've tried to be reasonable, but if you persist in not returning my calls, I'm afraid that some of this interesting information may become public. Security breaches, while regrettable, can and do occur and …" Winona snapped her comm shut while Howlett's recorded voice was still speaking.

There was absolute silence in the room, and Leo looked around, seeing the hard expressions on the knot of people that surrounded them. "I don't think," she said clearly, "that anyone here would blame me for belting you in the mouth."

Howlett smiled, but it was cold, the smile of a man used to getting his own way, to spinning the story to his own advantage, whatever that might be. "Only one problem with your scenario," he said, then waved a hand in Leo's direction. "McCoy assaulted me, not you."

Winona Kirk's answering smile was toothy and all-too reminiscent of one that Leo had seen over the past few years, and if he hadn't known where to look he would have missed it when she lashed out and belted Howlett but good, as Jim surged forward only to be cut off by a wall of red shirts.

Leo blinked and sidestepped the Enterprise's security team and saw Howlett sagging against a disgusted looking Ellsbridge before he pushed him away, Howlett still staggering.

"Easily remedied," Winona Kirk said in a suspiciously mild tone, shaking out her hand and inspecting her knuckles.

And damn, Leo thought, Jim Kirk had gotten more than his stubbornness and a fair part of his good looks from his mama, because that right hook had looked mighty familiar.

"And now," Winona said, taking a step closer to the Admiral, "it will be your word against mine."

"You'll never get away with this," Howlett spat, "not with all these witnesses."

Leo looked around at again at the crowd as Jim got to his mother's side and stood there, chest heaving, staring at her, wide-eyed.

Winona looked at her son, and then around at the crowd, meeting the eyes of person after person. "I think," she said mildly, "that I'll take my chances."

"Mom," Jim protested in a worried tone, while Howlett raged in the background. The Enterprise's security crew had moved to cut off his access to Jim and made an impenetrable phalanx that he couldn't get around.

"Jim," Winona said with a soft smile. "Your crew is waiting for their Captain to walk out with them."
"Mom …" Jim repeated gently, but Winona caught his chin and turned his head so that he could see them all, the Bridge crew, the department heads, and senior officers and a fair number of cadets. Spock and Scotty stood shoulder to shoulder with Uhura, Chekov and Sulu, waiting.

"C'mon, Captain," Nyota said, waving them forward.

"I'll see you later, Jim," Winona said, stepping up on her toes to press a kiss to Jim's cheek. "I promise." She gave Jim a small push in the direction of the crew, and then turned to look at Leo with a stare that clearly said, 'what are you waiting for?'

"Ma'am," Leo said, acknowledging her.

Winona smiled at him and he was struck anew by the resemblance. "Doctor McCoy," she said. "A pleasure to finally meet you."

"Doctor McCoy," Spock said in his precise voice. "Please join us."

Leo nodded a wordless goodbye at Winona and moved to join Jim and the rest of the crew as they made their way to the door, the Enterprise's security team ringing them.

"You ready, Bones?" Jim asked him, tugging on his own jacket and then pulling at Leo's.

"Are you?" he asked Jim, looking into the familiar blue eyes.

Jim laughed, and shrugged, slapping Leo on the shoulder. "Does it matter?" he asked. "Buckle up, Bones," he said. "There might be more turbulence ahead."

And then the doors opened, and he heard the roar of the large crowd waiting for them, as they crossed the threshold together, surrounded by their friends.

Chapter 44

The noise alone was loud enough that it was nearly stupefying, but it wasn’t the cries of the crowd of family and friends that brought Leo up short. It wasn’t the sound of the press, screaming their names in an effort to get them to turn their heads and look toward their cameras, although he supposed that the respectable members of the press wouldn’t be screaming like banshees or fishwives at them, so they must be … paparazzi? It wasn’t even the blinding flashes of strobing light that lit their every step that caused his foot to falter, although it was hard to see where he was going, he had to admit.

Nor was he alone in feeling discombobulated by the entire circus. He grumbled in a low voice in Spock’s direction as his eyes watered, almost missing the sight of the nicitating membrane that had covered Spock’s eyes reflexively before it disappeared. “Goddamn it,” he said, “this is going to give someone a seizure!”

“I concur, Dr. McCoy,” Spock said primly, voice raised to be heard above the din. “I’d also raise the possibility of auditory damage.”

Leo glanced over at Spock with a sympathetic expression on his face. With his auditory capacity, the man had to be getting a headache, and unlike his eyes, his ears had no protective means of mitigation.

He opened his mouth to ask if Spock was all right, when he was thunderstruck by the sight of the man standing near the back, away from the crowd, and stopped dead.

“Dr. McCoy?” Spock said, and even Leo could discern the concern in his voice.
“Bones?” Jim turned from where he’d been walking a pace ahead of Leo and Spock, who’d flanked him on the left and the right, respectively. “Bones?” Jim put a hand on his shoulder and brought his head in close to Leo’s, searching his eyes. “What is it?”

“Goddamn it, Jim,” he answered in a low, wondering voice after a few more seconds of silence. “Ted is here.”

Jim’s eyes widened, but he widened his smile, too. “Wow,” he said lightly, in a tone at odds with his expression. “Unfurrow your brow, man, and keep walking.” He slung an arm around Leo’s shoulders, and put a hand on Spock’s. “The cameras are looking for any hint of controversy, so let’s just keep moving forward, right, Spock?”

“I find this experience unpleasant in the extreme,” Spock announced in a severe tone. “Also, I fail to see the necessity of it.”

The Vulcan was so rigid that he might shatter if he was touched the wrong way, Leo thought. “Mr. Spock here thought that Starfleet was going to protect us from the press,” Leo said, blinking away the tears being formed by the bright lights.

Jim threw his head back and laughed as the cameras flashed wildly, automatic shutters clicking away, and Leo couldn’t help but grin, knowing that Jim was mocking the whole scene as much as he was playing it up.

“You ham,” Leo said with affection, as Spock raised an eyebrow at the term. “And why is it, exactly, that the cameras have to make a noise, aside from the infernal flashing? It’s totally unnecessary.”

“Not according to the Privacy Act of 2247,” Jim said cheerfully.

“The who in the what now?” Leo asked.

“The Privacy Act of 2247,” Spock narrated in his teaching voice, “stated that even where there was no expectation of privacy, such as a public setting like this one, a camera operator’s image capture of a sentient being must somehow be registered by the object of the image capture, so that they may protest the intrusion, or at the least be warned that they are being recorded.”

“Exactly,” Jim said. He gave Spock an indulgent smile as Leo wondered about the timing of that particular law.

The crowd ahead of them had ground to a halt while various crewmembers reached their families. The cacophony of the photographers had been eclipsed by the sound of reunions, and joyous tears. Leo found himself trying to peer over heads for Gram, who had to be here somewhere, unless … would Ted have come because something had happened to her?

“Bones,” Jim said, hand on the nape of his neck and forehead brushing against his. “Bones, she’s right over there.”

Leo looked into Jim’s serene blue eyes and then followed the line of his long arm to where it pointed into the crowd at Gram, graciously waiting while others surged forward around her, her eyes fixed on his, tears streaming down her face.

“Gram,” he said to her, although she was too far away to hear him.

But she heard him anyway, and she clapped her hands over her face after he said it, shoulders shaking slightly.
Leo began to move through the crowd with Jim, who was for once, the politer of the two of them, as he asked people to let them by to a chorus of “of course, Captain”s and “Is that Captain Kirk? He’s so young!”

Jim dropped back as they got to Gram, letting Leo engulf her slender frame in a hug, but even as her arms wrapped around him, he felt her move in his embrace, reaching beyond him for Jim.

Leo kissed Gram and she held his face in her hands, staring at him. “Boy,” she whispered to him, “I told you not to scare me like that anymore.”

“Jim kept me safe,” he whispered back to her.

And she laughed and cried at the same time as he kissed her again, before she called, “Jim Kirk!” in a far more watery version of her usual voice, but still the one that demanded to be obeyed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Jim said from behind Leo, and when he turned, there was a spot of pink burning on each of Jim's cheeks, like a little boy’s.

“Who now, Jim?” she chided, hands on her hips, holding an angry pose for one second longer before she opened her arms to him.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Leo heard Jim say to his grandmother as she hugged Jim as tightly as she could.

“Jim Kirk,” she said to him sternly, “this being a hero business is hell on an old lady, you know. You shouldn’t scare me like that. Either of you,” her voice was stern but warm as she broke away from Jim but looped an arm around Leo and pulled him back. "Let me look at you both now," she said, studying Leo first. "You're looking a mite skinny, boy," she admonished, "and like you need to sleep for a week. If I know you, you took care of everybody else on that ship before you even gave a thought to yourself."

Jim snorted at Leo's discomfiture when he said, "I was the CMO, Gram," in a tone meant to be more exasperated than petulant and failing. "What would you have me do?"

"Use that brain of yours to look at yourself dispassionately," she said with asperity. "You're no good to the crew that need you if you're dead on your feet."

Jim laughed outright at that, and Gram's sharp hazel eyes turned to him and assessed him. “Don't you start, Jim boy,” she said severely. "I know that you are ten times worse than my boy here, and you are always too skinny, and giving away what you don't have to spare." Her fingers ghosted over the injuries on his face. "And who was looking after you? Leo," she accused him, rounding back on him. “What have you been doing that he still looks like he went ten rounds?"

Jim caught Gram's hand in his and squeezed it, drawing her attention back to him while Leo stood there, mouth agape. "Don't blame Bones, Gram," he said, and Leo couldn't help the smile that broke out over his face at Jim's slip of the tongue. "They wouldn't let him fix me up."

"Who wouldn't let them fix you up?" Gram asked, outraged.

"Starfleet PR," Jim said easily.

Gram's eyes swung from Jim's to Leo's and back. "Those goddamned bastards," she said with feeling. "After everything they put you through last month — those …" Gram's fists were clenched as she looked around the room, eyes searching, and for the first time in his life, Leo thought that his grandmother might actually take a swing at someone given the chance.
"Don't worry, Gram," Jim said with a sunny smile. "Bones already belted an admiral over it."

Gram's head snapped back to Jim and stared, hard. Then she turned and looked at Leo. "That right, baby?" she asked him, using an endearment he'd outgrown years ago.

"Yes'm," he said, not daring to lie, but unsure of her response.

Gram's smile could not have been any wider. "You got all your gumption from me, boy," she said, patting him proudly. "Thank God. You'll tell me the whole story later," she ordered.

Leo only nodded, noticing that Ted, who'd been watching their reunion, had begun to move toward them. He couldn't help but stiffen at the sight, and felt Jim move subtly so that he was standing right next to him, shoulder to shoulder. "Ted," he said, when his grandfather got nearby.

"Leo," Ted said. He was staring at Leo like he'd never really seen him before. "This must be Jim Kirk."

"Yes," Jim said smoothly. "I am. Hello, sir." He smiled, but there was an edge of something nearly feral there that let Leo know that Jim Kirk, who'd stared down the psychotic Romulan that had killed his father, wasn't the least bit cowed by one angry and bitter old man.

"Nice to meetcha," Ted said, extending a hand. "Lizbeth's been talking about you for months now, so I feel I know you."

"And I you, sir," Jim said lightly, giving Ted the briefest handshake that Leo'd ever seen the man offer.

Ted's dark blue eyes narrowed at Jim's words. "Well, then," he said. "I thank you for all that you did up there. The universe owes you a real debt of gratitude."

"Actually, we wouldn't be having this conversation if it weren't for your grandson," Jim said with quiet authority. "He was the one that smuggled me onto the Enterprise in the first place."

Ted stared at Jim, while Gram looked at Leo askance. "Smuggled?"

"Technically, he brought me aboard as his patient," Jim said, "so it's not like I was in his luggage or anything. But … the fact remains that I was not supposed to be on the Enterprise, and if he hadn't brought me aboard …" Jim shrugged.

"Jim figured out what was happening at Vulcan," Leo said to Gram, unsure of how much of the story had been conveyed to them. "So we were shielded and at Red Alert when we came out of warp into …" He shook his head, unable to continue describing what he'd seen.

"Merciful heavens," Gram said, putting her arm around Leo. "The bits and pieces of the story that we've gotten haven't made much sense," she said.

"Were you on the bridge?" Ted asked Leo. His tone was surprised, but not as scathingly disbelieving as it once might have been. Ted knew, after all, that the roots of Leo's aviophobia lay in the shuttle crash that had claimed his mother and sister's lives.

"Yes," Leo said.

"We both were," Jim said. "It was …" he paused. "A sight I hope never to see again," he finished.

"So many people," Gram said. "And then Vulcan …" she shook her head in dismay. "I see that one
of the officers on the *Enterprise* is a Vulcan."

"Commander Spock," Jim answered, "he’s the first Officer. Or, well … he was. I’m not sure what he’ll do now."

Leo hadn’t actually given much thought to the idea, but he supposed that Jim was right. Re-establishing their culture, a colony, their people — those were huge tasks that would more than likely require the cooperation of every available Vulcan, but where did that leave Spock and Uhura? He looked over his shoulder to where Spock stood talking to Nyota and what must be her family. If he hadn’t seen it with his own two eyes, he might have discounted it, but the fact remained that there were sincere and true feelings between Uhura and the Vulcan, and he wondered what this would mean for their future together. It had probably always been a long shot, but … he knew that Vulcans weren’t a species that engaged in casual relationships, since it was illogical to pursue pleasure for its own sake. Still, he hadn’t considered what the destruction of Vulcan would mean, in real terms, for Nyota and Spock.

Or for all of them, he considered, reflecting on what Ambassador Spock had said to him when they’d met, about how no good could come of a universe where the seven of them weren’t together on the *Enterprise*. He looked around the room until he finally found the cloaked and hooded figure of the Ambassador, standing out of the fray, but no doubt watching it all. He stared at the man, willing him to do something about the situation, if not for Nyota’s sake, then for the sake of the future, until he and Jim were summoned away from his grandparents by yet another PR underling.

+ +

It turned out that Jim’s sunny jackass persona photographed really well.

Not that this was too surprising, since even with all the bruising on the side of his face that bore the most scars, Jim was still one of the more strikingly beautiful men that he’d ever seen.

And really, he wasn’t being that much of a jackass.

From what Leo could tell, Jim figured that part of his job as Captain was to rally his crew, and that included making sure that they were all, particularly him, smiling, in the group photos that Starfleet insisted that they pose for like they were holovid stars, or some other form of celebrity.

And it wasn’t that he didn’t think that what they’d accomplished, what *Jim* had accomplished, hadn’t been remarkable, it’s just that he wished that there was a little bit more solemnity associated with the situation. Spock’s planet had been destroyed, and even though the destruction of their own world had been averted, a couple thousand of their colleagues were dead.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t grateful for being alive and happy to still be by Jim’s side, it’s just that, after the welcome home came the debriefings, and then … the funerals.

He’d be lucky if there wasn’t a court martial for him in there, too, along with that stint in the brig he’d so far managed to avoid but had been half-expecting all along.

Although … he looked across the room where the *Enterprise’s* crew had been lined up to pose in various combinations and had noted the number of Admirals watching, which included Barnett.

And he had watched as Commander Winona Kirk spoke to one after another of them, watched them go from listening to her with an air — not of studied indifference, but a kind of professional reserve — to closely listening to her in alarm, and then anger. Watched more than one of them wave someone else over — an aide or another Admiral — to make them take notes or perhaps arrange an
appointment. And all through the long hour where they posed and smiled in various combinations, Admiral Howlett stayed away from them. And Commander Ellsbridge seemed mighty distracted, paying as much attention to Winona Kirk’s progress through the VIPs of Starfleet as he did to the Enterprise crew.

There’d been a kind of formal luncheon for the crew and their families, one which the press had blessedly not been invited to, after the protracted folderol of the picture-taking. He’d passed a surreal couple of hours seated at a table below the watchful eyes of the Admiralty at the head table, while he and Jim, Gram, Ted, Winona Kirk and Spock and his father, Ambassador Sarek, made conversation. It had been awkward, but between Gram’s well-bred amiability and Jim’s charm, not to mention decorous ankle-kicking from Gram directed toward him when he got too quiet, they’d managed to somehow muddle through, although the conversation had become less lively when Jim had excused himself to go around the room and speak to each crew member present and be introduced to their family. Jim’s cheeks had to hurt from having smiled as much as he had, but he was gracious from the first minute to the last, meeting parents and partners, siblings and children. He kissed babies, shook hands and was generally his charming self.

Leo was probably the only person, aside from Gram, who recognized how totally exhausted Jim was, who saw the toll that such an exercise took on him, as sociable as he was.

Although, he had to admit that he’d noted how carefully Winona was watching her son, and wondered at her level of knowledge. She hadn’t quite met his expectations, Jim’s mother. Aside from the physical resemblance between them, he hadn’t expected to see that there were other commonalities between mother and son. He’d always thought that Jim’s heroic tendencies must have come from his father, but that hadn’t accounted for his shrewdness, his incisive capacities. That, along with the right hook, seemed more of a facet of Winona’s personality.

Of course, of how exactly Winona had managed to convey these traits to her son he still remained unsure, since he’d been under the impression that Winona had spent large portions of Jim’s life elsewhere, and hadn’t had that much influence. He supposed now that the belief was unfair. True, he’d had his mother around every day for the first eight years of his life, but she’d been gone now for more than twice that time. Still, he felt her influence, acknowledged it as part of his self.

Now, hours later, Leo sighed and checked the time on the chrono on his communicator, noting that Gram, while slightly late, was not even close to achieving the hour of lateness that indicated he should begin to worry. In fact, she was still within the range of time that she alone considered to be on time, chronometers be damned.

He pointedly ignored the comms below the time, not needing to reacquaint himself with the summons for debriefings that would take up most of his day tomorrow. Instead, he chose to relish the peace and quiet of the Officer’s Club, where he and Gram would take their supper this evening, Ted having chosen to head back to Georgia after the luncheon. He was still a little rattled by his grandfather’s appearance, although in McCoy-like fashion, Ted had never actually acknowledged the long-standing rancor between the two of them, merely acted like everything was perfectly fine and dandy, like it was absolutely normal for him to barely speak to Leo for well over three years and then just show up one day and speak to him civilly. And really, who the hell knew? Maybe it was normal to do so in other people’s families.

Leo sipped at the fine, top-shelf bourbon that he’d intended to treat himself to after his long damned day, although his drink had been paid for by an officer down the end of the bar who’d identified himself as an old friend of Captain Pike’s. They’d spoken for a few moments before his dining
companion had showed up, and now Leo waited at the bar, sitting with his back to the door and eyes mostly focused on the blazing synth fire that was crackling merrily on the hearth, warming the room. The walk across campus from Starfleet Medical had been grey and damp, true Bay area winter weather. The harsh wind off the water had only served to enhance the solemn mood of the campus. If Leo hadn’t known better, he could have convinced himself that it was the holiday season, which accounted for why the campus felt so empty.

But it wasn’t the holiday season, and he knew very well that those missing from the pathways, and the lecture halls, and the mess, were never coming back.

He’d visited Starfleet Medical, mostly to check up on Pike, but also to just check in, although he was not scheduled to work. It had been a strange visit, with some colleagues, people he’d never really spoken to, coming over to say hello. Others had looked at him as if he were a ghost, or with anger or barely concealed resentment — he assumed because he was still alive when so many others were not. One of the more uncomfortable conversations had occurred when a colleague had come over to offer his condolences on the death of Ellie Pierson, and he’d realized with a start that he’d hadn’t known that she was onboard the Antares.

He hadn’t even thought to check for her name on the lists, because … because he was kind of a bastard sometimes. He spun his glass on the bar, brooding at the thought. They’d broken up and gone their separate ways, as separate as they’d been before he’d seen and touched every bit of skin she owned, and slid inside of her. That was it, though — he’d been intimate with another person and not been intimate.

It didn’t matter if that had been what Ellie wanted, all she’d been capable of giving. He’d been untrue to himself, to what he wanted, what he needed.

Jim.

Always Jim.

Really, no one else could compare.

Below the messages from Starfleet Command, there were comms from Jess, Tharis and of all people, Jocelyn Darnell, once McCoy. He’d loved them all, and still felt something for each of them, even if it was only bitterness in Jocelyn’s case. But he’d never felt as much for any of them as he felt for Jim, the depth of all he felt for Jim.

He sighed and sipped his drink, aware that he was smiling, probably dopily, at the very thought of Jim.

“Dr. McCoy,” he heard from next to him. He turned in his seat to look at Winona Kirk.

“May I sit?” she asked.

He waved a hand to indicate that she could. “Of course, Commander,” he said.

Winona studied him for a moment before she nodded to the bartender and ordered a high end Scotch for herself.

Leo pointed downward to indicate that her drink was on his non-existent tab when the bartender brought it, and caught the edge of the smirk that he’d always associated with Jim only, until now.

“Always the gentleman,” Winona said, raising her glass to acknowledge the gesture.
“There are rules,” Leo said mildly, tilting his own glass toward her.

Winona regarded him before she took a sip of her Scotch. “As I said,” she repeated, “always the gentleman.”

Leo said nothing, because there was no response required. Especially in light of his own recent thoughts, where’d he acknowledged his failures at meeting his own standards of gentlemanly behavior. It didn’t matter if Ellie herself wouldn’t have found fault with his actions. He’d disappointed himself. Meeting Jim?” he asked, honestly curious.

“Later,” she answered. “First, I’m meeting someone else.”

Leo nodded, and when the quiet had lasted for more than a minute, he looked up to find Winona contemplating him with a speculative glance.

“You don’t like me very much, do you?” she asked him.

“To be honest, I don’t know you, ma’am,” Leo answered easily. Winona Kirk would have to go a long way to find a man more blunt than he was, or one less likely to be offended by its use as a weapon against him.

“Ma’am,” Winona said softly. “I believe that I told you at lunch that you should call me Winona, but it’s still Miz Kirk this or Ma’am that.”

"Old habits die hard,” he lied easily.

“I suppose that I should be grateful that you’ve stopped calling me Commander,” she said drily. Leo smiled thinly and picked up his glass, knowing that she’d pegged his reluctance to get more familiar with her appropriately.

“The thing is, the fact that you don’t like me actually makes me like you more.”

Leo was glad that he hadn’t actually taken the mouthful of bourbon, because it would have been a shame to waste the fine whiskey all over the bar, not to mention ungentlemanly. “I beg your pardon,” he offered, eyebrow raised to the limit.

Winona smiled, and he wondered if there would come a day when he wouldn’t see Jim in her face. “No need,” she said. “Because if I were you, I wouldn’t like me either.”

Leo put his glass down on the bar.

“Don’t look so surprised, Dr. McCoy,” she said, and he knew by the way that she said his name that she’d noted that he’d not given her leave to call him by his first name. “I remember what it was like to love someone the way you love my son,” she said. “To have him be the most important person to you in all the universe,” her expression was soft as she said this, her eyes faraway. “My son and I don’t talk very much, but when we do, it’s ‘Bones this’ and ‘Bones that’. I know that you’re the one who takes care of my son, and that you do a good job of it.” She looked up at him. “And I know that you don’t think that I did.”

Leo stared back at Jim’s mother without flinching from her gaze, but she didn’t drop her eyes, the darkest shade of one the many blues in Jim’s striking irises, from his.

“You’re right,” she said without hesitation. “I didn’t. I didn’t take good enough care of either of my sons. Oh, I could make all sorts of excuses -- list my hurts, bare my scars -- but the fact is that I had
two beautiful sons and I failed both of them, left them to other people's care because ... well." She
looked down at the bar, her mouth a hard line. "By the time I realized what I had done, Sam was
dead and Jim wouldn't let me take care of him, not ever again." Her voice was harsh, anguished.

She looked over at Leo. "He's told you about that, hasn't he?"


Winona looked away and smiled with the same wry twist to her generous mouth that Jim got
sometimes. "Well ... that some is more than I have ever heard from him on the subject," she said,
looking at Leo. "When he came back ..." she inhaled sharply. "He ... wouldn't talk to me. He
wouldn't talk to anyone, really, not even to his grandfather. Tiberius," she clarified, "George's father.
He was this tiny, shrunken little boy with an old man's eyes. He lived with Tiberius until I got back
planetside, and I made him come home with me. Selfish," she said, with a laugh. "I used to long for
him to look at me, to really look at me. Until the day he did," she added. "And then I ... I wished I
were dead." She fell to silence, and Leo shifted uncomfortably on his stool.

"I know what happened up there," she said. "I went to the trial, a penance for my sins. Heard the
testimony of all those miserable bastards that let it all ... well," she stopped herself again. "You can't
change the past, right?" She took in a breath, and kept talking. "Sam had always been my angry
child, the one who resented me being gone, who resented his stepfathers, the foolish choices that I
forced on them, into their lives. Jim? Jim was the child who was always happy to see me, loving,
kind, so smart, so bright." Winona was smiling. "So much like his father. Sam I worried about.

She turned around on her stool and looked at Leo again. "I thought that I knew what it meant to have
lost everything," she said. "I took my children's love, I took their forgiveness for granted, Jim's in
particular. When he was a boy? He was so full of love that I fed off it, let it fill me up, until I bled
him dry." She picked up her drink and emptied it in one big swallow. "In short, I was a fool."

Leo worried the glass of bourbon on the bar, his natural tendency to want to say something soothing
at odds with his true feelings about the situation.

"You don't have to say anything to me, Dr. McCoy," Winona said. "Like most important lessons in
my life, I learned that one far too late. And now? I'm grateful for what I can get. I'm grateful for the
fact that, against all odds, Jim has let me be some part of his life. And I'm grateful for you," she said,
and it struck Leo how very brave she was to tell him all of this, knowing as she clearly did that he
was not her most sympathetic audience.

