Together we are bright as the stars
by dragon_rider

Summary

In the year 2255, John Grimm is living yet another life with no will or hope to make it his. What for? He will have to wake up one day and leave everything behind.

It's about existing off the radar, about hiding in plain sight, about enduring everything and forever on his own. It's not about belonging or finding.

Or is it?

Jim Kirk gives him a new purpose, tests all the beliefs he's been functioning under for the last two centuries.

Notes

Reaper!Bones is like my favorite thing ever. I hope I don't ruin it, God.

Also, English isn't my first language and I don't have a beta, so there are going to be mistakes in this and I'm sorry for that.
Fanmixes:
[Got another life now](https://example.com) (Bones' POV).
[Keep me alive](https://example.com) (Jim's POV).
Chapter 1

“I suffer from aviofobia, that means fear of dying in something that flies!” The lie comes easy to his lips and sounds every bit as absurd as he intended.

It isn’t hard to act as if he’s a bitter, heartbroken, half-drunken man either. In more ways than one, that is true. He isn’t an actor, but he’s fierce in protecting his secret and every few years he has to switch lives, learn a new speech and try to exist while simultaneously doing his damnedest not to and it’s fucking frustrating and lonely as hell, to say the least.

Usually, if he behaves like a lost cause and a nutcase just to be sure, people tend to leave him alone or rather, people scramble so fast away from him that they trip all over each other.

John wishes he could still see the funny side of it, but that got old quite fast.

It just leaves him bereft and hostile nowadays, makes him try harder to isolate himself because in the end that’s what he needs to do. What needs to be done. Remove the threat to regular evolution he is, the impossibility but actuality of all his abilities from the slightest chance of being noticed. Caught.

In simple words, he’s a freak. His extra chromosome denies him of the right of calling himself Human and for longer than two centuries, he’s hated it. He’s been low and then lower, trying to find an exit to a never-ending life with no purpose, with no driving force and no one but his own fucked-up thoughts for company ever since he lost Sam to what should come naturally to every living being. Death.

He still misses her. In the years following his alteration, they’d become quite attached to each other. It was astonishing what a great glue guilt and seclusion made. John had no one else to turn to; no one else who knew what he really was. She’d made him promise he’d never try to kill himself and John’s been true to his word. If he at some point or another has gone to wars that weren’t his own and very pointedly tried to be on the losing end, well, you could hardly call that suicide. It was more like selfish altruism and sure, that was a contradiction but so is his entire life or the mimicry he has of one.

He’s Leonard Horatio McCoy this time, cantankerous and recently-divorced doctor. He’s left a pretty ex-wife and a lovely little daughter behind to join the newest attempt of mankind to reach for the stars.

Of course he’s been up there before, but never in an overly imposing army like Starfleet and the novelty of it promises to keep boredom at bay, at the very least. Perhaps being a soldier again will bring him comfort and not only nostalgia to brood and wonder how many more years he can go through this without losing his mind once and for all, before losing himself to the black.

There is no place for him, no matter how wide and infinite the universe is. Space makes no difference if he’s not willing to make it his own, to turn it into his home and he doesn’t want to, doesn’t plan to try to belong when he knows he’ll need to drop it all as soon as his hair doesn’t start whitening and his face doesn’t start wrinkling despite of everything and everyone growing old around him.

There is life everywhere, but he defies it—insults it even as he draws breath, every time he does something as little as slipping with his razor in the morning and cutting his skin only for it to stitch itself back together.

He’s lost count of how long ago he should’ve died.
Sam had always said his problem was solitude, had asked him to forgive her for not thinking of grabbing an extra vial of the C-24 chromosome before their escape of Olduvai. John had been firm and quick in assuring her she’d done right. The last thing they needed was to recreate a race that had extinguished itself.

Unfortunately, John has been standing at a crossroad for some time now. Each day that passes, he cares a little less about messing with the ‘order’ of things—if there is any, that is—and contemplates more seriously the idea of using the formula for reproducing the C-24 he cracked long ago.

He’s a doctor now; a fine surgeon with a doctorate in Genetics. He’s externally still young and attractive, if the few women he’s been with are to be believed. All in all, not a bad catch if he thinks about it objectively. If his major issue is the lack of a partner, he might as well get one. He’s got literally all the time in the world to do so, he can be as picky as he wants. He carries a vial of C-24 wherever he goes and laughs humorlessly at himself because he knows that even if he’s lucky enough to find someone noble enough for the extra chromosome not to infect them and turn them into a monster, the odds of them staying by his side are slim. He’s got wounds deep enough to kill, but he can’t die, so they only fester and scab and pull whenever he tries to move on.

