A Matter of Choice

by kimuracarter

Summary

Jim Kirk is the head of Nero's household of slaves. His life changes forever the day Leonard McCoy becomes their newest acquisition.

Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Star Trek. This is a work of fiction and not for profit.
Chapter 1

Inspired by this post of pictures on jim_and_bones (must be a member to see pictures).

Here is the gorgeous banner made by avictoriangirl:

Jim Kirk was bored. The sellers were getting nervous. Product after product had been marched in front of him. Normally, his impeccable taste would have led him to the perfect selection hours ago. But today was different.

“Pick something you like,” Nero had told him with a small smile. “You deserve it. Won’t belong to you, but I think you deserve to pick out something you want to look at.”

And Jim hadn’t found it. He sighed.

“Mr. Kirk, perhaps we should take a break?”

Jim nodded. “Yes. Let’s.”

“We have made some renovations to the facility since your last visit. Would you care for a tour?”

Jim nodded. He supposed, the truth was, that he didn’t want to be here. Nero wanted a new pet, and he had trusted Jim’s selections for the past few years. He knew what Nero liked. But now Nero had thrown him a curve ball: pick something – someone – he liked.

He listened half-heartedly as his exuberant hosts showed him around the facility. They were always happy to see him. Nero was one of their oldest and most loyal customers. Jim could have asked for a solid gold couch to sit on, and they would have obliged him.

He looked around the expanded holding area. He liked to imagine that there was a time when seeing a bunch of human beings in cages would have bothered him. Nero had bought him young; he didn’t clearly remember what freedom was like and didn’t have much of a problem seeing others deprived of it. A lot of aspects of his job required that he be detached. This was just another one.

“And here is where our expanded recreational facilities will be,” the salesman – Francis – told him as they entered an open courtyard. It was currently occupied by two, large fenced in areas.

Jim looked at the group of people in regular clothes inside one of the large cages. “What’s it being used for now?”

“Ah, right now, it’s a temporary holding cell for some of our newest acquisitions.”

Jim spotted a man standing near the fence in a bright red shirt and faded jeans. He was struck by the ferocity in his green eyes and liked the way his unkempt hair crept down his neck. The man locked his fingers into the fence.

“What’re you lookin’ at, kid?” The man’s voice was gruff and deep with a Southern twang.

Jim smiled. He finally saw something he liked. Nearly everyone in his life was at Jim’s beck and call. He liked the fact that this stranger was challenging him.

“Mr. Kirk, please forgive me,” Francis babbled. “These acquisitions are completely untrained.” At
Francis’s gesture, two guards flanked the man and jabbed him with a tazer.

The man cried out and dropped to his knees. He grabbed the fence again to keep himself from hitting the ground. He looked up at Jim again with a furious gaze. “What the FUCK is this place?! Let me out, you sick –” He was cut off as they hit him again until he lay twitching on the ground.

Jim turned to Francis with a dazzling grin. “Good news, Francis. I found something I like. I want him.”

Francis’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kirk, but we don’t sell our untrained acquisitions. He hasn’t been broken yet –“

“I know. But I’m not interested in your regular products. I want him.”

“Allow us to break him first and –“

“No. I want him now.”

“But we can’t guarantee –“

“Nero will pay whatever it takes. He told me to pick something I like, and I like him. We have the facilities to break him ourselves, and we won’t hold you responsible. I’ll arrange a transport to pick him up tomorrow. We’ll take it from there.”

“Yes, Mr. Kirk. As you wish.”

Jim looked over his shoulder as the man was hoisted up by the guards. They dragged him by his arms towards the door of the cage.

Weird, Jim thought as he walked towards the office to fill out paperwork. First time I’ve made a decision for myself in a long time.

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“So, what did you pick for me this time?” Nero asked at dinner that evening.

Jim smiled slightly. “Something a bit unusual. You told me to pick something I liked, but I just couldn’t see anything that interested me. So, while we were touring the facilities, we passed by a cage of new, unbroken acquisitions. I picked one of them. I think you’ll approve. He’s certainly got spirit.”

Nero grinned. “Jimmy, sometimes I forget how brilliant you can be. It will be a delight to break him ourselves. It’s been too long.”

Jim nodded in agreement, though an unpleasant feeling churned in his stomach. He could faintly remember going through the process himself; it seemed so long ago.

“Did you get a name?”

“The official papers said he’s called McCoy. Leonard McCoy. Used to be a doctor.”

“Impressive. Might even be handy to have another person with medical training on staff.”

“Yes, sir.”
Nero pushed back from the table and stroked the back of Jim’s neck affectionately. “I knew letting you choose was a good impulse. I’ll have to do it again some time. Good work.”

Jim leaned into the touch slightly. “Thank you, sir.”

Nero dropped a kiss to the top of his head. “Goodnight.”

“Do you want me tonight?”

“No, Jimmy. I need you to stay in the Stable tonight, make sure it’s secure for our new guest. Send Erin in for me, would you?”

Jim repressed his shudder with practiced ease. “Yes, sir.”

After relating Nero’s orders to the staff, he headed out to the separate building known as the Stable. Despite the pleasant evening air, he was shivering by the time he got inside. The building had probably once been a stable. Now it was a dungeon.

Scotty greeted him at the door with a grin. “Jim! What can we do for you this evenin’?”

Jim forced a smile. “You’ve been told about the new acquisition?”

“Of course. We’ve got the place all nice ‘n cozy for ‘im.”

“Nero wants me to stay here tonight and check it out personally.”

Scotty’s smile faded. “I … see. Well, I guess we’d best get on with it then.”

Jim nodded, willing his shivering to stop. These people technically worked under him. They wouldn’t do anything to hurt him – at least, not without direct orders from Nero.

Scotty held the door for him.

Jim took a deep breath and stepped inside. He tried not to flinch at the smell – it smelled like a stable, but worse. Stables didn’t usually smell of dried blood. Memories briefly flashed before his eyes. Scotty’s hand on his arm was like a lifeline bringing him back to the present.

He was led through the dark corridor, past rows of empty cells to a heavy, steel door. Scotty punched in the code, and the door swung open.

This area – the secure lockdown – smelled strongly of antiseptic. Jim blinked in the fluorescent lights. There was a medical area of sorts ahead of him with a gurney, blood pressure cuff, and other materials one would find in an emergency room. As they swung left, there was another cell, all painted white.

“There have been some upgrades since you last visited, Jim, but not much. Not really sure why Nero…”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure everything’s in perfect condition, Scotty.”

Looking as uncomfortable as Jim felt, Scotty unlocked the door to the cell and held it open. Jim took
another measured breath and stepped inside. He forced himself not to wince as Scotty locked it behind him. It had been a long time since he had been forced to sleep in a cell – at least, one that actually had bars.

“D’you want me to stay for a bit?” Scotty asked kindly.

Jim turned to face him. “No, Mr. Scott. It’s fine. Go enjoy your evening. Starting tomorrow, you’re going to have your hands full for a while.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned and stepped out of view.

Jim couldn’t help the slight shiver as he heard the heavy steel door close and lock. He shrugged out of his suit jacket and paced around the cell, testing the bars and looking for any weaknesses. There was a small, high window, but it was out of reach. The single bed was bolted to the floor, so there was no chance of dragging it to the window. There was a toilet and sink, no mirror. That was it. This is where McCoy would be held while he was broken, however long it took.

He sat down on the bed, sighing. It was unlikely he would be able to sleep.

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Jim was able to leave the unpleasant night behind him with Scotty released him the next morning and wordlessly offered him a cup of hot, fresh coffee.

“Thanks,” he said, taking a careful sip. “Everything’s in tip top shape, all set for McCoy.”

Scotty raised an eyebrow. “Another Scotsman?”

Jim shook his head as they walked out of the Stable together. “No, he sounded like he’s from the South. Alabama maybe.”

“Shame, sir. Could use more of us around here.”

Jim smiled. “Sure could, Scotty. I’ll see you later.”

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Jim’s job for the day was to oversee the proceedings as McCoy was brought in. He was mildly surprised to find that Francis had ordered him to be drugged to make the transfer easier. He watched from the sidelines as his crew lifted the unconscious McCoy onto a gurney and secured him with thick, medical grade straps. They may as well have been moving a couch.

Jim signed off on the paper Francis handed him and then climbed into the passenger’s seat of the van. “How are his vitals?” Jim asked over his shoulder.

“Excellent, sir,” Spock answered. “He’s in good health. Probably slightly underfed and dehydrated. No obvious injuries, but we will perform a full exam.”

Jim nodded, gazing out the window as they pulled away. “Keep me informed.”

“Yes, sir.”
Jim was surprisingly good at waiting. In fact, if his mother could see how patient he had become, she would probably die of shock. But Nero’s training guaranteed that. And, in the beginning, the only way to stay alive was to do what Nero wanted.

Now, as his right hand man, he didn’t have to worry about Nero killing him. In fact, all things considered, his life was pretty sweet. He lived in a lavish mansion, with a staff to cater to his every whim. His thoughts were cut off as Spock approached him.

“Report?”

“The only injuries he suffered were light bruising and burns from the tazer. He’s been awake for just over two hours. He … is very spirited, sir. The fight has not yet left him.”

Jim smiled. “I’ll go to him now.”

“Sir –“

“Now, Spock.”

“Yes, sir.”

Entering the Stable again was easier this time; he knew he didn’t have to stay. He was led back to the cell he had spent the night in.

McCoy was locked inside, still strapped down to the gurney. He had been divested of his street clothes and dressed in a simple white t-shirt and sweatpants. And, Jim noted, he was cussing up a storm.

“Goddamn it, you people LET ME OUT OF HERE!”

“Mr. McCoy,” Jim said clearly, standing in front of the bars where McCoy could see him.

McCoy went still, glaring at Jim. “You.”

Jim smiled. “Mr. McCoy, my name is Jim Kirk, and I’m here to inform you that you’re now the property of Mr. Nero.”

McCoy’s eyes widened. “What?! What are you talking about?!”

“We purchased you from Wilson and James –“

“You can’t buy people! What the fuck is going on here?!”

“Actually, Mr. McCoy, you can. Especially if you’re as wealthy and powerful as Mr. Nero. Everyone who works here is his property, including you.”

McCoy raised an eyebrow, looking Jim up and down. “That include you, kid?”

Jim’s mouth went dry. He hadn’t felt ashamed of the fact for a long time. “Yes.”
“And you just … all do what he tells you to do?”

“Yes. And you will, too, McCoy. This process will be a lot simpler if you try not to resist us. You will learn to obey.”

McCoy stuck out his chin stubbornly. “Or what?”

“Or … things will be very unpleasant for you. Trust me. I’ve worked with these men. You don’t want to upset them.”

“Why the hell did you pick me?”

The question threw Jim. It had been so long since he’d talked to anyone outside the system. He shrugged. “Mr. Nero instructed me to pick someone I liked. I decided I liked you.”

McCoy rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Well, lucky me. Thanks a fucking lot, kid.”

Jim raised an eyebrow. “You know, people purchased from Wilson and James are used for all sorts of things. Experimentation, lethal jobs … there are lot worse places you could have ended up.”

“You expect me to be grateful?”

Jim considered that for a minute. “I suppose not. I was just offering some perspective.”

“So … what happens now?”

“Now you will learn obedience and the rules of the house. Then Mr. Nero will decide what job to assign you.”

“And when do I meet the all powerful leader?”

“When he decides he wants to meet you. Though there are cameras everywhere. He will probably check in on you. Now, if you feel you can remain calm, I can instruct the guards to release your restraints and get you some food.”

McCoy’s eyes narrowed. “Why in the hell should I cooperate?”

“Because, if you don’t, two men are going to come in here, beat the shit out of you, then strap you back down and feed you intravenously until you agree to accept solid food.”

McCoy finally looked afraid. “Who the hell are you people?”

“Like I said, Mr. McCoy, I suggest you cooperate. I’ll be back to check on you later.”

Jim turned to leave.

“Doctor.”

“What?”

“It’s Doctor McCoy, asshole.”
Jim smiled. “Whatever you say, Leonard.” He heard the shouting start up again as he left the secure area.

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Two days later, Jim went back to visit McCoy again. He had been released from the gurney, mostly because he didn’t have any strength left to fight. He looked, in a word, like shit. His stubble was getting long, his hair was dirty and greasy, and his eyes were red rimmed. His lips were cracked and dry. According to Jim’s staff, he had only been taking a few drops of water a day. He had refused all food.

Jim couldn’t say he was surprised.

“Leonard,” Jim said, standing in front of the bars.

McCoy managed to glare up at him from his place on the cell floor. “What do you want?”

“I’m here to ask you to be reasonable. I’ve warned you what will happen if you continue to disobey my staff.”

“And I don’t care.”

“I don’t think you understand exactly how unpleasant this will be for you. You’re going to wish for death.”

“I will never do what you say. Ever. I’d rather die than be a slave.”

“We’re not giving you that choice, Leonard. You have no choices, no rights. They won’t let you die. They’ll keep you drugged up and helpless but awake. You’ll know exactly what’s happening to you, and you won’t be able to stop it unless you obey.”

McCoy smirked. “Sounds like you almost care, kid. They do the same thing to you when they dragged you in here? How old were you?”

Jim smiled in return. “Nice try. You think it’s that easy to get under my skin?”

“I think I’m already under your skin. You just don’t want to admit it.”

“Well, unfortunately, you’re wrong. I’m not going to hold them back. Accept dinner tonight, or they’ll punish you tomorrow.”

Jim could see the fear return in McCoy’s hazel eyes, but he remained defiant. “Fuck you.”

Normally, that was the moment that Jim would leave again. He hadn’t seen someone broken down in a long time. For some reason, he wanted to try and make it easy on McCoy. After all, he liked him. “Leonard, seriously. You don’t want to do this. You don’t know what they’re capable of. I do.”

“Go to hell.” He was shaking almost imperceptibly.

Jim stopped himself from pleading with him. He dropped his gaze to the floor and turned to leave.

“Kirk.”
“Leonard?”

“You didn’t give in either, did you. You fought them every step of the way.”

Jim felt his heart start to pound. “Yeah. I did.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It matters to –“

“Enough. Eat tonight, Leonard. Or you’ll pay for it.” With that, he left the room.

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The next morning, he watched via video feed as Scotty and Sulu beat McCoy senseless. They were careful; they knew how to do it without causing brain damage or actually breaking bones. And Spock was on hand to patch him back up when they were done.

They weren’t even halfway through when McCoy started begging.

Jim sipped his coffee, glaring at the video screen. He was having a hard time remaining detached. Leonard had no idea what he had gotten himself into, and Scotty and Sulu didn’t care. Jim’s fingers itched to reach for his phone and call them off. But he knew that would raise more than a few eyebrows.

He turned off the video and tried to get back to his daily duties. It was then that he realized he could still faintly hear McCoy screaming from the next building over.

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For the next two days, Jim tried to put McCoy out of his mind. He threw himself back into his work, only getting distracted when Spock would bring him a status report. McCoy was recovering from his injuries and being fed intravenously. He would endure it until Jim made the decision to offer him food again. At the end of the second day, Jim told Spock he would check in personally at the end of the day.

He stopped by the kitchen first, asking for a bowl of soup. He carried it carefully across the campus to the Stable.

“Welcome back, Jim,” Scotty greeted, raising his flask in a toast. “Had a nice workout the other day. Been a while.”

Jim simply nodded. “Excellent work as always, Mr. Scott.”

He said nothing else as Scotty led him through the Stable and into the secure lockdown. Jim had override codes for the lock, but it raised some red flags if he used them.

He could see Spock in the medical bay.
“Sir,” Spock said, inclining his head.

“Spock, have there been any changes in his physical condition?”

“None, sir. It would be best if we could get him off the IV as soon as possible.”

Jim smiled. “I’ll see what I can do. If you’ll excuse us?”

Spock merely raised an eyebrow at the slightly unusual request before leaving.

Only then did Jim turn to look into the cell.

McCoy was once against strapped down to the bed. A red ball gag had been shoved in his mouth and buckled. Silent tears were tracking down his face as he breathed in heavily through his nose.

Jim looked him over clinically, noting the bruises and bandages that were visible. The ones on his face were starting to fade. Jim turned and picked up the keys to the cell, letting himself in.

McCoy looked up at him, and it bothered Jim that there was no defiance left in his eyes.

“I warned you,” Jim told him, stirring the soup idly. “I tried to reason with you.”

McCoy whimpered softly.

Jim looked back up at his face. “I know you’re in pain. That’s the point. When you disobey, you will be punished. That’s how it works.”

McCoy looked away before shutting his eyes. A small sob shook his frame.

Jim swallowed hard. He had never let anything like this bother him before. “I have good news, though. This soup’s for you. If you promise not to make a sound, I’ll give it to you. Then tomorrow, they’ll take you off the drip if you continue to behave.”