Winona's hand reached out and touched the ring that still sat on the smallest finger of his left hand.
"Because when Jim did talk to me about you, I could hear the love in his voice. And I hoped, I
hoped, that you were worth my Jim's love for you, because to know that I had ruined that for him
too, that would have been the worst blow of all." She smiled at Leo, the same true smile that Jim
gifted him with on occasion. "But I can see that you do love him. It shines from you, the same way
your lack of trust for me does, and that's exactly what I want for him, for once in his life, someone
who values him that much, who knows how truly special he is. I'm sure he's given you a run for your
money. He's good at testing people, and not believing that anyone is really trustworthy. That," she
said ironically, "he did learn from me." She looked up Leo again. "Sorry."

Her fingers, long and slender and like Jim's, were laying on the bar next to George Kirk's ring.

"Do you want it back, Winona?" Leo asked, picking up his hand and splaying his fingers. The smile
that crossed her face made him dizzy with seeing double for an instant.

"No, Leonard," she said certainly. "That ring is exactly where it belong." Her smile turned rueful.
"Besides, what I want, still and always, is the hand that first wore that ring." She searched Leo's eyes again. "I didn't tell you all this to charge you with making my boy happy, or because I have some illusion that I'm transferring his care from me to you. Or even to give you my blessing."

"OK," Leo said, unsure of what Winona was trying to say.

"I just …" she put her hand over his, and squeezed. "I hope you know," she said in an urgent voice, "-- especially after everything that's happened this week — I hope you really know that life is short. Don't put off things until tomorrow," she said, "because sometimes tomorrow never comes. That's what I've learned."

She let go of his hand and stood up. "It was nice to finally meet you, Bones," she said.

There was something in her impish tone that made him chuckle. "Likewise, Winona," he said sincerely, and when she cocked her head to the side and looked at him skeptically, he added. "Truly."

"Don't go draggin' down my good opinion of you now, Leonard," she teased.

He laughed outright then, and then sobered when he saw Gram walking in to the Officer's Club. She was holding the arm of an Admiral that he didn't recognize, talking earnestly. The Admiral appeared to be listening intently. "Uh oh," he said.

Winona turned and saw his grandmother. "How did your grandmother end up with Admiral N'bugwamu?" she asked, looking back at Leo

Leo shook his head helplessly. "She's wily," he said, by way of explanation as he stood to greet them.

"A family trait, no doubt," Winona said, as Gram and the Admiral drew close.

They exchanged pleasantries and sorted themselves into their appropriate pairs, Winona and Admiral N'bugwamu taking an isolated table across from the bar and sitting down.

"Well, Leo," Gram said, looking from Winona Kirk to him. "Tell me absolutely everything."

Her voice was warm, but her tone brooked no argument, and Leo could not help but smile at her. Much to her surprise, he wrapped his arms around her and just held on, while she hugged him back. "Gram," he said to her quietly. "I know that I don't say it often enough, but I am grateful that I have you."

Gram looked up at him, her gaze quizzical and slightly worried. "I know you are, Leo."

"No, Gram," he said to her sincerely. "You don't, really. I'm just … I've been very lucky to have you looking out for me, taking care of me."

Gram looked a little teary at his words.

"Not giving up on me," he said in a near whisper.

"Never," she said fiercely. "I would never do that."

"I know," Leo said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "And that's why I'm lucky. Thank you, Gram."

Gram's eyes were bright when she pulled away and she sniffed a little. "Silly boy," she said. "Don't think that buttering me up means you don't have to tell me what was going on here." She wiped at
her eyes with the handkerchief that Leo offered and stepped around him toward the dining room of the Officer's Club. "And don't think for one minute, Leonard Horatio McCoy," she said over her shoulder, as she marched toward the maître d' like she was the officer and not him, "that I didn't notice the fact that you're suddenly wearing a ring."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, rolling his eyes a little.

"And don't roll your eyes at me, boy," she chided, without turning around. "That's just childish."

Chapter 45

When it first started happening, he had almost convinced himself that he was hallucinating from too much booze or too little sleep, or both.

As time went on and it still kept happening, he decided that it was a sign of an incipient nervous breakdown, the rational veneer that he'd been clinging to by a freakin' thread since his father died and his life went to total shit sliding right the fuck off under the pressure of wanting something that he was never going to get. It was sublimated desire, refracted through an oddly chaste dream, like a memory of all the good parts of monogamy, without the really good parts, goddamnit.

But now that it's been four nights without Jim Kirk sneaking into his bed to sleep, he's really afraid that he is going to crack right the fuck up.

Because how the hell did it get to the point where he can't fuckin' sleep without Kirk, when all Kirk has ever fuckin' done is sleep with him?

If Leonard McCoy's life could get any fucking weirder, it would be … Jesus, he didn't even want to think what that could possibly mean, because it's already been too fucking weird to make any kind of rational sense. Because, really. He will not get any kind of sleep tonight again, if Kirk doesn't show up. And bitter experience -- does he have any other kind? -- has proven that a Leonard McCoy who hasn't slept more than an hour or two out of closing in on 96 hours is a fuckin' psychotic nightmare.

And he has the residency write-ups to back him the fuck up on that.

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Leo punched his pillow in frustration and allowed as how he wasn't being truly fair about the situation. Rationally, he knew that they'd made enormous strides in re-establishing intimacy and trust in the past few weeks, especially after their estrangement of the weeks prior. But he'd hoped that what had happened the past week aboard the Enterprise had finally set them back on the track that they should be traveling, the one that led to their friendship evolving from flirtation into consummation.

He knew that he was being impatient, knew that Jim had probably spent the night before with his mother, maybe catching up, maybe healing some of the breach that existed between the two of them. If Jim had slept at all the night before, that is, because when Leo had seen him earlier in the day, the bruises around his eye had been at war with the ones underneath them for which could be more prominent. Jim's face had been grim and tight underneath the veneer of the public smile that he'd worn for the non-Enterprise personnel present in the waiting room. Leo had been reviewing his notes before going in for the next round of debriefings, this time with the Medical Admiralty, when he'd felt the welcome weight of Jim's warm hand slide across his shoulders, and looked up into infinitely weary blue eyes. He'd heard the echo of Winona's words from the day before, about how Jim had had the eyes of an old man when he came back from Tarsus little more than ten years ago. He'd made much the same observation of Jim himself over the past couple of years, noting the
contrast between his typically sunny personality and the truth that was sometimes reflected in his expressive eyes, but still … he absolutely fucking hated to see it there.

It wasn't the time or place for it, but what'd he wanted to do when he recognized the contrast between his smile and the truth Jim's eyes was to stand up and take him in his arms and kiss him until that look was washed away by pleasure and love.

Damn it.

When the hell was it going to be their time?

His own debriefings had been mercifully brief in regard to the question of how, exactly, Jim had ended up on the Enterprise, and although he knew that he should be grateful that he hadn't been forced to out and out lie, the prevarications he'd made and the intimations of the politics that underlay every interaction that he'd had with Starfleet's Central Command had left him feeling jittery and exposed. He wasn't by nature a dishonest person, although he could keep secrets, his own and those of his patients, when it was necessary. But the fact that what had begun as an illegal maneuver had ended up being the salvation of the world that they knew, not to mention the remainder of the United Federation of Planets, meant that there were those on every panel who ensured that the answers surrounding his ultimate motivations had remained obscured. No one, it seemed, wanted to look too closely at the causality loop that had begun with his impulsive move, once they were assured that he himself had no idea of the events that were about to unfold.

By contrast, the medical debriefing had been long and grueling, with his actions in clearing the destroyed Sickbay, assuming command and rendering care scrutinized to the utmost degree. There, at least, he was more assured that he'd done what he could, and done it well, but there were those among the Admiralty who recalled his misadventure with the creation of the antiviral therapy for CHF III with displeasure. There, at least, was the censure and the scrutiny that he expected for bringing Jim aboard, and with it, some small measure of satisfaction for being called to account for his actions, good or ill.

The puzzling incidents surrounding Dr. Dehner's death were met with no small amount of disbelief, especially by those who'd supported her meteoric rise through Starfleet, and the lack of findings in support of the baffling electronic discharge that had occurred just before her death had been the source of long and vociferous argument. The testimony that Dr. Dehner had left behind on her tricorder had been ruled irrelevant, from a medical standpoint, dismissed as the delusional deathbed ramblings of a gravely injured woman. More study of what had occurred was finally agreed upon, before a painstaking analysis of his surgical interventions on Captain Pike's behalf was undertaken. Straightforward as that surgery had been, and with the recording of it in support of his memory, that portion of the testimony alone had taken hours. Leo had stumbled out of the hearing room long after it seemed the rest of the crew had been dismissed. The waiting room was empty, and only one door off the main room remained closed. He'd been left to surmise that Jim was behind it, still undergoing his own grueling questioning.

He'd had a quiet dinner with Gram, and seen her off to the shuttle for Atlanta with a hug and a kiss for himself and one for Jim, when he saw him. He'd commed him on his way back to his dorm and made it back to his room just shy of 2200 hours. He'd taken a shower, then listened to and deleted most of the comms that had piled up in his inbox while he sipped a few fingers of bourbon. One of the first comms had had been from Commander Ellsbridge, reminding him that he and the rest of the crew of the Enterprise were not to speak to the press without a designated representative of Starfleet's PR staff present, and for once, he was grateful for their strict control. He certainly had no
desire to speak to anyone from the press.

In truth, he had no desire to speak to anyone, not even Patty, who'd also left a message. He'd texted one back to her rather than calling, letting her know that he was exhausted but fine, and just plain talked out for the night.

Then he'd sat back and stared at the door for a while, willing Jim to appear.

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He'd finally given up the ghost after midnight, unwilling to stay upright any more, and beginning to doubt that Jim would show up anyway. They'd still been putting the tattered remnants of their friendship back together in the weeks before they'd gone out on the Enterprise, and if he'd been counting on the old fourth night rule being reinstated because of what happened during the time that they'd spent on the Enterprise, maybe he'd been the one deluding himself. Maybe he'd just allowed himself to be convinced by the trauma that they'd shared, by everything that had happened. But now that they were back on the ground, back to the reality of debriefings and the haunting sight of the high-rise dorm buildings at night with far too few lights on in them ... maybe things were different.

He found himself studying the ring on his finger when he realized that he was worrying it again, a nervous habit that he'd acquired in the days since Jim had given it to him. He wondered if he was investing too much meaning in the token, despite the significance that Winona and Gram seemed to place on it. He ordered the lights down to 5% and rolled over, shoving his hands up under the pillows of his too-big bed, the one that Jim had procured for him, and tried to will himself unconscious.

Around him, he could hear the vast emptiness of the dorm, and tried to convince himself that he wasn't the only one left in the building, willing himself not to think of all the empty rooms that surrounded him. He fell into an uneasy sleep, wondering who, exactly, was the ghost in this scenario.

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The snick of the door opening was startlingly loud in the quiet room, and it jarred him abruptly from a thin, grey sleep full of phantoms and shifting, jumbled landscapes that he was hopelessly lost amidst.

There was only one person that would come into his room at this late hour, and Leo blinked awake, eyes focusing on the wall next to his bed. He felt irrationally angry at having been forced to wait as long as he had, the past days bleeding into the tension that he'd been feeling for months, and he rolled over, poised and ready for a fight, almost spoiling for it. But the grief and exhaustion visible on Jim's face was like a gut punch and stopped him cold.

Jim was standing inside his door, hair mussed from pulling the dark watch cap he clutched in his hand off his head. He looked uncharacteristically uncertain, like he was still deciding if he should stay or go when he looked back at Leo. One hand was braced against the wall, and he was leaning like he was maybe going to take his boots off, with one foot behind the other, but just hadn't. He was clearly fucking exhausted, and when Leo rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up on the side, he looked almost surprised to see him.

He'd opened his mouth to speak, but Leo cut him off, standing up, feet curling away from the cold floors as he walked over to him. "Where you been, Jimmy?" he asked quietly.

Jim's blue eyes blinked slowly, the way they sometimes did when he was well and truly drunk, but
Leo didn't smell any alcohol coming off of him.

"Walking," Jim answered, slowly, licking his lips. His voice was a harsh rasp. He toed off the boot and shifted his stance to take off the other one.

Leo nodded and took the hat from Jim's hand, tucking it in his pocket, before his hands turned to the task of unbuttoning Jim's pea coat. He was reverting to being Jim's caretaker, but he couldn't help himself. It was his nature, and besides, if that was what Jim needed right now, he couldn't in good conscience push him farther. He watched Jim's eyes fall to where his hands were working the fabric open, seeming entranced by the sight, and there was a kind of regard, a heat in Jim's gaze on his hands that was reflected in the pink flush on his cheeks. Somehow, Leo didn't think that it was just the result of the raw San Francisco February night anymore, and he felt a wave of calm wash over him as he made his own decision.

He pushed the pea coat back off Jim's shoulders, stepping into him when he did so, and felt the way Jim's body moved toward him and then back, as if he had to stop himself.

Leo couldn't help the smile that curved the edges of his mouth as he reached behind Jim to hang his jacket up on the hook. "You want me to take your other boot off, too?" he asked Jim in a low voice, his face bare inches from Jim's.

Jim's chest heaved at Leo's words, and he blinked and reflexively licked his lips before he uttered a broken, "Bones, I …" which Leo caught in his mouth with a deep, searing kiss.

Leo's hands had come up to cup Jim's head to his so he didn't have much room to move back when Leo broke the kiss. "What?" he whispered, and kissed him again without waiting for an answer, slipping his tongue into Jim's mouth and making a lazy circuit.

Jim's hands had come up and covered his as he shuddered, wrapping his fingers around Leo's hands like he wanted to peel them away, but he held on and kissed him back.

Leo broke the kiss, and pulled away, staring at Jim in the low light of his room, waiting.

Jim tipped forward into his embrace, pressing his forehead against Leo's. "I don't know how to do this," he said, his words an echo of the last time they'd been in this room, but instead of getting angry, Leo felt himself smiling, feeling the way Jim was still holding onto his hands, not as willing to let go this time.

Leo kissed him again, catching his teeth against Jim's lips at the rising joy he felt, but pulled back at Jim's muffled protest. "What?" he asked, running his right hand through Jim's hair. "This?" Jim and he were so well matched in height that Jim's lips were right there against his when he kissed his way along his sharp jawline to his mouth, reveling in the way Jim responded to him despite his confusion.

"Bones," Jim said again, and his voice was slightly petulant. "This, you and me, I'm no good at this kind of thing."

Leo held Jim's head in his hands, running his thumbs over Jim's cheekbones, still smiling. "Like I am, Jim?" he asked. "Nobody knows what the fuck they're doing when it comes to this." He tilted Jim's head and kissed his eyelids, and then gently down the chain of bruises around his left eye, tasting Jim's shiver and his want at his actions. He stepped into Jim, placing one foot between his legs and pressed down on the heel of his remaining boot. "Take this off," he ordered.

Jim's eyes were dazed, but still dazzling up this close, although he hesitated before he stepped back, crossing a foot over behind him to toe off the boot. "Bones," he said, his voice serious, and he held
up his hands to block Leo’s kiss when he tilted his head to stop Jim’s mouth with his own. "I don’t want to fuck this up," he said. The boot fell on the floor with a clunk, punctuating his statement.

“Then don’t,” Leo said succinctly. He pulled Jim into him by his reds, crumpled after his long day, and wound an arm around his waist, moving him away from the door and toward the bed.

“Bones,” Jim began, and this time his voice had an edge of temper. “I’m serious. If I fuck this up …” Jim made a helpless gesture, but left the rest of the sentence unvoiced.

“Then don’t,” Leo repeated. He put his hand under Jim’s jaw as he held him with the other arm, keeping him close, keeping him next to the bed. “One of the ways we can fuck this up is to keep lying to each other, Jim,” he said clearly. “About what it is that we really want.” He trailed a finger down Jim’s neck, and then put his fingers on the pull tab of the zipper that held his uniform tunic together.

Jim had gone very still under his hands, watching Leo closely from under heavy-lidded eyes. “Why’d you bring me on the Enterprise, Bones?” he asked quietly as Leo began to pull down the zipper.

Leo raised his eyes up from where he’d started to part the fabric and looked Jim in the eye, not masking anything that he felt for him. He watched as Jim’s eyes widened and the color rose in his face, could feel the rising tide of his respiration below his hands when he pulled his jacket open. He leaned in until Jim’s eyes were just a mosaic of blue, and whispered, “You know why I brought you on the Enterprise, Jim,” before he kissed him, letting all of the love and longing he felt bleed into his kiss.

And yeah, maybe he was being kind of a dick for not saying the words when he felt them nonetheless, but he wasn’t going to be forced into saying them first.

Besides, he was goddamned sick and tired of talking.

Jim made a low, keening noise and pulled Leo flush against him, his hands wrapped low around Leo’s hips as he pressed his cock against Leo’s and ground against him. “Bones …” he said when they broke apart, but this time, his voice was an intent rasp as he shrugged impatiently out of his jacket and pushed warm, hasty hands up underneath the threadbare t-shirt that Leo had worn to bed before he kissed and bit the skin below Leo’s left ear where his jaw met his neck.

Leo wrapped his arms around Jim’s shoulders and held on, the smile that had been breaking free for the past few minutes reappearing as he tilted his head back, loving the feel of Jim’s beautiful hands finally, finally on his skin. He shuddered as Jim ran a hand down his back and under his briefs onto his buttock, startling when he bucked against his pants, still cold and damp from his wanderings across campus in the chilly dark. He opened his eyes to find Jim watching him avidly, hungrily, and smiled again, loving Jim’s look of surprise, even as he pushed away from him. “Now, hold up there, Jim,” he drawled. “You’re not going to jump the line here just because you decided to get with the program.”

Jim laughed. “Oh, I’m not?” he said challengingly, running his hands across the small of Leo’s back and down again, grasping firmly at his buttocks.

Leo slid a hand in between them and unhooked the top of Jim’s pants, fingering the pull tab while he looked Jim in the eye, challenging him, teasing him. “I’m the one who had to do the convincing here, Jim,” he said. He slid the zipper down and turned his hand to cup Jim, hot and heavy in his palm, and squeezed lightly, loving the groan that tore from Jim and the way his eyes were darkening. “You’ll just have to wait your turn,” he said, then leaned in to kiss Jim breathless.
When they broke apart, Leo gave Jim one last squeeze before he slid his hands out and around his back, over the smooth skin and the sweat collecting in the small of his back. He pulled Jim’s undershirt up and over his head, and stroked his hands over Jim’s shoulders, cataloguing the shiver that received with a pleased nod.

“What?” Jim asked, watching Leo’s face intently.

Leo smiled and kissed across the line of Jim’s shoulder moving from the neck outward, feeling Jim positively shudder against him. “I have this theory,” Leo growled, kissing his way back across Jim’s shoulder.

“Bones,” Jim said breathlessly, “now is not the time for science.”

“Says you,” Leo said, running his hands outward over Jim’s bare shoulders as he kissed a line down his neck, and then back over to his shoulder. He figured that Jim had told him a lot about where his erogenous zones were by how he touched Leo, and truthfully, the man was always draping himself over Leo’s shoulders.

He kissed the line of Jim’s shoulder as he slid his hands down Jim’s long torso until he hit his waist band, then he unzipped his pants all the way and skimmed his hands outward across Jim’s pelvis to his hips, pushing his pants down and away. Bingo. He couldn’t help the smirk that broke out on his face as Jim shuddered when Leo caressed his hip bones, particularly his right one.

“Proud of yourself?” Jim stammered out, chest heaving and his face flushed. He grappled with Leo to get ahold of his t-shirt and pull it up and over his head.

When Leo could see again, he immediately dropped his hands back to Jim’s hips and held on, brushing his thumbs over the flat narrow area of Jim’s pelvis while Jim wriggled in his grasp. “You betcha, Jimmy,” he drawled out, planting a kiss on the indentation on his shoulder where the deltoid attached above his clavicle before kissed and bit his way across to where Jim’s acromion flared up and over from his back.

“Bones …” Jim hissed out, shifting restlessly from foot to foot. His arms circled Leo’s head as he stood up on his toes to gain leverage, his tongue plunging into Leo’s mouth again and again.

They were both panting like they’d run a marathon by the time they broke apart, only far enough to catch their breath, and only for a few seconds before one or the other of them would dart back in to steal a kiss. Jim’s hands were wrapped around the back of his skull as he pressed their foreheads together, keeping Leo close while he worked his feet out of the pants still pooled around his ankles.

“Hold onto that thought,” Leo muttered, working his fingers under the waistband of Jim’s briefs and wrapping his hand around Jim’s cock so that it wouldn’t get bent backwards as he pushed them down Jim’s legs.

“Bones …” he groaned more than once as Leo stroked the heat and hardness of him, his fingers tracing the vein on the underside and the groove around the head, nipping at Jim’s mouth as he did so.

Jim’s hand slid down his spine urgently, pushing at the waistband of Leo’s shorts, and Leo used his free hand to push them away from his own erection, as his briefs tangled with Jim’s on the floor and were kicked aside before they pressed into each other, skin on skin everywhere from head to toe.

“C’mon now, sugar,” he urged, breaking away from Jim’s kiss, and pushing him down toward the bed.
“Bones,” Jim laughed at him, his neck and cheeks flushed with passion and just maybe from the blush that he’d never admit to, the one that Leo's endearment had caused. “So not true.”

Leo swept his tongue into Jim’s mouth as he stroked his thumb across the wet head of Jim's cock, bending over him as he urged him to move to the center of the bed. He smiled at Jim's gasp, making small circles in the wetness around the sensitive opening. "Is that right now, sugar?" he drawled. He kissed Jim again, and then took his hand off Jim's cock, licking his thumb.

Jim bit his lip and groaned, "Fuck," he said in a guttural tone as he watched Leo.

"I dunno, Jim. Surprisingly sweet might be my final opinion, but you know me …" he straddled Jim in a loose crouch as he lay on the bed, caging Jim's head in between his arms as he groaned. "I'll need to rigorously sample." He swept his tongue into Jim's mouth and let Jim taste for himself before he began to kiss his way down that long neck and torso, the one he'd seen far too much of as a doctor, but never been given leave to explore as a lover. Jim twisted restlessly under him, trying to urge Leo's head downward, but he wasn't going to be hurried, not after waiting as long as he had. He kissed and bit and nuzzled his way over Jim's pectoral muscles, sparing a minute or two to make sure that his small nipples were as pebbled and tight as they could possibly be.

"Bones," Jim said, and Leo reveled in how undone his voice sounded. "Bones …" Jim was shaking and sweating, his muscles as hard in arousal as they'd be if he'd been working out at the gym. Leo could easily trace the line down the center of his rectus abdominis and he did, first with his tongue and then with nipping kisses that made Jim lift his hips from the bed and grind his hardness against Leo's lower chest, leaving sticky trails against Leo's skin. He wasn't begging, exactly, but his repeated pleas to Leo and his increasing inability to stay still were incredibly arousing -- especially when coupled with Jim's hands reaching for his shoulder, his head, any point of contact he could make with Leo.

Leo hummed and licked his way out over Jim's ribs, anointing them, tasting them, so recently healed. There was a scar on the opposite side of Jim's body, hidden along his rib cage, a nasty divot from the lash of a whip that he needed to taste before this night was over, to reclaim it, and cleanse it, reinscribe it with love and not the hate that had made it, but he'd wait a while for that yet. From the way Jim was moving underneath him, he knew that he was as turned on as he was freaked out by Leo's worship of his torso. He had no doubt that no one had ever loved Jim the way he did, that Jim, for as many people as he'd fucked, hadn't allowed any of them to touch him with love. Hell, he'd out and out discouraged any such possibility until very recently, almost past the point where things could have fallen apart. But none of that mattered now, because Leo finally had Jim in his bed the way he'd wanted him for years, and he was going to love him until he couldn't see straight, wanted to make it so good for Jim that he'd never be able to stand the touch of anyone's hands on him but Leo's -- those hands that Jim watched from under his lashes, the ones he'd put his father's ring on. Jim bucked up underneath him hard when Leo began to trace the ridge that outlined his transverse abdominis, following the sensitive crease of it down, down to where his cock twitched against his abdomen. Leo pushed Jim's hips down toward the bed as he licked down the crease slowly, making small circles with his thumbs on the smooth skin in front of Jim's hipbones.

Jim's voice had been a steady litany of "Fuck, Bones, fuck!" as Leo got closer to his cock and moved over and past it, licking up the crease on the other side as Jim's hand twisted in his hair.

He smiled up at Jim wickedly, pleased that he'd gotten Jim so riled up that he was just about desperate, only to be surprised at the intent expression on Jim's face as he watched him. And he realized that the hand tugging at his hair had also been holding it back from his face so that Jim could watch him.
"Bones …" Jim breathed out, and there was something like awe in his voice, something vulnerable, despite how turned on he was, in the way he looked at Leo.

"Right here, Jimmy," Leo said quietly, and he never took his eyes off Jim's, the bright blue of them only visible around the edges of his iris. He licked and kissed his way back to Jim's cock, staring at Jim as he hovered over him, mouth open, using one hand to pull it back from where it had risen to lay on Jim's abdomen.

"So fucking beautiful …" he whispered, then he bent forward, using his hand to steady Jim's cock at the base as he swirled his tongue over the head.

Jim groaned, eyes falling closed and his head thrown back on the pillows, twisting, the hand not clutching at Leo's hair digging into the bed, and grabbing as much sheet as he could. He bucked hard, and Leo used his weight to press Jim's hips back down to keep from being choke before he sucked as hard as he could and then pulled off and licked his lips, while Jim watched him, chest heaving.