Jocelyn and Joanna aren’t exactly a figment of his imagination. He’d met them a century ago, in another life, being his same old but young sour self. Jocelyn had fished him and nourished him with promises of family and love and for a while, John had let her play house; pretended he could have normalcy and fatherhood while a vicious voice in his head reminded him he was virtually infertile and not capable of growing old in the slightest, both of which fundamental aspects of picking a partner to settle, to form a family with.

Joanna’s biological father, the real Leonard H. McCoy, had died in a shuttle accident when she was just a toddler. John had stayed with them for a year and decided he couldn’t keep feeding their hopes to keep him while plundering any real chance for Jocelyn to have a husband and for Jo to get a real dad. He had left them one night never to return and joined the first Med-School he came across.

Jocelyn hadn’t been perfect, but the glimpse of happiness John had by her side had changed him. He’d become obsessed with turning her so they could have their happily-ever-after, but he was too late in providing the not-so-magical potion for that and both Jocelyn and Joanna had died of old age before he was able to decipher it.

He’d vowed to himself he’d never try again. The notion had been unreasonable and dangerous, but being in love and lonely weren’t exactly good ingredients to produce logic and good sense. Time, if not reason, had won that battle, made everything end the way it should have.

It’s easy enough for a genetically created genius to hack into everything. He’s resurrected their names for his own purposes, getting himself a background story and smashing any real chance of knowing someone in the new circle he’s about to move in, full as it is of young people who’d see he’s nothing but trouble and not worth half of it.

But apparently, not this guy. Even after his ‘space is disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence’ speech he’s still staring steadily at John and a rush of excitement that he won’t name hope goes through him at noticing the interest he couldn’t shake off of those piercing blue eyes.

Jim Kirk is a piece of work himself. John has heard everything about his famous father and the way he was born amidst nothing but debris and pain. Meeting him makes hard to keep pitying the imaginary baby he’d always pictured in his head and it has nothing to do with the fact Kirk does everything he can and then some to fight against awakening any sort of feeling in anyone—well, except maybe annoyance and desire.
But Kirk has apparently decided John is an exception to his normal behavior. The kid has gone as far as jeopardizing his stay in the ‘Fleet by hacking the rooming system so they could end up sharing. John checked the previous day and he’d been assigned to share dorm with some M’Benga, Geoffrey so getting a Kirk, James T. instead is—not what he was expecting. And he won’t say welcomed, though he’s definitely not bothered about this course of events.

Who would have thought? Jim Kirk is a genius too and John has made an impression on him. A positive one, judging by the younger man’s effort to keep him close.

The hope is harder to deny this time.

“Hi, roomie!” the kid chirps as he crosses the entrance of what is supposed to be their house for the next three years, or at least the first one of those. A bit small and lacking, if you ask John, but he’s lived in worse.

There’s a tiny bathroom with a sonic shower, a kitchenette with a replicator, one small closet filled with Academy Red and one medium sized desk he supposes can double as dining table separating the two features of the room. One of the beds is lined up with the wall, the other with a window, a small nightstand between them.

John raises an eyebrow at him. “You forgot my name already, kid?” Kirk simply chuckles, deep and rich. “You’re not a Leonard,” he says, matter-of-fact, “I’m going to call you roomie until I can think of a better name for you.” “Oh joy. Nicknames,” John deadpans. He unceremoniously leaves his luggage on the bed closest to the door, hence claiming it with no further comment, “I’d almost forgotten what college was like. Thank God I have you to remind me.”

Kirk smirks at him, flipping backwards on his own mattress and looking at him with playful and too blue eyes that John has a hard time not reading too much into. He has a feeling it’s what the kid does to divert attention from whatever he thinks he needs to hide.

It works quite well even though John sees right through it. That Kirk is edgy doesn’t make his lips any less tempting as he licks them. John’s eyes are quick in cataloguing the outlines of his body as well, his tight pants and t-shirt making it rather easy. He’s rewarded with a strip of hipbone and abdomen as Kirk stretches before bouncing back to his feet and strolling to the door, a promising, “be right back!” shouted over his shoulder, leather jacket hanging on it as he goes out.

You’re not a Leonard. Kirk has no idea how right he is about that.

John is done unpacking by the time his roommate comes back with a six-pack and an almost apologetic shrug as he hands him a beer. “Cheers,” he says, lips pursed as he clicks his can with John’s, “To giving away our lives.”

It’s remarkably not cheerful. Kirk downs half of it and wipes his mouth with his sleeve.

It’s cheap, almost lukewarm beer. Somehow, it’s remarkably refreshing too.

John follows suit, adds, “To having nothing to lose,” and drinks it all in one go.

Kirk is staring at him when he’s done. He’s assessing him, measuring, calculating and whatever odds he comes up with are good enough. He nods, sips the rest of his beer just as quickly and cracks open a new one for each of them.