McCoy didn’t respond.

“Do you understand, Leonard?”

McCoy nodded.

“And I mean it when I say not a sound. If you say anything, I will gag you again and tell them to leave you on the drip for another twenty-four hours. I’ll do the same if you fight me when I gag you. Nod if you understand me.”

McCoy nodded again, opening his eyes.

Jim set the soup down on the floor and leaned over, unbuckling the gag and easing it out of McCoy’s mouth. He set it on the bed beside him.

McCoy didn’t make a sound, just winced and worked his sore jaw. The strap had left angry red lines across his face.

Jim picked up the soup and ladled a spoonful. He raised it to McCoy’s lips.
McCoy’s eyes were locked on Jim’s as he obediently opened his mouth and swallowed. His eyes closed briefly in relief.

Jim wasn’t sure what McCoy’s eyes were telling him as he fed him silently. He was scared, but he wasn’t quite begging. He looked relieved but not grateful. And truthfully, Jim wasn’t sure what he was feeling either. Confusing, protective feelings welled inside him. He desperately wanted to lean down and wipe away Leonard’s tears with gentle fingers, kiss his cracked lips.

Attraction. He could deal with that. There were certainly plenty of people on the estate that he was physically attracted to and most of them were available for recreation. And occasionally, he did feel protective over the ones he was closest to.

But that didn’t explain why he should feel that way over a complete stranger. He didn’t know Leonard McCoy, never met him before this week. When he had finished the soup, Kirk poured a cup of water from the sink and held it for McCoy to drink.

He had to curl his fingers into a fist to resist wiping off the drops that ran down McCoy’s chin.

“Better?” Jim asked when he had finished.

Leonard nodded, turning his head to wipe his eyes into the shoulders of his shirt.

“Now, if you behave tomorrow, you can have more. Things will be easier for you if you obey my staff.” He picked up the ball gag. McCoy opened his mouth and didn’t resist as Jim buckled it around the back of his head. Jim carefully loosened the straps a little. “Think that was on a little tight.”

Damn it, he thought as tears filled McCoy’s eyes again and spilled over. Get a grip, Kirk. It isn’t your job to coddle him.

“Try to get some rest,” Jim told him uselessly.

When McCoy looked up at him again, unbridled terror shone in his eyes.

Jim couldn’t stop himself. He went to the other side of the bed, so his back was to the camera, slightly blocking McCoy. He leaned down and raised a hand to wipe away the tears.

McCoy flinched.

“I won’t hurt you,” Jim murmured. “Take it easy.” McCoy didn’t have anywhere to run as Jim reached out and wiped the tears off his face with his thumb. The action seemed to settle him a little.

When their eyes met again, Jim could tell that Leonard wanted to know why he was doing this.

But he didn’t have an answer. “Do what they say, Leonard. You haven’t even seen a fraction of what they’re capable of. And I can’t protect you.”

Won’t, he had meant to say. But “can’t” had slipped out instead. He sighed and pulled the blanket from the foot of the bed up to Leonard’s chin, tucking it around him.

“Get some rest,” he repeated.
Leonard looked a little bit more relaxed; Jim decided that was good enough. He picked up the bowl and left the cell, locking it securely behind him.

He thought he might have heard McCoy whimper slightly as he stepped out of view, but he ignored it and marched out of the Stable.

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Jim hadn’t seen Nero in a few days; it wasn’t unusual. He wasn’t in charge of the man’s schedule, so he wasn’t sure when he was traveling or attending to other business.

He appeared at breakfast the next morning. “And how is our new acquisition … McMahon?”

“McCoy,” Jim corrected, forcing a smile. “He’s making slow progress. We will know more today about how stubborn he decides to be.”

Nero had a wistful smile on his face. “Do you remember any of that, Jimmy? Remember me breaking you?”

Jim looked back down at his oatmeal, appetite gone. “Yes, sir, I do.”

“You were the most stubborn slave I’ve ever had,” there was a small amount of awe in his voice. “It made it even more beautiful when you finally broke. It was also a bit of a relief. The staff tried to convince me that you were a lost cause.” He clapped Jim on the shoulder. “But look at the man you’ve become. I knew you were special.” He dug into his eggs and bacon with gusto. “Anything special about McCoy?”

“No, sir. I think it will be a fairly standard breakdown, possibly a little on the slow side.”

“You know, Jimmy, Spock mentioned something a little odd to me.”

Jim froze. “Oh?”

“He said you asked to be alone with McCoy last night.”

Jim shrugged, shoving a spoonful of oatmeal in his mouth and swallowing. “Spock looked like he could use a break.”

“I’d just hate to think that you’re not fit to watch over the progress of your own selection. You’re not attached, are you, Jimmy?” There was an edge to the question that he couldn’t miss.

“No, sir.”

Nero smiled at him. “I wouldn’t blame you if you were. I wouldn’t even be mad. I’d just have someone else oversee the process, that’s all.”

*And put me through conditioning to get all this “crap” out of my head,* Jim thought. His palms were sweating. “I’m not attached to McCoy, sir. I will see that he’s broken properly.”

“Glad to hear it. I look forward to hearing about his progress.”

Jim nodded and tried not to look relieved. “Of course, sir.” *I’m going to get myself killed,* Jim
thought grimly. Or McCoy. Or both. Damn it, I should let someone else take over, but … I can’t. They’ll be harder on him. Jesus, what’s wrong with me? Why do I care what happens to him?

For that matter … why did I pick him?

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Over the next few days, McCoy wavered between defiance and acceptance. Jim knew it was normal. Scotty and Sulu were in charge of his training. Spock patched up any injuries he received from punishment. Jim simply had to oversee the process.

He stayed as far away as he could, relying only on Scotty and Spock’s progress reports. He tried not to imagine McCoy’s outrage and being taught how to sit, eat, act, and move like a slave. Memories of his own training kept coming back to him, haunting his dreams. At the end of each day, Jim reviewed his progress and made a recommendation for his punishment. Of course, Scotty or Sulu would reprimand him along the way. But at the end of the day, Jim had to decide what the overall punishment was for his transgressions that day. He never ordered anything above level two. New slaves simply weren’t able to handle it.

At the end of the week, Scotty made a note in his report that McCoy showed a special aversion to electroshock punishment. Jim sent a message to his team, encouraging them to use that threat more often and speed along McCoy’s progress.

The second he hit send, he lost his appetite for the steak dinner in front of him.

“So, Jim, when will McCoy be presentable for me?” Nero asked, sitting down at the table.

Jim smiled. “Depends what you want, sir. I think by the end of next week, he’ll probably be ready to sit beside you at a meal. If you’re looking for him to do much else, it will be a longer wait.”

Nero nodded. “It’s been so long since we’ve taken in an untrained slave. Is his progress normal?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well. I would like to have him here at dinner by the end of next week.”

Jim nodded. “Yes, sir.”

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Jim avoided the Stable until the very last minute. The following Friday, he paid McCoy a visit. He watched as Spock checked him over for injuries.

“How is he?” Kirk asked Scotty.

“Behavin’ himself today, sir. Your suggestion about the electroshock punishment worked wonders.”

Kirk noticed that McCoy shuddered slightly. “So, he’s ready?”

“I believe so, sir. Try it for yourself,” Scotty said with a grin.

Spock moved away from McCoy, and Scotty unlocked the cell for him. McCoy stayed seated on the
bed. “No new injuries today. His muscles are adjusting to the poses required of him.”

Jim nodded. “Okay, let’s see how well he responds.” He entered the cell as Spock left it, letting Scotty close it behind him.

McCoy obediently kept his eyes to the floor in front of him.

“McCoy,” Jim ordered. “Come here.”

Keeping his eyes down, McCoy hopped off the bed, moved towards him and knelt at his feet with his back straight.

“Good. Now listen. Nero has requested that you join him at dinner tomorrow night. You’ll sit beside him quietly and eat anything he gives you. Do you have any food allergies?”

“Yes … sir.”

“What are you allergic to?”

“Coconut. Sir.”

“Good. I’ll make sure that’s not on the menu. Anything else?”

McCoy shook his head.

Jim bit his lip and cuffed McCoy around the ear. “Answer me.”

McCoy straightened back up. “No, sir.”

“Better. If you make a mistake like that in front of Nero, trust me, he won’t be so nice. Answer any questions properly and respectfully. Keep your eyes down unless instructed otherwise. Eat and drink anything that’s given to you. That should be all he asks of you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If he asks something else, and you don’t understand, state that clearly to avoid punishment. My team has been working hard on you McCoy. If you fuck this up, we all look bad. And that tends to make Mr. Scott and Mr. Sulu angry. You’ve only seen them on good days; you don’t want to see them on a bad one.”

He could see that Leonard – *McCoy, damn it, he’s McCoy* – was now shivering.

Jim removed the thick leather collar from his jacket and buckled it securely around McCoy’s neck. He wanted another glimpse of those green eyes, but they remained obediently downcast. Jim saw a tear run down his cheek as he adjusted the placement of the D-ring on the front. “If you think this is the last indignity you’ll suffer, you’re wrong. It only gets worse from here, so you may as well prepare yourself now. Obey, and you won’t be punished. It’s that simple.” He could heard Leonard sniffling as he straightened back up. “You know it’s better than the alternative. Now, go to bed.”

McCoy hesitated for just half a second before unsteadily getting to his feet and then lying down on the bed on his side. He didn’t make a move to reach for the blankets and Jim nodded his approval. “Good.” He left the cell as Scotty unlocked it for him. “Make sure he’s cleaned up before tomorrow
night. Give him the option to do it himself. I don’t think he’s ready to have it forced on him.”

“Yes, sir,” Scotty replied with a grin. “Me and the lasses will make sure he looks good enough to eat.”

Jim simply nodded. “Spock, make a note of his allergy in his chart.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tomorrow night, we’re on. I expect everyone’s best work,” Jim said as he strode purposefully out the door. He caught sight of Leonard’s tear-stained face as he left the secure area.

This is wrong, his mind screamed at him as he left the Stable. It was a voice that had long ago been silenced. He tried to ignore it, but it had been bugging him since they had brought McCoy in. Why now? he asked himself. I’ve done this before, seen this before. Seen much worse. Why is it getting to me now? What is so fucking special about Leonard McCoy?

He headed towards the gym, intent on working out his frustrations.

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“You seem nervous, Jimmy,” Nero purred as he sat down at the dining room table and motioned for Jim to do the same.

Jim plastered an easy smile on his face. “No, sir. My team is the best, after all.” He took his customary seat to Nero’s left. He looked up as Scotty led McCoy in by a leash.

“Hmm … looks good,” Nero said appraisingly. “Bring him here.”

Jim didn’t need to look as Scotty led Leonard into the dining room to stand between Jim and Nero. He knew that his wrists and elbows were secured behind his back with black leather cuffs. The metallic clinking as he walked told Jim that his ankles had been shackled with a one foot chain. Jim grabbed his glass of wine and took a large swallow, trying to ignore the faint tremor in his grasp.

“Down, McCoy,” Scotty ordered.

Like an obedient pet, McCoy knelt next to Nero, his eyes glued to the floor. This time, Jim couldn’t stop himself from looking. He was clean shaven now, and his hair had been neatly trimmed. He was shirtless and wore loose black pants.

Scott tied off the leash around the heavy oak table; McCoy wasn’t going anywhere.

“Thank you, Mr. Scott,” Kirk said. Scotty bowed his head and left the dining room.

“Excellent work, Jim,” Nero murmured, reaching out and running a hand through McCoy’s hair. “I like him a lot. Nice choice.”

McCoy shuddered very slightly at the touch but didn’t jerk away.

Please obey, Jim thought silently. Please don’t piss him off.

Nero’s hand went to the back of McCoy’s neck, rubbing it possessively. “He’s strong. He’ll make a
nice addition to the house.”

“I’m glad you approve, sir,” Jim managed, taking another sip of wine.

“Are you thirsty, McCoy?” Nero asked, as if talking to a child. “I’ll bet you are. They usually don’t let slaves eat or drink much all day when they’re going to be having dinner with me.” Tattooed fingers grasped his water glass. He cupped one hand and poured water into it, lowering the hand in front of McCoy. “Drink.”

McCoy hesitated for a second before obediently drinking out of Nero’s hand.

Jim breathed a silent sigh of relief. The rest of the meal passed in much the same manner. Nero would reach out and pet McCoy occasionally and feed him bits of his meal out of his hand like a dog.

Jim forced himself to eat, even though he hadn’t had much of an appetite since McCoy had arrived. McCoy was behaving well, staying still and keeping his eyes to the thick carpet. Jim was relieved when the meal was finished.

“I like him a lot, Jim,” Nero said, petting McCoy again. “In fact, I think he deserves dessert.”

Jim’s head snapped up. “Sir! He hasn’t been trained to do that yet!”

Nero smiled. “Jimmy, I’m sure he can figure it out.”

Jim struggled to control himself. “I don’t doubt it. But it won’t be in the manner you’re accustomed to. He needs to be taught. We haven’t gotten that far yet. Give me two more weeks, and he’ll be ready for whatever you –”

“I said, I want him now.” Nero was glaring at him; no one had denied him anything in a long time, and Jim knew it.

Jim took a deep breath to steady himself. “Sir, there are hundreds of people in this house that can give you exactly what you want; McCoy’s not one of them. He hasn’t been taught how to please you. Give me time; you won’t regret it.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw McCoy stiffen, as he finally realized what they were talking about.

The servants took that moment to slide plates of chocolate cake in front of Kirk and Nero. They both ignored it.

Nero took his napkin and threw it on the table. “You know, Jim, you’ve been out of sorts these past few weeks. Maybe letting you pick something you liked was a mistake.”

Jim tore his gaze away from McCoy and stared at the dessert in front of him. “I’m sorry, sir. I only want to make sure that everyone does their best to please you. McCoy can’t do that yet. Give him time.”

“You’ve been punishing him for his mistakes, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, then, allow me to make it simple. Eyes up, McCoy. On me.”
Jim held his breath as Leonard dragged his eyes up to meet Nero’s for the first time.

“Now. You’re going to have dessert, and you’re going to do it well and swallow all of it. If you don’t, if you fight, you will be punished far beyond anything they’ve done to you. Do you understand?”

McCoy’s shivering became slightly more pronounced. “Yes, sir.”

Nero looked up at Jim with a smug smile. “There, you see? I’ll even be gentle. I won’t judge him on anything other than completing the act. Sound fair?”

Jim hesitated. “Sir, I still have to object. Understanding what to do and physically doing it are two very different things for someone completely uninitiated.” He gulped. He knew that look in Nero’s eyes; he was furious.

Nero swirled his index finger in the chocolate frosting until it was coated. He held it out for McCoy to lick and suck. “Jim, I’m disappointed in you. You used to be able to take risks. In fact, I thought you proved that by bringing McCoy here. But you’ve grown … cautious. Complacent. Maybe you need to be reminded of your place in this house, re-learn some of those lessons I taught you myself when you were just a child.”

Jim gripped the arms of his chair, trying not to panic. He had gone too far.

Nero continued. “I might enjoy that, Jimmy. It’s been a while since I’ve had to discipline you myself. I think I – OWW! FUCK!” Nero snatched his finger away; it was bleeding. “He bit me!”

Jim stared, mouth agape; Leonard was smirking up at Nero.

“You impertinent little SHIT!” Nero kicked him, sending McCoy onto his back and blood spurting from his mouth.

Jim watched in shock as McCoy moaned and rolled onto his side, spitting blood and chocolate onto the pristine carpet. “Fuck you,” he growled at Nero.

Nero smiled, and Jim’s stomach dropped. “Jim?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Punish him. Level five.”

Jim felt like he was the one that had been kicked. “Sir! He hasn’t been trained to – we’ve only ever taken him to level two! He won’t be able to stand it!”

Nero stood, knocking his chair back. “I DON’T CARE! DO IT!”

Jim lowered his eyes out of habit. “Yes, sir.” Feeling sick, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “Scotty. Get Sulu. Take McCoy back to the Stable and start level 5.” He didn’t wait for a response before hanging up.

“As for you, Jim, I’m willing to let this slide. McCoy here will pay for your insolence. Take the time to clear your head and get back in the game. Then bring him back here, properly trained.”
Jim stood up, his heart leaping into his throat. “Sir, please … McCoy doesn’t know all of the rules. Don’t punish him for my –“

“Jim. You’re on thinner ice than you know. Now do as I say, or you can join McCoy.”

By the time Nero had finished talking, Scotty and Sulu had arrived and were dragging McCoy to his feet. Jim bowed his head. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Get someone in here to clean up this mess. And send Spock to me.”