Leo bent his head and licked a stripe up the underside of Jim's cock, outlining the prominent vein. He drew back and blew on the wetness, noting that Jim was fair enough that the raphe was easy to isolate both on his dick and on the sac below, already drawn up tight to his body. He drew a gentle finger around his balls, outlining them, before following the line up the center of his sac with his tongue while Jim bucked and twisted above him, swearing as Leo licked his way back up to the head, making a detour at the frenulum which he hummed and strummed like he would a woman's clitoris, making sure to suck on it hard before he engulfed the head of Jim's dick, still humming.

"Bonesbonesbonesbones," Jim was chanting above him, his voice rising in warning.

Leo would have smiled, but his mouth was too full and he was too focused on bringing Jim off. He stroked his hand back down over the raphe of Jim's sac to the perineum, stroking the smooth sensitive skin there and pressing in to stimulate Jim's prostate. When he grazed it, Jim yelled and bucked straight up off the bed, despite the arm that Leo had placed across his abdomen to hold him in place, then arced and inverted as he began to spurt, hot and fast, across Leo's upper palate. He swallowed a bit, but made an effort to relax and catch as much as he could in his mouth as he stroked Jim's perineum through the spasms. When Jim dropped back to the bed breathing hard, Leo raised his head to look at him, waiting until one of Jim's bright eyes peered out from under the arm that he'd thrown up over his head as he came.

When he was sure that Jim was focused on him, he swallowed deliberately, feeling the way Jim groaned his name echo through his body. He bent his head and nuzzled the skin in front of Jim's hip, dropping damp, sticky kisses as he moved upward, his hands circling under Jim's body to palm the weight of his buttocks in his hands, thumbs stroking the hollows on either side of them as Jim shivered.

"Bones …" Jim breathed out, chest still heaving, as Leo mouthed his way up to Jim's side until he reached the scar that he'd first seen dimly years ago. Jim sucked in a breath, his arm reflexively coming down to block Leo's way, but Leo caught Jim's elbow in his hand, bending his head to kiss the indentation, dipping his tongue in it.

Jim had stopped breathing underneath him, barely moving as he watched Leo over the curve of his ribcage, something fraught and vulnerable there that Leo filed away as he moved up, mouthing his way onto Jim's arm. He outlined the bulge of his biceps as Jim dropped his hand onto the back of Leo's neck on an exhale of pleasure, beginning to shift restlessly underneath him.

"Bones," he said, pulling at Leo's head to get him to move up to his mouth, his other hand curving
around Leo's back.

Leo, hard and throbbing against Jim's leg, continued his leisurely inventory of Jim's arms and his upper chest, leaving a nipping kiss on his infraspinatus before he did the same to his deltoid, and then kissing his way across the plane of Jim's shoulder.

"Bones," Jim said, turning on his side and kissing Leo desperately for long minutes. "Jesus, Bones. Let me catch my breath and … " Jim's clever hands were mapping Leo's abdomen, skimming over muscles before he closed his hand over Leo's cock, squeezing before he twisted.

Leo bit Jim's lower lip lightly and groaned, arching into Jim's grip. "Wait …" he breathed to Jim. "Wait …"

"Wait?" Jim's tone was incredulous. "Bones, you just blew me and …"

Leo kissed him, twining his tongue around Jim's, cupping his head in his hands so that he stopped talking. "I wanna fuck you," he said to Jim in a low, desperate voice, couldn't resist bucking into Jim's hand as he gasped and squeezed Leo almost too tightly. "Can I fuck you?"

"Jesus, Bones," Jim breathed out, before kissing him and shifting closer in the bed. "Yes, you can fuck me."

Whatever else he might have said was lost when Leo kissed him again, hard, reaching behind himself blindly to find the night table drawer for the dermal barrier gel that he used as lube. When he brought the tube back into the bed, Jim reached for it but Leo stopped him. "Let me do it," he bit out, kissing Jim hard again.

"Jesus, you're bossy in bed," Jim groused, but he was smiling.

Leo smiled back, drawing a finger down Jim's laughlines, seeing how gorgeous he was still going to be fifty years from now, if Leo had any goddamned say in the matter. "It's all you, kid," Leo said, kissing that smiling mouth. "You touch me too much and I'll go off in your hand like a fifteen year old."

"And that's bad, how?" Jim teased, between kisses. "Anytime you get to come is a good time in my book."

Leo laughed at him. "Yeah, yeah, but …" he dropped his voice to the drawl that he'd noticed made Jim shiver. "I want to be inside you when I come, sugar."

That got him a full body shudder that he could feel in his toes, not to mention his balls, and he had to grip himself hard at the base to keep from coming all over Jim before he got what he really wanted.

"Just let me," Jim started trying to move away from him to turn over on his stomach and Leo stopped him, pushing him onto his back.

"No," he said. "I wanna see you, Jim." Leo kissed Jim and flipped open the tube, squeezing out some of the gel onto his fingers as Jim watched him from under his long lashes, the blue flashing out at him above the pink on his cheeks. "I want you to see me." He pushed Jim's left leg up and out, stroking over Jim's perineum again with sure fingers until he felt the circle of tissue that he was looking for. He leaned forward and kissed Jim, whispering, "Wanna kiss you while I'm fucking you."

Jim groaned as Leo slid one finger in, pressing against the sphincter to open it up. He dropped a hand onto the back of Leo's head and pulled him back down into a heated kiss as Leo worked on opening
him up, going deeper and sliding more fingers inside Jim to ready the way, until Jim was pulling him, wrestling him over to cover him, sliding his other leg up and out of the way.

Leo sat back on his heels and stroked the dermal barrier over himself, watching Jim watch him, how his blue eyes flicked from Leo's hand on his cock to Leo's face.

"Jesus, Bones," he said again, chest heaving.

Leo chuckled darkly as he swirled the gel around the head of his cock, his control slipping badly as he looked down at Jim. He slid his arms up under Jim's legs and shifted him down on the bed as he slanted downward, blindly seeking entrance.

"Wait, wait," Jim said, moving his legs higher on Leo, giving him the space to move a hand down and guide himself into Jim.

Leo groaned deep in his chest as he felt the enveloping clench of Jim's body, and he tipped forward, balancing on his hands, stretching into it, but trying desperately not to move deeper until Jim said he was ready.


Leo's pelvis snapped forward in response to Jim's words, his eyes clamping shut as he gritted his teeth against the heat, the need to come almost overcoming him. "Jim," he said brokenly.

He heard the answering sound of Jim's laugh, wild and a little triumphant, and felt him shift against Leo, seating him further inside as Jim's hands slid down his arms. "Kind of hard to watch me with your eyes closed, Bones," he teased, and the sound of his voice was like a goad, and Leo slipped back and snapped forward, opening his eyes in time to see Jim toss his head back and moan.

"God," Leo breathed out.

"What?" Jim grunted at him as Leo slid in and out again, the end of his word catching as Leo caught his prostate on the way by and his eyes closed.

"I fucking love this," Leo hissed out, beginning to drive in and out, feeling the sweat pool on his lower back. "Love this, Jim."

Jim's eyes had popped open at his words and he stared at Leo intently, managing to wrap his slender legs around Leo's back and pull him in closer. "Look at you," he breathed out at Leo. "C'mon, Bones," he struggled to pull him closer, seemed to be trying to get up as Leo drove in and out, so he bent forward as he surged in, getting close enough for Jim to lean up and kiss him. "Bones," Jim moaned as Leo moved faster and faster. He wrapped a hand around Leo's back and stroked just above his tailbone, tapping against it, and gathering the sweat there.

Leo groaned, feeling the end coming soon, his body beginning to drive toward orgasm as he began to shudder, wanting it but never wanting this to end. "Jim," he warned, feeling the press of Jim's cock, hard again, pressing into his belly.

He fumbled, dizzy and spinning out of control, intending to reach for Jim, because Leonard McCoy didn't leave his partners hanging, but Jim arched up and kissed him, wrapping one arm around Leo's shoulders as the hand on his lower back moved away. "I got this, Bones," Jim gasped at him. "I got you, c'mon now, baby. Come for me, Bones."

He could feel the brush of Jim's hand against his abdomen as he stroked himself in time with Leo's frantic thrusts and that, coupled with the sound of Jim's voice urging him on, tipped him over the
edge. He threw his head back and bowed forward, burrowing into Jim as far as he could while he shook, calling Jim's name, before he dropped his head onto Jim's shoulder, holding onto him for dear life, dimly feeling the wetness of Jim coming against him.

They rocked together in the middle of the bed, Leo realizing that Jim was practically in his lap, astride him as his arms shook from the strain of holding them both up. He shifted, intending to move over so that he wouldn't collapse on Jim, but Jim held on, pulling them over sideways into an awkward heap where they lay, panting and still holding on, in a tangle of limbs.

"I should …" Leo said weakly, arm waving behind Jim. He meant that he should get up and get a cloth, and a glass of water, twist off the end of the dermal barrier where his come had collected before it started leaking everywhere, but Jim kissed him instead, long and sweet.

"Bones," he said, and Leo finally opened his eyes.

"My leg is asleep," Jim said with a smile. "Worth it and all, but totally asleep."

Leo huffed out a laugh and raised up enough so that Jim could pull his leg out from under the both of them. He winced as Jim rubbed his thigh to get the blood back into it. "You OK?" he asked Jim.

Jim raised an eyebrow and yawned. "C'mere," he said, and Leo lay back down, next to him this time. Jim kissed him and yawned again, wrapping an arm over him and pulling him in tight. "Tired," he said, closing his eyes, and moving in even closer.

Leo lay there and watched him for a moment, not quite believing what had happened, even though his blood was still singing.

Jim peeled an eye open and looked at Leo, his expression inscrutable as he studied Leo's face. The hand that he'd been stroking up and down Leo's spine rose to cup the back of Leo's head as he pressed another kiss to Leo's lips. "I'm happy, Bones," he said, tucking his face against Leo's neck so Leo couldn't see him anymore and kissing him there. "I'm happy," he murmured again, and there was an edge of wonder there that made Leo smile and hold him close, telling himself that he'd just hold on to Jim for a little while before he got up to get that cloth.

Leo closed his eyes, still smiling as he fell asleep, holding everything that he'd ever wanted in his arms.

Finally.

Chapter 46

Jim shifted in his sleep and jostled Leo's head just enough to wake him. He had to smile as he rubbed at the sore spot on his jaw courtesy of Jim's hard head, and not because he'd woken still wrapped up in Jim's arms. It was ironic, though, that even when they had the room to spread out, they somehow ended up pressed up against each other so closely that he doubted light would shine between them. And, of course, what had begun to feel familiar had a whole new aspect to it now that there was nothing but warm, bare skin all along his. He closed his eyes and smoothed a hand over the hollow of Jim's right hip before it rose to the sweet curve of Jim's gluteus maximus, reveling in his newfound ability to touch wherever he wanted.

This time it was Jim that shifted in response to his movements, but that shift of their lower bodies was enough to remind him that he'd never gotten that damp cloth. Leo opened his eyes on a wince as the fine hairs above his pubis were pulled, stuck as they were to Jim. He sighed and pushed away from Jim as he grumbled in his sleep, scratching at the crust of dried semen where they'd been stuck.
together. He ran a hand through Jim's hair and kissed him before he flipped the covers back on his side and slid out the end of the bed to cross the dimly lit room to the bathroom.

While he soaked a cloth in warm water, he stared down at himself. The dermal barrier gel hadn't leaked, but was probably even more adhered to him than usual. He was considering whether or not he should just hop in the shower or wash himself in the sink when he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and stopped to stare in surprise. He'd been smiling, he realized, and he looked good and fucked, with his hair mussed and pushed into tufts by Jim's hands. He had a hickey on his neck, and his eyes were shining, and for a moment, before the self-doubt came crashing in, he thought that he looked pretty damned good, despite the bags under his eyes.

Then it dawned on him that the last time he'd caught himself looking like this in the mirror was back when things had been good between him and Joce, and Jesus, look how that had ended up. What the fuck was he thinking doing this? Hadn't he learned his lesson, more than once? And what the fuck would he do if he lost Jim, too? His heart hammerered in his chest as he panicked, giving full rein to the neuroses that were never far below the surface.

He was still staring at himself, breathing hard, when the sound of the door whisking open startled him and he turned, barely able to register the sight of a totally naked Jim stalking toward him before he'd wrapped Leo up, pressing him back against the sink while he nuzzled against the hickey he'd left there earlier.

Jim let out a big sigh against him, and Leo felt a pang that Jim had woken up to find himself alone, and probably thought that he'd been left.

"Hey," he said to him, kissing his neck. "I was getting something to clean us up."

Jim hummed against him in response, and Leo heard the sound of the taps shutting off as Jim pushed away from him, and stared pointedly down. "I don't think," Jim said, pulling Leo away from the sink like they were slow dancing "that a cloth is going to take care of that." Jim's voice was sleepy, but intent and almost feverish.

"Oh?" he asked, and was met by a hot, hungry kiss from Jim as he danced them backward toward the small shower cubicle.

"No," Jim said, when he'd kissed Leo across the small room until his back was pressed against the far wall of the shower. He watched Leo intently as he ordered the water on at 27 degrees Celsius stopping Leo's hands when they reached over him for the gel. "No," he said again, shaking his head slowly, eyes never leaving Leo's.

"No?" Leo said, and it wasn't the cool tile against his back that was making him shiver. He was bemused by Jim's attitude, realized that his initial assessment that Jim had maybe been freaking out was colored by his own neurotic impulses. Because Jim, this Jim that had a possessive hand on his hip as he kissed the breath out of Leo's lungs, this Jim that was standing so close against him that they were practically occupying the same space, this Jim didn't seem unsure about anything that had happened between them, and if the hardness pressed up against Leo was any indication, was likely to be repeated shortly.

Jim watched him, beautiful blue eyes fixed on Leo's face. He leaned in for another kiss. "My turn," he whispered when they broke apart.

Leo couldn't help the shudder that ran through his frame at Jim's words, even if it provoked the cocky smirk that sometimes made him want to punch Jim right in his pretty mouth, as much as he loved the bastard. He ran his hands over Jim's shoulders and reveled in the fact that the light was
bright enough in the bathroom that he could see the blue darken in Jim's eyes, the colors shifting as he rubbed his thumbs in the grooves between Jim's muscles.

Jim's smile quirked up a notch at Leo's actions, but the intent look on his face never wavered as he bent in to kiss Leo once more and then, paradoxically, stepped away from him, leaving Leo alone against the back wall of the shower as he reached for the gel. Jim never took his eyes off Leo's as he poured a dollop of it into his palm and lathered up, his long fingers closing over each other. He crossed his right hand up and over, running his bubble-covered hand over his own shoulder, his eyes a blue flame as he watched Leo.

"All those times," Jim began in a low, raspy voice, "that I climbed into your bed after I took a shower?"

Leo had to make an effort to drag his eyes from the sight of Jim's hands washing his own pectoral muscles, the flow of bubbles streaming down his torso and over his forearms, curling around the base of his erect cock.

"I was in here thinking about you," Jim said. "Wishing you were in here with me, watching me." Jim moved his hands lower on his torso, making lazy x-es as he washed from side-to-side. "Wishing that it was your hands on me."

Leo shuddered as Jim's hand stroked lower, encircling his cock in one smooth motion. "Jim," he said, reaching for him, but Jim shook his head slowly, and he dropped his hands back to his sides, fingers sliding against the hard slick tiles instead of the warm flesh he craved.

"I used to wonder how you'd touch me," Jim said, "how your hands would feel on me when you weren't being my doctor," he stroked himself from root to tip, flicking his fingers over the head of his cock. "When you were just being my Bones." His nickname for Leo came out in a long groan, and Jim's other hand looped underneath to tug at his own balls. "No one, Bones," he breathed out. "No one's ever looked at me like you do." He drew in a long, stuttering breath, his cheeks flushed. "It made me wonder what it would feel like when you finally touched me."

Leo's cheeks were as heated as Jim's, his head spinning as he watched. Only Jim Kirk would write him porn as a love sonnet, would choose to torture and delight him by telling him these things and not letting Leo touch him. And even though his hands were aching and empty, he resisted the temptation to touch himself — he knew his own flesh far too intimately, and fuck it, but that wasn't going to do it for him, not when there was a chance that he'd get to put his hands on Jim instead.

"How your hands would feel on me," Jim continued. "Would you touch me the way you liked to be touched?" His hand twisted on his cock as Leo watched. "Would you like that?" His hand sped up, "Or that?"

"Jim …" Leo groaned, head dropping back and eyes closing for just an instant before he broke, moving his own hands toward his aching cock.

And that was what Jim had been waiting for. His left hand came around the back of Leo's neck and he pulled Leo into him, his tongue tangling with Leo's as his right hand knocked Leo's away and closed over his cock.

Leo's moan at the feel of Jim's hand closing over him was incredibly loud in the enclosed space and his head snapped back, only caught from smashing off the tiles by Jim's steadying hand.

Jim smiled and leaned in closer, pressing his forehead against Leo's. He wrapped his arm around Leo's shoulders, cradling Leo's head in the crook of his elbow as he stroked over Leo's cock with his
soapy hand, washing away what little remained of the dermal barrier. "Bones," he breathed out against Leo's mouth. "Does that feel good, baby?"

In answer, Leo's hand tightened on the bicep next to his head. He was incapable of uttering anything beyond an inarticulate gurgle that might have sounded something like 'Jim', as he focused on trying to keep his eyes from rolling back in their sockets, because then he wouldn't be able to watch and he'd miss some nuance of Jim's expression. "Jim," he managed to choke out as Jim rubbed his thumb over his frenulum before pumping his length through his closed fist. Leo could feel the muscles in Jim's forearm moving purposefully under the hand he'd dropped on it, not to guide but to connect in another way. "Jim."

"C'mon Bones," Jim chanted at him, peppering his lips with kisses in counterpoint to his strokes. "Come for me, Bones."

Jim dipped his head and kissed Leo beneath his left ear, sucking on the skin there, and Leo lurched in his grasp, feeling himself swell as he set the flat of his teeth against Jim's bicep to muffle the yell that burst from him as he spurted over Jim's beautiful hand and onto his hip. "Jim," he groaned out as he wound down, still panting as Jim kissed him and stroked him through his orgasm.

Jim drew back from him and smiled, eyes sparkling with mischief as he raised a finger to his mouth and took a taste of Leo's come. He rolled it around on his tongue elaborately, like he was at a wine tasting. "Not so sweet," he said appraisingly. "But still vintage."

Leo laughed, swatting him on the ass as he pulled him close and kissed him. "I don't eat as much fruit as you do, jackass."

Jim looked mildly surprised. "Huh?"

"That's why you're sweet, sugar," Leo growled at him, reveling in the shiver that pulled from Jim. He pulled Jim's narrow hips in closer to him, feeling his erect cock dig into his stomach muscles. As soon as his knees stopped shaking, he was going to do something about that, goddamnit. One of his hands curved over Jim's hips, seeking the heat and hardness of him, but Jim blocked his hand again, shaking his head.

"No," he said slowly, kissing Leo and then stretching, reaching for the shower gel again. He soaped up his hands behind Leo's head, dropping kisses on Leo's mouth between pants, his hips moving restlessly against Leo's pelvis.

Leo raised an eyebrow at Jim's rutting, running a finger down his cheek as he kissed him. "What do you want then, sugar?"

Jim laughed, tucking his hands in between them to clean them both off before his hands slid around Leo's ass and crept to the cleft there. "I wanna fuck you," Jim said, kissing Leo, his mouth stretching over Leo's smile and swallowing it.

Leo curled his tongue around and under Jim's, humming his approval while he tried to figure out the logistics. They were pretty much the same height, but maybe Jim's longer torso would be enough of a differential for leverage, since strong as he was, there was no way that Jim could support his weight up against the wall. And with the shower not more than a meter in width, there wasn't a lot of room to bend – maybe he could just brace a foot up against the wall?

Jim cut into the spiral of his thoughts as he breathed heavily against Leo's open mouth, his fingers circling his anus. "In your bed," he gritted out. "That bed I got for you."
Leo's eyes popped open in surprise at Jim's words.

"I used to fantasize about getting in that bed with you," Jim panted, "and kissing you awake so I could fuck you."

"Jim …" Leo groaned.

"C'mon," Jim pulled at him impatiently. "Computer: water off!" His tone was as commanding as it had been on the bridge of the Enterprise.

Leo laughed at his eagerness as Jim pulled them both out of the shower, grabbing at a towel and rubbing it over Leo ineffectually, mostly because he wouldn't stop kissing him.

"You want me to go in the other room and pretend I'm asleep?" he teased, and Jim's eyes dilated even more than they already were before he got Leo all wet again by pressing the long, damp length of his skin against Leo's, while he swept his tongue into Leo's mouth.

"Not this time," Jim breathed out. "It'll be better when you're not acting." He'd wrapped his arm around Leo's shoulders again, holding his head in the crook of his elbow. It was an incredibly possessive gesture, but there was something about it that made Leo think that Jim was ensuring that Leo wasn't going to disappear on him.

Leo ran his hands over Jim's flanks, pulling the towel from Jim's hand and running it over the both of them to get what water hadn't run onto the floor while they'd stood there kissing.

Jim was nudging him backward toward the door, dancing him through it and toward the bed as he kissed Leo, who took the opportunity to run the towel over both of their heads and then over his back before Jim pushed him impatiently down on it and sprawled on top of him, all long limbs and damp satin skin and heat, focused on getting inside Leo.

"Lube," Leo grunted at Jim, pushing up with his pelvis to break Jim's vice grip.

"I know," Jim scoffed at him, leaning over to reach the nightstand as Leo took the opportunity to pull the towel out of the ball it was in underneath him.

"How …" Leo started to ask, but his words were caught in a groan as Jim's slick finger slid into him without warning.

"Like this," Jim said, and Leo knew that he looked surprised when Jim laughed, low and wicked. "Never really did it this way before," he said to Leo, dropping a hard kiss on his mouth as he pushed another finger into him.

Leo groaned in answer, and not all from pleasure. "Jim, slow down," he said, running a hand down his chest. Jim was tremoring in lust, and he wasn't much better, but he was the more patient of the two of them. Well, some of the time. "It's been a long goddamned time."

He could actually feel Jim scowling, even though he was still kissing him, still working his fingers in and out of Leo.

"What are you talking about?" Leo asked, when Jim let him speak. He watched as Jim wiped his hand on the towel and got more lube.

" Fucking face to face," Jim said, looking at Leo from under his lashes. "I don't really do it."

Leo's eyebrows raised to his hairline, and he opened his mouth, but nothing came out of it. Jim took
the opportunity to slide a third finger into him and he breathed out through the stretch.

"Not even with chicks," Jim continued. "Well, unless they were on top, but …" he stopped talking and looked at Leo. "It's weird talking about fucking other people when we're in bed together, isn't it?"

"It's fine, Jim," Leo said, because he was more curious than he was jealous. "So, no kissing while you're fucking."

Jim tipped forward and kissed Leo, long and slow, but still urgent. "Always thought the kissing was to get to the fucking," he whispered. He tangled his tongue with Leo's and Leo shifted and took a page from Jim's playbook, wrapping his arm around Jim's neck to cradle his head in the crook of his elbow and keep him close. His reward was the long, low groan that reverberated against his chest. "Bones," Jim said brokenly, moving back. "I gotta …"

Leo closed a hand around the lube and squeezed it, then dropped a hand to Jim's cock, slicking him up, as he moaned and muttered.

"Bones," he hissed at Leo. "Fuck, that's enough!" He broke away from Leo and then pressed back against him. "Sorry …" he breathed out, and Leo almost laughed. As if the fact that he'd gotten Jim Kirk so hot and bothered at the idea of fucking him that he was snarling at him in lust would upset Leo.

"What're you waiting for, sugar?" Leo drawled, tilting his pelvis up to get the best angle.

"Fuck," Jim breathed out, biting his lip, and Leo could feel the tremors of lust as Jim tried to control them, getting into position between Leo's legs. He used his fingers to open Leo up, and then slid his cockhead between them, pressing in and withdrawing his fingers as he slid in halfway.

Leo shifted on the bed, rolling his hips to accommodate Jim's upcurve, stretched and already aching a little, but still smiling.

"Fuck," Jim said, his voice agonized. He clamped his eyes shut as Leo pulled on his ass, trying to pull him forward.

"What?" Leo asked, stroking a hand up his chest and cupping his jawline.

Jim opened his eyes and looked at Leo, groaning long and loud, and clamping his eyes shut again.

"Jim?" Leo asked curiously. The kid was weird sometimes, no lie.

"You're smiling," Jim whispered between gritted teeth, almost glaring at Leo.

Leo laughed, and Jim groaned and shoved forward, hard, until they were both moaning, and Jim caught his mouth in a kiss before he slid back out and in and in and in, tongues tangling, Leo's feet braced on the bed to rock up into Jim on the downstroke.

"Bones," Jim said to him again when they broke apart, rolling his forehead against Leo's. "You're still smiling."

Leo's grin became teeth-gritting as Jim slid along his prostate with agonizing surety. "Yeah?"

"You …" Jim thrust in and slid back, his voice strained "don't..." again "smile..." again and again and again.
He balanced himself on one hand and reached down to stroke Leo's cock with the other, as Leo's head rolled back against the pillows. The next time Jim grazed his prostate, Leo felt himself coming apart in Jim's beautiful hand, the orgasm weaker than earlier, but still welcome.

When he could think, he grabbed Jim's face in his hands and made sure that Jim was focused on him as he thrust in and out, chest heaving. "Only for you, Jim," Leo said. He was still smiling.

Jim's hips snapped forward as he convulsed and came with a cry of "Bones!" and collapsed forward onto Leo's chest.