John pretends he didn’t see the pause.
“How did you manage to bring these in anyway, Kirk?” he asks, curious, “Alcohol is illegal on Campus. Trust me, I checked.”

“No, I checked,” Kirk counters, smug, “It’s illegal once the year starts and that’s officially tomorrow, so technically it’s perfectly legal now. And it’s Jim, by the way.”

“Really,” John snorts, impressed and amused. It’s not even their first day and Jim is already bending regulation to his will, not to mention his previous stunt into the Academy rooming system. He’s more interesting by the second and there doesn’t seem to be an end to his appeal, “Since you’re so set on finding me a nickname, maybe I should just call you Baby blues. I think it’d suit you just fine.”

“I think you can do better than that,” Jim says, but it doesn’t seem as if he’d care in the slightest if John were to call him that, judging by the way he’s looking at him right through his long lashes, casually but almost artfully leaning back on the desk.

There’s an invitation there, John is not imagining it. His pulse quickens with want, raw and blinding, and for a moment he sees himself on top of the gorgeous blonde, kissing him as he presses him to the bed.

He can almost hear the noises Jim would make for him, the moans he’d be able to pull out of him.

He blinks. There’s a choice here too. It’s harder to notice it but the ex-marine has always been a throughout observer.

*He could be it.* The one. His companion.

He can feel it. It does nothing to calm him down; to stop the want, the need to reach out, to grip, to hold, to own—

Jesus fuck, he’s just met the kid. He can’t be feeling this way, he barely knows him at all. Just because Jim feels right, smells right, even rings true, he can’t possibly act on nothing but instinct. He’s not gambling with a life here.

He’s gambling with forever, with condemning another Human being to the same endless Hell he’s been living for 209 years.

He needs to know more, find out everything he can about Jim before considering him for real.

For now though, he needs to control himself.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim Kirk is a flirt. John has known this ever since they met, although at the time his focus of interest had been a girl who seemed more amused than interested in Jim’s attempts and, well, him.

He tries to discern a pattern in it to help dealing with the displeasure the habit brings him. At the end of the first day of classes, he’s got it; if you’re breathing and in Jim’s near proximity, he’ll flirt with you. It’s still a diverting technique, John would bet on it, but he has yet to find out what exactly Jim is overcompensating for.

The first classes prove useless. Surreptitiously eyeing who Jim finds worth his attention is a way of passing the time and John isn’t the only one bored out of his mind.

He plays the good student, of course, and has an ear in whatever lecture they’re in while reviewing alien anatomy in his PADD. If a doctor is everything he can be in this life, then he’s going to be the very best. Getting that sort of attention on himself doesn’t worry him. Hiding in plain sight is second nature to him by now.

Jim, on the other hand, is all but inconspicuous about being bored and starts making faces at him the third time they hear the word ‘introduction’. John has to stiffen a smirk whenever his roommate gets bold, raises his hand and starts a sentence that definitely won’t end well with, “excuse me, sir.”

To the Academy Instructors’ dismay, it seems Jim’s default setting is bold. And loud. Whenever he’s not making pointed questions, he’s tapping away with his foot or a stylus, never unmoving and always alert despite of what he’s doing or who he’s whispering things to.

What keeps John calm is how Jim always turns back to share whatever it is he finds funny or to simply look at him, as if to check he’s still there.

John, of course, hears every murmur in every classroom they’re in. It’s mostly gossip and he should be used to it by now. No matter the era, people have nothing better to do than to discuss those who are more outstanding than them and they hardly do it in a good light or with any knowledge at all. The Marines did it too, quite extensively, although he’s never been fond of it, not even when he was Human.

Tactics, skill, instinct, wits he can discuss. Personal affairs and flaws, not so much. He’s always had plenty of those of his own to be concerned about anybody else’s.

Apparently it’s a big deal to get James Kirk, son of the Federation hero George Kirk, as classmate and you can either love him or hate him but you’ll form an opinion on him and fast, that’s for sure.

John develops a habit of his own and looks daggers at whoever is around them more often than not.

It’s not his fixation with Jim what makes him protective of him. It’s his principles.

So what if Jim’s father saved 800 people in 12 minutes? He was in a life or death situation and he was a damn Starfleet Officer. Jim is 22, for Christ’s sake, what do these people want from him? It’s obvious they have no idea what it is to live with the aftermath of such a tragedy—heroics involved or not, for the survivors is nothing but that—they don’t have a clue about what it is to grow up without a father.
John knows. He knows what’s like to keep going counting with no one but yourself when you’re young and naïve. It was hard enough even after having his parents for a while, before they were killed in the accident in Olduvai.