“Yes, sir.” He tried not to watch as McCoy fought against Scotty and Sulu as he was dragged out of the room.

~~~

Jim lay on top of his covers, staring up at the ceiling. He hadn’t been able to sleep. He could hear McCoy screaming from the Stable. He had been through level five himself. He remembered screaming as they had sliced through layers of skin until they reached bone and made him watch. They had put him back together, though not without scars.

Jim felt nauseous. This is my fault. If I hadn’t picked him … if I’d let someone else take over his training … no, the result would have been the same. Nero wanted too much too soon. But … damn it, McCoy, why did you bite him?!

He ran the conversation through his exhausted brain.

He was obeying. What changed? Was it just the threat of having to suck Nero off? No, he even agreed to that he … he bit Nero while he was threatening me. Why would he do that?!

He rubbed a hand over his eyes, looking at the clock. It was just past four in the morning. McCoy’s screams had stopped a while ago, but Jim knew that wasn’t a guarantee that it was over.

Jim’s cell phone rang. He fumbled for it. “Kirk here.”

“Spock here, sir. We need you to come to the Stable immediately. It’s McCoy.”

Jim lurched to his feet. “What is it?! What happened?”

“We lost him, sir.”

“What?!”

“He experienced some form of psychotic break; he’s catatonic. Standard treatments have been unsuccessful.”

“No … how did it happen?”

“Mr. Scott and Mr. Sulu followed all rules and regulations to the letter, sir. Perhaps it was the jump from level –“

“I’ll be right there.”
Jim took in the exhausted faces of his crew; he wasn’t the only one who hadn’t slept. The door to McCoy’s cell was open, since he obviously wasn’t going anywhere. Even so, he was once again strapped down to the bed, wearing soft white scrubs. He was staring at the ceiling, blinking occasionally.

“He has failed to respond to standard stimuli, lorazepam, or electroshock therapy,” Spock informed Kirk.

“Sir, if you review the video feed of the incident, you’ll see that we didn’t do anything that was outside of regulation,” Sulu stated.

Jim ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sure you’re right, Sulu. He just … wasn’t ready.”

“Sir, why did you order level five?” Sulu blurted out.

“I didn’t,” Kirk answered. “Nero did. I tried to talk him out of it, but you know how that goes.” He turned back to Spock. “Is there anything we can do?”

“I’m sorry, Jim,” Spock said. “He needs real psychological help. There’s nothing else we can do here. We can see if he improves in a few days, but … I am not optimistic.”

Jim swallowed hard. Psychological help. There was no way Nero would agree to it. “I don’t blame any of you,” he managed to say evenly. “I’ll inform Nero. Spock, let me know if anything changes. Watch him closely.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jim went into the cell. McCoy had new bruises on his face and new, healing wounds that were covered by his clothes. Jim could see the outlines of bandages under the fabric. He reached out and laid his hand over McCoy’s. The older man didn’t react at all; he didn’t even seem aware of Jim’s presence.

“He hasn’t reacted to any stimuli, sir,” Spock said, standing on the other side of McCoy. “We’ve tried everything.”

“I know,” Jim told him. “I just needed to see it for myself.” He swore quietly, releasing McCoy’s hand. “I’ll tell Nero first thing.” Jim stormed out of the cell, out of the Stable. He stood in the courtyard, breathing hard.

He didn’t deserve this. This is my fault.

~~~

When Jim entered the dining room the next morning, McCoy’s blood was absent from the carpet. Nero didn’t look up at him.

“Sir?”

“What?”
“It’s McCoy, sir. We lost him.”

Nero’s head snapped up. “What?!”

“He suffered a psychotic break during his punishment. He’s catatonic and not responding to any stimuli or treatment. Spock is not optimistic that he’ll recover without psychological treatment.”

Surprisingly, Nero’s gaze softened. “Huh. Well, it looks like you were right after all, Jim. He wasn’t ready. I should have listened to you.” He smiled sadly. “I’ll make it up to you. Go back to Wilson and James and pick someone else you like. We’ll try it again, and I promise I’ll listen to you this time.”


Nero waved his hand dismissively. “He’s of no use to us. Get rid of him.”

Jim took a deep breath. “Sir … I appreciate your generosity more than you know. But … I feel that I made an error in bringing McCoy here untrained. If anyone is owed anything, it’s him. Please let me take him to a place where they can try to help him. I’d rather do that than have any choice over your property again, sir.”

Nero just stared at him. “A place … what, like an institution? That’s out of the question. Besides, what kind of life would he have? Wandering around, drugged up all the time? That’s no life. And I won’t pay for that kind of waste.”

Jim went to Nero’s side and dropped to his knees. “Please, sir—”

Nero slapped him. “Enough. I don’t spend my money on useless things.”

“But you don’t know what kind of life he would have! He might get better!”

“Jim, get out of my sight and do as you’re told. Now.”

Jim blinked back tears and left the dining room.

~~~

Jim stirred as someone knocked on the bathroom door. He groaned, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and flushed the toilet. “What?”

“Sir, we’re ready when you are,” Sulu’s voice told him.

“I’ll be right out.” Jim pushed himself off the floor and rinsed his mouth. 

*This is my fault. He’s going to die because I brought him here.*

Jim gagged and coughed, trying to keep himself from throwing up again.

“Sir, are you all right?” It was Spock.

“Yeah, just give me a minute!” Jim shouted back irritably.
He had seen this happen before. Slaves were murdered when they became “useless.” But this was
the first time Jim felt like the blood was on his hands.

Said hands shook as he washed and dried them; he didn’t think they would ever feel clean again. He
took another deep breath and left the bathroom. He walked down the hall of the Stable, following it
out to the back entrance.

There was a white van parked and waiting.

McCoy was strapped to a gurney in front of it, staring blankly at the midday sky.

Scotty, Sulu, and Spock stood around him. He tried not to stare at the syringe in Spock’s hand.

“It will be almost completely painless and quick,” Spock told him. “He’s not aware of anything
anyway.”

Jim blinked furiously. “Then give the man some fucking dignity. Undo the straps,” he ordered.

Scotty and Sulu nodded, unbuckling the straps.

Jim tried to breathe slowly.

Spock took a step forward. “Sir … you can wait until after –“

“No.” When McCoy was free, he nodded at Spock. “Do it.”

Spock nodded and swabbed McCoy’s elbow, readying the syringe.

“Wait!” Jim shouted, making everyone except Leonard jump.

Spock looked up at him curiously.

“Let me do it. I started this … I’ll finish it.”

Spock looked like he was about to comment but changed his mind. He handed Jim the syringe and
switched places with him.

Jim focused on holding the syringe as steadily as possible, bringing it next to McCoy’s skin. “I’m
sorry,” he whispered as his thumb moved to the plunger. He looked up at McCoy’s hazel eyes.

McCoy was looking back at him.

Jim snapped back his elbow, catching Spock square in the nose. Scotty and Sulu made noises of
shock as Jim rolled under the gurney and swept Scotty’s feet from under him. The back of his head
smacked into the brick wall as he went down.

Sulu engaged him, exchanging blows until Jim got a sharp upper cut through, laying Sulu out. Spock
was groaning and struggling to his feet, blood pouring from his nose.

Jim leaned over and slung McCoy over his shoulder, dodging Spock’s uncoordinated grab and
dumping McCoy in front of the passenger seat of the van. He shut the door and jumped in the
driver’s seat, throwing the van into drive. He slammed down the accelerator as he wrenched his door shut, barreling through the chain link fence and pulling onto the road.

He checked the rearview. No one was pursuing. Yet. He fished his cell phone out with one hand and tossed it out the window. He spared a look at McCoy.

Leonard was curled up into a ball, eyes leaking tears.

“I knew it,” Jim gasped in relief. “I knew you weren’t completely gone.”

McCoy looked up at him in sheer panic.

“It’s okay. I’ll get us out of this. Just stay down.”

When McCoy didn’t make a move, Jim let himself focus on the road. He had to keep driving; they would soon have the devil on their tail.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Jim Kirk is the head of Nero’s household of slaves. His life changes forever the day Leonard McCoy becomes their newest acquisition.

Nero was quiet as he viewed the video feed of the escape.

Sulu and Spock watched nervously; Scotty had been taken to the hospital for his head injury. The rest of the senior staff stood silent.

When the video ended, Nero didn’t move. No one else did either.

“I’m glad you showed me this,” Nero said finally. “If you had told me that Jim had broken out and taken McCoy with him, I wouldn’t have believed you. But now I’ve seen it for myself. Oh, Jimmy. Took the doctor and ran. Didn’t even say goodbye.” He waved his hand vaguely. “Assemble the recovery team. Find them. Bring them back alive.”

“Sir,” Spock began. “The team has already begun their search. Jim discarded his phone and deactivated the GPS on the van. It will not be easy to find him. He knows our tactics.”

“No, Spock. It’s simple. We’ll have their faces on every news channel in America and spread the word on the internet. There’s only one place Jim can run. He’s heading for the border. The US turns a blind eye to slavery; Canada doesn’t. That’s how we’ll find them. Now, get to it. Dismissed.”

As everyone filed out of the room, they froze as Nero called out a name.

“Erin?”

The small, red-headed woman trembled. “Yes, sir?”

“Stay.”

The rest of the staff backed away from her and walked out the door. She looked at them desperately and started to cry. Nero needed some way – someone – to use to vent his frustration.

Sulu was the last one out of the room; he watched the tears streaming down her face before he closed the door. She wouldn’t leave the room alive.

~~~

The only time Jim stopped the van was to go to an ATM and grab all the cash he could before Nero froze his accounts. Only the most senior members of staff were allowed to have money of their own, and Jim had never been more glad of it.

Leonard had eventually crawled into the passenger seat and fastened his seatbelt. They hadn’t said a word to each other.

Despite what he was doing, Jim was choking on his guilt for what he had done. And nearly done.
About an hour into the trip, Leonard finally spoke.

“Kirk?”

“Yeah?”

“Pull over.”

“I can’t.”

“Now would be good.”

Jim glanced over. He saw that Leonard had turned green and yanked the van onto the shoulder of the highway. Leonard shoved his door open and spilled out of the van. Jim pushed his own door open and circled the van, wincing as he watched Leonard vomit violently onto the gravel. The arm braced against the van was shaking. Jim stepped forward, opening the back of the van and rummaging until he found a blanket.

Leonard’s knees buckled, and he narrowly missed the puddle of vomit.

Jim knelt beside him, wrapping the navy blanket around him and rubbing his shoulder. “You’re gonna be okay. Just breathe.”

Leonard was trying not to hyperventilate. “They … you – I was … oh, God.” Tears spilt down his cheeks.

Jim squeezed his shoulder. “Breathe, Leonard. It’s okay.” He looked nervously down the empty highway. “We need to keep moving.”

Leonard jerked away from him. “No. I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me what the hell is going on!”

“I’ll answer anything you want to know, but you need to get back in the van. I’m not gonna hurt you. I’m trying to help you. If we stay here, they’re gonna catch up to us. They’ll drag us both back, and you don’t want to know what Nero will do to us.”

Leonard was shivering when Jim stopped talking.

Jim tuck the blanket tighter around him and bundled him into the van. He raced around the front, got back in, and drove off down the road.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s only one place we can go. We have to get to Canada. Nero’s reach doesn’t extend that far.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Why can’t we just go to the police?”

“Because Nero has a lot of government officials in his pocket. The US looks the other way when it comes to slavery. Believe me, people have tried. No one makes it to authorities or the press.”

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“I wish I was. I’ve been in the system long enough to know. Most of the American public is completely unaware of all of this.”

“I don’t believe it …”
“You saw the size of Nero’s operation. That’s just a fraction of it. And there are other powerful families that own slaves, too. They all work together to keep up the lifestyle.”

Leonard was quiet for a while. “Has anyone … ever made it?”

“Yeah. Slaves sometimes get free and make it to Canada. Then they lay low. If they went public … well, it would put them at risk. Or some slave houses pay them off to stay quiet. But … no one’s ever escaped Nero.”

“Great.”

Jim flashed him a grin. “Hey, if anyone was gonna do it, it would be me. I took longer to break than any of Nero’s slaves.”

“How old were you?” Leonard asked quietly.

Jim focused on the road again. “About fifteen. My stepfather sold me to make some cash. What about you? How did Wilson & James get you?”

Leonard sighed. “I can’t remember all of it. One minute, I was in a bar, drownin’ my troubles. Next thing I know I’m locked in a cage with a hundred other scared people. They probably drugged me.”

Jim nodded. “They usually do.”

Leonard stared at the open plains passing them by. “Wait, where the hell are we?”

“Colorado,” Jim answered.

“What?! I was drownin’ my troubles in Georgia. How the hell did I get here?”

“Most likely? By truck. They pick up people from all over the place, all ages, orientation, walks of life. Never know what a buyer will be looking for.”

Leonard shuddered. “I don’t understand. This’s been your life for ten years. Why did you save me?”

“I … I don’t know.”

“You’re risking everything. Looked like you had it pretty good back there: nice suits, obedient staff, fine cuisine … why me? Why now? I think I deserve to know.”

“I picked you, like I said. And when things went to shit … I felt like it was my place to help you. Nero was gonna kill you …” The road in front of Jim blurred.

Leonard’s voice was close. “Jim?”

“I was gonna …”

“JIM!”

The world faded, like an old fashioned TV turning off.

~~~

Jim gasped awake as water slapped his face. He sputtered. “… the fuck?!”

“Easy, don’t get up.”
Jim wiped the water from his eyes. “Leonard?”

“Yeah. Take it easy.” The doctor was holding a bottle of water he must have found in the van.

Jim felt his heart start to pound. “No. We have to keep moving!” He tried to sit up.

Leonard pushed him back down. “Just hold on a sec. You passed out, for cryin’ out loud. Lie still a minute.”

Jim clutched at his arm. “We can’t. They’ll find us. That was one of the other jobs Nero had me do. I’ve been on the recovery teams.”

“Then you’ll know how to avoid them. Just breathe for a sec. I’m a doctor; let me do my job.” He took Jim’s wrist, feeling for his pulse.

Jim lay back and did as he was told, almost out of habit. “What happened?” He looked around; he was in the back of the van. “Did we crash?”

“Thankfully, no. I managed to grab the wheel and then pretty much had to jump on your scrawny lap and jam on the brakes.”

Jim shivered. “I almost killed you. I took the needle, and –”

“Listen. I don’t remember everything that happened in the past twenty-four hours, and it’s probably better that way. But whatever you did, you did because you were ordered to. Christ, you were taken when you were just a kid. You fought against all that programming to break me out. And I’ll never be anything but grateful, Jim. I’m not one to usually take back things I’ve said, but … you didn’t have a choice. You were a slave under Nero’s control. I don’t blame you for any of this. I owe you my life, kid.”

Jim swallowed the lump in his throat.

“And I know that what you’re going through right now is anything but easy. But I can’t do this alone. We have to work together, okay?”

Jim nodded and slowly sat up; he was shivering again. His mind was starting to run through all the different things Nero would do to him if caught.

Leonard’s voice brought him back to earth. “You were the one who told me if anyone could do this, it was you. I trust you, Jim. We’ll make it. And then we’ll fix whatever that bastard did to you, okay? I promise.”

Jim just stared at him uncomprehendingly. Panic was trying to fog his brain now that the adrenaline had abated slightly.

Leonard frowned at him. “C’mere.” He pulled Jim into his arms, holding him close. “I’m scared, too, kid. Doesn’t make you weak.”

Jim shuddered against him, breath hitching.

Leonard rubbed his back. “It’s okay. We’ll get through it.”

Jim shied away from the contact; no one had held him in a long time. No one had seen him vulnerable since –

“Shhh,” Leonard whispered, not letting go. “Easy, now. Not everyone in this life is going to use you
or hurt you. Christ, you’ve been through enough. I’m sorry to lay all this on your shoulders, but … you know them. You can fight them. And I’ll have your back, Jim. I promise.” He pulled back and pinned Jim with his hazel eyes. “You get me, kid? You’re not in this alone.”

Jim took a deep breath and nodded.

“Okay. Let’s get the hell out of here. Want me to drive for a bit?”

Jim nodded again. “Yeah. We have to keep pushing north.”

“How are we going to get across the border?” Leonard asked as they both crawled back to the front of the van.

“There are places that help slaves that have broken out,” Jim answered, buckling his seatbelt. “Some of them are just covers for the slave houses; they snatch people back the moment they break out. But I know one that’s real and right near the border.”

“Oh?” Leonard asked, shifting the van into gear.

“Yeah.” A smile touched Jim’s lips. “Looks like we’re goin’ to the Chapel.”

~~~

Nero was not pleased. He had lost more people than Jim and McCoy, taking out his rage on other staff members. He grabbed his cell phone and dialed the recovery team.