Leo carded his hands through Jim's damp hair and kissed his forehead and his brow as Jim's respirations wound down from their peak. He murmured Jim's name, but got no response. He tilted Jim's head back from where it was pressed against his neck and chuckled when he saw the slack, blissed out expression on his face.

"You passed out on me, sugar," he said, filing this moment away for blackmail material later on. He shifted his basically unconscious lover over so that he could get at the towel he was still half-laying on and cleaned them both up before he pulled the covers up and curled up around Jim. "Lights off," he ordered the computer, running his hands over Jim's body.

He was still smiling when he fell asleep again, dreaming of waking Jim in the morning with kisses.

Jim Kirk was a rulebreaker. He knew this, and yet he was still surprised when he woke up in his sunlit dorm room to the feel of Jim's mouth surrounding his cock.

The environmental controls had been adjusted high enough that he hadn't gotten cold when Jim had uncovered him completely. Jim's dark blond head was bobbing up and down, his hands pressed above the root of Leo's cock, his forearms pinning Leo's hips to the bed.

As Leo gurgled his way to consciousness with a noise that would probably embarrass the shit out of him under any other circumstance, Jim raised his head to look at him, blue eyes blazing, mouth somehow arranged in a smirk even when full of Leo's cock. Leo breathed in a huge gasp, ready to come right there and then, only to have Jim's hand slam around the base of his cock and squeeze, stopping him.

He pulled off with an exaggerated sucking noise and licked the head and ran the tip of his tongue over Leo's urethra for good measure before he smiled and said, "Morning, Bones!" cheerfully.

Leo's laugh was a little forced because his teeth were gritted, but he couldn't resist Jim's sparkling eyes and wicked expression for too long. "Jumping the line again, kid?"

Jim raised his brows with a faux innocent look, and Leo's laugh this time was more natural. "I didn't know there was a line …" Jim said thoughtfully. "Was there something else you wanted?"

"So, it's still your turn then?" Leo asked with a smile, running fingers over Jim's cheek.

"Well," Jim answered with a shrug. "There was morning wood, and you weren't waking up fast enough, so … Did I tire you out or something?"

"Sugar, the way you passed out on me last night," Leo said, "I hardly think you have reason to look smug."

"I think we should both be looking pretty smug this morning, Bones," Jim said, sliding his tongue up
Leo's torso, and kissing him.

Under the taste of his own skin and the tang of pre-come, Leo could taste mint. "You brushed your teeth already," he accused.

"I had to pee," Jim said succinctly. "I also started coffee." He stroked a hand up and down Leo's erection. "Anything else you'd like to bitch about?" Jim asked impishly. "Aside from me blowing you?"

"I wasn't bitching about being blown," Leo said, "because I haven't been, yet." He stared down at Jim significantly. He'd lain across Leo's chest and was smiling at him, slick hand still wrapped around Leo's cock.

"Hold that thought," Jim said with a lazy smile. He raised up and kissed Leo, letting go of his cock as he swung a leg over Leo and then reached behind himself, sliding Leo inside him as Leo gasped and gripped his hip bones.

"Jim," he groaned out, gritting his teeth against the burn of Jim's body sliding down over his cock. Even with the gel, he was raw from the friction of all the sex they'd already had.

Jim breathed in through his nose and settled, shifting his weight as he began to post, slowly but surely, on Leo's cock.

Leo couldn't stop the smile that broke out over his face as he watched Jim. Trust the kid to find a way to get fucked that still left him in charge. Not that he minded overly much. He watched Jim as he threw his head back and groaned, the long line of his torso and neck gleaming in the early morning light, Jim's cock jutting out and away from his body as he fucked himself on Leo. God, he was beautiful. He thought for a second more before he opened his mouth and said it, watching the flush spread over Jim's face and down his neck and onto his chest when he said to him, "You are so beautiful, Jimmy."

There was something vulnerable and aching in the dirty-sweet expression on Jim's face after he said it, a downcast of Jim's eyelashes that told him that as much of a cocky bastard as he could be, Jim was far more accepting of insults than he was praise.

The next time that Jim rose above him, Leo slid his hands under his ass and stopped him from sliding back down.

"What?" Jim said from above him, dazed.

"Shift up," Leo said, as he did so, stacking the pillows against the headboard so that he could sit up.

This time, when Jim slid back down over his cock, he leaned over and caught his mouth, morning breath and all, kissing him for all he was worth.

Jim grumbled at him about the loss of leverage as he shifted up, and Leo smiled at him and offered him his hands, kissing Jim's surprised noise when he laced his fingers with Leo's and tilted, changing the angle of penetration. Their movements together were more languid, peaceful even, like they knew each other's bodies already, and Leo couldn't stop smiling as they kissed and Jim shuddered above him. He heard the change in his breathing and reached down to stroke Jim through his orgasm, his own coming seconds after as Jim gripped his muscles and bore down on Leo's cock.

When he came back to himself, he found that he'd pressed his face into Jim's neck, and he made a worried noise — Jim was still pretty goddamned bruised right where he'd been putting pressure.
"I'm fine, Bones," Jim said from above him, running his hands through Leo's hair, and then wrapping his arms around Leo's shoulders.

Leo kissed his way across Jim's shoulder and then down over his heart, looking up at Jim as he kissed him there, telling him without saying it that he loved him.

Jim smiled and ducked his head down to kiss Leo soundly, then kissed the back of the hand that he was still holding, the one he'd put his father's ring on little more than a week ago. "What I meant was that I don't really know how to do the relationship thing," Jim said, returning to the conversation that they'd been having hours before.

Leo drew down his eyebrows. "Jim," he said, "we've been friends for years now. That is a relationship."

"Yeah, yeah," Jim said. "But so not what I'm talking about, and you know it. I'm talking about the whole being faithful thing. I've never actually had to do that. Well," he shrugged, "not since high school."

Now Leo's eyebrows went up to his hairline. "Jim," Leo said slowly. "Did I ask you to be faithful to me?"

Jim rolled his eyes at Leo. "Don't pretend that isn't what you want, Bones," he said.

"You know what I enjoy?" Leo asked acerbically. "I enjoy how you have these conversations with me, in your own head, and make decisions for me like the conversations actually happened."

Jim didn't seem in the slightest bit perturbed by Leo's sudden flare of irascibility. "So … you'd be totally cool if I were fucking around?" Jim asked.

Leo pinned his lover with a stare. "The question you have to ask yourself Jim is, would you be cool with me fucking around?" Jim's sunny expression began to darken as Leo ran his hands over Jim's body, outlining his shoulders. "Would you be fine," he drawled, "with me putting my hands all over somebody else's body – " he looked up at Jim, "-touching them everywhere," he clarified, "making them come."

Jim's expression had become abjectly mutinous, the set of his jaw like stone as Leo continued to speak. "Because Jim, whatever rules we decide govern our relationship apply to both of us. That's how it works."

Jim leaned forward and took Leo's mouth in a savage kiss. "No fucking around," he growled, his blue eyes dark and stormy.

Leo stroked his hands through Jim's hair, mussing what was already thoroughly disheveled. "No fucking around," he agreed, then tipped forward to seal his promise with a kiss.

Chapter 47

The slow, steady beat of Jim's heart under his hand told him that Jim was not yet awake. Leo smiled at the idea that Jim's hyperkinetic energy had been tamed by him, of all people, before he pressed a kiss to the sensitive spot where Jim's shoulder and neck joined. Well, maybe tamed was too big of a word. It was more like momentarily subdued, or lulled. Still, Leo reveled in the peacefulness of being together like this, and savored the still novel feeling of wanton luxuriousness that Jim's skin pressed against the full length of his inspired.

They'd spent the past day and the night that followed it in bed together, an abbreviated honeymoon.
of sorts. Conversation had been minimal, mostly utterances of the passionate variety, one or the other of them urging the other on, giving instructions, or offering endearments. He’d put on clothes once, to go downstairs and collect a food order from the officer at the desk. Displeased as he had been to see the flash and strobe of camera lights outside the lobby (and he’d been far less displeased than the infuriated duty officer), he’d been glad that he’d taken the time to shower and shave. He hadn’t done that to appease the paparazzi, but to please himself and Jim, whose fair skin had been marked by the stubble that had resulted from Leo’s missed beard suppressants. When he’d gotten back to the room, scowling, he’d been met with a kiss as soon as the door closed, and Jim pulling him back down into the freshly made bed, pleased as he could be to get a chance to undress Leo this go-round.

Luckily, the food and the beer had been as good cold and warm respectively, when they'd finally gotten to them hours later.

From the light in the room, he assumed that it was fairly well on into the morning. As he and Jim had no particular place to be, he was in no hurry to get up and be irritated by the comms that had no doubt accumulated while they’d been drifting alone together, finally for all the right reasons, in Leo's bed. He pressed a kiss to the nape of Jim's neck and his answering hum was a low murmur of sound and a vibration against his chest where Jim was pressed back against him.

He felt the answering twitch of his cock, tucked as it was against the curve of Jim’s ass, and had to restrain a wince at the motion, subtle as it was. He was sore, almost rubbed raw from Jim's hands and tongue, not to mention the clench of his body around him, and as much as he wanted to pick right up where they'd left off when sleep had finally claimed them, his anatomy was protesting. He shifted away from Jim to stretch out, his back kinked from sleeping curled around Jim and aching from use and over-exertion.

Jim shifted onto his stomach, raising himself up on his elbows as he looked down at Leo speculatively, rubbing at his eyes. “The thrill is gone, huh, Bones?”

Leo raised an eyebrow, running a hand over his chest, which was littered with bruises and love bites. “Speak for yourself, kid,” he said, yawning. “In this case, I think that maybe Matthew had it right.”

Jim tilted his head at that, and Leo could practically see his prodigious brain working over that comment, loving the light in his eyes when he cracked Leo’s code. “Bones,” he said, drawing out his name. “Don’t you think it might be considered a bit blasphemous for you to apply Biblical aphorisms to this situation?”

“I’m too busy being surprised at your recognition of the reference to even worry about what the possibility ramifications of my blaspheming what probably doesn’t exist,” Leo drawled.

“You think God doesn’t exist?” Jim said. He sounded a little shocked at the idea. “And I think I’m insulted.”

“You’re hardly altar boy material, Jim,” Leo said drily. “And I have no idea if God exists, what with the no proof thing and all.”

Jim smiled at Leo’s words. “Altar boy? Not so much with the Catholic there, Bones, but I had a grandma, too, you know, who used to scrub me up and take me to church. And I thought you ascribed to Horatio’s belief that the magnificence of the universe itself was a testament to the existence of God, a priori.”

“And Sunday school, too, I guess,” Leo said, turning on his side. “And how does the potential existence of multiverses affect that reasoning?”
Leo quirked an eyebrow at Jim’s last statement, before he shifted back to the previous line of argument and said, “From my limited memory of Sunday school,” Leo said, tipping close to Jim. “Avoiding temptation was high on the agenda.” He kissed Jim’s swollen mouth.

“Mmm …” Jim said. “I believe I’ve heard about this whole ‘avoiding temptation’ thing,” he said mock seriously, “although I’ve never tried it myself.”

“Just about everything else, though,” Leo said drily, “you have tried.”

“Pretty much,” Jim agreed cheerfully, “and thoroughly enjoyed most of it, if I can brag for a moment.” He smiled. “But you know, Bones, you can still find the Bible, along with a number of other sacred texts, in the bedside drawers at most motels.”

Leo quirked an eyebrow. “Motels were your house of worship?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing, Bones, but …” Jim ran a finger down Leo’s chest slowly, “I don’t recall hearing any complaints.”

Leo winced as Jim got closer to the tender flesh between his legs. “Keep going and you might,” he said plaintively.

“Bones!” Jim said with a gleam in his eye, shifting closer. “Are you saying that I wore you out?”

Leo palmed Jim’s buttock in his left hand, sliding inexorably toward his anus, waiting for the hitch in Jim’s breathing that would tell him he wasn’t the only sore one, and he smiled when he got it, although Jim barely flinched, the bastard. “Don’t try and pretend it’s just me, sugar,” Leo drawled. Jim flushed and let his forehead rest against Leo’s. “Fine,” he said huffily. “You broke me, OK?”

Leo’s other eyebrow raised in surprise.

“But, in all fairness,” Jim continued, “I don’t think I’ve ever had this much sex in such a short timeframe.”

He looked at Leo as if he expected to hear the same kind of confession from him, and Leo pursed his lips, thinking. He’d been married, after all, and there had been one three-day weekend where he and Jocelyn had never actually gotten out of bed -- and had resulted in them getting engaged in the first place.

“Bones …” Jim said.

“I’ve never been this sore before,” Leo said, because in truth, he’d never been penetrated this much in any of his previous outings, not even when he was trying to bond with Tharis and Talea and their chen, Teara. He’d pretty much been the one who was doing the penetrating there.

“Very diplomatic,” Jim said, eyes narrowing. “Why do I get the feeling that I’m not the first one in your bed for a weekend of sexcapades?”

“I was married, Jim,” Leo said deliberately.

“And?”

“I had a honeymoon and all,” Leo said. “And this is pretty much …” Jim’s expression was getting that stony look that Leo was coming to hate. “Jim, the point isn’t who was there first, it’s who’ll be there last.”
Jim’s eyes were still focused on him. “And?” Jim said.

Leo rolled his eyes. "If I had my way, that'd be you."

Jim looked mystified and wary. "Why are you saying it like that, Bones?" he asked. "Are you doubting…?"

Leo didn't let him finish the sentence. 
"No," he blurted out. "I'm just … Jim, we don't know where we're going after we finish here."

The troubled expression in Jim's eyes eased. "We're going out on a ship," he said clearly. "Together."

Leo shook his head. "We don't know that," he said doggedly, raising his voice when Jim started speaking over him. "We don't."

"Pike said," Jim began, and Leo leaned up and kissed him.

"I know what Pike said," Leo said. "And I know that you'll do everything you can to try and make sure that we get the same assignment, but … we have to be realistic, Jim."

"I am being realistic," Jim said tersely. "Just not pessimistic, which I know is your default setting," he said calmly, "so I'm trying not to be angry about this. I'm just …" he ran a hand over Leo's head. "Just trust me, Bones," he said quietly. "Believe me when I say that I'm not letting go of this." He pulled Leo toward him, rolling onto his back so that Leo's head was pressed over the steady, sure beat of his heart. "I'm not letting go of you."

Leo closed his eyes and listened to that cadence, the engine that was Jim Kirk, and tried to make himself believe in happy endings again.

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After a prolonged bout of -- Leo refused to call it cuddling, or snuggling, but the fact of the matter was that they'd laid in bed for quite some time, pressed together, only moving to exchange kisses or find a new, comfortable position — hunger had finally forced them to shower and get dressed, but only after a prolonged session with Leo’s dermal regenerator to deal with the most visible hickeys and razor burn. Jim was much more interested in Leo’s willingness to regenerate the most sore flesh on his anatomy, although he attempted to negate all of Leo’s good work almost immediately. Only when a promise to re-regenerate certain abraded tissue was extracted from Leo would Jim actually consent to leave the room.

The campus was still eerily deserted, and although the sight of it was sobering, it didn’t serve to puncture the good mood that enveloped the both of them. Oddly enough, Jim had chosen not to sling an arm around Leo’s shoulders, or to bump up against him every fifth step as he’d been previously wont to do. Leo wasn’t foolish enough to believe that Jim was ashamed of him — Jim wasn’t ashamed of much, as a general rule — but he was clearly mindful of how they were on display, set apart from the remainder of the Academy, as evidenced by the double-takes, and the whispered words behind hands as they passed by. Leo wasn’t much pleased with their sudden notoriety, and found himself reflecting wistfully on the relative privacy of the halls of the Enterprise, where everyone aboard had had a role, a part in what had happened. The burden had been shared there, the experience communal. But here, underclassmen stopped and stared, or saluted, and comms were pulled out to record them walking or take a picture. It was unnerving.

For once, Jim’s smile was not omnipresent, and mostly false when it was offered. When Leo looked
at him askance, he was answered with a thump on the shoulder and a small, teasing smile that was for his eyes alone. “C’mon Bones,” Jim said in a cajoling voice. “I don’t smile for just anyone, you know.” His smile widened at Leo’s raised eyebrow, and Jim bumped into him with his shoulder. “Not today, anyway,” he said in a low voice, putting his hand on the back of Leo’s neck and pulling him in closer. “I’ll smile for you when I get you back home,” he said in a low voice that made Leo all sorts of promises.

Leo stifled the moan that Jim’s words caused, although he could do nothing about the blush staining his cheeks like a schoolboy’s, thinking of one particular blissed out smile in Jim’s repertoire. “You are wicked, Jim Kirk,” he said to him.

“Part of the reason that you love me, Bones,” Jim said cheerfully, setting up to dash up the long staircase that led to the central student mess.

Leo shook his head and followed at a more sedate pace, becoming hyperaware of his tender muscles as he did so. Jesus, his ass was killing him. Jim waited for him at the head of the stairs, and they crossed the vestibule together into the noise of the food hall. Here, at least, it was crowded, and Leo felt some of the tension he’d been feeling dissipate at the size of the crowd. He wondered if people were lingering over their meals in an effort to stay together and stave off the loneliness of their empty dorms -- an idea that he’d have encouraged if he could have.

“Bones,” Jim said, raising his voice to be heard over the din. “I’m gonna go back to my room and get my stuff after lunch while you’re at Medical, OK?”

Leo couldn’t help the smile that broke over his face at Jim’s words, which got even wider when Jim’s pupils dilated. They hadn’t actually discussed what came next — he’d thought about suggesting that Jim move in, but had thought that he’d wait a little while longer before he brought it up. He should have known that Jim, having already taken the leap of faith, would not share that opinion.

Jim leaned forward and in, putting a hand on Leo’s shoulder and whispering in the ear that was facing the food line with its automated servers. “Don’t smile at me like that when I can’t do anything about it.” He pressed the tiniest of kisses to Leo’s neck just below his ear and ducked out, turning away. “Hot in here,” he said aloud, fanning himself with his tray.

Leo just smiled and pushed at him to move along. “You’re holding up the line, sugar,” he drawled out.

Jim flushed even more. “You’re the end of the line, Bones,” he said reprovingly.

“And I’m hungry,” he answered in a low voice. “I’ve had very little to eat in the past 24 hours, just some protein and sucrose.”

Jim’s pupils dilated even more, and he spun on his heel and started to move down the line. “You’re kind of evil yourself, Bones,” he said from a few feet away as he put some potatoes on his plate.

“Eat some greens, too, Jim,” he said in answer. “I’ll be checking to make sure that you’re getting all your vitamins.”

Jim’s eyes widened at the implication, but he added some green vegetables to his plate, his cheeks still flushed.

Leo took his time going down the food line, turning when his tray was finally full to his satisfaction to see where Jim had gotten to. “McCoy!” he heard, and turned to see Sulu standing at a table, Chekov on one side and Kirk on the other. He nodded to indicate that he’d seen him, and made his
way to the table where he noted that not only the Bridge crew, but a significant number of \textit{Enterprise} personnel in general were eating, or just hanging out to be sociable. He nodded in response to calls of hello and moved to sit down where the Bridge crew shifted over to make room for him.

Sulu’s plate was empty, but he was nursing a cup of tea. “Hey, man,” he said to Leo when he sat down. “How’re you?”

Leo nodded. “I’m doing OK,” he said, breaking off a piece of fish. “Re-entry’s been …” he shook his head. “A little different.”

“Tell me about it,” Sulu sighed. “Chekov and I went to the rec room to play pool with some of the other guys that are still around, and … the damned paps were inside the dorm.”

“No kidding,” Leo said, honestly surprised. “How’d they manage that?”

“They bought IDs from the contactors that do the maintenance is what I heard,” Scotty said from Leo’s left.

Spock, sitting on Leo’s other side, was primly eating some tofu concoction that Leo thought looked particularly ghastly.

“That makes sense, I guess,” Sulu said.

“None of this makes sense in my opinion,” Spock said, and Uhura leaned forward to hear him, smiling and extending a hand to Leo. “Why would a picture of you and Mr. Chekov playing pool have any remunerative value for these mercenaries? I fail to see what the interest is.” Spock paused to look up at Sulu, whose expression indicated that he was momentarily wondering if he should be insulted.

“They were waiting in the bushes outside my dorm when Spock came to collect me,” Uhura said to the group at large, then lowered her voice, eyes dancing. “There was a slight altercation.”

“I merely ensured that any unauthorized interloper on the campus remained \textit{in situ} until the proper authorities could be called,” Spock said. “Actions have consequences.”

“You nerve-pinched him, didn’t you?” Leo said into the lingering silence, smile forming on his lips.

“Them, Doctor,” Spock said. “There were two of them.”

Leo looked at Jim, who was listening avidly while he neatly and efficiently ate an enormous amount of food. He shook his head. “Just try not to get thrown in the brig, guys,” he said.

“I did nothing wrong,” Spock said with a kind of icy precision that Leo reckoned was his stand-in for out-and-out wrath, a belief that was supported when Nyota laid a calming hand on his arm.

“How’re the debriefings going?” Chekov asked as silence descended on the table.


“My experience is also limited, Captain,” the Vulcan answered, “but I believe that these proceedings qualify as highly unusual, given the circumstances.”

Jim nodded. “Are you going back?”

“On Monday, yes,” Spock said, and looked at Leo, who nodded, as did Scotty on his other side.
“I’m done,” Sulu said, and the tilt of Uhura’s head indicated her agreement as she ate her dessert.

“Me, too,” Chekov said, then added quietly. “Wednesday, the funerals begin.”

“Aye,” Scotty said softly, when the silence had gone on for nearly a minute. “I’m sure I’ll see you all there.”

There was a collective nod around the table, but the silence reigned until Sulu broke it by saying, “Doc, can I ask how Captain Pike is doing?”

All heads swiveled toward Leo. “I’m on my way there after lunch,” Leo said. “But he was doing just fine last I saw him. He’s started regeneration therapy, and the prognosis is promising.”

He heard Chekov softly exclaim in Russian, but it was Sulu who said, “That’s great,” his smile warm and heartfelt. “I was really hoping that it was going to work out for him.”

“Bones wouldn’t settle for anything less,” Jim said, before he took a big swallow of his juice, his eyes challenging anyone to gainsay him. Uhura’s eyes narrowed as she looked from Jim to Leo and back again.

“Centaurian slug, wasn’t it?” Scotty asked with a shudder. “Nasty fuckers, they are. I hate bugs.”

Thinking of Pike made him wonder where Chapel had gotten to, and Leo nodded as he scanned the mess looking for her. She wasn’t a Cadet, but enough of the Enterprise medical staff had been that he thought she might have chosen to take her meals here, where there was company. “I’m still not sure where those Romulan bastards got a Klingon creepy crawlie,” Leo said absentmindedly, and Jim raised his head sharply and looked at Uhura, who clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Prison planet,” Uhura said, loosening her fingers at the questioning glances sent her way.

“And it’s not like those fuckers would ever tell us if they’d had Nero all this time,” Jim said. “Can you …?”

“Scan transmissions logs?” Uhura answered, her eyes locked on Jim. “Yeah.”

“To what end?” Spock interjected. “Not that I find your hypothesis unlikely, but at this point what good would confirmation do?”

“I can’t say,” Jim said, “but I think it’s important to know what happened, what led to … everything.” He regarded Spock steadily. “Who knows what knowledge may one day prove useful?”

Spock quirked an eyebrow at Kirk. “Indeed,” he said. “I must take my leave. Nyota?” She nodded and he stood and stepped back neatly over the bench, picking up his tray and holding out a hand for Nyota’s as well. “Dr. McCoy,” he said, and Leo looked up at him, expecting him to ask him to convey his well wishes to Pike, only to be confounded when Spock said, “May I suggest that you get yourself examined while you are at Starfleet Medical?”

When Leo looked at him quizzically, he continued, “I’m afraid that your concern for the wellbeing of Captain Pike and your other patients may have led you to neglect your own injuries, as I could not help but notice a slight hesitation, almost a limp, in your gait.”

Across the table, Jim made a strangled noise that he disguised as a cough and then muffled in his napkin. Nyota’s head whipped around, the long tail of her hair drifting across Spock’s back as she turned to look at Jim.
“Odd,” Spock said to Jim. “I would tend to think that you’d be more sympathetic to the Doctor’s plight, particularly while you are still limping from your own injuries.”

Leo pursed his lips together and purposefully looked away from Jim, noting that Sulu’s dark eyes were tracking from Nyota to Jim to him and back. “Thank you, Spock,” he said seriously, but with just a tinge of dry humor. “I surely appreciate you watching out for me.”

The Vulcan nodded and walked away, followed by Nyota.

“He’s … an interesting fellow,” Scotty said. “A bit weird, but his heart’s in the right place.” He paused. “So to speak.”

Christopher Pike was reading something on a PADD when Leo presented himself for admittance. The man was still flat on his back, and he looked tired, but not wrung out like he had been while they were still aboard the Enterprise. “Well, well, well …” he said, looking Leo over. “Lieutenant Commander McCoy. C’mon in.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “You love yanking my chain, don’t you, Pike?” he said, syncing his PADD with Pike’s biobed.

“A man has to have his interests,” he said. “And I’m not yanking your chain if you’re keeping the rank.”

Leo looked up from the PADD into Pike’s serious grey eyes. “I’m not done being debriefed,” he said.

“I know,” Pike said easily, “but there are more conversations occurring than just the ones that you’re privy to. Phil Boyce knows how to count, and he knows how to politic,” he paused, and his voice became less playful and more serious, “and he knows a good goddamned surgeon when he sees one.”

Leo nodded. He knew that he was a good goddamned surgeon, so he saw no point in denying it.