He can only imagine what’s like to have no one to look up to. He always had that, at least. A role he needed to set apart from in order to move on, or so he thought. Now he’s a scientist, just like his folks were and Sam would laugh at him for all the years he spent running from what comes natural to him.

He’d like to know what most of these bratty kids would’ve done with their lives with such pressure on them—and very little to rely on, if anything at all—and their ‘promising’ futures.

He doesn’t hesitate to shut them up whenever they’re loud enough for other students to hear.

Jim pretends he doesn’t care about the gossip but he starts smiling at John in a new way—awed, genuine, thankful—after that.

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Jim doesn’t sleep much. He does his best to hide his insomnia but John needs little rest so he can’t be fooled. He’s not sure whether Jim is pushing himself to study until late at night because he wants to prove everyone he has every right to be here or if he just can’t get his brain to unplug entirely, if he’s always been like this during night. For all he knows, it could be both.

He reads on his PADD still in his bed as much as he can. Then he’s out of it as if he’s been stung and he paces the room like a caged lion.

No matter how hard or long John looks, he can’t figure out which one is the cage; the Academy or Jim’s own skin.

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When Jim announces he’s going to the city on Friday night, he’s glad the kid asks if he wants to go with him. He was planning to follow him regardless of it, so that makes things easier.

They put their civilian clothes on—Jim’s are the same ones he wore the first day, but at least they’re clean now—and take a bus to practically the other end of San Fran, where Jim decides they’re to go down and come into the first bar they come across.

It’s a big place but welcoming, enough for the crowd not to seem overwhelming. There’s old rock from the 20th century playing in the background and laughter in the air, along with sounds of glasses clattering and pool balls colliding with each other.

Jim makes a beeline for the latter and John walks over to the counter to get them beers.

When he’s back, the game is on. His roommate has five broad and brash guys betting against him but John can see Jim knows what he’s doing as he leans on the table; aiming and announcing he’s going to pocket three balls in one shot.

Unsurprisingly, he’s a show-off but he backs up what his mouth says with actions so John can see nothing wrong with that.

He leans against the wall and watches Jim—the other guy has yet to make a move and seems to be getting angrier about it by the second—admirers the effortless way with which he grips the cue stick and positions himself perfectly; his rear forearm completely straight and his chin down on the stick,
his bridge hand seldom the same at each shot, his eyes glinting even in the low light of the place as he focuses on the game.

The swelled curve of his ass on display every time, clad in those dark tight pants, is a bonus that John is not the only one aware of.

“Maybe we should pay you just to bend you over the table like that,” one of the men remarks derisively just as Jim is making his move, “You look pretty enough for that.”

It doesn’t have the intended effect. The right ball goes in the right pocket, Jim’s unruffled demeanor keeping his arms steady and the cue level.

John glares at them, scowls and bites his tongue but says nothing. Jim turns back from the table and cocks his head towards it after he misses the next shot, signaling it’s the asshole’s turn as he takes his beer from John’s hand.

“Nah,” Jim says flippantly, once he’s sipped his drink and they all have laughed at the jerk’s proposal, nodded their assents, “I don’t think you asked nice enough to make up for your ugly face. We’ll have to stick to pool.”

“Jim,” John hisses, scandalized, low enough only for him to hear.

There’s no doubt in his head Jim is always this reckless, even without him tagging along. He’s no back up here. He’s a doctor, not a soldier, after all.

Jim pats him confidently on the shoulder. “They’re just easy money, Bones, relax. I’ll finish them off in five minutes, you’ll see.”

True to his word, Jim sinks the 8 ball in about four minutes. John has to at least hand it to the guys they’re not as sour losers as he thought they would be. They don’t try to start a fight to avoid paying and Jim pockets their credits with a wolfish, satisfied grin that doesn’t waver when one of them taunts him again.

“Hey,” Jim settles him, a hand on the crook of his neck and a curious tilt on his head, as if he’s not even contemplating the possibility of someone getting mad on his behalf, “What is it?”

John glowers, realizes belatedly he bristled. He realizes something else, too, and his frown deepens. “What did you call me before?”

Jim chuckles, takes his hand off him and beckons him to the counter to get another drink. “Bones. All I got left is my bones, remember?”

The moniker is oddly reminiscent of Reaper. The past rushes back on him, Sarge guffawing as he fills up John’s file in the RRTS with his official codename on it.

He sees Sam’s unimpressed stare, too.

“So, ‘Reaper’? As in ‘Grim’?”

“They’re Marines, Sam, not poets.”

“Why can’t you just call me McCoy?” he growls. It’s harsh and uncalled for, considering Jim’s been nothing but playful, “That’s my fucking name, regardless of your ridiculous feelings about it, kid. Drop it.”
It flies right over Jim’s head. John should be glad he isn’t reading too much into his behavior. “That’s your last name and sure, it’s fine, but I’m not gonna call you what everyone else does.”