“Mr. Sulu, report.”

“Sir, as Kirk is a seasoned veteran of our recovery teams, he knows where we will be looking. We have found no trace of them so far.”

“I’m waiting for the good news, Sulu.”

“Sir, we’ve concluded that there is only one place that Kirk can cross the border and acquire false identification to get through customs. They’re heading for Warroad, Minnesota. If nothing else, we can stop them there.”

“Chapel?” Nero growled.

“We think so, sir.”

“No one’s ever found her.”

“We will, sir.”

“You’d better. Choppers, trucks, guns, whatever it takes. Use everything to stop them.”

“Yes, sir.”

Nero slammed the phone down onto the table. “Damn it, Jim.”

~~~

Jim chugged down a second bottle of coke as Leonard looked on in mild alarm. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’m sure I don’t want to fall asleep at the wheel. I don’t think you want that either.”
Leonard nodded, sipping at a bottle of water. They had finally stopped a few hours ago to grab food, new clothes for Leonard, and a bathroom break. It was a twelve hour drive from Colorado to Minnesota, but they added a few more hours on with all of the back roads they had taken. Leonard had suggested stopping for sleep, but Jim had shot down that idea. Instead, they took turns driving through the night.

“So, how do we find this chapel? Where is it?” Leonard asked, rubbing his eyes.

Jim chuckled. “Not a place. Chapel’s a person. She’s rumored to be around Warroad, right on the border.”

Leonard groaned. “Rumored?”

“She has to keep her exact location a secret. There’s nothing for it; we’ll have to ask around. At least I should be able to spot any of Nero’s people if they beat us there.”

“You think they know where we’re going?”

“Unfortunately, yes. We’ll have to be careful. In fact, we should ditch the van as soon as possible. Keep an eye out for anything that’s open twenty-four hours.”

“You’re gonna steal a car?”

Jim shrugged. “We need to give ourselves the best chances of making it out of this alive.”

Leonard swallowed audibly. “All right.”

“There … is another way. I could make a diversion and get Nero’s team on me. Then you can head to Warroad on your own. You’ll attract less attention. It’s me he wants.”

“No! I’m not leavin’ you behind, Jim. Not after everything you’ve done for me.”

Jim glanced over at him. “You’ll have a better chance of making it.”

Leonard folded his arms. “I don’t care. Forget about it.”

Jim sighed. “Okay.”

~~~

Nyota Uhura didn’t want to disturb the Captain’s sleep, but she had no choice. She knocked softly on the cabin door until it opened. “What is it?”

“We’ve got trouble,” Uhura answered. “All the surrounding communities are reporting sightings. Nero’s trying to find us again.”

Christine Chapel groaned and rubbed one eye with the heel of her hand. “Why now?”

“Rumor has it that Jim Kirk is making a run for it.”

Chapel was instantly awake. “What?”

“That’s what they’re saying. And we do have media sources confirming that Nero’s put out wanted bulletins for him and another man.”

Chapel shook her head. “It’s a trap. Kirk is a spy; he’s in Nero’s inner circle.”
“What do you want us to do?”

“Normally, I would say lay low and wait them out. But … this could be just what we need. If we get Kirk, we could use him. Might just keep Nero out of our hair.”

Uhura straightened slightly. “It’s risky.”

Chapel smiled. “I know. But we have people to protect. And some of them are tired of hiding. Send people out. Find out who Nero’s sent our way. If it’s a small number, grab Kirk. If it’s more than we can handle, we’ll just lay low until this blows over.”

Uhura nodded. “Understood.”

~~~

“They’re onto us,” Scotty announced as he convened with Sulu, Spock, and the rest of the recovery team.

“Chapel knows we’re coming.”

“Pull everyone back,” Sulu ordered. “If they don’t know the size of our force, they might even reach out for Kirk. Then we can grab him and McCoy.” He turned to Spock. “Any luck on locating the center of her operation?”

Spock shook his head. “We have nothing conclusive.” After a pause he added, “You should inform Nero of our progress.”

“No. He’ll be asleep. Besides, there’s not much to report.”

“I doubt he’s asleep, lad,” Scotty said softly.

Sulu swallowed and reached for his cell phone. “All right.”

~~~

Leonard pulled down his baseball cap as he pumped gas into the new car they’d acquired – a slightly banged up SUV. He felt bad about it, but he trusted Jim. He stole a quick glance to the front seat, confirming that Jim was still asleep. The kid needed the rest; they both did, but they couldn’t afford to stop. After looking around to make sure the gas station was empty, Leonard left the pump running and ducked into the store to get some coffee and pay for the gas.

The sun would be coming up soon. The lack of sleep only made the whole situation feel more unreal; nothing had felt real since … well, since he had gotten a letter from Jocelyn’s attorney, looking for more alimony. After that, he had been drinking … then drugged. Random things stood out with sharp clarity: the sting of the tazer after he had talked back to Jim; the salty tang of the soup running down his throat after his first beating; the tattoos on Nero’s fingers when he fed him dinner; Jim’s wide blue eyes when he told him that everything would be okay.

When he got back to the pump, it had finished. He put the nozzle back in its holder, got into the car, and started it back up.

Jim stirred, mumbling incoherently.

“Shh,” Leonard whispered. “Sleep, kid. It’s okay.” It was a lie, and he knew it. But after all he had been through, by God, the kid deserved a moment’s rest.
Jim quieted, head lolling against the seat.

Leonard pulled the car out of the gas station and kept heading north.

~~~

“Who’s Spock on the phone with?” Scotty asked, trying to stretch in the cramped van. It was loaded with surveillance equipment that would rival the FBI.

“Minnesota authorities,” Sulu answered. “Things might get ugly. He’s making sure no one interferes or tries to contact the media. They’ll be completely cut off if that’s the way things go.”

“Is there no way to draw Kirk out peacefully?”

Sulu shook his head. “Not when he’s gone to so much trouble to run.” He sighed. “And all over McCoy. It doesn’t make sense. Ten years and then this.”

Spock ended his call. “Everything is in place.”

Scotty paced back and forth in the small space. “I cannae stand all this waiting.”

“He’ll be here,” Sulu stated. “Kirk’s got nowhere else to go.”

~~~

Leonard rubbed his eyes and squinted at the map of Minnesota. “Jim, why are we heading to Warroad? There are at least two other places we could cross.”

“Because that’s where Chapel is. If we’re going to stay in Canada, we’re going to need to paperwork to prove it. And it’s the only crossing Nero can’t completely control.”

“Why’s that?”

Jim smiled. “Look at the map again.”

Leonard stared at it. “The lake?”

Jim nodded. “The Lake of the Woods. It’s huge. There’s no way Nero can cover all of it. One shore is in the US; the opposite one is in Canada.”

“We’re goin’ swimming?”

Jim laughed. “I’m hoping we can pay for a boat. But, you know, if all else fails …”

“Are we stopping in Roseau?”

“No. They’re probably camped out there. We’re gonna cut below it, stay off the main roads. Then we’ll ditch the car and hike the rest of the way. Hope you picked good shoes.”

“Yeah.”

Jim glanced over at him. “You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s just … this is it. They know we’re comin’.”

Jim reached out and grabbed Leonard’s hand. “I swear I’ll do everything I can to get you out of this, Bones.”
Leonard just blinked at him. “Bones?”

Jim released his hand, turning his attention back to the road. “I decided you needed a nickname. Leonard is just too formal.”

“And Len or Leo just didn’t cut it?”

Jim could hear the smile in his voice. “Nah. Needed to be something original. So, Bones.”

“As in Sawbones.”

“Right.”

Leonard chuckled. “Whatever floats your boat, kid. I’d think of another nickname for you if I’d had any sleep in the last twenty hours. I can hardly recall my own name.” It was quiet again for a minute. “You do a lot of hiking?”

“Not really. Not since … I mean, I used to do some as a kid.”

“With your family?”

The question was gentle, but it still stung. “Yeah. My dad died just after I was born. But my mom used to take me and my brother camping and all that jazz.”

“Any family left?”

Jim shrugged. “My mom disappeared when I thirteen. Sam ran off about a year later. And then the year after that, my stepfather sold me. What about you?”

“My ma lives in Italy. Probably thinks I went and drank myself to death. My dad’s dead, and my wife divorced me two years ago.”

Jim winced. “I’m sorry, Bones. Once we get to Canada, we’ll contact your mom.”

“But … won’t that put her in danger? Will Nero try to track her down?”

He could hear panic edging into Leonard’s voice. “No. She’s outside the US. She’s safe.” He let the reassurance sink in before he asked anything else. “No siblings?”

“Nope. I did my fair share of hiking and camping growin’ up, though.”

Jim smiled. “Good.”

“Jim? What’re you gonna do once we’re out?”

Jim blinked; he hadn’t thought that far ahead. “I, uh … I don’t know.”

Leonard chuckled again. “Well, you might want to give it a little thought.”

“I don’t know. I’ve got no job history, no college degree. But you know what? I’ll fuckin’ flip burgers if I have to; I don’t even care. I can’t … I don’t even remember what it’s like to own something myself.”

“You’re smart, Jim. I’m sure you could degree easily enough.”

“Heh. Yeah, except you forget that I’ll be broke by the time we get there. I’ll figure something out.”
Leonard muttered something.

“What?”

“Oh, hell with it. I’ll help you, Jim. As soon as we get to a bank, I can access my accounts and figure somethin’ out until you land on your feet.”

“You don’t have to –“

“Damn it, Jim! Look the hell around! We’re in the middle of fucking nowhere, running for our lives, and I’m only breathin’ right now because of you. You really think we’re gonna cross the border, and I’ll just kick you to the curb?!?”

Jim opened and shut his mouth soundlessly a few times. “I, uh …”

“Well?!” Leonard sounded furious.

“Sorry,” Jim mumbled.

“Wrong answer, kid,” Leonard said more gently. “I get that Nero warped the way you view the world. But trust me when I say I’ll help you, okay? Just accept it.”

Jim blinked rapidly to keep the tears from running down his face. “Thanks.” He valiantly fought back against the voices in his head, screaming for him to run, to never trust anyone. Everyone in his life had let him down or used him.

“Hey. You want me to drive?”

Jim pulled over wordlessly. They said nothing as they got out of the van to trade seats. Jim avoided Leonard’s eyes but found himself yanked into a tight hug. He hesitantly hugged back, his face against Leonard’s shoulder. They broke apart a moment later and got back on the road.

“You should get some more rest.”

Jim shook his head. “No. We both need to keep our eyes open now. Don’t trust anyone.”

“Are you going to be able to tell Nero’s people from … others?”

“Yeah. I’ll be able to tell.”

~~~

“You lads ever think about it?” Scotty asked as the three of them sat in the surveillance van.

“What?” Sulu asked.

“Makin’ a run for it.”

Spock raised an eyebrow. “It is illogical to speculate about such things.”

“I couldn’t do it,” Sulu stated. “People are dying back home, and it’s Jim’s fault.”

“No, it’s Nero’s fault,” Scotty corrected.

“You really want to have this conversation now?” Sulu snapped. He was running point on the search. It was his neck on the line if Kirk escaped. “I wouldn’t be naïve enough to say that any of us
chose this life, but there’s a price to be paid for trying to leave.”

“Looks like our Jim found somethin’ worth fightin’ for,” Scotty commented. “Must be nice to believe in somethin’ again.”

“Do you believe that Jim has decided that his and McCoy’s lives are worth more than the people Nero has killed during the search?” Spock asked.

Scotty shook his head. “I dunna believe Jim thinks like that. He wanted to save McCoy’s life. Wouldn’t have been saved if Jim had just let ‘im run on his own. We woulda grabbed him right back up.”

“Well, that’s going to happen anyway,” Sulu stated. “We’ll get them back.”

“Though it is possible that Jim has snapped McCoy out of his catatonic state,” Spock commented.

“Good,” Sulu growled. “Then he’ll know what’s going on when we punish him.” He glanced over at Scotty. “Right?”

Scotty simply nodded. “Aye.”

~~~

“Great,” McCoy sighed as he and Jim loaded their supplies into backpacks and pulled on new coats. “Now it rains. Just as we’re about to start walkin’.”

Jim pulled on his new boots. “It’ll work in our favor. If they find the car, it’ll be harder to track us in the rain.”

“Think they’ll find it?”

Jim shrugged. “I doubt it. But I can’t underestimate Nero. Especially when he’s after me.”

“How did you climb the ranks like that?”

Jim looked away. “I don’t think you want to know.”

“I do. But it’s all right if you don’t want to talk about it. Just remember, you were a slave. You had no choice.”

“Choosing you was the first real choice I’ve had in a decade. And then my second choice was to break you out, heh.”

Leonard clapped him on the shoulder. “I appreciate it. On both counts.”

Jim’s head jerked around to face him again.

Leonard stood, shouldering his backpack. “I can’t imagine that anyone else who ‘purchased’ me would have also broken me out of jail, kid. Now, come on. Let’s make it a clean break, if we can.”

Jim nodded, shutting the door of the SUV and grabbing his own backpack. He had grabbed food, warm clothing, and as many camping supplies as he could easily get his hands on in the store. It had been strange wandering around with “normal” people. Life went on, heedless of the fact he and McCoy were running for their lives. It hadn’t even occurred to him to reach out to someone for help. Not that it would have done any good; he would have been carted off to a mental institution … and then grabbed back up by Nero and …
“Jim?”

“Hm?”

“I can hear those gears grinding from here. What’s on your mind?”

Jim shrugged as they walked along. “It’s weird. I haven’t been around … ‘normal’ people for a long time.”

“Lord help us all the day I’m considered normal,” Leonard snorted.

Jim laughed. “Well, normal compared to me, anyway.” He was quiet for a minute. “Thanks for not … you know, prying. I’m sure you have a million questions.”

“You bet I do. But they can wait. Once we’re over the border, you can tell me then if you want to.”

“I do,” Jim admitted. “I … I’ve been in it for too long. I need to know that it’s not normal, that it wasn’t okay.”

“I think you know that, Jim. Why are you doubting yourself?”

Jim shrugged. “Because I know the price for running. Right now, people at that house are being hurt and killed because of what I did.”

Leonard stopped in his tracks. “What?!”

Jim sighed. “When Nero doesn’t get his way, he just loses it. Takes it out on the nearest thing or person. I know that, but … I couldn’t let them kill you –“

Leonard faced him, firmly grasping both his shoulders. “Jim, listen to me. Nero is insane. You are not responsible for what he does.”

“It’s cause and effect, Bones –“

“That’s bullshit. You’re not making him do anything, kid. It’s his choice. Understanding his moods and behavior does not make you responsible for it. That’s how he runs that whole place; everyone’s so afraid of what he might do that they just do what he says. Believe me, whatever’s happening, it is not your fault, okay?”

Jim forced himself to meet Leonard’s eyes. “It’s hard to see it that way.”

Leonard smiled slightly, letting one hand wrap around the back of Jim’s neck. “I know. Give it time to sink in.” He let Jim go, and they resumed their trek through the woods.

~~~

Chapel barely looked up as her dinner was brought to her desk. The office was a flurry of activity around her.

“Report?” Chapel asked.

“There’s no sign of Kirk or the other man,” Uhura replied. “The sightings of Nero’s spies have all but stopped. They’ve either given up or they’re waiting.”

“That’s not good,” Chapel said with a sigh.
“Do you want me to send out people to find Kirk?”

“No. It’ll leave us too vulnerable. We need to wait until he tries to find us.”

“Are we going to grab him?”

Christine chewed on her lip. “I don’t like the fact that whatever their plan is, it doesn’t seem to be synchronized. Either there’s been a mistake, or Kirk is actually running.”

“It might just be what they want to think,” Uhura offered. “Should we just stay out of it?”

“That’s what I would like to do. It does seem like they’re trying to draw us out.” She looked up at Uhura. “You’d like to snag Kirk, though, wouldn’t you?”

Uhura smirked. “I’d certainly like to show him that he can’t play us for fools.”

“Tell you what. Take a small team and search the area tonight. If you find them, fine, if not, we stay out of this until it blows over.”

Uhura nodded. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Chapel shook her head with a smile. “I know you’re ex-military but stop calling me that. Now get out there and don’t get caught. I don’t want to have to patch anyone back up.”

Uhura smiled and nodded again. “Understood.”

~~~

“Jim, listen to me,” Leonard said, trying to catch Jim’s arm again. “We need to stop. You can’t see where you’re going, and we’ve pulled each other up off the ground at least a dozen times in the last hour. We’ve got to rest.”

“No,” Jim shot back, struggling to stay on his feet with only a flashlight to guide him.

“Jim, I’m a doctor. We’re running on fumes. I was injured, and I can’t go much further without any rest. You’re not much better. We have to stop. One or both of us is going to end up seriously hurt if we don’t.”