“He also knows what it takes to be a good CMO,” Pike continued, “and you, you gruff bastard, had your baptism by fire and you did magnificently. The Vulcan High Command has been singing your praises.”

Now Leo’s eyebrows did make a jaunt up toward his hairline. “I didn’t think they were particularly pleased with my treatment modalities,” he said quietly. “I got the feeling that I’m a bit too pushy, and far too emotional for their taste.”

Pike shook his head. “Ambassador Selek,” he said with delicate emphasis, “has spoken very highly of you, as has Sarek.”

“And T’Pau?” he asked.

“Has not said anything negative, or contradicted them. She also has made it quite clear that Tolok’s death was not avoidable.”

Leo’s mouth turned down at Pike’s statement, but he nodded, watching Pike carefully. “Meaning that someone charged that I either did not do my best,” Pike was very still in the bed, “or insinuated that I aided Tolok in his quest for death. I have a history, after all.”
Pike’s gaze was level. “And your manner leads some to take offense, for some reason,” he said blandly. “Plus, there are members of the review board who believe that your testimony so far has besmirched the name of one of their bright lights, and will ultimately cast a shadow on her work.”

Leo shook his head. “Fucking morons,” he said. “I fail to see how Elizabeth Dehner’s exposure to whatever it was and her response to it, all of which happened light years from Earth, has anything to do with whatever research she was doing.” He looked at Pike. “Or was I supposed to have somehow saved her?”

Pike shrugged. “Some would argue that if you really were as brilliant as you’re purported to be, then you should have found a way.”

Leo laughed. “And I bet not a one of them who has this opinion is either a) a surgeon or b) a doctor that’s ever been out in the black in battle.”

Pike tilted his head in a way that indicated that Leo was correct.

“I’m sure that me belting Howlett doesn’t help, either.” He sighed. “Have I mentioned that I fucking hate Starfleet and all its political bullshit, Captain?”

Pike smiled. “I believe you may have groused a time or two about it, McCoy.” He pointed a finger at him. “Listen to me. I don’t tell you these things to inflame your mordant sensibilities further. I’m telling you this so that when you go in there on Monday, you answer the questions with an eye toward what the issues are.”

Leo sighed even more loudly.

“And as far as Howlett is concerned,” Pike said, “that situation is actually helping you. Commander Kirk has been very, very thorough,” he said, “not that I’d expect anything less from someone with the Kirk surname. She’s told enough key members of the Admiralty about Howlett's questionable behavior around the 25th anniversary of the Kelvin, and with the proof she has?” Pike shook his head. "He’s got no sympathy coming to him from just about anyone, and certainly no one who counts. The scuttlebutt says that an investigation into conduct unbecoming an officer has been launched, but you didn’t hear that from me.” Pike paused. “As far as I’m concerned, you should be goddamned proud for belting that bastard. Not,” he added severely, “that I am advocating that you repeat the action on other senior officers.”

“Don’t worry,” Jim’s voice said. “I won’t let him hit you, Captain.” He went to the other side of the biobed and dropped his duffel on the visitor's chair before grasping the hand that Pike extended to him. “Looking good there, Captain Pike,” he said. He looked over at Leo. “How’s he doing?”

“Give it a good six months,” Leo said, “but he’s going to be out of that chair and walking.”

Jim’s smile was huge and heartfelt, as he leaned across the biobed and slapped Leo on the shoulder. “That’s my Bones,” he crowed to Pike. “He can repair a spine like nobody’s business, and if there’s no anesthesia, he’ll knock you out with a southpaw blindside!”

Pike laughed. “From all accounts, Jim, his left hook wasn’t quite as impressive as your mother’s right hook.”

“Well …” Jim said, eyes twinkling. “Severe verbal beatdowns are more the McCoy family specialty, but for a good ol’ fashioned hands-on pounding, you've got to get a Kirk for the job.”

Pike shook his head, but he was laughing just the same. "Too bad your mom wasn't in that brawl I found you at the bottom of then, huh, Kirk?"
"Don't make me hurt you, sir," Jim answered, cracking his knuckles.

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The lights were low, the shades drawn against intruding eyes with long lenses, and now and then, Leo could hear the patter of cold rain against the windows.

Inside, it was warm and safe and they were naked, pressed against each other in the middle of what Leo had come to think of as their bed, Jim holding the both of them in his warm hand and stroking, their breath hitching as they moaned and shivered, and kissed.

They were almost too raw for this, but Jim had been too impatient to let the regenerator heal more than just enough, and had pulled Leo onto the bed, arranging them so that he was sitting in between Leo's outspread legs, his own thighs spread wide and over Leo's as he slicked them both up and caressed them firmly, together, pulling them towards oblivion.

Leo shifted so that he could reach between them, rolling Jim's sac in his own slick hand as Jim groaned, dropping his head back before he pressed it against Leo's.

"Bones …" the word was a tortured whisper torn from deep in Jim's chest, a warning and a plea.

Leo moved in closer, raising his hips restlessly into Jim's grip, wanting more -- of Jim's hand, of the fevered press of his smooth cock against Leo's, more pressure, more pleasure, more. His slick hand trailed up and over Jim's pelvis, ghosting up over his hip and the curve of his buttock, moving across to caress the smooth skin over his tailbone, stroking it, tapping it before he followed the path downward to the cleft between Jim's buttocks.

Jim arced into him, against him, hand twisting on them both. "Bones …" the word was drawn out as Jim tipped his head down, seeking Leo's mouth and his tongue, while Leo's finger circled the knot of tissue there, still swollen from all the sex they'd had. Jim shuddered against him, and Leo could feel the surge of blood beating in Jim's cock against his own and he wrapped his free hand around Jim, around them both, as Jim yelled, his chest heaving against Leo's as he began to come.

Leo watched the light in Jim's dazed eyes -- blue and black like the sky above them and the infinite space beyond it -- and felt himself dissolving into it as Jim wrapped his other arm around him, holding him close, and they came apart, together.

Chapter 48

The sound of Jim's voice, warm and quietly laughing, was what woke him up the second time.

Technically, he thought with the kind of sleep-addled precision that would have made Spock proud, it was the third time, but the first barely counted. He'd been soundly asleep when Jim had broken from his embrace and slipped out of bed. He must have reached for him, because he had a memory of Jim kissing his hand and then his cheek, running a hand through his hair and telling him to go back to sleep unless he intended to get up and go running with him. The room had still been dark, and the patter of the rain against the windows had sounded cold, so Leo had shivered and Jim had laughed, smoothing the covers up and under Leo's chin.

The second time had begun with the weight of Jim’s body hitting the bed as he bent to take off his sneakers, followed by the thud of them one after the other as Jim tossed them toward the boot tray by the front door. It hadn’t taken much effort for Leo to stretch up and out of the covers, to pull Jim down next to him as he pulled the sweatshirt over his head. Leo had run a hand over Jim’s KFF t-shirt, feeling the warmth radiating off Jim’s chest before he dropped his head onto it, burrowing into
Jim’s heat and smelling the rain and the sweat. Jim had protested and run his cold hands over Leo’s neck, but although Leo had flinched, he still willed himself back to sleep, wrapping his arms around Jim firmly.

Jim’s hand was warm now as it stroked over Leo’s scalp, his long fingers stopping to roll pieces of Leo’s hair between his fingers as he spoke in a quiet voice. From the disjointed cadence of Jim’s speech, Leo sleepily comprehended that Jim was on the comm with someone and he blinked and then dropped his eyes closed in contentment as Jim ran a hand over his head.

“Half asleep, I think,” Jim said, his voice a rumble under Leo’s ear.

Leo tilted his face up toward Jim, and Jim ran a finger over his eyebrows one after the other.

“Just tired,” Jim answered. “There wasn’t a lot of time to sleep on the Enterprise.”

Jim’s laugh was low and intimate. “A bear?” he said, and Leo could hear the smile in his voice. “That does seem kinda fitting, doesn’t it?”

Leo’s brows drew down as he tried to puzzle out who Jim was talking to.

Jim laughed. “He’s definitely waking up,” he said. “He’s frowning.” He laughed at whatever was said to him and then leaned forward to drop a kiss onto Leo’s forehead. “Gram says to cut it out, Bones,” he said. “OK,” he continued on. “I will. Bye.”

Leo heard the clap of the comm closing. “Why’s Gram calling you?” he asked.

“Good Morning, Sleepy!” Jim said cheerfully. He wiggled lower in the bed, pulling the covers he was laying atop off Leo as he did so.

Leo huffed out a sigh as the cold air touched his skin and curled closer into Jim’s heat, tucking his face into Jim’s neck.

“Man,” Jim said. “Your nose is cold. Does that mean you’re healthy?”

Leo ignored him. He was a grossly energetic chatterbox, a man with no healthy respect for the tradition of a good Sunday morning lie-in, and he told him so.

Jim was totally unfazed, and continued to monologue. “She wasn’t calling me, actually,” Jim said breezily. “She called your main comm, and then your personal comm and well, I thought it might be the hospital so I looked and saw that it was Gram and then I answered it. The End.” He paused. “Except for the part where she was telling me about how you used to frown even as a baby when someone tried to wake you up.”

“What kind of an idiot wakes a sleeping baby?” Leo asked, not opening his eyes.

“That’s what your Gram said!” Jim said with a laugh. “Evidently, your parents were worried that you weren’t eating enough because you weren’t waking them up all the time, so they used to wake you up to feed you, until the time they made the mistake of waking you in front of her.”

“And?” Leo said, after a while. If he didn’t prompt Jim, he’d wait forever to tell the punchline.

“And evidently, Gram said that she’d never seen a baby scowl with outrage before, although she claims that otherwise you were a perfect child in every way. Also, she thinks that you’d hibernate for short periods if given the option.” Jim’s hand was sifting through Leo’s hair as he spoke, the other one punctuating his words in swirls and flourishes somewhere above Leo’s head.
Not that Leo had opened his eyes to confirm this fact, but he was pretty sure that he was right from the way Jim’s muscles were shifting under his head.

“Shower?” Jim said cheerfully.

The peaceful silence had reigned for all of five minutes, long enough for Leo to slip into a doze, and at the sound of his beloved’s voice, Leo groaned, knowing that he wasn’t going to be getting any more sleep.

If anyone had told Leo three years ago that he'd be pressed up against the wall of his shower stall with his hair soaped into horns, laughing his naked ass off while Jim Kirk kissed him breathless and brought them both off in his soapy hand, he'd have scanned them for hallucinogens. But here he was nonetheless, naked and wheezing with delighted agony, having more fun than was probably legal, and happier than he remembered being in a long time.

Maybe than he'd ever been, really, Leo thought, running his hands over Jim's slippery back, still longing to be closer, to be more connected, even when Jim dropped to his knees in front of him and his head, still crowned with its ridiculous hairdo, hit the wall of the shower with a hard thunk as Jim’s mouth closed over him. He wanted to keep his eyes closed and simply feel, but he couldn’t stop watching Jim, cheeks rosy with health and lust, blue eyes hot with hunger as they watched Leo watching him, a feedback loop of desire running between them as Jim’s tongue swirled and the shower ran like rain over his head, eradicating Leo’s paltry efforts at proving that Jim was the horny bastard in their relationship. Jim’s hair, damn it, was too short to really make horns. And as much as he hated to be wrong about anything, this was so, so much better than a Sunday morning lie-in — and if he was still in his bed alone, dreaming, he never ever wanted to wake up.

"Jim," he groaned into the warm, humid air, fingers flexing against Jim’s scalp as he bucked and surged into his mouth.

Jim was smiling when he rose from his knees to kiss Leo, his expression that slightly smug smirk that he wore when he’d done something that he thought was awesome.

Honestly, Leo had neither the heart nor inclination to disagree. He was too busy shuddering through the aftershocks as Jim wrapped him up in his strong arms and kissed him, dancing Leo’s pliant, oxygen-starved body over under the stream of water. Jim’s hands smoothed over his soapy hair, ruining the horns he’d so meticulously sculpted as Leo waited for his nervous system to function more than autonomically.

"What?" Jim whispered into Leo's mouth, kissing him as the soap bubbles cascaded over his face and shoulders.

He shivered, despite the warmth, at the sound of Jim's voice, raw and intimate, echoing inside of him. "Just … Jim," he whispered back, making a supreme effort to raise a hand so that he could outline Jim's mouth with his fingers.

Jim laughed and leaned back in to kiss him, pulling back once to say, "Bones," but still standing so close that the Leo could feel his lips as they brushed against his while he shaped the word.

"My Bones," the end of Jim's words trailed off into a satisfying groan when Leo grasped him with his other hand, working him over with it while the first remained on Jim's face, fingers playing over his mouth as they kissed. It was hard to split his focus, but he had years of kisses to make up for. He swallowed every groan and shiver greedily as he twisted his hand over and around Jim's cock, until
Jim was leaning heavily against him for support and Leo was forced to drop his hand from Jim’s face to cradle his lover against his chest, his arm slung around Jim’s back tightly to hold him up.

They kissed until the water shut itself off and the cascade of liquid raining from their skin slowed to a trickle and then an occasional droplet, their breathing winding down in the aftermath like a storm receding.

After a cup of the coffee that Jim had brewed while toasting bagels, squeezing oranges and scrambling eggs, Leo had to concede that maybe Jim did understand something about Sunday mornings.

For one thing, it was nearly 1100 hours, a thoroughly respectable hour for brunch, and well past the time that Leo usually slept, even on a day off. Jim going out so early had meant that he’d gotten not only bagels, but all the trimmings from the mess, even filling his pockets full of oranges for juice. And even if the bagels and cream cheese were synth because of Jim’s wonky immune system, the lox was real and the coffee was hot, and Jim was making them both breakfast in Leo’s tiny kitchenette, whistling as he did so, gloriously naked and unashamed while Leo lay in their bed on his stomach in a similarly unclad state and enjoyed the view, drinking a cup of freshly brewed coffee. They ate their breakfast in bed, Jim reading the news over his shoulder when he got bored with whatever he was reading on his own PADD.

Leo was cradling the still warm cup of coffee in his hand when he flipped to a new screen and almost spilled it all over himself. “Jim?”

“Mmm …” Jim’s hand on his head was still, and his tone told Leo that his focus was on something else.

“Jimm.” Leo repeated more insistently, tilting his head back against Jim’s collarbone so that he could see him more clearly. After finishing breakfast, they’d found themselves pretty much in the same position in which they’d started the day, Jim hogging all the pillows and half on top of the covers while Leo rested comfortably underneath them, laying on his back with his head pillowed on Jim’s chest.

Jim’s answering murmur was more quizzical this go-round, so Leo pointed at his PADD where a vid of Jim leaping over a puddle, oranges bulging from his pockets, carrying the bag that contained their breakfast fixings, was playing on a loop. Breakfast for Two? the headline screamed in oversized font. Or Is Captain Kirk Just A Big Eater?

Above him, Jim snorted with laughter. “Seriously?”

On the vid, Jim’s head turned sharply as he honed in on the person filming him, and he glared for a moment before he turned and loped away from the camera, his steps fluid and sure but at such a pace that the cameraman gave up after joggling after him for only a few steps.

Does Captain Kirk Have a Secret Lover? another headline screamed in blinking type.

“What are you reading?” Jim asked.

“Not The Universal Enquirer, you ass,” Leo said, leaning over him to put his cup on the nightstand. “This is a standard news aggregator. I just finished a story on Vulcan’s political future and flipped back to the main page, and this is in the Top Stories link.”

Jim gaped at him. “You are shitting me,” he said, keying open a new screen on his own PADD.
“Jim,” Leo said, exasperated, “You clearly saw the pap.”

“So what?” Jim asked. “Who cares about me getting breakfast?”

Leo was scanning the story. “Well, the supposition is that you either have an eating disorder, or a secret lover.”

“Supposition?” Jim asked, sitting up and dislodging Leo. “Who the fuck — why would I — Jesus, this is annoying — secret lover?”

“Yes,” Leo said with grim humor, clicking over to the attached stories about Jim.

I Slept With Enterprise Hero!! one of them screamed.

“I never slept with her!” Jim said in an outraged tone. Clearly, he’d clicked over as well. “You know damned well that I don’t sleep with anybody but you.” Jim squinted at the screen. “And I sure as hell didn’t fuck her,” he added with disgust. “I don’t even know her,” Jim said. “Jesus, Bones. There’s images of me from high school on here. Who the fuck is selling these?”

“You played football, Jim?” Even if they were intrusive, Leo couldn’t help but smile at the pictures of a far younger Jim, who looked even younger than he was at the time.

“So did you,” he said. “Only my senior year,” he added. “After I …” he sighed. “Caught up, you know, growing and … everything. I played in juvie, too,” he said sullenly. “Can’t wait until those pictures come out.”

Leo sat up in the bed and pulled Jim back against him as he rested against the pillows.

“Jesus, Bones,” Jim said. “Why are people interested in this crap? What if …” Jim shook his head. “There are things I don’t want to see on the news, Bones,” he said. “I don’t want to talk about …” he shook his head again. “Sooner or later, someone’s going to start to wonder where my brother died.”

Leo put aside his PADD and closed his arms around Jim, holding on. He should have seen this coming, but honestly, he hadn’t thought it would go this far. “You think this is Howlett?” he asked, wondering if there’d be any interest in his own secrets. God. He shivered, thinking about what it could mean if the story about his father got out.

“What?” Jim asked. “And no, I don’t think this is Howlett. I mean, it could be, but …” He sighed and dropped his PADD on the bed, turning into Leo’s embrace. “My whole life, Bones,” he said. “I’ve seen this happen, seen how my dad got treated in the press. I Had George Kirk’s Love Child!” he sketched the quotes in the air. “I guess I got so used to it being focused on him, or my mom and their tragic love story, that I just didn’t think about what would happen now. I should have known.”

“Jim,” Leo said gently. “Don’t be an ass. You were a little busy at the time, what with saving the planet and all, to think about these kind of ridiculous fucking ramifications.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, pressing his face into Leo’s neck. “I still should have known.”

“It’s your own damned fault for being so pretty,” Leo drawled, running a hand through Jim’s soft hair.

He snorted against Leo. “Listen, Jim Kirk’s secret lover, I think you better worry about your own pretty ass, which they’ll be trying to get pictures of.”

Leo grumbled against Jim’s head. “And that’s why,” he said, “I want to keep the windows polarized
“You ashamed of me, Bones?” Jim asked. "Want to keep me in here in hiding, hibernating with you?"

Jim had said this in a teasing manner, but Leo was used to his ways by now, and knew that there was a kernel of discomfort in the question. He thought long and hard about how to answer before he spoke. “Remember, long time ago, when we were talking about poor Irina, and about how this — what happens between two people in bed — was sacred to some people?”

Jim had gone still in his arms.

“This is sacred to me, Jim,” he said slowly. “Not because of any religion, but because I think it’s holy in the way things are when they’re rare.” Jim raised his head from where it had been, and looked at him. “And I want to keep that part of it between just us, because it’s not for other people to understand or judge. It’s private, and I don’t want to share it.” He ran his hands through Jim’s hair and down the long line of his back. “As far as them figuring out that I’m your so-called secret lover - - fine by me. That way, I don’t have to explain why I’m scowling at your stalkers, because I don’t want to share you with them, either.”

Jim answered by surging up and into Leo for a ferocious, consuming kiss, rolling Leo underneath him while he pushed impatiently at the covers caught between them. Jim's protest at Leo's assertion that it was his turn had resolved into groans of need as Leo had bent his head to his task, worshipping every part of Jim's spine. He'd started at the base of it, thumbs spreading Jim wide as he kissed and licked his way around and up, thumbs pressing on the edges of each vertebrae after he mouthed up over them, fingers smoothing over the curve of firm muscles from his gluteus all the way up to his rectus posterior at the base of his skull, all of the muscles that held Jim upright, made him run, made him … Jim. He smoothed his way back down over Jim's soft skin, pressing his face against the thin stripes of scars that were barely perceptible, felt the hitch of Jim's breathing every time he touched one, and reached blindly for the gel, needing to eradicate all the wrong that had been done to Jim.

Jim groaned and shook below his hands, pushing up to his knees and back into the press of his fingers as Leo kissed the shifting long muscles below his skin.

He stroked his hands up Jim's spine and back down as he slid inside, hands sliding across the arch of Jim's waist as Jim shifted to get the best angle from Leo's thrusts, turning his head vainly, seeking Leo's mouth.

Leo bent forward and slid his arms up and under Jim's body, fingers splayed wide to caress all the taut muscles, circling his nipples while Jim groaned and called out to him, head still turned. Leo, weight fully on his knees now, bent over Jim's back, thrusting, and wrapped one arm around Jim's chest and the other low on his abdomen, just above the root of his cock, pulling him up and back against Leo. "C'mon, sugar, up," he said into Jim's mouth, kissing him as they rose up on their knees.

Jim's laugh was breathless, "I am up, Bo-," he began, and then shuddered at the change of angle, finishing Leo's nickname on a groan. "—ones." He dropped his head back on Leo's shoulder as Leo thrust, stroking Jim's cock in concert with his motions. Jim moaned into Leo's open mouth, eyes closed.

"Jim," Leo said urgently, feeling himself tipping over the edge. Despite his best efforts at control, this was still too new and he loved Jim too much, needed him too much, wanted him even more now that he had him than he ever had when he'd only dreamed about this. "Jim."
Jim's eyes slitted open and he focused on Leo with a sex-stoned gaze. "Yeah, baby?"

Leo's eyes slammed shut as he circled his hips and thrust up hard, feeling the moan that jarred out of Jim. He forced his eyes open and nudged Jim's chin with his forehead until his eyes opened again. He drew his head back so that he could watch Jim's face. "I love you, Jim," he said to him, feeling himself starting to let go, to unravel.

Jim's eyes widened and his breath hitched as he jolted and came suddenly, all over Leo's hand seconds before Leo did.

Leo, trembling and weak-kneed, leaned in for a kiss only to be surprised when Jim shifted up and off him before he could catch his breath, turning to wrap his arms around Leo, knocking him backward on the bed with the force of his kiss. When Jim broke from the kiss to press his forehead against Leo's, Leo lay there panting, his chest heaving against Jim's as he straightened his legs out from where they'd been caught underneath him. "Jim--" he started, but Jim pulled back and kissed him, eyes wet and wide and fiercely blue. One of his hands was pressed against Leo's cheek, the other on his shoulder where it had come to rest after Jim had circled his neck with his arm again, cradling Leo's head possessively in the valley of his elbow.

Jim stared at him for a good minute, eyes searching Leo's face as if memorizing him, or trying to understand him or …

"Jim," Leo asked in a questioning tone, watching as Jim's eyes tracked down to his mouth to watch the word being formed.

When he looked back up at Leo again, Jim smiled in a way that Leo had never seen before. "My Bones," he said in answer, and there was something different about the way he said the phrase now, a finality on top of a note of ownership and possession that made Leo shiver.

Jim laughed as he felt the ripple of Leo's shiver and then he slowly, slowly bent in for a kiss, eyes never shutting completely as he closed in, inexorably.

"God," Leo groaned. He hoped he'd be able to walk tomorrow.

But even if he had to crawl into his goddamned hearing, he'd still be the luckiest goddamned bastard in the universe.

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After a nap, another shower and a change of bed linens, Leo was whistling when he came out of the bathroom and caught Jim's bright-eyed smile before his expression changed. "Bones!" Jim accused, "you're wearing clothes!"

"You answering comms naked, you exhibitionist?" he asked easily.

"I'm reading them," Jim answered, his tone still accusatory. "And why are you wearing clothes?"

Leo whistled as he walked the few steps to the kitchenette, putting away their dishes from the morning. "I need food," he said. "Which means we've got to order something, which means … clothes."

Jim pouted, but startled when the comm beeped with an incoming call, and stood up from behind the desk.

"You gonna get that?" Leo asked drily. "Give someone a thrill."
Jim squinted at the details. "I don't think Morrissey at the front desk swings that way, Bones," he said. "But if you've changed your mind about sharing …"

Leo jostled Jim out of view as he laughed, grappling for Leo. "Ass," he said.

"You love my ass," Jim retorted, out of view of the screen.

"Yes," Leo said into the comm, raising an eyebrow. "McCoy here."

"Sorry to bother you, Dr. McCoy," Morrissey said, "but you have a visitor." He flashed the Starfleet ID at the screen and Leo smiled.

"Send her up and thanks," he answered, "McCoy out." He turned to a puzzled Jim, who had his hands on his hips. "Pants, Jim," he said. "And maybe a shirt."

"Who is it?" Jim asked, begrudgingly rifling through his duffel for some briefs and sweats. The dorm was so quiet that they could clearly hear the lift moving and then the flurry of activity in the hall.

"Sounds like more than one person," Jim grumbled, stepping into sweats, and hastily pulling a KFF t-shirt over his head.

The chime sounded on the door, and Leo could hear a quiet voice talking, and an occasional answering burble. He smiled enigmatically and went to the door, glad they'd made the bed up entirely, and taken a few minutes to clear up the mess from breakfast. He pressed the enter key and the door whisked open to reveal Bet Wah, juggling something that smelled delicious while she tried to keep the baby strapped to her front from bursting out of the sling. "Oh my!" Leo said at the sight of the baby, the Southerner in him coming to the fore as he took the bags from her. "Look at you!"

"Oh, Leonard," Bet Wah said. "I'm so happy to see you looking so well."

"Bet Wah!" Jim said from behind him. He greeted her more formally, although Leo lost any thread of the conversation after 'Ni hao'.

"Jim," she said, with tears in her eyes. "I'm so happy to see you." She hugged them both, one after the other, while the baby in the sling squawked and protested, and they all laughed. "Let me just …" she said, and stepped back, freeing the babe from his sling. "This is Jianyu," she said with a smile, turning the infant around to face them both. He was rosy-cheeked and round, wearing a hat with the coloring and ears like a panda bear's, eyes wide and dark at the sight of strangers.