That makes the flashback relent a bit. His bleakness dies, if barely just. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not everyone else.”

The sentence has a deeper meaning, one that John likes hearing even implicitly, but it makes no matter. He’s on defensive mode. He can’t have something so close to his past on his present. It’ll drive him insane.

His sanity is already threadbare. “So you go around calling people stupid names, is that it?”

Jim huffs, rolling his eyes at him. “You can be very dense, you know that, Bones?”

“I told you, damn it, you don’t get to call me—“

“Gentlemen.”

A woman that wasn’t the bartender when John got their drinks cuts in, bringing them refills that she places in front of them as she leans on her elbows, eyeing them both intently.

Her gaze lingers on Jim, of course. And she’s pretty, if a few years older than him.

That doesn’t help John’s mood at all.

“Were you the one that was betting in my pool table?” she asks, “You are aware that’s illegal, I trust.”

Her tone brooks no argument, authoritative but peculiarly soft. It’s the right mix to have Jim shrugging apologetically in about a second. “I am. I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“I’m Edith Keeler,” she says, raising her eyebrows at the almost sincere apology, “And you are?”

“Jim Kirk,” they shake hands and John wills his temper back, makes himself grunt, “Leonard McCoy,” when the owner of the place extends her hand towards him.

Her next question is unexpected. “You know how to mix drinks, I suppose, or you could learn. Are you free on Friday nights? And Saturdays’?”

Jim furrows his brow. “Yeah, I know. And—huh—yeah, I am.”

She smiles at him. “Excellent,” she says, “I could use a hand around here during those nights. You’re hired. It wouldn’t hurt if you know your way with a mike and a guitar too, I like having entertainment on the weekends sometimes.”

“I can sing. And play,” Jim blinks, stares at her for a moment before turning to him to mouth, “Is she nuts?”

To offer someone who just committed a felony under her roof a job, yes, John thinks she might be. He shrugs. He can’t deny she’s a remarkable woman despite of it—or maybe because of it.

Jim needs cash, that’s plain to see if you know how to look. She decided to provide it instead of reproving his ways of getting it. John doesn’t miss the kind look she’s directing at Jim.

They stay until the bar closes at 4 am. Jim doesn’t try calling him Bones again. John is thankful but
not delusional enough to think he’s given up.

It’s when Jim is receiving supplies on the back that Edith approaches him. “Jim is quite something, isn’t he?”

*Speaking mildly, yes, but you know nothing about him.* Not that he knows much, either, but he knows more and he’s not referring to Jim’s history of bar brawls and hustling and other things he’s not supposed to know about. “That he is.”

She touches his arm, her fingers quick as they ghost over his jaw. He tenses, but doesn’t pull away. “Easy,” she says, gently, “We’re on the same side. We want good things for him,” she smiles beatifically at him for a second before rounding the counter to scrub non-existent stains on the surface, “You’ve been watching him all night. I’m sure a lot longer than that as well. Be good to him.”

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The next day, it’s the first one they spend apart for longer than a few hours. It grates on John’s nerves and he berates himself constantly as his first shift in the E.R. of Starfleet Medical ticks by.

It’s a job but also extra credits for his course. Pike seemed delighted by his brass when he offered him the chance.

“Fine,” John had said, and then added, dead serious, “but I’m getting paid. I’m a licensed doctor, not a green boy. I don’t need your extra credits, but real credits could come in handy.”

Pike had stared, nonplused, and then chuckled. “A man with a backbone, huh? I can see why Kirk likes having you around. Very well. You got yourself a deal, Doctor.”

He meets his not-roommate there. He’s a doctor too already, doesn’t flinch under John’s scrutiny, extending a hand to him once they get a moment to themselves. “I’m Geoffrey M’Benga. I have to say I’m relieved to share the E.R. with someone experienced.”

“Leonard McCoy,” he says with a nod, “and I could say the same, M’Benga.”

“Geoffrey will do,” the man’s gaze trails behind him then. John knows who’s there before he turns around, sharp senses more than attune to recognize that particular gait and scent anywhere.

Jim comes into the room, saluting the nurse by the door, sky blue eyes and grin bright and firm in place as he tosses a brown paper bag that smells like burritos in John’s direction.

“Saving you from hospital food,” Jim explains, already waving back to the door, “See you.”

John raises an eyebrow at the abrupt retreat but gets it once he turns the bag and catches the scrawled name there.

*Bones.*

He sighs, defeated, and waits for Geoffrey to start eating.

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He returns the favor on Sunday, taking Jim out of Campus with the excuse of finding a decent Chinese restaurant from which they can order take out later on in the semester.