“Gotta find Chapel,” Jim responded.

“Damn it, Jim!” Leonard stepped forward, wrapping both his arms around Jim, forcing him to stop plowing forward through the wet wilderness. “I need you to stop, you reckless idiot!”

“Bones, we have to keep moving!”

“Kid, we don’t even know if we’re moving forward! We could be runnin’ in circles right now, and we wouldn’t know it! We can’t see a thing, and the rain is getting worse. We need to stop and take some food and rest. I am not goin’ another goddamn step, and neither are you!”

Jim fought him for a minute but then slumped back against Leonard. “Okay. Okay.”

“Good. Now, do we have anything we can use for shelter?”

“Yeah. I have a tarp. If we can find a way to rig it up, we’ll at least keep the rain off us.”

Leonard let go of him, after making sure that Jim was steady on his feet. “Okay.”
They found a trio of trees nearby and tied up the tarp using rope Jim had bought. Fortunately, they discovered a second tarp to spread on the ground.

Leonard removed his backpack and lowered himself to the ground with a groan. He pulled the backpack under the tarp with him and started rummaging for food. Jim landed beside him a second later. He flopped onto his back.


“Nngh,” Jim complained. But he obediently sat back up and sucked on his water bottle. Leonard handed him a granola bar and a pack of beef jerky. Jim took it gratefully, tearing the granola bar wrapper with his teeth and digging in. They ate quietly, listening to the pounding rain.

“All of the blankets still dry?” Leonard asked a few minutes later as they moved on to munching on trail mix.

“I think so,” Jim answered. He rummaged around his pack and pulled out two heavy blankets.

“We need to take off the jackets, if they’re going to stay dry.”

Jim nodded, peeling off his jacket.

Leonard did the same, fingers fumbling as he wrapped the blanket around himself. He lay down on his side, wincing at the feeling of rocks and roots under his back.

Jim laid Leonard’s jacket on top of him, carefully trying not to let the wet exterior touch the blanket.


“No problem,” Jim answered, pulling his own blanket and jacket over himself. “Warm enough?”

“Sort of. I’m from Georgia, remember?”

Jim chuckled. “Better come here then.”

Leonard rolled onto his other side, so that Jim could spoon around him and rearrange the jackets on top of them. His eyes slid closed as his back was enveloped by Jim’s warmth. He stayed conscious long enough to wrap his arms over Jim’s and pull him closer.

“Night, Bones,” he heard Jim whisper before exhaustion finally claimed him.

~~~

Jim awoke slowly and wondered what on earth he had done to deserve such a severe beating. Every part of him ached, and a deep weariness had settled into his bones.

_Bones … Bones!_

He startled awake, blinking in the strange, blue light.

There was a moan beside him. He was still spooned around Leonard. _What time is it? _he wondered, fretting about how much daylight they had lost. The rain had stopped, and he stared up at the canopy of the bright blue tarp they had erected over their heads.

“Bones,” he said, gently shaking the other man. “C’mon, wake up. We need to get moving.”
Leonard moaned, sleepily wrapping Jim’s arms more firmly around him.

A smile tugged at the corners of Jim’s mouth. “Come on, Bones. Time to get up!”

“Christ, let a man sleep, will ya?”

“Sorry,” Jim said, pulling his arms back. “But we need to get going. We’ve slept too much of the day away already.”

Leonard’s eyes finally opened. “What time is it?”

“No clue. We need to move.”

Leonard nodded and started to pack up.

~~~

“Kirk’s been spotted. We’ve projected their most likely trajectory and selected an extraction point. Permission to engage?”

“Permission granted.”

~~~

Leonard filled up his water bottle at the stream. Jim was next to him, splashing cold water on his face. They hadn’t said much; it was obvious that neither felt fully awake, even though they’d been walking for two hours already.

Jim’s hand was suddenly on Leonard’s arm.

Leonard’s head whipped to face him. “What?”

“Shh,” Jim told him. “We’re being watched, I think.”

Under any other circumstances, he would have tried to convince Jim he was being paranoid. “What do we do?”

“Only thing we can.”

Leonard gulped, stowing his water bottle.

Jim locked his eyes to Leonard’s. “Run.” They sprinted off together, Leonard falling in behind Jim. He didn’t want to, but he could hear movement around them over the pounding of his heart.

_No no no! Not when we’ve come so far!

He managed to keep up as Jim changed up the path, zigzagging through the trees and brush.

Something flew over Leonard’s head, and a second later, he was pulled off his feet. The wind was knocked out of him as he rolled on the ground, struggling with the net tangled around him. He saw Jim stop.

“BONES!”

He sucked air into his lungs. “No, Jim! RUN!”

Jim ignored him, running back towards him.
Leonard watched in horror as two figures in black grabbed Jim and jabbed a tazer into his side. It didn’t take much in his exhausted state to take him down.

Leonard fought uselessly against his bonds. “NO! JIM!” He watched helplessly as the two people in black let Jim hit the ground; they pulled him back up and yanked a black hood over his head. “JIM!”

He was silenced by a tazer hitting his side; he screamed. The pain faded along with his vision; the last thing he could see was Jim being dragged away.

~~~

When Jim woke again, he was in darkness. A blindfold had been tied around his eyes and a gagged shoved in his mouth. His wrists were tied together above him, bound tightly with course rope. Metal cuffs encircled his ankles, tethered with a chain. He got his feet under himself, standing and taking some of weight off his wrists. His bare feet scraped roughly against the cement floor.

He listened carefully. Everything about this was wrong. Nero wouldn’t do this, and neither would his team; they pretty much never used blindfolds; they always wanted you to see what would happen, what could happen, and who owned you.

Jim turned his head from side to side but he couldn’t hear anything but far distant voices. He forced himself to breathe slowly, pushing down the panic as he realized he had no idea where Leonard was. Hell, he didn’t even know who had captured them. But he was almost positive it wasn’t Nero, and that, strangely, gave him a small sense of relief.

A door to his left creaked open and shut; booted feet stepped towards him.

“James T. Kirk,” an unfamiliar female voice said. “Never thought we’d meet face to face, so to speak.”

Jim bit down on the cloth gag to keep himself calm. He wanted to fight and demand they tell him what had happened to Leonard.

“Probably thought you could out smart us, huh? We’re just full of surprises.” She stepped closer and untied the blindfold.

Jim blinked in the dim light as she removed the gag as well. He couldn’t tell anything about his location from the nondescript gray room.

“Where’s Bones?”

“McCoy? He’s in another room. You really want us to believe that you – one of Nero’s inner circle – risked everything to break out a guy you barely know?”

Jim glared at the petite woman. “It’s the truth.” And then it clicked. “Are you Chapel?”

She smiled. “No. I’m Uhura, her right hand woman. And we’re not gonna fall for your act, Kirk. You were obviously sent by Nero to find us. But we plan to turn the tables on him.”

“It’s not an act,” Jim snapped. “And Nero’s people are watching everything. If you didn’t want to get involved, you shouldn’t have snatched us. They’ll find you, or they’ll tear the place apart trying. Listen, you’ve been through my stuff; take the money and use it to get McCoy across the border. Let me go, and I’ll get Nero out of your hair. You don’t have much time.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you serious? You want us to just let you go and save the day? They
have no idea where you are. And it’s going to cost Nero to get you back.”

“He won’t make a deal with you; he’ll just blow this whole place apart!”

Uhura scoffed. “I think people will notice that.”

“Have you checked that you’re not under a media blackout? Nero can do that; he’s done it before. And this is a very remote area, Uhura. It wouldn’t be hard. Pay off the right official –“

They were both cut off by the noise from the next room.

It was Leonard, and he was screaming.

Jim tried to free his wrists. “Goddamnit, what the fuck are you doing to him?! He hasn’t done anything!”

Uhura’s eyes were wide. “W-We know. We wouldn’t hurt him. Scare him a little, maybe—“

“You don’t understand what he’s been through! Did you tie him up like this? He won’t know that you’re not Nero. LET HIM GO!”

Without another word, Uhura left the room.

Jim struggled in his bonds, pulling on his aching wrists. “BONES!”

~~~

“If this is an act, those two deserve Oscars,” Chapel said as she and Uhura conferred in the hallway. There was still yelling coming from Jim’s cell.

“I don’t understand,” Uhura said, pulling her hair into a high ponytail. “Why would Kirk risk everything?”

“Maybe he’s just not who people made him out to be,” Chapel said thoughtfully.

“Or that’s what he wants you to think –“

“Well, we don’t have much to go on. Unless we get McCoy to settle, we can’t get anything out of him.”

“With all due respect, it doesn’t change the plan –“

“Was Kirk right? Are we under a media blackout?”

Uhura swallowed. “Yes. He was right. And law enforcement has apparently been bribed not to interfere.”

“This is a disaster,” Chapel stated. “If he’s gone to all that trouble, Nero’s got an army waiting. We’re no match. Damn it. We fell into the trap with our eyes wide open.”

“We expected Nero to underestimate us. Unfortunately, he really is after Kirk, so he brought the whole gang.”

She chewed on her lip. “What do we do?”

Chapel nodded her head at Kirk’s cell. “Get the boys to help you. Let Kirk see McCoy. Then maybe he can help us get out of this mess.”
Jim stopped fighting and yelling once Uhura came back and explained that they were taking him to see Leonard. Two tall men untied him and released the ankle cuffs before escorting him roughly to the next room.

Jim ignored the tall blond woman inside and strode straight to the figure huddled in the corner. “Bones?” When Leonard visibly flinched, Jim glared at the woman. “What did you do to him?”

“Same thing we did to you. That’s all. We haven’t touched him.”


Leonard slowly turned to look at him with disbelieving eyes.

Jim gave him the best reassuring smile he could manage. “I’m here.”

“Jesus Christ,” Leonard gasped, pulling Jim close and burying his face in the crook of his neck.

Jim wrapped his arms around him, felt him shaking. “It’s okay, Bones. They won’t hurt you. We made it to the Chapel.” He felt tears prick his eyes as he realized that it might have all been in vain.

Leonard pulled back, hastily wiping his eyes. “I thought –“

“I know. It’s okay.”

“You hurt?”

Jim shook his head. “I’m okay. You?”

Leonard nodded. He opened his mouth to say something but was cut off as the whole building shook with the force of a nearby explosion.

Jim threw himself over Bones, protecting him from any possible debris.

Uhura scrambled back to her feet, coughing as she stumbled into the cell. “Is everyone all right?”

Chapel was getting to her feet, dusting herself off.

Kirk and McCoy untangled themselves from each other. McCoy must have snapped out of it, because he was swearing up a storm at Kirk for being self-sacrificing.

“Kirk, what the hell was that?” Chapel demanded.

“It’s Nero,” Kirk answered. “They probably don’t have your location pinned, but he knows you’ve got us. He’ll keep this up until you hand us over.”

Uhura noticed how McCoy’s eyes widened in terror, but she didn’t have time for sympathy. “This was your grand plan, Kirk? Find us and then hope we could miraculously shelter you until you got across the border?! Innocent people will die!”
Kirk shook his head and stood. “No. I was going to find you, give you McCoy and the money, and then distract Nero while you took him across the border.”

“WHAT?!” McCoy jumped to his feet. “What the fuck, Jim?! I told you, I ain’t goin’ without you!”

“The wanted bulletins were for both of you,” Christine stated. “Nero won’t stop unless he gets what he wants.”

“That really what you want?” Kirk challenged. “You want to give in to his demands? If you only give him me and save McCoy, then you’ll get Nero off your back but still tell him to fuck off. You’re a legend. Don’t let Nero destroy that; he’ll just keep walking all over you. Set up a meet to hand me over, and get McCoy safe. Best of both worlds.”

Another explosion rocked the building.

“Goddamnit, Jim, I’m not going!” McCoy bellowed.

Uhura looked at Chapel; she could tell her Captain was tempted.

“I don’t have any cards left to play, Chapel,” Jim told her. “You’ll take me to him either way. But if you save McCoy, you’ll get under his skin. I’m begging you. Let my death mean something.”

McCoy was grabbing at him now, trying to physically shake some sense into him. Unfortunately, Jim’s plan made a terrible amount of sense.

“This will only work if we can stall him,” Chapel stated. “We need to time to get McCoy away from here. And … I’m placing a lot of lives on the line by trusting you, Kirk.”

“I know,” Kirk answered steadily. “Call Nero. Set up a time that gives you time to get McCoy out of here. He won’t dare start an international incident over him. Trust me.”

“Is NO ONE listenin’ to me?!” McCoy yelled. “I’m not going anywhere without him!”

Chapel finally turned to Uhura. “Do it. Set up a call. I’ll tell them four hours. That’s enough time to make false papers for McCoy and get him on the Defiant.” She turned back to the two men. “It’s a ship we use to take people across the lake.”

Kirk gave a small smile. “Good name.”

“LISTEN TO ME! I’m not going without –”

Chapel cut McCoy off. “Kirk’s right. I’m sorry it’s against your will, but it’s the only way to send a message that Nero can’t step all over us. If you’ll excuse us, gentlemen, we have work to do.”

Uhura left the cell and waited for Chapel to exit before closing and locking the door. It was only a second before McCoy was banging on it and shouting.

“Well,” Chapel said more quietly. “At least Kirk seems to be the real deal. If he’s right, we might all live through this.”

Uhura nodded. “I’ll get going on the paperwork.”

~~~

Spock held out the phone to Sulu. “It’s Chapel.”
Sulu took the phone and grinned. “So, I finally get to talk to the infamous Chapel.”

“Call off your dogs. We have Kirk, and I doubt that Nero wants him back in pieces.”

“No can do. Hand Kirk and McCoy over, and we’ll be on our way. We know you have them. Our sources informed us.”

“Fine. But we need time; your little bombings are making it difficult to run my operation. We’ll meet you in Roseau at five. I have your word that once you have Kirk, you’ll back off?”

“Yes. But I’m not prepared to wait.”

“And I’m not prepared to argue. You don’t like my plan? Then keep blowing us to bits, and Kirk right along with us. I’m sure Nero will be happy about that.”

Sulu growled. “Fine. Five o’clock in Roseau.”