"Hello, little man," Leo said, bowing and shaking the baby's hand. "He's what now, six months?"

"Just about," Bet Wah said, wiping at her eyes again. "Thanks to you both." Her lips were trembling, and at the sound of the emotion in his mother's voice, Jianyu looked increasingly tremulous, and began to whimper.

"Now, now, darlin'," Leo said to them both. "None of that, c'mon in and sit a spell."

Behind him, he could hear the sound of Jim tapping on the console at his desk, and suddenly, the lights on Leo's Christmas tree flared on and began blinking as the starships spun, casting dancing shadows on the walls and the ceiling. Jianyu's fretful noises broke off as he stared at the little tree on the windowsill of Leo's kitchenette.

Jim began talking to the baby in Cantonese, repeating his words in English for Leo's benefit. "See that, Jianyu?" he asked, getting the tree and bringing it over to the desk. "Star ships!" He pointed. "Quasars!" The baby was fascinated, and barely noticed his mother taking off his outerwear or her own, didn't make a peep when she handed him to Jim, who pulled Leo's desk chair out and sat on it,
showing the baby the shiny tree and talking.

"You're good with him," Bet Wah said to Jim, her tone approving.

Leo quirked an eyebrow at him, but Jim just smirked and said loftily. "Some people don't have the appreciation for the shiny things, but Jianyu and me?" Jianyu leaned companionably back against Jim at the sound of his name and looked up at him, "We're men of taste, right?" Jianyu grinned up at him toothlessly and reached a dimpled hand up to Jim's bright eyes, before he latched onto Jim's nose. He used it as a rudder to steer Jim's head in one direction and then the other, as fascinated with Jim's blue eyes as he'd been by the tree.

Leo smiled as Jim obligingly shifted his head from side to side, winking and blinking his eyes in rapid succession, to make the baby laugh.

"Did you have younger siblings, Jim?" Bet Wah asked curiously, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Nah," Jim said easily, but Leo could see that he was wearing one of his company smiles. "But I did my share of babysitting."

Leo felt a pang at the thought of Jim's tiny cousins, long dead on Tarsus, and turned his attention back to Bet Wah, lest she catch the changing temperature in the room. "It's good to see you, darlin'," he said to her, sitting down next to her. "And he looks like a real handful, your boy."

"He's a good baby," Bet Wah said, reaching her hand out to Leo. "And I meant what I said, Leonard," she added in a soft voice. "To you and to you especially, Jim. I cannot thank you enough."

Jianyu's baby laughter was bright as Jim spun them around in the desk chair, making zooming noises. Jim stopped the chair, making an elaborate screeching noise for brakes that amused Jianyu even more than his previous antics had, and Leo's own laugh was heartfelt at the sight of the two of them, of the baby hiccupping with laughter at Jim's antics. "Oh no!" Jim said in a dramatic tone, repeating the words in Cantonese before he continued. "The inertial dampeners must be offline!"

"Careful you don't make him throw up there, Captain Kirk," Leo warned, laughing even more when Jim looked alarmed at the prospect, carefully eyeballing the baby.

"He's fine, Jim," Bet Wah said. "In fact, he should be getting hungry soon." She glanced at the chrono on her wrist.

"Well now," Leo said. "Aren't you going to stay and eat that fantastic smelling food with us?"

Bet Wah patted his hand fondly. "No," she said sweetly, and there was something mischievous in her expression when she added. "I'm sure that you have … things you need to attend to before tomorrow's hearings. But, when I saw the newsvids today, I figured that you'd appreciate not having to go out and dodge the press."

Leo's scowl deepened at her words, and the reminder of what was coming tomorrow.

"Bones," Jim said in a chiding tone, "say thank you and smile at Bet Wah." He bowed a little in his chair, and said a phrase that made Bet Wah smile.

She answered Jim with a phrase that clearly was not 'you're welcome' from the flush that rose on Jim's cheeks. Leo supposed that she was telling Jim that he was the one to be thanked in this situation, a sentiment that was underscored when she added. "Seriously, Jim. For him, and for me and his father. Thank you."
Jim bowed slightly forward, but Leo could see that he was still uncomfortable.

Bet Wah clapped her hands and said something to Jianyu as she stood. The baby smiled at first, but protested when he realized that his mother was intending to take him away from his new playmate. "Oh, Jim," she said, laughing as the baby yelled and reached for him. "You've got a friend for life."

"I can always use more friends," Jim said, running his hand over the baby's round head. "You going to come fly with me when you're all grown up Jianyu?" He asked the baby, trying to amuse him while Bet Wah stuffed his flailing limbs into the bunting that she zipped up before she put on his panda hat. "You can't build the universe unless you're in space."

Bet Wah laughed at Jim, slapping at his shoulder. "Don't give him ideas, Jim Kirk."

Leo looked closely at the knitted items, suddenly suspicious of their provenance. "You talk to Miss Elizabeth much?" he asked conversationally, holding up Bet Wah's coat, while Jim tossed the baby up into the air with accompanying zooming noises.

"Oh, I love your grandmother," Bet Wah answered. "She's really wonderful -- and she's sent me so many beautiful things!" She stood up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Leo's cheek. "Take care of him out there in the stars," she said to him in a low voice, and Leo smiled at her. "And let him take care of you, too."

Leo wrapped her in a fond hug. "I will, darlin'," he said. "Don't you worry."

"Good," Bet Wah said, drawing back to look him in the eye before she turned to hug Jim and take her son from him, kissing his round cheek, and then Jim's. "That's from Jianyu," she said. Jim smiled as Bet Wah leaned in and kissed him again, on his other cheek. "And that's from his father and me." She said something to Jim in Cantonese and he smiled, nodding. She turned and walked to the door, which whisked open for her. "And remember, Jim," she said from the hallway. "If this whole Captain thing doesn't work out, I can always use more hands in the lab." She waved Jianyu's hand at them as the door closed.

Leo shook his head and turned, only to find Jim already in the kitchenette, opening containers and pulling the drawer open for utensils. "Hey!"

"What?" Jim asked. Half of a fragrant-smelling bun was hanging out of his mouth. "I'm hungry."

When Leo opened his mouth to protest Jim's lack of manners, Jim stuffed a pork-filled bun into it, and his protests evaporated. "Plates?" he chided, mouth full of food.

"Amateur," Jim retorted, but he handed them to him and followed Leo back to the bed for dinner.

It wasn't the first time that groans had filled the air of Leo's bedroom that day by any stretch of the imagination, but this time, the cause was entirely different.

"You know," Jim said, after Leo'd gotten up to get them a couple of beers and some napkins. "I promised Bet Wah that I'd take care of you out there in the stars, and I will." He'd caught Leo's left hand in his right, and his fingers turned the ring on Leo's finger as he said this.

Leo shifted uncomfortably on the bed at Jim's words. He still had his doubts that Starfleet would let them go off together. No matter what Pike said, he knew that there were members of the Admiralty who had to see that letting an inexperienced Captain fly with an inexperienced CMO was not an option, despite the shortage of qualified personnel.

"You just have to trust me when I tell you that it will happen, Bones," Jim said. "Can you do that?
Can you trust me?"

Leo stared at Jim, wanting more than anything to believe in the impossible, to believe that they'd be out there in the black, together. "I can try, Jim," he said finally.

Jim studied him seriously, and then nodded. Leo could see that he wasn't particularly happy with Leo's answer, but he'd decided not to push any further. "It's going to happen," he said firmly. "I promise, Bones." He paused, still holding Leo's hand like he was making another kind of vow entirely. "Trust me." He leaned forward and kissed Leo, clasping his free hand behind Leo's head as Leo closed his eyes, and hoped.

Chapter 49

"Patty darlin', I am so very sorry," Leo said as he walked swiftly across the anteroom. Patty, curled up in the corner of one of the armchairs that stood sentry next to the low-backed and distinctly uncomfortable couches, looked up in surprise from the PADD she was reading, an open bag of rice crackers next to her. Leo fidgeted uncomfortably, aware of the double import of his words after they'd been said. "To keep you waiting so long," he added, his words rushing over each other. "You must be starving."

Patty smiled softly, but her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked up at Leo, waving her bag of snacks. "I had a little something to take the edge off," she said. "No worries."

Leo sighed in frustration, looking at his friend with a doctor's eyes. Despite the presence of the snacks, she looked a bit hollow in the cheek, and her eyes betrayed both her lack of sleep and her sorrow. Leo held out his hand and Patty took it, allowing him to pull her small, curvy form from the chair and up against him in a hug. Wrapping his arms around her only confirmed what he'd assessed, and he was determined that this was going to be one meal that he'd make sure that she ate. "All that will be left in the mess is the dregs," he complained, "but if we go the O Club, we can get something."

Patty leaned back and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Hungry?" she asked in an arch tone before she added. "Are we skipping meals – or just burning lots of calories?"

There was a secretive smile curving her lips as she spoke, despite the shadows in her green eyes, and Leo smiled back down at her, happy to see it, even as he blushed a bit at her astute observation and the memory it conjured up. He'd been woken by Jim well before the sun was up, by a hand on his cheek and earnest kisses. Jim had made love to him in the silence, only the rustling of the sheets and the sounds they made breaking the peacefulness. Jim had been intent and serious, his eyes never leaving Leo's for long as he bent over him, driving in and out, sending them both soaring. He'd kissed Leo in the aftermath, long and sweet and serious, and Leo knew that Jim was telling him the words he could not yet say, could feel it in the tightness of Jim's grasp as he wrapped his arms around him, not in desperation but with possession. Jim had never had much to call his own, not really, and now that he had Leo, he wasn't particularly shy about claiming ownership. Of course, Leo thought with a wry smile, thinking back over the weekend they'd shared, Jim wasn't particularly shy about much of anything.

He blinked and looked down at Patty, letting the smile stay on his face. "Patty darlin'," he said, "a gentlemen does not kiss and tell. Besides," he added mischievously, "you know that bureaucratic fuckwitttery always makes me ravenous." He let her go, only stopping to grab her hand and the PADD that she'd left on the chair as he towed her behind him, laughing.

"You do turn a phrase, Lieutenant Commander," she said impishly.
"Darlin', I'm just a lowly Cadet in these reds, and if you think that they didn't fucking remind me of that every five minutes for the past five plus hours, well …" Leo shook his head as he savagely punched the call button for the turbolift.

Patty looked up at him, worry creasing her brow. "But Buckley's in there with you, right? And she's been on your side since you saved her grandson. And then there's Boyce, and Vattern's the head of surgery, so …"

They stepped into the empty lift and Leo punched in the sub-basement destination. "He's never been a fan," Leo said. "I'm not enough of a suck-up."

"Len," Patty said with emphasis. "You're not a suck-up at all, but … he's enough of an egotist that anyone who's as skilled as you are is a credit to him." Leo rolled his eyes as Patty chuckled and continued on, "and let's face it, the Pike surgery was huge. The vids of it are being watched like they're bootleg porn."

Leo looked at her in surprise.

"Seriously," she said. "Even I've seen parts of it and you know I hate surgery." She bumped her shoulder against his bicep. "But, I did enjoy getting to casually drop into the conversation that we're like this." She held up her hand with her index and medius pressed up against each other.

"Always," Leo said firmly, wrapping an arm around her and using his height and bulk to shoulder his way into the stream of Academy personnel using the underground tunnels to avoid the raw San Francisco day above ground. He ignored the stares that his presence caused, still unnerved by his sudden notoriety.

"I know," Patty said softly, when they stood waiting for a turbolift up to the Officer's Mess. She had clearly noticed the young women across from them who were openly gaping at Leo as they whispered.

"Was I on the goddamned newsvids again?" Leo growled as they moved into the blessedly unoccupied lift.

Patty frowned and flipped through the display on the wall comm, shaking her head. "It's probably just the vids of the operation," she said with a shrug and then added. "Although, seriously? Poor Jim."

"What now?" Leo asked, as they debarked from the elevator.

"He can't go to the bathroom without someone taking a vid of him," Patty said, shrugging.

Leo signaled 'two' to the maitre d' and waved Patty in front of him as they walked into the mostly empty dining room. "He's pretty concerned that his time off-world is going to come up," Leo said circumspectly as they were handed menus, looking at her over his.

Patty's glance back was incisive. "He's right to be worried about that," she said, nodding. "I'm sure it will come out. He should have a strategy about how to deal with it."

Leo snorted. "This is Jim we're talking about," he said. "Strategius should have been his middle name rather than Tiberius."

"Is that even a word?" Patty laughed.

"No," Leo answered, smiling. "I think it's consilius, but c'mon, Strategius sounds better."
Patty smiled at him, then dropped her voice as she asked. "Is he worried about anything else coming out?"

Leo spoke without thought, and then could have kicked himself in the balls after he said, "If he was then he wouldn't be worth my time." He immediately closed his eyes in anguish, cheeks burning. He reached across the table and grabbed Patty's hand. "I'm an asshole," he said.

"No," Patty said softly, squeezing his hand. "You're just honest." There were tears in her eyes. "I've uh …" she sighed. "I've done a lot of thinking about Shohreh in the past few weeks, long before this … all happened." Patty wiped at her eyes with her napkin as the waiter came to take their order, only continuing on after he left. "I had already started back in therapy."

Leo nodded wordlessly trying to encourage her to speak, reaching out to take her hand again.

"So …" Patty said. "No conclusions, but I know that you know that we both have to guard against the urge to heal our lovers, and the ego gratification that comes with that, the power that we feel when we effect change."

"Oh, yeah," Leo said, nodding. "There was a lot of that in my marriage –" he stopped himself thinking, "and I almost started down that road again."

"What stopped you?" Patty asked curiously.

"Jim," Leo said clearly. "You know, he'd be the first one to admit that he's fucked up, but that doesn't mean that he wants me to fix him." He shook his head. "Hard lesson for me to learn. Harder still for me to accept that I'm pretty fucked up myself."

Patty squeezed his hand. "I love you so much," she said to Leo in a watery voice. "And I know that you know what I mean by that."

"Patty darlin'," Leo said. "I am so sorry about Shohreh."

She nodded, the tears in her eyes spilling over her lower lashes. "You know what's weird?" she asked, then continued on without waiting for Leo to respond. "She's dead and I know that, I mean, I feel it, but …" she shook her head, "in so many ways, her being dead allows me to really grieve everything that she threw away between us." She paused, and Leo lifted their intertwined hands to wipe away her tears. "And to be angry with her. Really, really angry with her."

"For leaving you in such a final way?" Leo asked quietly.

"Not the way you think," Patty said, and Leo could hear the strength of the anger that she was holding back. "You know, we didn't see a lot of each other while you were dating Ellie Pierson – and I'm sorry about that --" she added, referring to Ellie's death. "Anyway, Shohreh and I … we were together on and off throughout that whole period, and I convinced myself that I was persuading her back to me … right up until the instant that she told me that she was pregnant."

Leo quelled his outburst as the waiter returned with their salads. "Oh, darlin'," was all he said in a sorrowful voice.

"You know, Len," Patty said, cutting her vegetables with uncharacteristic savagery. "Up until just that instant, I'd convinced myself that she wasn't still having sex with her husband. And she helped me along in that delusion," she said. "She fed me enough tidbits about her unhappiness that I just …" she waved her fork in the air as she spoke, "believed what I wanted to believe. Delusion," she said, pointing her fork at him. "It's not just for crazy people."
"Patty," Leo said, and his voice was a tad sharp. "I think that you're being very hard on yourself."

"Yeah, well, you should hear me talking to Shohreh at night when I'm alone," she said caustically. "Because even though she's dead, there are still things I wanted to say, things … I don't know if I can ever forgive her for, Leonard." She was quiet for a moment, looking at him. "She was not the person that I had convinced myself that she was," Patty said firmly. "She was far more devious than I'd given her credit for."

Leo opened his mouth to object again, but Patty shook her head and ran right over his words.

"No," she said firmly. "You know how that works, I know you do, because I remember when you told me about your ex-, and how it had gradually dawned on you that you were very different people, before it all disintegrated. Anyway, I saw her with her husband one night."

Leo started at her words, almost choking on his lettuce. He raised an eyebrow at Patty.

"Oh, don't give me the eyebrow," Patty said. "It's not like I was stalking her, or anything. Stop it, seriously, Len," she said, before continuing on. "But … I did know that she was going to this particular fundraiser in town because she'd asked me if I was going, and when I said 'no' she seemed relieved. So. I said yes to the invite and got dressed up and went late and basically lurked until I saw them, laughing and kissing on the dance floor, and …"

Leo reached for her hand again, but Patty waved him off. "No," she said. "I don't want sympathy, not really." She stabbed at her salad. "The worst part?"

"What?" Leo asked, already suspecting.

"I think that she got off on the deception," she said. "Deceiving both of us, me and her husband. I made sure that she saw me that night." She nodded, lost in thought. "Watched how her eyes widened when she saw me, saw the fear of exposure, but there was an element there, like …" Patty narrowed her eyes "anticipation -- almost excitement. She would have loved for me to have made a dramatic scene."

"What did you do?" Leo said, and in his mind's eye, he was seeing Jocelyn in their bed with her lover, the way he'd found them the last night he called their place home, feeling how everything Patty was saying resonated with his own experience.

"I didn't do anything," Patty said simply, "I stood there and finished my glass of champagne, watching her, and then I left."

Leo nodded. "She knew that you knew."

"Yeah," Patty said. "I never spoke to her again. She commed me. She came by. I told her there was nothing more to say, and left it at that." She was pensive for a couple of minutes, pushing her greens around on the plate. "I think that she would have been perfectly happy to continue on the way we had been, even with a child involved. What's really hard for me, on a personal level, is how I missed the signs of her narcissism."

Leo shifted in his seat at her words, grateful for the interruption of the waiter with their entrees. He loved Jim more than anything in the universe, but that didn't mean that he didn't recognize that he was a classic narcissist in many ways.

"C'mon," Patty said. "It barely counts if he can back up his egotism with actually saving the universe."
Leo's smile was wry. "You know what's funny? He's kinda … I won't say embarrassed, because really, I don't know what it would take to embarrass Jim, but he's repeatedly emphasized that he didn't do it himself. For a while there, he was really focused on me getting him on the Enterprise as being the key to the whole cascade of events."

Patty's smile was soft. "I'm sure to him it was."

Leo looked up at her.

"You have to know how much that meant to him," she said. "I don't know him half as well as you do, but I know that he hasn't been used to having anyone to depend upon -- until you. That's huge for him. And I saw how the crew was with him that day when you debarked. It was clear to me that he's already won their loyalty — despite the bonding that would have occurred under the extreme circumstances, that tells me that his leadership qualities are pretty profound."

Leo was nodding.

"Tell me what's bugging you," Patty said gently.

"Pike is sure that they're going to certify Jim's field promotion," Leo answered, gripping his fork. "And considering the decimation of the ranks that's occurred, he's also sure that they're going to make me a CMO."

"They'd be fools not to," Patty said. "Your own leadership qualities might be less apparent than Jim's, but they are nonetheless there."

"I know I'm a bossy so-and-so, darlin'," he said gruffly.

Patty smiled at him, and took a bite of her pasta. She tilted her head and looked at him with her warm, insightful eyes, waiting, and he sighed again. "What if we're assigned to opposite ends of the galaxy?" he asked, hearing the rawness of his question as it was voiced aloud, his darkest fear exposed.

"What does Jim say?" Patty asked.

Leo flapped a hand at her, slicing off a wedge of his salmon. "He tells me not to worry so much, that it's all going to work out."

"Captains do get to choose their command staff," Patty said reasonably.

"Who in their right mind would let an inexperienced Captain pick an inexperienced crew? Because if Jim got to choose, I have no doubt that he'd pick all the same people we flew with last time."

"As I recall," Patty said mildly. "You did rather well on your first mission."

"Lightning doesn't strike twice," Leo said snappishly.

"Except when it does," Patty said, not at all ruffled by his temper. She leaned over and put a finger on the ring that sat on Leo's minimus. "This is Jim's, isn't it?" she asked.

"It was his Dad's," Leo said gruffly, watching as Patty's eyes widened.

"Wow." Patty's voice was low and heartfelt as she looked at Leo. "You have to know what this ring really means," she said, "right?"

"He told me that he wanted me to hold onto it for him," Leo said. "That's all."
"Oh, come on!" Patty said. "He gave you what amounts to his most prized possession for safekeeping. He's telling you that he'll always come back to you, marked you with it."

Leo thought about the way Jim touched the ring sometimes, the expression that he got on his face when he looked at it on Leo's hand, and flushed.

"You know what you've always said to me about Jim?" she asked. "I wouldn't bet against him." Patty smiled. "Take your own advice, doctor." She patted his hand and then withdrew her own, returning to her lunch. "And eat up. You're going to need your strength is my guess."

Leo raised his eyebrow at her, but she only smirked at him.

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By the end of the second debriefing session of the day, Leo was so ready to see the outside of the room that he struggled not to run from it like a kid headed for summer break. He supposed that he should be grateful that this afternoon’s debriefing had been mind-numbingly boring as opposed to grueling, with the Admirals on the panel reviewing the transcripts from the previous week’s depositions and asking for clarification on a number of items, most of them related to his taking command after Dr. Puri’s death. He'd been chastised over some of his answers on paperwork, but he’d stifled the urge to roll his eyes and said ‘yessir’ and had waited, impatiently, until the next question rolled in, while the Admirals scrolled through screens and made the occasional note with their styluses. He had tried not to fidget, or sigh, or to daydream about Jim and their weekend together. Although thinking about that, even briefly, caused his cock to twitch and his stomach to clench with longing, and he'd been forced to think about the most gruesome autopsies he'd ever performed to get control of himself.

He looked around the crowded anteroom, hoping against hope to see Jim's beloved figure somewhere. Unfortunately, instead of Jim he saw Spock, talking to some members of the Admiralty that Leo didn't recognize, his back so rigid that Leo’s eyes narrowed. Almost despite himself, he found that he had made his way across the room.

"Commander," he said politely, schooling his expression not to reflect his surprise when Spock turned to him with something that looked like relief, although his posture only relaxed fractionally from its overly formal stiffness.

"Lieutenant Commander McCoy," Spock answered. "Admiral L'Ental, Admiral Sharis, this is Doctor Leonard McCoy, who served as Acting CMO on the Enterprise in its recent engagement."

The Admirals nodded at Leo, but their glances were more dismissive than friendly.

"Doctor McCoy performed the neurological grafting on Captain Pike," Spock added, and Leo squelched his astonishment at the implied compliment.

"Ah …" one of the Admirals said. "I hear that is likely to be successful in the long run."

"We hope so," Leo said, nodding pleasantly before he asked Spock. "Have you completed your debriefings?"

"For the day, yes," Spock said in his precise fashion. "We reconvene tomorrow morning. And you, Doctor?"

"We're adjourned until further notice," Leo said, "but the debriefing wasn't closed."

Spock nodded. "In case they wish to confer with you on any matter that the Acting Captain or I
might bring forth."

"I guess," Leo said. If he and Spock were alone, he might have made further comment on the
asininity of the bureaucratic process that was Starfleet, but it was clear that no matter how boring his
day had been, Spock's had been grueling. He could only wonder what that meant for Jim. "Have you
seen the Acting Captain?"

"No," Spock said. "Although I believe that he is still in Conference Room 1. Forgive me for ending
our conversation, Doctor, but I must conclude my discussion with the Admirals. I'll see you on
Wednesday?"

"Yes," Leo said grimly. Without thought, he grasped Spock's shoulder and gave it squeeze. It was an
utterly illogical move on his part — not only were he and Spock not really friendly, he'd barely
forgiven Spock for stranding Jim on Delta Vega — but there was something about Spock's posture
that let him know that the other man needed the support. "Until then?"

"Yes," Spock said, but he was staring at Leo in a way that made Leo wonder how much information
Spock could glean from a touch even without skin to skin contact. "Thank you, Doctor."

Leo nodded and turned away.

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It was a relief to be in the hospital with its familiar smells of antisepsis. Leo would never say that they
were pleasant, but they were olfactory signals of a place he belonged, at least during the work day.
The nights were Jim's, and despite Patty's words encouraging him to be hopeful, to trust in Jim's
ability to get what he wanted despite the odds, he couldn't help but worry about what he would do,
about how empty his life would be, if he were separated from Jim for months at a time.

He synched his PADD at the nurse's station on Pike's floor, getting a download of his latest data that
he was reading as he walked into the Captain's room, only stopping on the threshold when he
realized that the man was not alone.

"Doctor."

Leo could hear the warmth in the elderly Vulcan's voice, and he wondered if this then, was the true
reason for his lack of antipathy toward his counterpart earlier. "Ambassador," he said, "I'm surprised
to see you here."

"No doubt," the elder Spock said, "and I'm sure that you wish to confer with the Captain privately. I
was merely stopping in to say thanks before I moved on to my next charge."

Leo's confusion was evident in his face, he was sure, if Pike's wry expression was any indicator.
"Oh?"

"T'enev is going to be staying at my home in the Mojave," Pike said clearly.

"She's being discharged?" Leo asked with a pang. He'd been meaning to stop in and see the woman,
but hadn't found the time to do so.

"It's for the best, Doctor," the Ambassador said with assurance. "And Captain Pike's suggestion is a
good one. The peaceful desert environment is not the same as our home, of course, but the similarity
will be beneficial, along with the air and the quiet."

"I don't believe it's good for her to go alone," Leo said.
"She will not be," the elder Spock said, "although I will not be staying for more than the night. She travels with a Vulcan healer, and also a Dr. Pak."

Leo's gaze swung over to Pike.