They spend a couple of quiet hours walking in the streets and John is careful because Jim is edging
Neither of them has asked about the other’s past, about how their lives were before Starfleet claimed them for its own.

John has already snooped enough in Jim’s life by reading documents he’s not supposed to have access to. There are things he doesn’t understand, things he can’t ask because the answers are obvious enough to guess, if not to grasp.

How a 22 year-old can be so used to scrapping by on his own having a living mother is one of them. Winona Kirk is listed to be on a Deep Space mission right now, has been for over ten years off-planet and it makes no sense because Jim hasn’t, according to record at least, been in space except on the day of his birth.

He’s sadly not surprised. People in the 23rd century are supposed to be mankind at its best but that’s a big joke no one with half a brain should ever consider believing. Everything that makes people ugly is still present, if more concealed. Earth has a whole Federation of planets to impress, after all, and it wouldn’t do to have them knowing any of that.

“Pike wants me to take the Command track,” Jim blurts out once they’ve found a place to eat and ordered, a small but clean restaurant John approves after glancing at the kitchen and dismissing the possibility of getting food poisoning.

It’s happening. Jim has decided to trust him and this explains how he didn’t pretend to sleep last night and how soothed he seemed at leaving the Academy grounds.

He’s about to speak when Jim laughs humorlessly. “Poor bastard thinks he’s got himself a George Kirk the second, but he’s got me instead.”

The self-deprecation is blatant, but John feigns he doesn’t hear it. “And what do you want to do?”

Jim blinks, looks up from the tablecloth. He tenses, jaw clenching as he stares at John, probably to discern whether he’s another hopeful and foolish son of a bitch or not. “I don’t know,” he admits at last.

John doesn’t push. The food arrives and starts getting cold but he doesn’t make a move to eat.

“I’m supposed to have three months to decide,” Jim says, gaze dropping again, “I was thinking about Engineering.”

Apparently he passed whatever test Jim was submitting him to. “But?”

“But Pike says that can be my minor, not my major,” Jim picks up the chopsticks, but it’s more about having something to do with his hand than for actual eating, “It’s only been a week. Maybe he’ll change his mind later.”

Jim is brilliant. John, being an ex-Sergeant, can see the potential in him. He’s suddenly furious at Pike all the same. This isn’t his decision to make, damn him. “It’s your career, Jim. Whatever the Captain says to you about it it’s only advice. The final word is yours.”

Jim shakes his head, stabs a shrimp viciously only to leave it on his plate, untouched. “You don’t get it,” he says, frustration battling with something else in his tone, “I shouldn’t be here. He got me in.”

John huffs. With Jim’s outstanding scores, he doesn’t think Pike had any real trouble convincing the
board to take him in. A genius with attitude problems is better than no genius. It’s simple math. Jim would be a significant addition to any department. But he’s not supposed to know about those charts or his criminal past, so he shrugs and finally starts eating.

“So?” he swallows, “He got me in too. He’s not the boss of me. He recruited me and I happen to be a surgeon, but that doesn’t mean that’s what he’ll get. I can join Security and he’ll have nothing to say on the matter.”

Jim huffs out a laugh. “You are quite fit to be just a doctor,” he notes, eyes appraising John’s muscular chest and arms. Once he’s done, he shoves some food in his mouth, licking his lips and smirking as he notices John is doing some staring of his own.

He isn’t ready for Jim to start flirting again. The air is electric between them but he doesn’t want to drop the subject like this; he wants to make sure Jim doesn’t do something he regrets just because he feels pushed to it.

“Point is, I can do whatever the hell I want and so can you.”

“Yeah,” Jim concedes. He looks crushed, not convinced, “Yeah, you’re right.”

John can’t get him to look up for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

RRTS = Rapid Response Tactical Squad. It's the unit in the Marines John was part of.

Things at the Academy are all made up. I haven't read the books (can't get my hands on them where I live *sobs*). Let's say the first half of the first semester consists of general stuff every track needs to know and in the meantime they can decide their focus.

P.S.: Thanks for all your comments and kudos!
Chapter 3

It takes Jim three more nights of scarcely sleeping to collapse. They come from a seminar that dragged late into the evening and he face-plants in his bed; such a weary sigh rushing past his lips that John winces in sympathy as he watches him curl on his side, full uniform and boots still on.

He waits a few minutes. When it’s obvious Jim is fast asleep, John moves soundlessly and, with the gentlest touch he’s capable of, grabs one of his roommate’s ankles to help him rest more comfortably.

That doesn’t go as planned, it’s what he thinks as he dodges Jim’s blind, unconscious kicks and saves himself the pain of having a black eye and probably a broken zygomatic bone too. The explaining he’d need to do after healing instantly is also a thing he’s grateful of avoiding.