The line went dead.

~~~

When Leonard finally realized that no one from Chapel’s team was going to answer him, he turned back to Jim. “This was your plan all along.”

Jim was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. “Well … I had hoped to find Chapel before she found us, but … yeah.”

“You lied to me,” Leonard spat, stalking towards him.

“I’m sorry. I knew there was no way to get us both out alive.”

“We couldn’t just run across the border and claim asylum?”

Jim shook his head. “Nero would have fabricated criminal records for both of us and had us deported. He won’t bother for just you. Not when he has me.” He looked at the floor, flushing slightly. “I let myself hope for a few hours there. I thought maybe – just maybe – my team would guess wrong and wouldn’t find us here. For what it’s worth … I’m sorry.”

“I am not goin’, kid. You hear me?”

“I gave them a reason, Bones. They’ll force you. Please, just go with them. Get out of here and forget all this.”

Leonard sat in front of him. “Nero will kill you.”

Jim nodded. “Eventually. He’ll probably draw it out, make an example of me. And you being there … it won’t make a difference. He’ll just kill you, too. It’ll … be easier if I at least know you’re safe.”

“I swear to God, Jim, they might be able to force me across that border, but they can’t lock me up over there! I’ll come back for you.”

Jim’s head snapped up. “No. Bones, you can’t!”

“I will! Damn it, I’m not gonna let you die for me! I’ll swim back across that lake and –”

“You can’t fight him, Bones. Not by yourself. You’ll be killed, and then this will all have been for
nothing!"

“I don’t care!”

For the first time, Leonard saw tears fill those amazing blue eyes. “Then I’ll die for nothing.”

Leonard was speechless.

Jim shook his head as the tears rolled down his face. “Bones. You have to promise me that you won’t do anything stupid like that. Please. Consider it a last request. I want my death to mean something. Promise me.”

Leonard shook his head as his throat closed up. “No.”

Jim slammed his palms back against the wall. “Damn it, Bones! Promise me!”

“Why are you doing this?!” Leonard roared. “You don’t even know me!”

Jim wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. “You were my choice. And you don’t belong in the system. You’re a good man.”

“Jim, you don’t know that –”

“Yes I do.” They were silent until Jim finally asked again softly, “Promise me you won’t do something stupid? Please?”

Leonard choked back a sob. “Goddamnit, Jim.” He reached out and roughly pulled Jim into his arms, wishing he could protect him from what was coming.

Jim leaned into it, wrapping his arms around Leonard’s neck. “Promise me,” Jim begged.

Leonard could feel the collar of his shirt getting wet, felt Jim shivering in his arms. He nodded jerkily.

Jim’s body seemed to relax slightly at that. “Thank you.”

Leonard held him tighter and turned his head to press a quick kiss to his temple. “I’m not worth it, Jim. How could I ever be?”

“You’re worth it to me, Bones. Make it count, okay?”

Leonard nodded again, angrily lifting one hand to wipe at the tears on his face.

They held each other for a while. The noise outside the cell seemed to be increasing, though the explosions had stopped.

“Jim?”

“Yeah, Bones?”

“Is there anything you want? Anything I can do?”

Jim pulled away and smiled, drying his face on his shirt sleeve. “Like I said, make your life count. Make it a good one, Bones.”

Leonard reached out and laid his hand over Jim’s. “I meant now, Jim.”
“Oh. Um …” Jim blushed.

“I know it’s not easy for you to make choices. Try to make one now. Just tell me what you want.”

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s kinda … weird.”

“Like I give a damn. Tell me what you want, Jim.”

“I want you to kiss me,” Jim answered finally, avoiding Leonard’s eyes. “And then … just hold me. Tell me it’ll be okay. Lie to me. Please.”

Leonard nodded and swallowed back a sob before leaning forward and tipping Jim’s chin up. “Can’t say this hasn’t crossed my mind.” He pressed their lips together gently.

Jim was still for a minute before tilting his head and slanting his mouth to Leonard’s.

Leonard’s mouth opened automatically, letting Jim explore with his tongue. His hands found Jim’s shoulders, pulling him closer. Jim molded easily against him, and Leonard gave a soft moan. One of his hands went to Jim’s cheek, thumbing away the tears he found there.

He felt Jim pull away slightly and let him go, gently nipping his lower lip before they broke apart. The only sound in the room was their breathing as they rested their foreheads together. There was too much to say and not enough time to say it.

Leonard pulled Jim close and held him against his chest. “It’s okay, Jim. Everything’s gonna be all right.” His voice broke on the last word. He carded a hand through Jim’s hair and pressed a kiss into it. “It’s okay.”

Jim shuddered against him, his cheek pressed against Leonard’s chest.

“Shhh, it’s okay.” *No one ever did this for him,* Leonard realized. *No one let him be weak or took care of him. He was just a kid when he was sold* … “I’ve got you. You’re all right.” It was all lies, but the words weren’t meaningless. Jim got to hear them for at least once in his life, even if they weren’t true. Leonard wanted them to be real, wanted to save him.

And that was all he could give him: the assurance that at least one person cared about him.

Leonard held him tightly and kept murmuring soothing words to him.

Jim settled against him, lulled by the sound. His eyes fluttered shut.

“That’s it, darlin’. You rest now. It’s okay.”

Jim muttered something and tried to rouse himself.

Leonard shushed him, placed a gentle kiss to his head. “It’s all right. Rest, darlin’. I’m here. I’ve got you.” And in the chaos around them, Jim fell asleep in his arms.

~~~

Jim stirred as the cell door opened; the look on Leonard’s face told him everything.

“It’s time,” Chapel announced. “We need to get moving.”

Leonard held onto Jim tighter. “You can’t do this! He saved my life!”

“It’s not saved until this is over, Bones,” Jim told him. “I’m sorry.” He was slightly relieved as four
men in black approached them. “Please, Bones, let me go.”

“No!”

Jim shut his eyes as the men closed in and ripped him out of Leonard’s arms. They dragged him to his feet, pulling him towards the door. When he opened his eyes again, Leonard was violently fighting the other two guards and screaming his name. He pulled back, looking at Chapel. “Wait!”

She nodded her head, and the arms holding him let go.

He ran to Leonard, still held securely by the guards, and kissed him, cradling his tear-streaked face.

“Don’t do this,” Leonard begged when Jim pulled back. “Please!”

“I have to,” Jim told him, kissing him again. “Now go. Be safe.” He pressed their mouths together again.

“All right, let’s go,” Chapel stated.

Jim didn’t move until the guards grabbed his arms again and pulled him back; he tried not to fight. “Goodbye, Bones.”

“NOOO! JIM!”

Jim winced; Bones kept screaming as he was escorted down the hall. They were following Uhura. “Promise me he’ll be safe.”

“We’ll do everything we can. With you as a distraction, we should be able to get him to Canada without a problem,” she responded without looking back at him. “Sorry you couldn’t have more time, but we need to move now. We have to stay off Nero’s radar, and that will take time.”

Jim nodded and reviewed the last two hours in his mind. He could handle whatever Nero would to do him; Bones was safe.

~~~

Once briefed, Nero had reluctantly caved to reason and agreed that they would not try to track Chapel’s location. He just wanted what was rightfully his.

The town was deathly quiet as Sulu waited with Spock and Scotty outside the van. It seemed fitting that Jim’s old team would be the ones to “greet” him and McCoy. The rest of the troops were set back in cars and vans along the road out of town.

“They are punctual,” Spock noted as a white van drove up to the gas station on the opposite side of the road.

Three people hopped out: a petite woman with a ponytail, a man dressed in black, and Jim with his hands secured behind his back.

Sulu tensed. “Fuck. Where’s McCoy?”

“Easy, lad. Whatever happens, remember that Jim is the prize,” Scotty told him.

Jim was still wearing his suit pants, but they were wrinkled and grimy like the gray sweatshirt he had on. The trio stopped in the middle of the empty street.

“Where’s McCoy?” Sulu demanded.
The woman smirked. “You should pay attention to your words. The deal was only for Kirk. And by now, McCoy is safely in Canada with paperwork proving he’s a citizen. You can’t touch him.”

As soon as Sulu was close enough, he planned to punch the matching smirk right off Kirk’s face. “You don’t want to do this, Chapel—“

“I’m not Chapel. I just work for her. And if you don’t believe me, check your record of our phone call. You promised Chapel that once you had Kirk, you would back off. So, I suggest you cut losses and go. McCoy’s out of your reach.” She nodded at the man in black, and he gave Jim a shove forward.

“I believe she is correct,” Spock said quietly. “I have listened to the exchange several times.”

Kirk was walking slowly towards them as the woman and her assistant got back into the van; there was nothing Sulu could do.

Scotty reached out and took Jim by the arm as soon as he was close enough, inspecting the ropes binding his wrists.

“So, was it worth it?” Sulu snapped, getting in Kirk’s face. “Do you know how many people have died since you left? How many more will die once Nero finds out we lost McCoy?”

Jim was still smirking. “Those deaths are on Nero’s hands, not mine. And no matter what happens or what he does to me, I will never regret saving McCoy.”

Sulu punched him, but it didn’t make him feel any better. “Get him inside. We’re leaving.”

~~~

Chapel handed Leonard an envelope. “There’s your new life, McCoy. Use it well.”

Leonard took it and nodded mutely. He had pretty much lost his voice screaming for Jim. Once they had pushed away from shore, and Uhura reported via radio that she had delivered Kirk, he had stopped.

He stood on the deck of the boat, looking out at the water.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, McCoy,” Chapel said gently, standing beside him. “It all happened so fast. So, just listen to what I have to say and then process it later. You’re in a unique position. Most former slaves we take across are too scared to even think of popping their heads up again. Their freedom comes with the price of always looking over their shoulders. Some handle it better than others.

“But you haven’t been in the system long. You can overcome this. And you won’t be alone. We’re sending you to friends of ours to help you get adjusted to your new life. I’m also going to put you in touch with Christopher Pike of Enterprise Law. He’s been trying to work with former slaves for years to expose the system in America and take it down. But they’ve never been able to put a face and a voice on the movement. That could be you, McCoy. You could help take them down. And … I’m sure Jim would be proud of you for that.”

“It won’t be soon enough to save him,” Leonard whispered.

“No, but it will make his sacrifice mean more than he dreamed possible.”

Leonard nodded. “Thank you.”
She nodded in return and left him alone.

He clutched the envelope and tried not to think of whose blood had paid for it.

An hour later, they docked, and a woman with amazing curly red hair met him and wrapped a blanket around him. “Welcome to Canada, Dr. McCoy.”

He could blame the fact that he threw up all over her on motion sickness, but he knew better. He had been so convinced that he and Jim would be standing there together.

Gaila – she had said her name was – simply stripped off the blanket and found him a new one. She patted his back until he could stand again and walked him to a waiting ambulance; he wanted to object, but he was too damn tired.

Whoever these people were, they were more than experienced dealing with people who had just run for their lives. One of the medics quickly had him hooked up to an IV pushing fluids. Gaila climbed in after them, resting one petite hand on Leonard’s leg and talking to him reassuringly as the ambulance took off.

Leonard stared at the ceiling, faintly aware that his chest was heaving with sobs. After a few minutes, he could tell that one of the medics had given him a sedative.

“Jim,” he whimpered, shutting his eyes.

“You need to rest,” a voice nearby told him.

That was what he had told Jim as held him in his arms, whispering lies into his ear. Leonard wished someone would lie to him now, tell him that Jim had escaped and was on the next boat out. That he would see those stunning blue eyes again and be able to heal every hurt Nero had ever carved into him. He wanted so badly to believe it.

But no more words came as darkness finally claimed him.

~~~

Jim was calm as he was stripped of his clothes. He hadn’t been forced to wear a collar for years, but Scotty secured the thick black one around his neck efficiently. Sulu forced him to his knees before wrapping heavy metal chains around his torso, pinning his arms down. He was mildly surprised that Spock bothered to check his circulation afterwards; he didn’t expect to live long enough for it to matter.

Finally, he was left alone in the large cell. This part of the Stable hadn’t been used in a long time.

“Jimmy. So glad you’re home,” Nero’s voice sounded from behind him. “How was Minnesota?”

Jim smiled. “It was a nice vacation.”

Nero circled in front of him. “Not even going to address me properly anymore? What ideas did that dear doctor put into your head?”

Jim grinned. “Wouldn’t you like to know. Oh, but that’s right. You can’t ask him, because he’s out of your reach.”

“You’re going to pay for this, Jim,” Nero growled. “I could have had a rebellion on my hands.”

“Good.”
Nero slugged him, and Jim hit the floor hard. “Jimmy, you’ve undone all my hard work breaking you, and that will be punished.”

“I don’t care,” Jim wheezed, spitting blood on the floor.

Nero knelt beside him and smiled. “Oh, I think you do. Because there are ways to make you obey, Jim, that don’t involve beating the shit out of you. You think I’m just going to kill you and be done with it? Oh no, you’re going to be at my side, on your knees, for the rest of your life. Even if you’re drooling on yourself.”

Jim’s eyes widened slightly, and he swallowed hard. Nero didn’t usually bother with brain surgery to make his slaves compliant. It seemed he was willing to make an exception. He shook his head and steered his resolve. “Then I’ll care even less.”

Nero petted his hair. “But you care now. You care that I’m going to turn you into an obedient, mindless zombie. It scares you.”

Jim found another smile. “Nothing you do scares me anymore. I’m not afraid.”

Nero grabbed his hair and smashed his head into the floor.

~~~

Once he was physically recovered a few days later, Leonard demanded an appointment with Christopher Pike at Enterprise Law. Gaila had tried to tell him to slow down, but he wouldn’t listen.

When he finally met the man and shook his hand, he knew he had made the right choice.

“You sure you want to do this McCoy? There could be severe repercussions. You know how connected the slave houses are.”

Leonard nodded. “I’m sure.”

Pike was quiet for a moment. “It will take years. You can’t save Jim.”

“I know. I know he’s probably already dead. But I’m doing this for him anyway.”

Pike nodded and held out his hand again. “Welcome aboard, McCoy.”

Leonard shook it. “Let’s get to work.”

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Chapter Summary

Jim Kirk is the head of Nero’s household of slaves. His life changes forever the day Leonard McCoy becomes their newest acquisition.

One year later …

“Sir?” Sulu asked nervously. “I think there is something you should see.”

Nero set down his newspaper and let Sulu put a laptop in front of him. It was a streaming news video. His hands instantly curled into fists. Macy.

“My name is Leonard McCoy, and I’m here today to tell you about a terrible injustice that is happening as we speak in the United States. As impossible as it may seem, there are a series of slave houses that keep people against their will across the nation.”

Nero picked up the laptop and flung it across the room. “MCCOY!”

~ ~ ~

Two years later …

In his old life, Leonard McCoy had hated politics. He didn’t trust politicians, and he stayed as far away as possible from any type of manipulation among the doctors and hospital officials in Atlanta. And yet, now he was the face of political and humanitarian movement. He worked himself to the bone, helping lobby for the United States to acknowledge and take down the slave houses.

Years of hard work had finally paid off. He had worked with other former slaves in Canada and Amnesty International to get the message out. Leonard had learned to be patient.

And so, it was politics, not blood or guns that finally brought down the major American slave houses. The government finally stepped in (and many high ranking politicians were disgraced for their involvement along the way) and put an end to it. Kidnappers like Wilson & James were brought to justice. And then they went after the houses themselves, hunting down strongholds.

So, there were some guns involved. Leonard was okay with that. In fact, when it came to Nero, he would have put himself on the front line if they had let him.

But he wasn’t a soldier. He did, however, manage to get a list of names a young investigator – Pavel Chekov. He was to contact Pike if any of the names came up during interrogations.

Some of the slaves were overjoyed to be freed. There was great debate over what to do with the ones who had committed crimes. Some had willingly surrendered; others had stood by their masters and fought tooth and nail. The government went quiet about what they did with former slaves who were clearly not so innocent. There was nothing Leonard could do about that. His goals had been achieved.

The day Nero was finally tracked down and caught, he had celebrated with Pike and his staff with
champagne. It was a bittersweet victory for Leonard. He hadn’t been holding his breath, but part of him broke all over again during the next few weeks, as there was no word from Chekov. No word on any of the names he mentioned. No Jim.

He had told himself not to hope, warned himself, that he was gone. But he would be damned if he could stop. He wanted to be sure.

~~~

Leonard looked up from his lunch as his cell phone rang. He flipped it open. “McCoy here.”

“I have word from Chekov,” Pike said without preamble. “He says that a man named Spock claims to know what happened to Jim.”

Leonard nearly fell off his chair; his heart pounded painfully in his chest. “Well?! What does he know?”

“He wants to talk to you in person. He’s being held by the government until they figure out what to do with him. He certainly didn’t help bring down Nero, so they’re reluctant to let him go. Chekov questioned the other high ranking members of Nero’s staff, and no one would say a word. And of course, the man himself is silent as the grave.”

“When can we meet?”

“I set up a meet in Boston a week from today. Are you sure you can handle seeing this Spock person again? Usually a face to face request like this is all about intimidation –”

“Chris, I would sit in a room with Nero himself if he would tell me what happened to Jim.”

“Okay. I’ll e-mail you our itinerary. And I’ll be sending Gaila over to check on you.”

Leonard grumbled.

“It’s going to be a stressful week. Take the help. She’s a woman of many talents, one of those being the ability to scare grown men into eating and sleeping properly.”

“All right. I’ll put sheets on the guest bed.”

“Good man. I’ll be touch.”

McCoy snapped the phone shut and stared out the window of his apartment. Not knowing what else to do, he opened the phone again and called his mother. Left to his own devices, he would probably reach for the bourbon until it was time to fly.

~~~

*One week later …*

McCoy tried not to fidget, but it was difficult.

“Just remember, he might be playing us,” Pike reminded him.

“I know! It’s just … he hasn’t made any demands, other than wanting to see me. So, why would he lie?”

“I know. Just remember, this was not all about Jim. You’ve accomplished so much and saved a lot of
lives. Don’t forget that.”

Leonard managed a smile. “I certainly didn’t do it alone.”

A prison guard stood in front of them. “We’re ready.”

Leonard legs felt like jelly as they followed the guard into an interrogation room. Spock was sitting at the table calmly, dressed in navy jumpsuit.

“You have information for us?” Pike said as he and McCoy sat down.

Spock nodded. “Yes. We were instructed never to speak of Jim Kirk. But since Nero no longer owns me, I felt that someone should know.”

“Is he alive?” Leonard asked, unable to stand it any longer.

“It is possible.”

Leonard nearly leapt over the table. “Possible?!?”

“I have much to add in addition to speculation on where you might be able to find him. Shortly after his return, he suffered a head injury. Nero had planned to lobotomize him. I don’t know what happened in that surgery; I wasn’t present. But when Jim came back he wasn’t the same; his cognitive abilities were compromised. Nero moved him to a different location after that, and I never heard anything more than whispers. But I do know that Nero had no plans to terminate his life. Therefore, you should be able to find Jim at Nero’s house in Maine.”

Pike blinked. “We … no one mentioned that house to us.”

“Indeed not. Nero had many homes all over the country. I can give you the exact location. And the locations of others. Jim should still be in one of them.”

“But … wouldn’t the staff of the house have heard about Nero’s takedown?” Leonard asked.

“Quite possibly not. Nero kept many of his operations under communications blackout.”