"He needs a break almost as much as he needs to be useful," Pike said with a shrug.

"Indeed," the elder Spock said, grasping Pike's hand with affection and without hesitation. "You will remember what I said, young Christopher."

"I'm unlikely to forget it," Pike said, covering their clasped hands with his free one, before the Ambassador broke away.

"Leo," the Vulcan said, laying his hand on Leo's shoulder. "I shall convey your regards to T'eneyv." His lips thinned in a manner that Leo chose to interpret as a smile, albeit one that would leave his reputation intact should a member of the staff choose to walk in at that moment.

"Please do," Leo said, reaching up to grasp the elderly man's elbow.

Spock nodded. "It's always a pleasure to see your face, old friend, however briefly." His dark eyes looked into Leo in a way that made him feel that all his secrets were exposed. "And even moreso to see that all is well." He looked at Leo a moment longer. "Yes," he said firmly, then let go of him and moved to the doorway. "As always, gentleman," he said, turning to salute them in the Vulcan fashion from the threshold. "Live long and prosper."

Pike returned the salute, as did Leo unthinkingly, and then he was gone in a swish of the door.

"He's kind of like a superhero, isn't he?" Pike said drily.

Leo turned and looked at him in the bed. "Has he told you much about your alternative self?" he asked, curiously.

"Some, but after a conversation with Jim," Pike said with ill-tempered emphasis. "He's become remarkably closed-mouthed about what he's willing to discuss."

"In Jim's defense," Leo said, "I will say that it was me who postulated the theory that the Ambassador is not from our timeline, a conclusion that the Ambassador came to independently himself."

"Been doing a lot of defending of Jim?" Pike asked, tilting his head to look at Leo.

Leo thought about his response as he reviewed Pike's regenerative progress. "Actually, no," he said, after a minute. "I had to justify my own command decisions after Dr. Puri's death, and my medical decisions in regard to triage and treatment during the crisis, but they haven't really asked my opinion about what we did up there. They did question the fact that I was on the bridge to participate in those discussions, but … other than that, no."

"Conclusions?" Pike asked.

Leo threw up his hands. "I'm hopeless at this kind of shit, Pike," he said. "You tell me."

"My intel says that it's all going to be concluded satisfactorily," Pike said, and then looked down at his legs. "Well. For orders of satisfactorily that include astronomical levels of death and destruction."

Leo bristled. "Meaning?"
"Meaning that Jim is going to get his command, with all that entails," Pike said with emphasis.

"I don't see how anyone in their right mind would –" Leo began.

"Your first mistake," Pike interrupted smoothly, "is to assume that the phrase 'in their right mind' could apply to the Admiralty. Your second mistake is to overlook the importance of the value of the Enterprise crew to Starfleet."

Leo's expression was stony, and he knew it. "PR?" he asked distastefully.

"McCoy," Pike said, as if he were talking to a small child. "It was bad enough when there were seven ships full of experienced hands and promising cadets destroyed out there, but now that we know that the Mayflower was nearby and responded and was destroyed as well …"

Leo nodded. "All those experienced hands," he said gruffly. "I know. I get it."

"Do you?" Pike asked sharply. "Because it's not just about PR — we are vulnerable, man. And not just Earth, but the Federation itself. The Vulcans may have participated minimally in serving the way Spock — the younger Spock — does, but that doesn't mean that we haven't lost diplomats and thinkers, intel, and god, the scientists. If the Romulans want to strike ..." he let that sentence trail off. "Or the Klingons."

"Jesus Christ," Leo said, sitting down heavily.

"Yeah," Pike said. "You're going to be graduating quite soon."

"They're sending us back up there?" Leo knew that it was true, but he needed to hear it said.

"As soon as the Enterprise is ready, and despite the opposition of some members of the Admiralty," Pike said with assurance. "There really is no other choice. But make no doubt about it, McCoy, the Enterprise will be a target, just because of what you're a symbol of."

"You're not going with us, are you?" Leo asked.

"No," Pike said. "But I promise you. I will do everything in my power to support you from down here," Pike's clear gray eyes were focused on Leo. "You have my word."

Leo nodded numbly.

+ +

Hours later, Leo lay in bed alone, his PADD still on the same screen it had been thirty minutes before when he'd gotten into bed, tired of sitting up and waiting for Jim. After a visibly embarrassed and off-duty casually dressed Christine Chapel had shown up with dinner for herself and Pike, he'd left. He'd gone to the mess and had dinner with Sulu and Chekov, as well as the sad remnants of the KFF, but not Jim, Spock or Uhura. Scotty had waved his sandwich, and then gone back to his conversation which involved drawing on a PADD and yelling with other engineer types including Keenser.

Leo had come back to his room and commed Gram, who appeared to be out for the evening and then he'd tried to watch the news, but gotten disgusted with the coverage of the so-called Narada Incident.

He'd finally gotten in bed to proofread the dissertation that he'd have to be turning in sooner rather than later if Pike was right, but had been unable to focus. He glanced at the chrono in the corner of the screen, displeased to see that it was closing in on 2200 hours and fourteen hours of debriefing for
Jim. He had no doubt that was where Jim still was -- especially after his conversation with Pike -- was sure that there were members of the Admiralty that would be petty enough to keep Jim there for hours, simply to prove that they could do so. Tired and hungry as Jim probably was, he was safe, something that Leo wouldn't be able to count on in the near future. Years ago now, he'd told Jim that space was disease and danger, wrapped in darkness and silence. He sighed loudly. He was pretty sure now that he should have reversed the order of those first two.

He shifted in the bed, reaching to drop his PADD on the night stand. He wouldn't sleep until Jim got home, but he was through pretending that he was reading anything. He stretched, and pressed his face into Jim's pillow, deriving some pleasure from the smell of him on their sheets, then stilled, hearing the noise of the lift moving, the sound still unusually loud in the eerie quiet of the mostly empty dorm. A minute later, he heard the sound of Jim's unusually heavy-footed tread as he trudged down the hall, and rolled onto his back again to face the door.

"Hey," Leo said softly as it whisked open to reveal an exhausted-looking Jim, carrying the peacoat he'd already taken off.

"Jesus," Jim complained, toeing off his boots and unzipping his tunic and dropping it on the floor on top of his peacoat as he steadily walked to the bed. He fell face forward onto it, jostling Leo.

"Jim?"

The subject of his query groaned as Leo carded a hand through his hair, his face hidden in his pillow. "I am so fucking tired, Bones," Jim said. His voice was shot, probably from the combination of talking and inadequate hydration.

Leo squeezed the back of Jim's neck and his trapezius muscles. "Did you eat today, Jimmy?" he asked in a low voice. Jim's shrug was the confirmation he needed and he started to shift up and out of the bed when Jim turned with surprising swiftness and pinned him, wrapping his arm over Leo to hold him there, hiding his face in his neck.

"No," Jim said, his voice muffled against Leo. "I need this more than anything else right now."

Leo thought long and hard about arguing with Jim before he decided against it, despite the fact that he hated that Jim was so good at ignoring his body's needs for food and sleep. A lesson he had learned first at the hands of an indifferent caretaker, and then, of course, on Tarsus.

Jim let out a heavy sigh when Leo relaxed and wrapped his arms around his lover. One hand pulled up and squeezed the rigid muscles of Jim's shoulders, while the other pushed up under his undershirt to rub at his back.

"Bones," Jim said in a low groan, his voice slurring.

Leo craned his head back and looked down at Jim, not surprised to see that he was nearly asleep. Jim was never anything other than idiosyncratic, and he supposed that being forced into inactivity for such a long time, having to consistently quell the urge to fidget and to talk back, had been as exhausting for Jim as running a marathon would be for a normal person.

He chuckled at the thought, and Jim shifted and muttered against him, making a whistling noise through his nose that Leo recognized as a consequence of his allergies. He couldn't help that his smile broadened at the soft sound, at all the pieces of secret knowledge that he alone knew about Jim Kirk. Jim might be famous because of what had happened in the past week, and maybe more stories about his past would come out, anecdotes of what he'd been like as a child or an angry teenager. But here, where it was just the two of them, all those opinions were meaningless, because here and now,
no one other than Leo would know these things, would be allowed these intimacies.

He stroked one hand through Jim's hair and smoothed the other over the satiny skin on his lower back. If what Pike had said was right, and he had no reason to suppose that it wouldn't be, he needed to learn to revel in the time that they had now, to learn how to be in the moment and stop worrying so much about what was to come. Life was short, Winona had said to him.

He shifted Jim so that he could feel the beat of Jim's heart against his bicep. It wouldn't make much difference if Jim ate now or a few hours from now. And besides, he'd be here when Jim woke up to make sure that he was fine. Leo closed his eyes and let the steady drumbeat of Jim's heart lead him to sleep.

Chapter 50

Leo's tread was heavy as he crossed his dorm room and dropped into the desk chair, thumbing the console back to life from hibernation. While he waited for the comm to initialize, he took a deep pull from the tumbler of bourbon and savored it, raising his glass to look at the amber color as he rolled the generous mouthful around. The Evan Williams had been a gift from Pike -- a thank you he said, for the surgery that would make it possible for him to walk again someday. Leo wasn't foolish enough to believe that Pike's decision to give it to him just one day before the funerals began had been anything other than calculated, not that he didn't appreciate the gesture, or the whiskey. It was truly fine, and unlike any bourbon that he'd ever tasted. He had purposefully stopped himself from looking up how much it had cost. Just the sight of Jim's eyes when he saw the label had been confirmation enough of how expensive it must have been — he'd never stocked a bar like Jim had, but he'd seen enough of Liam Finnegan's liquor collection to recognize that it belonged on the top shelf, even in a private stash.

He supposed that there would be those who would find his drinking liquor today distasteful, and part of him wasn't sure that they weren't right. Still, he wasn't wallowing, and as the comm began to ring through, he raised a glass to all the beings who had died at the Battle of Vulcan, as it was being called. Today's ceremony had memorialized the first ships into the fray. His glass was still raised when Gram's face appeared on screen and he lowered it to the desktop, alarmed at her appearance.

"Gram!"

"Oh, Leo," she said wearily, her eyes red-rimmed. "It's good to see you, boy, and stop lookin' at me like that. I defy any woman to look good when she's been crying all day long."

Leo knew that he was scowling, but he couldn't stop himself. He'd never actually seen his grandmother looking so … old, and it broke his heart and scared the bejesus out of him at the same time. "What happened?" he asked tersely, fully prepared to take a shuttle to Georgia and punch Ted in the face, despite the ceremonies tomorrow.

"What do you think, Leo?" Gram asked exasperatedly. "The ceremonies were on all day here, too."

Leo dropped his head back, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Gram," he said softly. "You shouldn't have watched."

"Don't you tell me what to do, Leonard Horatio," Gram said sternly. "I get quite enough of that shit from that grandfather of yours. And what am I supposed to do," she demanded, "pretend that it didn't happen, pretend that I don't know just how lucky I am to have you still here, when so many …" her lips trembled. "So many, Leo."

"I know, Gram," Leo said quietly, around the lump in his throat. He'd thought that it wouldn't be as
bad as it had been, or maybe he'd hoped that because of the absence of coffins that it wouldn't be as
overwhelming as it could have been. But the sight of the risers with the urns on them had been like a
punch in the gut, particularly once he realized during the first ceremony, the one for the Mayflower
crew, that the short row of urns in the front represented the recovered remains of crewmen, and that
all the rows behind, hundreds of urns with their vacuum seal lids not depressed, were empty.

There had only been seven urns in the front row.

"I also think," Gram said, in a more severe tone, "that they really should not hold more than one
ceremony a day."

"I know, Gram," Leo said quietly. "But these are only the public ceremonies. The families …" he
started, and sighed, "the families have been waiting to hold the funerals."

"So few remains to turn over," Gram said. "I can't help but think … that could have been me Leo,
waiting." Her eyes were teary again. "If not for your pigheaded stubbornness, and that Jim Kirk,"
she added. "And where is that pretty boy?"

"With the Admiralty," Leo said, hesitating before he continued on. "They're turning over the remains
from today's ceremonies to the families, and they asked Jim to be there."

"Oh no," Gram's face crumpled. "Why on Earth … " she sighed. "Is he just going to be beating
himself up about the ones he couldn't save, or am I wrong?"

"You're dead right," Leo said, wincing at his unthinking choice of words. "But you know that he
couldn't have not gone. It's just not in him to avoid something like that."

Gram sighed. "I worry about him, I do, Leo," she said. "He's awful young for all this responsibility."

Leo looked away from the comm, swirling the bourbon in his glass, thinking of Jim and Tarsus, of
the stepfathers that he hardly ever mentioned, of the burdens that he had acquired just by being born.
"Jim is young," he said, turning back to Gram. "but he's incredibly strong. I'm not saying that I like
what he takes on as his own, but … I admire his capacity to do it."

Gram nodded sadly. "They kept the camera on him a lot of the time," she said, "and I don't know
how he did it, how he kept his feelings from showing, for the most part. I think part of the time that I
was crying, it was because of him, because he wasn't allowed to grieve like the rest of the people
there. He had to have known people on the Hood, at the least -- the both of you must've."

"Yeah," Leo said, his voice ragged. He took a pull of the bourbon. "There's no way that we couldn't
have." Of the graduating classes of 2258 and 2259 and their nearly 3000 souls, only the crew of the
Enterprise and a handful of other survivors remained, a scant 700 beings. The number of names
added to the roll of honor, just for today's ceremonies, had been overwhelming.

He couldn't think of it without starting to tear up again, hearing the echo of the grief that had swept
the room as name after name after name had been read aloud. Spock had been so still next to him that
Leo hadn't been sure that the man was breathing at certain points. It was only then that it occurred to
him how truly deep the losses for Spock must run. He'd lost his planet, his mother, his home, but he
must also have lost students, friends and colleagues from his second home, the Academy. The
dawning realization had frozen the breath in his own lungs in empathy and he'd sat stock still until he
had seen Jim's hand move. He couldn't see Jim's face without craning his head, and he didn't want to
draw more attention to him, conscious as he was of the red eye of the camera that was most likely
focused on Jim and Spock. Jim's hand, broad but elegant in its long lines and fine bones, had been
resting on his thigh throughout both ceremonies, in a seemingly relaxed pose, although Leo knew
better. When he saw Jim finally lift that hand to his face -- surely to wipe away tears -- that was when he had lost it, and next to him, he'd heard the sound of Uhura breaking, and reached blindly for her hand.

"I'm not sure that this is good for all of you," Gram said quietly. "The cameras and the scrutiny. It shouldn't all be on display. It seems … indecent."

Leo couldn't help but agree, remembering the feel of Uhura's nails biting into his skin as she trembled, struggling to maintain some semblance of control, which had become even more difficult as the sound of Chekov's artless sobbing had reached them. Even Spock's hands had spasmed at the heartbreaking sound. It hadn't surprised Leo that the boy, young as he still was, cried with the abandon only the very young and the very old seemed to possess, but it had hurt to hear it, and to see his downcast swollen face after the ceremony, not to mention Scotty's uncharacteristically grim expression, and the lines of sorrow and age etched into Sulu's young visage by grief.

"There's nothing decent about any of this, Gram," he said harshly. "Not one goddamned thing."

"No," she said softly, agreeing. "No." She looked incredibly weary. "How long do you think it'll be before they send you all back up there?"

Leo looked up at the comm in surprise.

"I'm not stupid, Leo," she said, with a hint of the steel that had allowed her to withstand so much tragedy throughout her long life. "I've been watching inter-galactic politics my entire life, and I understand what's at stake here. They can't afford --" she took in a deep breath, "all of us in the Federation, we're vulnerable now -- to those damned Romulans, and the Klingons, and those Cardassians. I knew that when they recalled all the survey ships like the one Jim's mama was on. There's no more room for pure scientific exploration, not when the Neutral Zone needs patrolling, am I right?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "Commander Kirk will be back up as soon as they retrofit her ship. They're not going to be as well-staffed as they were, but …"

"They need all the experienced hands they can get," she said sadly. "Even if the experience was just the one time."

"Yeah," Leo agreed gruffly, before adding, "Captain Pike is sure they're going to make Jim's captaincy permanent."

"I would agree with him," she said drily. "Starfleet is clearly using his handsome face to recruit. Actually, all of your faces," she said thoughtfully. "That Miss Uhura is quite a pretty little thing, I must say." She looked at Leo, her gaze incisive. "How is he, really?"

Leo couldn't help the soft smile that broke over his face. "He's all right," he said laconically.

Gram raised an eyebrow. "Is he now?"

"Don't start with me," Leo said, flushing like a schoolboy. "I'm … he's … Gram!"

On the other end of the line, Gram was laughing at him. "Leonard Horatio," she said impishly. "You are done for, aren't you?"

"Gram …" He elongated her name into a bunch of syllables, as peevish as an adolescent as she clapped her hands in delight. He scowled at her.
"Leo mine," she said, calming down. "I'm more happy for you than I am to have been right. You know that much, don't you?"

"I do," Leo said begrudgingly. "I just …"

Gram sighed. "Oh, Leo, how I wish you wouldn't worry so. You moved heaven and earth to keep Jim by your side, to all of our benefit, I might add. You just have to trust that he'll do the same for you. He's promised as much, hasn't he?"

Leo was silent, nodding.

"I don't think that Jim Kirk is the kind of man that ever makes promises that he doesn't deliver on," she said firmly. "In fact, I bet he makes promises very rarely."

Leo huffed out a puff of air in agreement. "Actually, Gram, that's true."

"Then trust him, baby," Gram said. "I'm not saying trust in God, or the universe, or that something somewhere will put things right, but in Jim. You've got to trust that you're just as important to him as he is to you."

"I'm trying, Gram," Leo said.

Gram looked at him sadly. "If I could get my hands on Jocelyn Darnell's neck, I swear I'd happily choke the life out of her! Oh, and don't look at me like that, Leo," she said. "I know that she wasn't the only one that broke your trust, but she was the icing on the cake, wasn't she?" Leo couldn't see below Gram's shoulders, but from the set of them he knew that she had her hands on her hips. "Vile creature."

"Gram," Leo said, "I had my part in the end of my marriage -- more than, really."

"Oh?" Gram asked acidly. "Were you fucking around, too?"

"Gram!" Leo exclaimed, shocked.

"Oh, please, Leo," she said. "How dumb do you think I am?"

Leo's mouth was still hanging open at her uncharacteristically raw language.

"Do you know she commed me?" Gram asked.

"Me too," Leo admitted. "I deleted it after the first congratulations."

"Good!" Gram said, eyes snapping. "Butter wouldn't melt in that foul mouth of hers, the way she tried to charm me and get information about you out of me." She drew in a deep breath. "If you even thought about taking her back," she said firmly, "I'd be calling that nice Admiral Barnett and making sure you were off in deep space for the next five years myself!"

Leo laughed out loud at her ire and her pronouncement, even harder when Gram looked outraged at first, before her mouth began to curl up into a smile, despite her best efforts to control it.

"You are so handsome when you smile, boy," Gram said warmly. "I want to see more of that, once these days are past."

Leo wiped at his eyes, and started to speak, holding up a finger when his comm bleeped. He flipped it open to read the text from Jim that said. "Come upstairs." He smiled at the message. Only Jim would think that stargazing from the roof of the medical dorm in late February was a fine idea. "Give
"Gram," he said, "I've got to go meet Jim."

"I figured as much," Gram said with a smile. "You should see your face, Leo." Leo flushed as she continued speaking. "You tell that young man that I'm thinking of him, won't you, Leo?"

"Yes'm," Leo assured her, then added cheekily. "You want me to tell him to comm you, too?"

"That would be nice," Gram said breezily. "Now get." She smiled at him. "Oh, and Leo?"

Leo, who had begun to root through his desk drawer looking for where his flask had gotten to, turned back to the comm. "Gram?"

"I must admit that I find the idea of blue eyed great-grandbabies quite appealing," she said impishly. "Much more so than the blue-skinned ones I thought I'd be getting at one time."

"Gram," Leo protested. "That's just ... highly unlikely, as Mr. Spock would say."

"Oh, please, Leo," Gram said dismissively. "You were ready to use all and any means of artificial intervention with that horrible woman — manipulated cell lines, synthetic wombs. I don't see what the difference is."

"We're going out on a starship, Gram!" Leo said with exasperation. "And we could be at war any minute now."

"I didn't say you had to have a baby tomorrow, Leo," Gram reproved. "But there's never a safe time, a perfect time. Keep that in mind, boy. 'sides," she said with a sly smile, "they'd be pretty babies." She winked, blew him a kiss, and disconnected their link before he had a chance to do more than gape.

"Crazy foolishness!" he muttered. Because honestly? Babies? His mind drifted, hand stilled in the drawer. They sure would be pretty, though.

"Goddamnit, Gram!"

Leo used his comm to light his way out onto the darkened roof, having ordered the lights in the stairwell off before he opened the door. Technically, he should be more worried about the rules they were breaking rather than the paparazzi who might see them, but if he knew Jim, and he certainly did, he'd somehow rigged it that it was OK for them to be up here. He'd probably bribed the security guard down in the lobby to ignore or disable the alarm. When his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he spotted Jim, flat on his back staring up at the stars, arms crossed over his chest like he was hugging himself. He couldn't see Jim's face, because he'd smartly situated himself in the corner where the low parapet of the roofline sheltered him from view. He shifted the comforter he'd grabbed from the common linen room, and quietly walked across the roof, letting the starlight guide him. The last quarter moon hung low in the sky like an iridescent wedge, and would likely be totally obscured from view when he joined Jim.

"Bones," Jim said in an admiring tone. "This is why I love you, man."

Jim sat up and pulled the comforter from Bones, ignoring Leo's raised eyebrow at his choice of words. Not that he doubted that Jim meant it in the least, just ... how like Jim to choose to announce that he loved Bones in such a casual fashion.
"Oh, that's the reason?" Leo asked acerbically, as Jim arranged the comforter on the ground so that it was folded in half.

Jim was smiling as he hummed a noncommittal positive answer. He slid into the pocket of the comforter and then raised up, tugging at Leo's hand to get him to lay down. When Leo did, Jim pulled off his pea coat and folded it, lifting Leo's head and putting it under him, dropping a kiss on his mouth. Then he sighed deeply as he dropped his head onto Leo's chest, using it as a pillow while he stared up at the stars, pulling the comforter up over them both.

"Well, then," Leo said. "I guess you won't be needing this." He fished the flask out of the pocket of his pea coat, as Jim turned his head to see.

"No fair, Bones," Jim said.

"All's fair in love and war, right, Jim?" Leo said, taking a pull off the flask. Above him, the stars burned in the black.

Jim shifted up and propped his head on a hand, staring down at Leo. He ran his thumb over the wrinkle between his brows that Leo was fixing to make permanent, what with all of his frowning, and tipped forward to kiss Leo softly and sweetly. So sweetly in fact, that Leo almost missed the feel of Jim's clever fingers, stealing the flask from his slack hand.

"You're a sneaky bastard, Jim Kirk," Leo said, as Jim tipped his head back and took a drink.

"Also a good attribute for that love and war thing," Jim said affably, kissing Leo again. He rested his forehead against Leo's. "Missed you, Bones."

Leo nodded and kissed him in reply, and then wrapped his arm around Jim's chest when he turned back over to his original stargazing pose. "Tough day," he said quietly.

"Yeah," Jim agreed. He took another pull off the flask and waved it at Bones. "Damn, Bones, this is good. Is this the Williams?"

"Yeah," Leo said, taking it back. "I suppose I should have saved it for a celebration, but …"

"Let's hope that these next few days are a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence," Jim said, and his voice had a thread of exhaustion in it that hurt Leo to hear.

"I'll drink to that, Jim," Leo said firmly and did so, handing the flask to Jim as he raised his hand for it.

"Amen," he breathed out, tipping the flask to the stars.

The silence between the two of them was comfortable, but Leo had no fear that Jim would be lulled to sleep by the calm or the alcohol, even though he doubted that he'd eaten much to counter it. There was a tautness, a tension about Jim's body that Leo knew would take time to dissipate. They were both exhausted by the events of the day, but nowhere near ready for sleep.

"The Newton and the Antares tomorrow," Jim said after a while. "Remember Shields?"

Leo's brow drew down at his words as he searched his memory. "The kid who smelled?"

"Hmm …" Jim said, nodding, and Leo could hear the smile in his utterance. "He got over that, no help from you, Bones."
"Yeah, yeah," Leo said, trying his best to remember what Shields had looked like the last time he'd seen him.

"He'd gotten really tall," Jim said. "A full head over Cupcake."

"You really have got to call the guy something else, Jim," Leo chided.

Jim continued on. "I don't think he was done growing …" He sighed. "Newton."

Leo couldn't help the deep sigh that Jim's observation had provoked, and Jim's bright head rode the rise and fall of his chest like a wave. They'd both been quiet for a few minutes when he said, "Shohreh Esfahani was on the Antares."

"I don't think I know her," Jim said. "Do I?"

"She was Patty's ex-," Leo said.

Jim's head raised up off his chest and he turned to look at Leo. "That ex?"

Leo nodded.

"Shit," Jim said, and dropped his head back down with a groan. "How's she doing?"

Leo sighed and tightened his grasp on Jim. "She's … OK. Thinking about qualifying as a ship's counselor."

Jim nodded against him. "Change of scenery?"

"Yeah," Leo said, "Plus, you know, the vacancy rate. I dunno though, Jim. She says that she was through with Shohreh before she was killed, but you know, things aren't ever that easy. Not when there are real feelings involved." He paused. "Jocelyn commed me."

Jim's head came up again and he turned to look at Leo, but Leo was pleased to note that there was only the smallest hint of wariness under the curiosity. "Your grandmother hates that woman," Jim said. "I didn't think that she had it in her until she brought her up."