“Easy, Jim,” he says, loud but placating, “It’s me. I’m just taking off your shoes. Stay still.”

Jim’s uncoordinated and frantic movements come to an abrupt halt at hearing his voice. His eyes open and focus on him for a brief moment. His body drops back down on the bed the next, the foot John is still holding going meek and inert just like he asked.

“Bones,” Jim murmurs, assumes the same fetal position he was in before John disrupted his sleep and sighs, going back to sleep as quickly as he did the first time.

Any other situation and John would be rolling his eyes, huffing and complaining about the nickname. Right now, he can’t. He purses his lips, finishes what he was doing and steps back, only to return from their closet with an extra blanket to cover Jim with.

No part of John liked the defensive response to the unexpected touch, but the recognition—the trust, and what has he done to deserve that? They’ve only known each other for two weeks!—is another matter.

That, he liked. More than he should.

He watches Jim for hours before forcing himself to go out and get some air.

The longer they’re together, the stronger his need to get closer to him turns. Having this kind of proof that Jim could—would?—welcome him does nothing to quench that urge.

He has to keep in mind Jim might need something different—simpler, safer—than him.

He can’t rush it, not this. If Jim is the one, he needs to do this right.

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“Damn it, Jim,” he grunts once he’s back, tugging at Jim by the elbow with enough force to move him, but not enough to hurt or do the job completely on his own, “Get your ass back inside before you crack your skull on the sidewalk, would you?”

Jim snorts, stays put where he is sitting on the windowsill with more than half his body out, “I won’t fall, Bones. And anyway, it’s just two stories. I’d be fine.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” John counters, scowling, “You’d hurt yourself.”

John gives him exactly two minutes to get back in before doing it himself, although he does make a show of it and they both end up sprawled on the floor; Jim on top of him, looking for all the world
like John has grown a second head and a tail too.

“You were really worried about me,” Jim exhales, looming over him as he supports his weight on both hands. It’s the closer they’ve ever been and he’s breathtaking like this, the faint scars on his face adding to his beauty more than reducing it; they make him Human. John wants to trace each one of them so much his fingertips tingle, but he doesn’t.

He concentrates on what’s important.

Jim sounds disbelieving, like he’s trying to convince himself John cares and it pulls at something right in the middle of his chest so hard that for a second, he can’t breathe.

He’s been alone for so long he’d recognize the echo of loneliness anywhere, in any form. That it’s coming from Jim isn’t comforting; it’s upsetting.

John wishes they’d met sooner so that Jim wouldn’t know what it is to have no one but yourself to count on.

“Of course I was,” he assures, and his tone might be irate but his hands on Jim’s sides, right under his arms, are tender, “What kind of dumb question is that?”

Jim laughs; a short, sharp, watery thing. He stands up and extends a hand to help him, fleeing to the bathroom and staying there until long enough has passed that John should be asleep before coming out.

John hopes this isn’t normal, that it’s just something triggered by Pike’s and Jim’s own expectations about what he should do in the Academy.

Somehow, he knows it isn’t.

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Jim shouldn’t wake up after only six hours of sleeping (tops), he shouldn’t have such nasty nightmares, he shouldn’t react with such knee-jerk violence to a simple touch, he shouldn’t mock his way out of John’s concerned eyes but those are all things Jim does and there’s nothing John can do except wait.

He owes Jim the same deference he’s showed in not snooping in his past. If he told the kid how much John already knows about him, Jim wouldn’t take it well in the slightest and he feels ashamed of giving in to his impulses, to his need of finding out everything he can about him, but not regretful.

He’d do it again. Chances are there is still information awaiting him if he digs deep enough. There are gaps in Jim’s medical history that tell him that much but John won’t pry, not anymore.

He will wait for Jim to tell him himself, if he’s ever going to.

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“So how are you doing, Bones?” Jim asks him on Saturday noon, “You like working here? Has it been—“

“Don’t, Jim,” John cuts in, dipping his chopsticks in soy sauce before taking his next bite, “Don’t say it.”

They’re sharing lunch on one of the benches inside the hospital’s patio. The small chapel is on their
backs and one of the building’s main pavilions—where the E.R. is located and most of the O.R.s too—is in front of them but John notices those things almost as an afterthought, enjoying Jim’s company and how the Sun seems to shine brighter on him, warming them both with more than just heat.

Jim gives him a playful look, chews and swallows, “What?” he says, and the way his smile turns mischievous tells John exactly what he’s about to do. He doesn’t stop him. “That it’s been quiet?”

John groans. “Thanks, you’ve just jinxed my shift. God only knows when I’ll be making it out of here now.”