Pike pushed a piece of paper towards him. “Write ‘em down, Spock.” He looked over at Leonard. “You ready for some more traveling?”

Leonard nodded. “Absolutely.”

~~~

It had taken Pike and Chekov almost a week to convince the FBI that Leonard and Pike should join the recovery teams. Leonard wanted to be there to find Jim – if he was still alive. And Pike didn’t want McCoy to go alone.

“This could take a long time,” Pike commented as they waited in the SUV. The team was securing the house. “He might not be here. There were a lot of houses on that list.”

“I know,” Leonard answered steadily, gripping his medkit. “And I’ll go to every damn one until we get answers.”

Twenty minutes later, two of Nero’s staff members were escorted out of the house, and Leonard and Pike were allowed to join the search.
Leonard thought he might lose his mind as he ran through the luxurious rooms, looking for a panel, anything out of place that might lead to a secret room. “JIM!”

“McCoy! Up here! I think I found something!” Pike shouted.

Leonard followed his voice up the stairs and then up another set of stairs to the attic. He shivered; there was no heat in this part of the house. “What is it?”

Pike pointed to an unusual seam in the wood planks on the floor. “I think there’s a room underneath us; it would be over the garage.” He took a crowbar to the seam. McCoy stepped away to yell for help. When he came back, Chris had levered the wooden plank away, leaving an opening in the floor that dropped down into dimly lit space.

They both recoiled at the stench. Pike gagged.

Leonard’s eyes were watering, but he grabbed his flashlight and lowered himself into the room. “Jim?” He blinked, trying to get his eyes to adjust. The beam of his flashlight illuminated a form. There was a quick scrabbling followed by a rattling sound. “Jim?!” He stepped closer.

Heavy black chains attached to the walls trailed across the room – only a couple feet.

Leonard stepped cautiously closer to the huddled figure. “Jim? It’s okay. I’m not gonna hurt you.” He could see dirty, torn clothes and hair darkened with dried blood, dirt, and God only knew what else.

“McCoy, what is it?” Pike called.

“Get the medics and some blankets!” Leonard yelled back. He turned back to the figure in front of him and knelt beside him, setting down his flashlight. “Hey. It’s okay. No one’s gonna hurt you. Take it easy.”

The head hidden in cradled arms finally lifted, and Leonard knew those blue eyes anywhere.

“Jim.” Hot tears filled his eyes. “Jim, it’s me. It’s Bones. Leonard. Remember?”

Jim just blinked at him uncomprehendingly.

Leonard’s heart sank. “It’s okay. We’re gonna get you out of here.”

“McCoy, help’s on the way! I found a set of keys!” Pike shouted.

Leonard moved back towards the opening. “It’s him. Throw ‘em down.”

“Is he okay?”

Leonard caught the keys. “No.” He moved back towards Jim, looking around the tiny cell. It was barely big enough to stand in. There were buckets by the door that were the main source of the stench. He studied the walls, noticing scrawls all over in black.

He knelt next to Jim. “C’mon, kiddo, let’s get you out of here.”

He reached for the manacles on Jim’s wrists, but Jim gasped and pulled away.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Not gonna hurt ya, darlin’. Take it easy,” he soothed.

Jim tried to push himself further into the corner, breathing fast.

After a minute, his breathing slowed a little, and he looked back up at Leonard.


Jim let him this time, and he unlocked the heavy iron manacle. He winced at the raw skin underneath. He reached for his medkit and lightly wrapped gauze around the wrist. He tried to distance himself from what he was doing; he had to. Otherwise, he was just going to pull Jim into his arms and sob helplessly. Jim needed him to be strong.

“Let me see the other one, darlin’.” He gently grasped Jim’s left wrist, but when he went to pull it forward, Jim cried out in pain and pulled back.

Leonard reached for his flashlight, keeping it away from Jim’s eyes and ran it over his arm.

“Oh, fuck.” He could just barely make out an angry red wound and something protruding from it, most likely bone.

Jim whimpered.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Leonard murmured, managing to unlock and wrap Jim’s left wrist without moving the arm. “I’ll take care of that. I promise.”

They both looked up as two medics dropped down into the room.

Jim shouted in alarm, trying to get away. But he could only push himself against the walls.

“No, Jim! It’s okay! Stay still!” Leonard cried, trying to hold him without hurting him further. He managed to grasp his legs and pulled him away from the wall, scrambling into the open space and sitting on his other side. He gently took Jim’s shoulder, turning him slightly diagonally, so the open wound wouldn’t rub against anything.

Jim looked up at him; terror was written in his face and every line of his broken body.

Leonard pulled him a little closer, hoped that the contact would be soothing. “Shh, it’s okay. We’ve got you, Jim. You’re gonna be okay.”

Jim looked back at the approaching medics and drew a sedative into a syringe. Jim barely noticed as it was injected at his elbow. It took effect almost immediately. Jim sagged against him, eyelids drooping.

Leonard gave into the urge to wrap his arms carefully around him and hold him close. “You’re okay, kid. I promise. Everything’s gonna be all right. And this time, I mean it.” He closed his eyes, tears pouring down his face as Jim went slack in his arms.

It was a few minutes before anyone said anything. “Doctor McCoy? We need to get him out of here
Leonard blinked his eyes open; they had brought down more lights.

“We need to check for any injuries before we move him. Will you let us lie him down?”

“Broken arm,” Leonard told them, not moving.

“Okay,” the medic closer to him said. He couldn’t remember her name. Betty? Becky? “He’s going to sleep for a bit. He’s safe now. Will you help us help him?”

Finally, Leonard nodded, and they gently laid Jim down.

Pike made his way down into the room. He took in the scene for a minute before asking, “Beverly? Can you be in charge here for a minute? I think Doctor McCoy needs some air.”

Leonard didn’t remember the next hour. Chris had guided him out of the hole, made him drink some water and sat with him while the medics stabilized Jim. Chekov was coordinating a team to cut into the room from the garage, so that they wouldn’t have to drag Jim up the hole and risk hurting him.

By the time Chris sat next to him again, it was to update him that they had successfully loaded Jim into the ambulance. “Come on. We’ll take the SUV with Chekov and be right behind them.”

~~~

It was hours before Leonard saw Jim again. The hospital staff had taken good care of him. They had cleaned him up and dressed his wounds, pushed antibiotics and fluids intravenously. He looked pale and thin against the white hospital bed.

Leonard felt tears welling up again as he reached for Jim’s hand and squeezed his fingers gently. He had hoped – but never dared to truly believe – that Jim was alive. There were so many questions that all revolved around all of the pictures the doctor’s had taken of his brain.


Jim was deeply asleep, probably would be for a while.

Pike had worked with American associates to get Leonard temporarily placed as Jim’s legal guardian, since his family could not be located. One of the doctors had briefed him on Jim’s physical state earlier: bordering on starving, dehydrated, surgical incisions on his scalp, numerous lacerations and contusions all over his body, bones that had healed after being broken, the marks left by the manacles, the broken arm Leonard already saw, and evidence of repeated rape.

Chekov and Pike had sat on either side of him when he received the news, helped control his rage afterwards. He wanted to find whatever hole they had stuck Nero in and strangle him with his bare hands.

He looked up as someone appeared in the doorway.

It was Gaila with a vase full of flowers. “Hey, Leo.” Her eyes flicked nervously to Jim before she stepped into the room and set down the flowers.

Leonard tried to dredge up a smile for her. “Hey. How’d you get here, Ginger?”

“I was on standby to fly in when you needed me.” She pulled a chair next to him. “How are you
doing?”

“I don’t know.” He gave a shaky laugh. “I mean, he’s alive … but he might not remember anything. It certainly didn’t look like he remembered me.”

Gaila put a hand on his arm. “But he is alive. And Nero can’t hurt him anymore.”

Leonard nodded, wiping a hand across his eyes. A doctor who had introduced himself as the head of Neurology stepped in the doorway. Leonard stood.

Doctor Perry held up his hand. “Please, sit, Doctor McCoy.”

“Do you want me to go?” Gaila asked.

“I think it would be good if you stayed,” Doctor Perry responded, looking at Leonard for confirmation.

Leonard’s heart sank as he nodded and sat back down. “He’s not okay, is he.”

“The information you received was correct. Jim suffered a head trauma, and there was surgery afterwards to control the intracranial bleeding. God only knows what they were actually trying to do in there, but there is damage to the frontal lobe as well. We’ll know more once he wakes up, but it seems likely that the damage is permanent.”

“What does that mean?” Gaila asked quietly.

“It means that most likely, he won’t remember anything, and it’s going to be a crap shoot to see how much higher brain function he has left,” Leonard spat.

Gaila gasped.

“We’ll keep monitoring him, but there are no current bleeds or pressure,” Doctor Perry continued. “He just needs to rest and start therapy once he wakes up.”

Gaila asked a few more questions, but Leonard didn’t hear her. He just stared at Jim, wondering what was trapped inside the remains of his mind.

Doctor Perry left a few minutes later.

Gaila shook his shoulder gently. “Leo?”

“I … I can’t do this. I can’t stand this waiting.”

“Okay. Want me to take you back to the hotel?”

“But…”

“Leo. You’ve been through a lot. You should rest, too. And … listen. None of us were really thinking that Jim would still be alive. And I’m happy that he is, and I know you are, too. But there’s no law that says you’re responsible for him now. You did what he asked and more. You saved him. No one has any right to ask any more of you. No one would blame you for stepping down. Now, come on. Let’s get you back to the hotel. The hospital will call when they know anything.”

Leonard stood and paused. “You lifted my cell phone again, didn’t you?”

She smiled evilly. “Sorry. Pike told me to screen your calls.”
Leonard sighed. “Okay.” He released Jim’s hand, leaning over to brush a soft kiss against his cheek. “I’ll be back, kid. Just gotta get myself together.”

Jim didn’t respond.

~~~

Leonard crashed hard and slept for hours. He slept mostly dreamlessly thanks to the clonazepam he had taken. He didn’t awake fully until the next afternoon; he was still exhausted. He dragged himself to the shower, after calling Gaila. She said she would meet up with him and go with him back to the hospital.

He tried not to think of the horrors Jim had been through. How much of it does he remember? How much did he comprehend?

Gaila greeted him with a cup of coffee and a brown bag lunch.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, letting the hotel room door close behind him. “So, what’s been going on while I was out of it?”

“Jim’s awake. They’ve moved him to another wing of the hospital, and they’re monitoring him carefully. They’d like to move him to another facility where he’ll be more comfortable as soon as possible.”

Leonard almost stopped walking. “He doesn’t remember.”

She shook her head sadly. “And he can’t or won’t communicate. His mood swings are violent, and he’s paranoid and agitated to boot. He only seems to calm down when they leave him alone and give him something to draw with.” She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes. “I’m sorry, Leo.”

Leonard sighed. “I … it’s okay. I’m just grateful he’s alive.”

She stood in front of him. “Are you sure you want to do this? Like I said yesterday, you’ve done your part. You can just let them take care of him. He’ll be safe.”

“I haven’t decided yet, sweetheart. And … I want to see him.”

She nodded and continued walking. “Okay.”

~~~

Leonard joined Doctor Perry, who was observing Jim through a two-way mirror. They were quiet as they watched Jim sit on the floor, scribbling onto pieces of paper.

“Does he understand what we’re saying?” Leonard asked finally.

“Somewhat,” Doctor Perry answered. “All things considered, he’s doing well. I’m sure he will improve a bit with medication and therapy. Some of your colleagues from Canada were able to send me information on what they have observed in former slaves. Many of them remain silent, since they were conditioned to be so.”

“He’ll need care for the rest of his life.”

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’d like to see him.”
Doctor Perry nodded. “At the moment, his moods are a bit unpredictable.”

“I understand.” Leonard didn’t move for a minute. “Nothing’s changed.”

“Excuse me?”

“He’s still scared, alone, and locked in a cell. Nothing’s different.”

Perry looked somewhat affronted. “Doctor McCoy, no one is hurting him. We will do our best to help him and find a suitable facility where he will be comfortable, possibly even happy.”

Leonard ran a hand over his eyes. “Of course. I’m sorry.” He took a deep breath. “I’m ready now.”

~~~

Jim looked up nervously as the door opened.

“Hey, kid,” Leonard said softly, stepping into the room and sitting on the floor.

Jim stared at him for another minute before going back to his drawings.

“Do remember me from yesterday?” Leonard didn’t get a response and hadn’t expected one. He simply sat there, and Jim tolerated it. Well, at least it was a first step. He watched Jim scribble. There was a desperation to it, as if he were trying to work out a puzzle and lacked the tools to do so.

It broke his heart all over again.

Jim abruptly threw the marker against the wall with a grunt of frustration. He pulled his knees to his chest, scooting back against the wall. He cradled his casted arm with his free one and tried pull into a ball.

Leonard could hear him start to cry quietly and couldn’t keep still any longer. He moved slowly over to him. “Shh, it’s okay, kid. We’ll sort it out. I promise.”

After a few minutes, Jim looked up at him.

And Leonard knew his life would never be the same again. He opened his arms. “C’mere, kid. It’s all right.”

Jim didn’t understand, just stared at him.

Slowly, Leonard wrapped his arms around him and pulled him close.

Jim let him, snuffling against Leonard’s neck until he found a comfortable spot.

“That’s good, Jim,” Leonard whispered. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.” He closed his eyes, pressed his lips to Jim’s temple. “And I always will.”

~~~

They moved Jim to a mental institution a few days later. Leonard visited him every day and started to make arrangements to find a new home with Gaila’s help.

Pike met up with him while he was visiting Jim. They both watched from the doorway as Jim sat at one of the tables in the common room, drawing with different colored markers.
“You sure about this, Leo?” Chris asked.

“I’m positive,” Leonard answered. “It’s the only thing that’s felt right in years. I know he doesn’t remember me from before, but he’s getting to know me now, and … I want to take care of him. I don’t want to leave him in a place like this. Besides, he responds to me. I mean, he responds to the staff, too. But he’s starting to reach out to me.”

Chris laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently. “You’re an amazing man, Leonard. Jim will be in good hands.”

They looked up as two of the other residents started shouting and hitting each other. The staff was quick and efficient, smoothly intervening and breaking up the altercation.

Leonard noticed that Jim had moved and was now huddled under the table. Without a glance back at Chris, Leonard went to his side and knelt next to him. “It’s okay, Jim. No one’s gonna hurt ya. C’mere, kid.” He moved to get his arms around Jim and pull him out, but Jim resisted. “Okay,” Leonard sighed, keeping his arms around him. “Okay. We’ll just stay here until you’re ready.”

Jim shivered in his arms, burrowing into the crook of his neck.

Leonard stroked his back soothingly. “You’re okay, Jim. Everything’s all right. I promise.”

~~~

Three months later …

Leonard strode into the cheerful building after another tough day at the hospital. Janice, one of the nurses, saw him and waved. “Doctor McCoy. How was your day?”

Leonard smiled. “Not too bad. You?”

“Pretty good,” she answered with a smile.

“How is he?”

Her smile faded. “He’s … well, he’s having a bad day. But … at least they’re happening less often, right?”

“What happened?”

She shrugged. “He just didn’t want to engage in any of the activities. It’s just one of those days when he retreats into himself. And … he seems sad.” She shook her head. “But I know he’ll feel better once he sees you.”

Leonard nodded as he felt the worry crease his brow. He followed her into the main room. The adult day care facility was brightly lit and cheerful. The staff was wonderful. Most days, Jim had a good time here while he was working at the hospital.

He spotted Jim by the window, curled up unhappily next to it.

Jim looked up as he approached and smiled.

Leonard, as always, felt his heart melt a little. “Hey, kiddo,” he said, kneeling down and dropping a kiss to the top of his head. “You have a bad day?”

Jim nodded, looping his arms around Leonard’s neck.
“Come on. I’ll take you home, and we’ll see what we can do about that, darlin’.” He released Jim and almost laughed at the lightning speed with which he grabbed his things and put on his shoes. Leonard stood and held out his hand; Jim took it and followed him eagerly to the door.

“See you both tomorrow!” Janice called cheerfully after them.

Leonard threw her a smile over his shoulder. “See you then. Thanks, Janice.”

~~~

Jim’s mood was down again when they got home. He was usually more responsive and interactive. Instead, he just stubbornly clung to Leonard with his arms locked around his waist as he moved about the kitchen, fixing them dinner.

Leonard told him about his day at the hospital. He worked as a surgical consult, helped out in the clinic, and sat on several boards. The American government paid for all of his and Jim’s living expenses, so he didn’t need the money.

They had settled back in his home state of Georgia in a large Southern home. His mother had moved back as well; it was helpful to have her nearby. Sometimes, Jim was a handful as they adjusted his meds and slowly worked through therapy.