"And why, exactly, were the two of you discussing the ex-Mrs.?" Leo asked.

"Don't eyebrow me, Bones," Jim said with a smile. "And don't be an ass. We were gossiping."

Leo chuckled at Jim's ready admission. "Just so you know, I'd never take her back."

Jim laughed out loud. "I wasn't worried," he said, "but thanks for the update. She wants you back, though, right?"

Leo shrugged, equivocating.

"Bones, I've heard from everyone that I've ever fucked that's still alive, including that girl from first year that announced in Mess Hall that I was a lousy lay," Jim said.

Leo whistled. "I remember that."

"Yeah, well -- I'd allow my sudden irresistibility to swell my head if it weren't for the fact that one of my mother's ex-husbands suddenly wants to be my pal, when he never had any use for me when we lived in the same house." Jim's mouth had a sour twist to it.
"You delete that fucker's message?"

"Even before he finished talking," Jim said surely. "And then I blocked him. You?"

"The same," Leo said. "There's just some people that we're better shut of."

"You got that right," Jim said, reaching for the flask. "Remember Aribel Ramirez?" he asked, after a few minutes.

"Antares?" Leo guessed, remembering a long ago night at Finnegan's.

"She was already out of the Academy," Jim answered. "Mayflower."

"Shit," Leo said.

"Yeah," Jim said. "Irina's the day after tomorrow."


Jim looked at him with knowing eyes, but didn't comment further. "The Farragut's on Saturday."

Leo ran a hand through Jim's hair thinking of Subie, and all the people that Jim had written to him about the summer before. "We'll get through this, Jim."

"I know we will," Jim answered quietly. "We're the lucky ones."

Leo searched his eyes in the low light, but there was no hesitance or prevarication in his expression.

"It's our duty," Jim said surely, "to go on. To live. I learned that a long time ago, Bones."

Leo nodded. "I'm still tryin', Jim."

Jim's mouth twisted into a smile, and he leaned forward, kissing Leo. "I know you are, babe," he whispered. He pressed his forehead against Leo's as he spoke. "Do me a favor though?"

"Anything," Leo promised.

"Don't hold Spock's girlfriend's hand tomorrow, OK? It was making him crazy to watch you making out with her."

"Jim!" Leo said in exasperation. "I was doing no such thing, and you very well know it."

Jim chuckled against him, stealing another kiss. "Maybe not from your cultural perspective …"

"Ass," Leo said. "He should switch seats with me and not stand on ceremony or rank or what-the-fuck-ever, if he wants to comfort his girlfriend."

Jim's eyes were twinkling. "I know that you're a big advocate of comfort," he said, kissing Leo again, slow and deep. "Solace, I think you called it."

Leo hummed his response into Jim's mouth.

"I believe you said it was a critical component of mental health," Jim continued, covering Leo with his long, lean body.

"Are you saying that you're in need of mental health assistance?" Leo asked when they broke apart. He cradled Jim's head in his hands, looking up into his bright eyes, and then down at his kiss-swollen
mouth, feeling the press of Jim's hard cock against his own.

"Only from a fully-qualified medical professional," Jim said primly. "I'm very particular about my medical care."

Leo coughed out a little laugh at this remark, but leaned up to kiss Jim once more before he said. "Well, as long as it's a medical matter … but Jim?"

Jim drew back from kissing him, opening eyes that were already starting to get the languorous drugged look that sex gave them, and murmured a quizzical noise.

"I'm a doctor, not a mattress."

Jim laughed out loud, a goofy hiccuping guffaw that made Leo smile so hard his face hurt as he held onto Jim's bouncing body.

When Jim wound down, Leo said, "No way are we doing this out here on this hard roof. Let's go inside to that nice bed you got me."

Jim stopped laughing and pinned him to the ground with a bruising kiss, before he drew back and said in a sultry voice, "Race ya." Then he scrambled up off Leo and bolted for the door as Leo laughed at him.

"Infant," he said, rising and shaking out the comforter and finding his flask and Jim's pea coat. "Don't start without me."

"What fun would that be?" Jim's voice asked, suddenly right next to him. Jim kissed Leo below the ear and slung an arm around his neck. "C'mon old man, starlight's wasting."

Epilogue

Leo was checking the PADDs on his desk against the list on his console to ensure that he had done all the necessary paperwork, when the comm unit built into his desk bleeped. He depressed the button immediately.

"Damn it, Jim," he said, "you better not be telling me that there's gonna be any delay."

Jim's laughter rang out in his office, echoing through it and beyond into the half-lit and patient-less Sickbay.

"A little eager are we, Bones?" Jim asked teasingly.

"Yes, Jim," Leo said testily. "Especially since I know how pathologically attached to this tin can you are."

"Bones," Jim said in a reproving tone, "She can hear you talking about her, you know."

"You better be talking about Uhura monitoring comms," Leo shot back, "and not anthropomorphizing the ship again."

"Lieutenant Uhura is currently on Starbase 14 with Lieutenant Gaila," Jim said, doing his best imitation of the computer's location report. Because Jim couldn't see him, Leo smiled at his godawful imitation of the cool, feminine voice. "… buying bikinis in the beachwear shop," Jim continued.

"Your First Officer clearly isn't anywhere nearby," Leo said, eyes flicking back and forth from his console to the stack of PADDs.
"In my Ready Room?" Jim asked in a mockingly scandalized tone. "What kind of boy do you think I am?"

Leo raised an eyebrow.

"I can almost hear that, Bones," Jim said in an intimate voice.

He sniffed expressively. "Is there a point to this call? Other than you telling me that you've got to delay our leave?"

"Bones," Jim said, and there was a warning there, despite the warmth. "What did I say about leave?"

Leo raised his head again, but this time didn't bother to control the soft smile that broke over his face. "You promised," he said quietly, turning around in his chair to look behind his desk.

"I did," Jim said lightly, and Leo felt a pang at his falsely sunny tone, then brightened when Jim's voice got progressively warmer as he said. "Purple sand and weirdly blue waters, Bones. Sunshine. Fruity drinks. Other surprises. You. Me. Ten minute warning, Bones. Meet me in the transporter room so I can help you carry all your crap. I'll be the one wearing flip flops. Kirk out."

Leo sighed, but this time with longing. Damn, but that sounded good, especially after six months of recycled air and artificial sunlight. Even if the sunlight was alien, he was ready for it – past ready, honestly. He tossed the stylus onto his desk and stood up, his eye drawn to the framed parchment on his wall, and he smiled. Jim and his promises.

Leo had worried and obsessed over the possibility that he and Jim would be posted at the opposite ends of the universe, refusing to hope, much less count on, them both being on the Enterprise until it was an absolute certainty. But even then, even after he'd gotten the comm that he'd been waiting for, longing for, some element of pessimism remained -- the neurotic vestige of not getting what he wanted, or having what he wanted turn out to be not right after all -- so that morning, he had doubted and worried about a mistake having been made.

He had expressed none of this to Jim, because, well, if Jim realized how much of a crazy person he truly was, he'd surely have those orders revoked, before he ran as far away as he could get, say, to the other end of the universe.

But Jim … Jim, who knew him better than any other person in the universe, and loved him anyway ... Jim knew exactly what he needed.

Jim had been waiting for him that April morning, just a couple of days before their sad and early commencement, while Leo had his final meeting with his thesis advisor.

"Here," he'd said, thrusting a slim, flat parcel wrapped in brown paper at Leo.

Leo'd opened it curiously, grumbling at the waste and expense of paper, while Jim had rolled his eyes and shifted impatiently from foot to foot, his brow furrowed. But by the time that Leo had turned over the item and comprehended what it was, Jim's expression had transmogrified into one of such sunny beauty that Leo'd blamed the tears in his eyes on the glare from his smile, while Jim had chuckled and rubbed the back of Leo's neck, pressing their foreheads together.

The framed orders for Lieutenant Commander Leonard H. McCoy, M.D., Ph.D. to report to the USS Enterprise as her Chief Medical Officer had been printed on thick, old-fashioned matte paper, and signed by Admirals Barnett and Pike, as well as the Chief Medical Officer of the Fleet, Philip Boyce. The seals of their respective offices had been embossed below their signatures.
Leo knew, rationally, that there was nothing about the framed orders that made them any more real, any more true than what he'd already received electronically, but there was something oddly more permanent in the tangible object. It was counter-intuitive, really. The databits that made up the order in his e-mail could be retrieved virtually forever, even if erased. The paper orders would degrade and fade and ultimately crumble to dust. And yet, it'd been the first thing that he put in his carry-on bag for the Enterprise, the first item that he'd put up on his walls here in Sickbay.

And he'd damned well dragged Jim off into a deserted classroom for a more proper thank you than a chaste press of foreheads, although he'd saved a more detailed thank you for that night when they were alone in his old dorm room. After all, Gram had always raised him to mind his manners, and to show appropriate appreciation.

Leo smiled as he ran a finger along the frame, then blew a bit of dust off the orders as well as his favorite holo on the shelf below it. In that image, Jim was smiling warmly at a behind-the-camera Gram, his arm swung over Leo's shoulders with casual possession. Leo was smiling, too, despite the mixed emotions that had been part and parcel of that day, and the commencement ceremony itself. His black armband was out of view behind Jim's back, but Jim's was clearly visible, the last day that they'd worn their reds -- together like they'd been that very first day.

"Leonard Horatio," a voice said from behind him. "You're daydreaming again."

Leo smiled and turned around, then whistled, low and admiring at the sight in front of him. "My, my Christine Marie," he said, raising an eyebrow at the brightly colored cloth that she'd wrapped around her body. "A sarong?"

Chapel's bare white shoulders gleamed as she shrugged. "Nyota talked me into it," she said, and there was a note of diffidence in her voice that gave Leo pause.

He wasn't quite sure what had happened, or might still be happening, between her and Pike, but he knew poor timing when he saw it. Nyota had told him, perched on the counter in the shared bathroom between the Captain and First Officer's quarters, that the comms between Christine and the Admiral had become fewer and farther between as their months away from Earth had begun to pile up. Leo had been sorry to hear it, but not truly surprised. Hell, long distance relationships were hard enough when people were on the same planet -- he couldn't imagine what kind of strain would be put on a relationship that was just burgeoning when a whole galaxy lay between the participants. God knows he'd had his fears about what it would do to him and Jim. He'd been hoping that maybe Admiral Pike would make the trip out to Starbase 14 for their shore leave to Rosettia, but Uhura had told him that she hadn't seen his name on any manifest.

Leo smiled at Christine, trying not to convey any of the disappointment that he felt for her. "She's good at that," he said. "Although I, for one, am having a hard time picturing Spock frolicking in the waves of Rosettia's equatorial beaches."

Christine laughed out loud at the very idea, clapping her hand over her mouth, and bending in two as her giggles escalated.

"What?" Leo asked, smirking.

"I can't actually picture him in anything other than his uniform, with the boots and everything -" Christine choked out, "—in the water."

"Highly illogical for a bathing costume," Leo agreed laughingly, but now that she mentioned it, he couldn't picture Spock in a bathing suit either, particularly not the kind of tiny trunks that Jim preferred. He shifted his posture and clipped his tone. "Perhaps one of those striped woolen one-
piece bathing costumes from the early 1900s on Terra would suit?"

Christine flapped her hands at him in a shooing gesture as she wiped at her eyes and tried not to crack up anew. "Oh my God! Thanks, McCoy — I'm going to need a LOT of booze to get that image out of my head."

Leo was grinning at her as he relaxed his pose. "Well, now, darlin', I believe that you and I have a long overdue date for a drink that we will have to fulfill sometime in the next week."

"You got it," Christine said warmly. "I'll comm you, and we'll figure something out, but I better get going before Scotty has an apoplexy." She waved and then hurried through the doors as Leo called his good-byes.

He'd become a bit more acquainted with her story as they'd served together these past few months. He was glad that she'd broken her engagement off to that damned fool rapscallion who didn't deserve her, but he wondered at her willingness to put herself in seemingly impossible situations with men like that Korby, or Pike.

Ah, well. Jim would tell him to stop trying to solve everyone else's problems, but he couldn't help but worry.

Christine was good people – he'd known from the first hour they'd served together that she was just his kind of medical professional — and, anyway, despite his own mordant proclivities, he really did like people to be happy. And he did worry about the Enterprise's crew, especially after all that they'd been through together. Hell, there wasn't anyone else to worry about their psychological wellbeing, Jim aside. Professionally, he worried at the evidence that he saw of post-traumatic shock among many of his crewmates, going untreated except for his own paltry ad hoc efforts, what with the ship's counselor post vacant again. Their original counselor had died in the Battle of Vulcan along with Dr. Puri and so many others, and Jim had yet to find the right person to fill the post. Leo had a sneaking suspicion that he was waiting for Patty to finish qualifying, but he had proved maddeningly difficult to pin down on the subject.

He did know that Starfleet's original prospect for the role had spent far too much time focusing on Jim, his childhood and Tarsus for his taste, much less Jim's, and that had been before they shipped out. There had been some blowback at Jim's refusal to accept the leading candidate, but Pike had backed Jim as always, especially after both Leo and Ambassador Selek, of all people, had advocated for a different choice. He had no idea how the elder Spock had insinuated himself so easily into Starfleet's upper echelons, but he had, and had provided a staunch ally throughout the process of reassembling the crew, including somehow, Leo was certain, ensuring that the younger version of himself was on the Enterprise.

He shook his head as he mused, methodically checking things off on his list. Six months aboard and Leo found himself in the odd position of still liking the older variant of Spock more than he did the one from his own universe and time. He supposed that was too simplistic. He did correspond with the Ambassador, and found him surprisingly easy to talk to on the occasional videocomm, but his relationship with the younger Spock had improved. For one thing, he was a damned good First Officer, and there was no getting around that fact. He tempered Jim's impulsivity in good ways, but he seemed to be learning when to give in and trust Jim's judgment. For another, well ... there was the fact that he'd saved Jim's life a time or two, which couldn't help but raise Spock in Leo's judgment. And then, of course, there was proximity. Let's face it, with he and Jim most often bunking in the Captain's cabin, and Spock and Uhura doing the same in the XO's, bumping into each other in the shared bathroom facilities was bound to happen. It had, in fact, become Leo and Nyota's favorite place to gossip, much to Jim's amusement, and Spock's chagrin.
Leo had to admit that he found Spock's territorial displays, as understated as they were, both oddly endearing and hysterical. The man was fussy and prim and seriously, sometimes he did wonder what Uhura saw in him, but … "Truth really is stranger than fiction," he said aloud, as he powered down his console. Because he had no doubt that the Vulcan would snap his neck if ever so much as laid one finger on Uhura in a way he deemed inappropriate.

Leo picked up his bags and walked across the bay, ordering the lights off, a spring in his step as he strode through the empty halls on his way to the transporter room. He only hoped that the next six months of their five-year mission would go as smoothly as the first six had. It's not that there hadn't been skirmishes or casualties, just that it had gone better than he expected, and barring the occasional disastrous away mission, Jim and the ship had gotten them out of more jams than into them. He made a wish for their continued safety and pressed it into the Enterprise's skin as he rounded a corner, running a hand along her warm walls, and hoping that she'd persist in keeping them out of harm's way -- especially as the next six months would bring them ever closer to the hotter sections of the Neutral Zone.

If only Jim could see him now, he thought with a wry smile, but there was no one around to observe him, and the Enterprise would guard his secret, he was sure. As much as he teased Jim about anthropomorphizing the ship, he'd never have trusted being posted on another — the Enterprise had risen to the challenge of their first mission, served beyond her capacity just like the rest of them. About this one thing, he did believe Ambassador Spock: yes, they belonged together in the stars, all of them, with Jim at the helm, but they belonged on the Enterprise.

The doors to the transporter room whisked open to reveal Jim chatting with Scotty about the upgrades that the ship was slated to receive while they were docked. Jim smiled as Leo entered, but raised his eyebrows mockingly as he looked at Leo's small carry-on and larger duffel "You had Scotty beam down all your stuff already, didn't you?" he asked drily.

Leo smiled and got up on the transporter pad. "Scotty," he drawled, "I hope we're going to see you planetside."

"Oh, aye," Scotty said easily, so charmingly affable that one would be hard-pressed to know that he was lying, but Leo had already played too much poker with the man to be fooled. "Although more likely at night, as I have a tendency to burn under such strong UV."

Jim's eyebrows were sky-high at Scotty's declaration, and he looked like he was going to say something until Leo said," Are you coming or what, Jim? Sunlight's wasting, kid." He raised a brow at Jim's decidedly regulation footwear and Jim smirked as he came over to the transporter pad.

"You didn't expect me to actually wear sandals with my uniform, did ya, Bones?" he asked in a low voice.

"Such a sartorial choice would be illogical," Leo intoned with a flat expression as Jim chuckled. He turned back to Scotty as Jim made sure that their bags were on the pads correctly. "I can fix that sun sensitivity, Scotty," he said.

"I'll comm ye about that very thing," the Scot lied easily, and then said, "Energizing, Captain."

When they rematerialized from the swirling white whirl of the transporter beam, they were facing a clear wall that gave them a spectacular view of the sea at the base of the promontory on which they'd been deposited. Jim whistled next to him in appreciation. Clearly, these Rosettians knew a little something about interplanetary tourism and presentation. The view was glorious, the colors of the ocean and the flora absolutely dazzling, but to Leo, they were nothing to Jim's bright eyes as he stood next to him, gleaming with happiness.
"C'mon, Bones," he said eagerly, slinging bags over his shoulder and Leo's, then grabbing his hand and pulling him outside of the transporter station.

The air felt incredibly humid after the modulated air of the ship, and there was a scent in it that reminded Leo of freesias, with an undertone of the metallic tang of the water. Leo took in a deep breath as the breeze ruffled his hair the minute they stepped outside. "I do believe that your Chief Engineer is intending to engage in some sort of indecent liaison with your ship while we're all ashore, Jim," he drawled.

"La la la," Jim sang, fishing in his bag for something. "I can't hear you, Bones!"

"Keptin!"

Jim laughed next to him and Leo turned to see their favorite curly-haired menace behind the wheel of some sort of overgrown golf cart wearing what looked like a Hawaiian shirt on steroids.

"Oh my," Leo drawled, as Chekov waved energetically as they strolled over to the cart.

Jim flashed him a smile before he popped on some UV-polarizing glasses, hiding his dancing blue eyes from Leo's view. "Pavel," he said, "thanks for coming to pick us up, man." His smile got even larger as he went to pile their bags in the back compartment. "Why, it seems there are already some bags in here -- how interesting!"

Leo tossed his duffel at Jim with no comment and climbed into the front seat, strapping himself in and stowing his small bag at his feet. A man needed his medical supplies when he was going into an alien environment. He wasn't going to justify it.

"Bones!" Jim protested.

"You didn't call shotgun, Captain," he said. "So get your ass in the back."

Chekov was enthusiastically declaiming about the wonders of the hotel and the planet in general, despite its lack of Russian-ness, driving one-handed and pointing out some of the flora that Sulu was already documenting, so he failed to notice when Jim mouthed, "You love my ass," to Leo when he turned to make sure that Jim was buckled in as they took a hairpin turn.

Leo smiled, pleased as ever at the flush that spread up Jim's neck when he caught sight of it, before he turned back and let the sunlight and the fresh air wash over him.

+ 

One rose-colored moon had risen high above the horizon, and the other was just beginning to peek over the south-east horizon in the dark mauve night sky. Leo stood on the deck outside the small club, catching a breath of fresh air while the music pulsed behind him. He'd been surprised that Jim had arranged their lodgings so far away from the main hotel at the resort, and most of the crew, but now, after three full days of uninterrupted time with Jim, he was more than happy. It wasn't that they had no private time together aboard the Enterprise, but here he got Jim's undivided attention whether they were swimming in the violently colorful sea, or swinging in a hammock, or his personal favorite, soaking in the tub out on their deck. Their rooms were out on a point of a deep cove, a good twenty-minute ride from the rest of the resort, and they had yet to travel back since they'd been dropped off. There were shops and restaurants out here, and although Leo had shopped a bit, it wasn't until he mentioned that he'd yet to get one of the fruity drinks that Jim had promised that they'd decided to forego dinner in their room and walked over to the club -- really a series of tented structures with the sides pulled up -- that was nestled in the middle of the cove. By day, it was the
kind of place that you could swim up to and order a drink or lunch, both of which Jim and he had
done, when the reddish-tinged sun overhead had gotten too fierce.

It became more temperate at night, although a good three hours after sundown, it was still close to 30
degrees C, and sticky. Just like home. Leo smiled as he rolled the sleeves of his loose-woven white
overshirt up over forearms already turned brown. The thin material reminded him of linen, but it
didn't rumple no matter what, which he found delightful. And it breathed like linen, allowing him to
feel the cooling breezes swirling around his legs through the weave of the taupe pants that he'd
chosen.

"I still say that you shouldn't have worn that outside of our room," Jim said from behind him,
extending an arm with a drink in it.

Leo took the offering and sniffed at it, looking at Jim in surprise. "Mint julep?" he asked, taking a
sip.

Jim shook his head, hair brightened by the sun bristling in a halo backlight by the club behind him.
"Not exactly," he said apologetically, "but I tried."

Leo took a more generous sip. "It's not bad at all, Jim," he said. "Thanks."

Jim smiled, white teeth flashing against sun-reddened lips. "I mean, you look kind of naked."

Leo rolled his eyes at Jim, who was wearing a t-shirt and jeans so tight that certain attributes of his
were easily discernable. They'd already had this discussion back in their room when Jim had realized
that Leo was going commando. It wasn't like he was being immodest — he'd checked, and nothing
other than Jim's fervid imagination was currently on display. Not to mention the fact that Jim was
also commando, and probably sweating, in his jeans. "Pot," he grumbled, then turned back to look at
the water when Jim exclaimed.

"When did they start?" he asked with shining eyes, resting his sharp chin on Leo's shoulder.

"Just now, evidently," Leo drawled, watching as the flying fish began their elaborate mating ritual,
their bioluminescent fins illuminating the water above and below as they cut in and out of it. Several
of the clubgoers moved out onto the deck to join them and watch one of Rosettia's chief tourist
attractions, and Jim pressed in even closer to Leo as they watched in relative silence except for the
alien tongues being spoken in hushed tones around them. Jim and Leo watched the dance until most
of the crowd had dissipated, until the second moon rose to a height that its light, combined with that
of the first moon, obscured the pale fire below the water, and the fish stilled.

Jim sighed, one arm across Leo's chest, still holding him close. He took a deep breath in and out as
Leo finished the last of his drink. "Can we dance now?" he asked in a low voice, kissing Leo's neck.

Leo laughed, turning his head to catch Jim's mouth before they switched positions. This time, Jim
was in front, leading them back into the club, into the heat and the swirl of the somewhat less elegant
humanoid mating rituals. While they'd been out on the deck, the lights in the club had been turned to
black, making their white shirts gleam in a pallid imitation of the bioluminescent show that had just
ended. He laughed again when he noticed that some of the beings dancing around them had painted
their skin with runes and swirls designed to show up under the black lights as they preened and
displayed.

Jim turned his head and grinned, knowing what Leo was thinking without being told. Leo tipped
forward and kissed the laugh lines around Jim's eyes, wrapping his hands around Jim's narrow hips
as he steered them through the gyrating mass of bodies, looking for a little bit of space to call their
own. Leo felt loose and open, slightly drunk from the alien liquor, but mostly from the freedom. Right here, right now, they weren't Captain and Doctor, nor the heroes of the free universe, carrying the weight of all those expectation on their shoulders. Right now, they were just Jim and Bones, lovers and friends, and he could have this, dance with Jim like this, because they had fought their way through the darkness, built this trust over years, and hardship, and the bodies of the dead.

The music throbbed around them and Jim was bouncing to the beat, his hips undulating as he kept time, navigating through the dance. Watching Jim, feeling the life pulsing in him like the beat shivering around them, Leo could feel the looks they were getting, the greedy looks that Jim's bright beauty always drew, like moths to a flame. Some primal part of him wanted to snarl and posture and make it clear that Jim was his, so they could all fuck off, because they'd goddammed missed their chance … but then Jim's hips were turning in his hands, so he made himself loosen his caveman's grip, just enough so that Jim could turn and wrap his arm around Leo's shoulders, his other hand coming up to frame Leo's jawline as he kissed Leo once, fleeting and sweet but possessive too, with that arm hooked behind his head to keep him in place.

But Leo smiled, not the least bit perturbed by Jim's ownership display, despite the sticky heat of the tropical dance floor. He ran his hands up from Jim's hips to his shoulder blades and back down again, all the while thinking, 'mine, mine, mine' in time with the pounding music.

Jim's expression was intent as he nudged Leo's head to the side so that he could speak right into his ear. "I think we should go back to our room," he said, and there was an edge of menace to his voice, "because I swear to God, Bones, I will knock somebody the fuck out if they try to cut in and take you away from me."

And Leo laughed, throwing his head back as he pulled Jim in closer and said, "Kid, it ain't me they want," before he kissed him, pulling that maddeningly undulating pelvis flush against his, right where it belonged.

When they broke apart, he realized that Jim had been dancing him backward, navigating them across the crowded dance floor to the open side of the tent where the footpaths that led up the coastline were. Away from the noise of the club, Jim pushed him back against one of the tent poles, holding Leo's face in both of his hands as he said, "Whatever, Bones. I spend my days negotiating with all sorts of beings — I know when someone wants what I have."

He pressed a kiss against Leo's astonished mouth.

"No deal." Jim's eyes made all sorts of wicked promises before he gathered Leo's hand up in his.

Then he turned away and pulled a smiling Leo after him along the starlit path of an alien shore, leading them back home.

*Fin.*

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