Leonard whipped up a simple stir fry for dinner and managed to get Jim to detach from him long enough to eat it. He handed him two chocolate chip cookies (Jim’s favorite) for dessert and led him by the hand out into the back yard.

They sat together on the porch swing as Jim devoured the cookies and licked his fingers clean.

They looked up as little dots of light started to appear in the trees that surrounded the yard.


Jim looked up at him.

Leonard grinned and took his hand. “Come on.” He led Jim out into the yard.

Once over his initial surprise, Jim was quickly chasing after the little flecks of light and laughing. Leonard was, too and couldn’t resist playfully tackling Jim and tickling him; he loved hearing him laugh. They were both out of breath by the time the sun had fully set.

Leonard held out his hand and led Jim back to the swing. Jim curled up against him, staring happily out at the fireflies dancing in the trees. Leonard just watched him, pressing a soft kiss to his cheek.

Leonard pushed the swing with his toes and held Jim close as they swung gently back and forth. “Love you, kid.”

Jim sighed happily against him, and Leonard smiled.

“Any day with you is a good day, darlin’.” He pressed a kiss into Jim’s hair. “And I plan to spend every day with you. Sound good?”

Jim tightened his arms around Leonard, and he decided to take that as a yes.

They stayed cuddled together on the swing long after the fireflies had moved on for the night.
Jim Kirk is the head of Nero’s household of slaves. His life changes forever the day Leonard McCoy becomes their newest acquisition.

Christopher Pike smiled ask Jim Kirk held the door open for him. “Hey, Jim. Is Leo around?”

Jim nodded shyly, making little eye contact.

“Chris? That you?”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Chris called back as Jim shut the door.

Leonard appeared a moment later, and the two hugged. “You look good.”


Leonard nuzzled Jim’s head. “Don’t be shy, Jim. You remember Chris, right?”

Jim peeked out, smiled and nodded. Then he hid his face against Leonard’s chest again.

“Is … now an all right time to talk?”

Leonard nodded. He kissed Jim’s temple. “Hey, kiddo. Go on upstairs for a bit, okay? Then you can show Chris your ships. We’ll be down here.”

Jim nodded and kissed Leonard’s cheek before bounding up the stairs.

Chris couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “Leo, he’s so happy.”

Leonard smiled a little sadly. “Yeah. Most days, he is.” He gestured for Chris to join him in the dining room. They didn’t use it often. “We need drinks for this discussion?”

“Yeah. We do,” Chris sighed.

Leonard poured two glasses of Scotch and set them on coasters before sitting down.

“How’s the prep for the trial going?”

Leonard sipped his drink. “Not bad. It’ll be hard to be in the same room as Nero and not strangle him.”

“I’ll be there. Remember that. And he’s going down for this, Leo. I promise you. The evidence is overwhelming.”

“So, what’s the bad news?”

“It’s not bad, exactly. It’s just … something strange has happened. I was contacted by the
prosecutors. Nero had a request, and he wanted it to go through me. So … reluctantly, I’m bringing it to you. And I don’t expect you to say yes, but I just … it didn’t feel right not telling you.”

Leonard took another drink. “What is it?”

“Basically, Nero unofficially offered to save us the cost of a trial and confess to everything … if he could spend five minutes with Jim face to face.”

Leonard nearly crushed the glass in his hands. Red clouded his vision. “What?!”

“I just … God, Leo, I didn’t want to bring this up. But I had to. It would be a lot less painful for everyone, but I –“

“Absolutely not. No fucking way.”

“Okay.” Chris looked at him steadily. “Okay, Leo. You say no, then I’ll tell that bastard where to stick it, okay? Don’t let it get to you. He knows he’s going down, and he’s grasping at straws.”

“Why would he –“

“Leo.” Chris reached across the table and gripped his wrist. “Let it go. Don’t ask why; don’t try to think about what he wants. Just forget I even mentioned it.”

“I … I can’t.” He pulled away and stood up, walking to the window.

“Leo, I am so sorry I even had to ask you.”

“It’s not your fault. It’s just … bad timing.”

“Tell me. If you want.”

“Four days ago … I warned the day care to make sure not to put the news on the TV. I knew if Jim even saw Nero’s face, he’d lose it.”

“Oh, Jesus …”

“It – it was an innocent mistake. Some per diem nurse. And of course, he’s on every fucking channel. So …”

“What happened?”

“Jim … lost it. He broke the TV, started throwing things. He – he can’t remember everything that happened, but he can still feel it. He’s got so much anger inside him. We’ve been working on it, but … thank God, no one else was hurt. It was a near thing, apparently. The staff had to take him down, strap him to a bed. Then they paged me.”

Chris rose and stood next to him. “Leo, I am so sorry.”

~~~

Faces blurred as Leonard ran into the day care and followed the nurse to the isolation room. He cried out as his saw Jim strapped down to the bed, crying hysterically – howling.

He went to him, stroked his face until he responded.

“Shhh, baby, it’s okay. Breathe, Jim, shhh.”
Jim leaned into his palm and sobbed.

Leonard kept shushing him as he unbuckled the straps, sat on the bed, and wrapped him up in his arms. ‘I’m here, darlin’. It’s all right. He can’t hurt you ever again.” He held on tight when another wave of anger went through Jim, accepted the blows of fists against his chest. “I know, darlin’. I know. It’s all right. Let it out.”

The scream that ripped out of Jim nearly took Leonard’s soul with it.

He took a few deep breaths and felt tears streaming down his own face. “You’ve got every right to be angry, Jim. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

Jim yelled wordlessly, writhing in Leonard’s grasp.

Leonard just held on and kept murmuring soothingly. He felt useless.

Finally, Jim quieted and clung onto him.

“That’s it, Jim.” Leonard smoothed a hand through Jim’s hair. “I’m here. No one’s gonna hurt you.” He loosened his grip a little, letting Jim get more comfortable against him. He rocked them side to side slowly. “Shhh, it’s all right.” It was hours before Jim was settled enough to move.

Leonard took him home and tucked him into bed, wouldn’t leave his side for a second.

Jim didn’t want to sleep, just kept crying and pulling on Leonard, trying to hold onto him as tightly as possible. Leonard let him, crawling into bed beside him and holding him close. Jim kept drifting off but would wake screaming after only a few minutes. Leonard just held him and stroked his hair. He had long run out of anything he could say to chase away the nightmares. About an hour before sunrise, they both fell into an uneasy sleep.

Leonard woke up late the next morning; Jim was just staring at him with those too blue eyes that had seen too much. He stretched slowly and sat up; Jim followed his every move. Tension radiated off of him. He thinks I’m going to leave him.

“It’s okay, darlin’. We’ll just stay in today. You and me. I’m not goin’ anywhere.” He called out of work for two days.

~~~

“Jesus, Leo –”

“I know. It’s not your fault.” Leonard wiped his eyes. “If I could just … erase that asshole from existence, it would be easier. I wish to hell I could make Jim forget him.”

The two stood at the window, watching the occasional car go by. Chris kept a hand on Leonard’s shoulder, rubbing it softly. “Leo … there’s one more thing. But it’s a good thing. Just listen. I was contacted by a Montgomery Scott. He’s also testifying against Nero, even though he is serving time for what he did. He told me that he got to talk to Jim on the way back from Minnesota.”

Leonard jerked away. “Chris, don’t.”

“Please, Leo. Just listen.”

“He’s lying!” Leonard shouted, dashing a hand across his eyes.

“He’s not, and I have proof. He said that Jim begged him for something to write with. He wanted to
write a note. For you. He didn’t ask Scott to mail it; he knew it would be too risky. He just told him to keep it and find a way to get it to you if he ever saw you again. He knew it was a one in a million shot. And it was.

“Scott kept the letter and never read it. When Nero’s house was overtaken, there was damage, but Scott’s possessions survived. He told me where to find it. I took it and had it analyzed against earlier samples of Jim’s writing – also not easy to come by. It’s a perfect match. It really is from Jim.” Chris took something from his pocket and laid it on the table. “Read it when you’re ready.”

“You read it, didn’t you.”

“No. Only the analysts read it. And who are they gonna tell?”

Leonard sat down at the table and finished his drink. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Take your time. Why don’t I go sit with Jim for a while, and you can have a little time to yourself?”

Leonard nodded.

“Anything I should know?”

“Just … um, he’s really into astronomy right now. He should open up if you talk about that; he’ll show you his spaceships. And if you end up with a book in your lap, he wants you to read it to him.”

“Got it. Let me know if you need anything.” He quietly left the room and made his way upstairs.

After a minute, Leonard stood and poured himself another drink. He set it back down on the sideboard untouched. He sat down at the table and stared at the folded piece of paper.

*He’s sitting upstairs, alive and well. But these are Jim’s last words. As far as I know.*

His hand shook as he gingerly picked up the paper and unfolded it. The writing was terribly uneven; he must have written while they were driving. It was miracle they had identified the writing as English, let alone Jim’s hand.

**Bones,**

*I know you’ll probably never read this, but it makes me feel a little bit better to get it down on paper. I just want you to know that, whatever happens, I’ll never regret any of this. I know you’ll have a good life, and that’s worth it to me. The alternative would have – well, let’s not even go there. I hope you can forgive me for not being completely honest with you.*

*I wish we’d been able to spend more time together, and that’s a huge understatement. Thank you … for, well, everything. Nero broke me, but you saved me. Remember that. No matter what, remember that you saved me, Bones. I’d rather die for defiance than live my whole life as an obedient slave; I’m not going back to that. You snapped me out of it. I –*

Damn. I can only write for short periods at a time. I don’t remember how I was going to finish that thought. Sorry. I’m lucky to even have written this much, so I have to wrap this up no matter how much I don’t want to. Three things:

1. **If you ever run into my mother, don’t tell her what happened to me. Make up something.** Anything. Her name is Winona. If you happen to run into my brother Sam, you can tell him.

2. **I know that you want to know why. Why I chose you, why I decided to save you. So, now that I’ve**
I had a minute to get my thoughts together, I’ll tell you. I picked you, because you stood out; you were different, and I was intrigued. As for why I saved you … Bones, you made me realize what we – what Nero was doing was wrong. I’d forgotten it somehow. As for why I chose to die for you … it’s because you’re the first person that made me want to have a future. Kinda backwards, right? I give up my life, because you made me realize I wanted one. But we wouldn’t have both made it out alive, Bones. It was the only way. I wish I could share that future with you, but try to make it good for both of us, okay?

3. I wanted to tell you something, because I know I’ll never have another chance. And since you’ll probably never read this, I know I most likely blew it completely. But with everything you did, and everything we never got to do … I know we would have been something, Bones. Together. So, I’ll just go ahead and say it. I love you.

Thank you,
Jim

~~~

Jim had been a bit wary at first when Chris stepped into the library. He was sprawled on the floor with star charts and astronomy books all around.

Chris had just smiled at him and started talking about the stars.

Jim’s wariness gradually melted until he was flipping open books to pictures of the planets and then pointing them out on the chart.

Chris was impressed. His verbal skills were missing, but Jim could still learn and retain information. He was glad all over again that Leonard had decided to look after him. There was no way he would have had this kind of life in an institution.

He noted, though, that Jim did look tired. He kept yawning and rubbing his eyes as the afternoon turned into evening. The incident at the day care had only been a few days ago. Was he still having nightmares?

Chris picked up a book that told a fanciful tale about a young boy taking a journey around the stars. He got onto the window seat and patted the spot beside him. “C’mere, son.”

Jim clambered up onto the seat next to him and, after a moment’s hesitation, leaned against his side so that he could easily see the pictures.

They had almost finished the book when Leonard finally appeared in the doorway.

Jim immediately jumped up and ran to him, and Leonard hugged him tight, kissing the top of his head. “Has he been good?”

“Yeah. He’s smart. Definitely tired, though.”

“I ordered takeout for dinner. You’re staying.”

Chris laughed. “All right then.”

Leonard kissed Jim again; his eyes were wet. “Could you give us a minute?”

“Of course. I’ll set the table.”
Leonard took a few steadying breaths and rapidly blinked to keep from crying again. “C’mon, Jim. Let’s sit down for a minute.” He led Jim back to the window seat and sat down.

Jim scrambled up next to him, almost crawling into his lap; he was a little anxious. He knew something was wrong.

Leonard wrapped an arm around him and stroked his hair. “It’s okay, darlin’. Everything’s fine.”

Jim calmed a bit.

Leonard wasn’t sure what he was doing; he knew it probably wasn’t a good idea, but he needed some way to reconcile the two “Jims” in his mind. He slowly took the letter from his pocket and handed it to Jim. “Do you remember this?”

Jim unfolded it carefully and stared at the messy scrawl. His brow furrowed.

“You wrote it, Jim. Do you remember?”

Jim nodded slowly.

Just as Leonard was about to sigh in relief, Jim shoved the letter back at him, jumped off the seat, and grabbed the closest pencils and paper he could find.

Leonard folded the note carefully and returned it to his pocket. He knelt beside Jim. “What is it?”

Jim gave a little cry as he scribbled desperately on the paper, the other hand going into his hair; he was frantic.

Leonard put his arms around him. “Easy, Jim. Shh, it’s okay. Calm down.”

Jim shook his head and pulled away; he went back to “writing,” more desperate than before.

And then it clicked. “That’s the last thing you remember, isn’t it? The last thing before Nero scrambled your brains. You were trying to write to me …”

Jim hiccupped a sob and sadly pushed the papers towards Leonard.

Leonard took the letter out of his pocket again. “Jim, it’s okay. You don’t have to worry; you don’t have to keep fighting. I got it. I got your message. It’s okay.” He got his fingers under Jim’s chin and tilted his face up until their eyes met. “I got it, Jim. It’s okay. You can stop now.”

Hope lit up Jim’s eyes.

Leonard smiled and nodded. “I got it, Jim. You did good. And … I love you, too.” He slowly gathered Jim into his arms as he relaxed, crying tears that weren’t entirely unhappy into his shoulder. Leonard stroked his hair softly. “It’s all right, darlin’. I heard ya loud and clear.” Something released inside Jim; he could feel it. The letter had brought him a measure of peace.

Leonard just held him as tears pricked his own eyes. Jim went slowly slack in his arms, his breath soft and even against Leonard’s neck. He softly kissed Jim’s temple and laid him on the floor. He stood before bending and gently lifting Jim into his arms. He carried him to his room and tucked him into bed, wiping away the tear tracks on his cheeks. Jim didn’t even stir; he was finally getting the
rest he desperately needed. Leonard leaned down and kissed his forehead.

“Sweet dreams, darlin’.”

~~~

Chris was just paying the delivery girl when Leonard finally descended the stairs. Leonard knew he should object, but he couldn’t get the words out fast enough.

Chris took the bags of food and nudged the door shut with his hip.

Leonard wordlessly stepped forward and helped him bring the bags into the kitchen.

“Jim okay?” Chris asked as they unpacked the Thai food.

“Yeah,” Leonard answered, his voice rough. “He’s good. You remember how when we first found him, he kept trying to write? That letter – writing that letter to me is the last thing he can clearly remember. He was still trying to do it, still trying to get to me. I got him to understand that I finally got the message. He was so relieved … he’s sleeping now.”

Chris smiled softly. “Good.”

“How long did you know about it?”

“This whole process has taken just over a month. I didn’t want to breathe a word of it to you until I knew it was real, and I had the damn thing in hand.”

“Thank you. It … it brought us both some closure.” He bit his lip. “Do you –“

“Only tell me if you want to. It’s between you and Jim.”

“He … I don’t think he makes the full connection; I don’t think he remembers me from before. He just remembered that he was trying to write something, and it was important. But … he did seem to recognize the letter; that was a miracle.” Leonard set down the plates he had been holding. “He told me why he did it. But I still … even so, I don’t understand. How could I be worth it?”

Chris’s hand was on his shoulder again. “Leo, listen. I can’t imagine what it’s like to have someone make that kind of sacrifice for you. But you took that gift, and you used it. You even went beyond it by volunteering to look after Jim. Now it’s time to move on. It’s time to be grateful for everything you’ve got, and everything we’ve done.”

Leonard leaned on the counter. “I guess … I never thought after the divorce that I’d ever have a family.”

Chris smiled. “Now you do.”

“You’re part of that, you know.”

“Damn right.”

Leonard didn’t move, even though everything was ready.

Chris squeezed his shoulder. “Go on. Go to him. I’ll be here.”

Leonard nodded and jogged back up the stairs.

Jim was still sleeping peacefully.
Leonard wiped a tear from his eye as he leaned over and softly kissed his forehead. “You do get a future, Jim. Might not be the one you imagined, but you – we get one. And I’ll make it as good as I can, darlin’. I promise.”

~~~

Thank you for reading!

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