“Oh, come on, Bones,” Jim snickers, hits him on the shoulder as if to infuse him with common sense, “You don’t really believe that because of one word shit will go down today. That’s silly. Nothing will happen because I said—“

“I’m not a superstitious man, kid. It’s the way things usually go. It’s empirical fact,” John says. It has nothing to do with belief, but with factual and collective evidence of rounds always going downhill whenever anyone dares pointing out it’s been peaceful, “We don’t say ‘have an easy shift’ for a reason. We say ‘good’, not quiet, not easy, not uneventful, just good. You don’t want to believe me, that’s fine, but I’m the one who’s a doctor and works around here, so you’d do better trusting me on this.”

“Sorry,” Jim makes a face and John can see he’s maybe a little too sorry, practically deflating as he keeps eating quietly and that’s odd; Jim is never, ever silent for longer than a minute.

“There,” John says, stealing the last of Jim’s Mongolian beef out of his box, “We’re even now.”

“Hey!” Jim sounds annoyed, but his eyes brighten again so John knows his move was the right one.

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John decides he hates being right. A side of his past comes through Starfleet Medical’s doors late that night and he sees through the corner of his eye the fallen and desiccated bodies of the Security guards so he knows he needs to act quickly.

He doesn’t allow himself to hesitate, even if what’s he’s about to do means endangering his cover.

“Take two nurses with you and go to the supply closet. Lock all the patients’ doors you can and don’t come back, no matter what you hear. Call Starfleet Command.”

His orders take a second to kick in and he doesn’t blame the man. They’re equals here most of the time, but they’re definitely not with potentially lethal aliens in the room with them. He’s glad when Geoffrey finally nods and rushes to the back after patting on the shoulder two of their colleagues as he passes, punching the keys to lock every door he comes across.

John relieves the nurse on the front desk, takes the emergency phaser they keep there out and works in overloading it as he watches the fuckers lurk in his E.R which is thankfully empty of patients at the time being.

The Ugegtoo are a race he’s encountered before, far away from Earth, traveling in deep space back when Warp drive was not even an idea yet. He doesn’t know much about them except they use life as fuel—their engines seem to operate with Carbon, something the Human body and other living organisms in this side of the Alpha Quadrant are rich on—and that they can easily pass as Andorians, but their skin is paler and they have two sets of antennae instead of one. Their muscle mass is quite more impressive, too, and there’s the not small detail about their bodies having a high amount of ammonia so their blood can corrode even metal in seconds.
He was the one who sent all the specifications about the species to Starfleet when it was created 94 years ago and damn it, he’s pissed. Pissed because it’s clear they’ve come through the Earth’s defenses and that shouldn’t be; John described their ships, the ionic signature they leave and the frequency they communicate in with enough detail that a child could recognize one coming anywhere near the Solar System but apparently it was either not enough or Starfleet is dumb enough to think a few decades with no attacks means the threat no longer exists.

John entertains the idea of eloping with Jim as he approaches them after disconnecting all the security cameras in his surroundings.

He likes thinking Jim would say yes. Neither of them has developed a special fondness of Starfleet yet, after all. They could explore the confines of the galaxy without it, together.

He lets himself indulge in that thought, smirks and sets off to break their spines in pieces.

He has around 10 minutes before the phaser blows up. It’s more than enough, if he catches them by surprise.

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He tosses the five corpses inside an examination room, throws the overloading phaser in and locks the door for the blast to wash away the evidence of how he dealt with them with his bare hands.

Later, he’ll say he lured them inside pretending he was running to hide, that he needed them all as close as possible to the detonation point to make sure it’d kill them.

He picks up another phaser before reaching the front doors.

He’s kneeling beside one of the Security officers—rather, what remains of one—when reinforcement arrives.

Right on time. There are three more Ugegtoo’s charging their way. John rolls to the side and leaves Security to deal with them.

He puts the phaser down, picks a med-kit up from a cabinet and rushes to the aid of the injured officers as soon as the quarrel is over.

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He gets checked for injuries and mental stability after such a ‘traumatic experience’—which it wasn’t, not really, the main sentiment left in him after it being relief because Jim was long gone when it happened and John thinks that with a bit of effort, he can keep his masquerade on—but as soon as it’s proven he’s one hundred percent he’s questioned about what happened and his part on it—he claims good instinct and common sense, sticks to it—then, he’s driven and ushered to Pike’s office, as if he hadn’t had enough questions in two hours of going in circles and tricky phrasing to see if they could find any holes in his statement.

“Doctor McCoy,” the Captain greets him, nodding to one of the chairs in front of his desk, “Please, take a seat.”

“I’d appreciate if you could cut it to the chase, sir,” he asks, mildly but gruffly, as he sits down, “It’s been a long day and an even longer night.”

“Yes, of course,” Pike agrees, “First of all, let me thank you in behalf of Starfleet Command for your performance today. You will receive an official commendation, but you acted admirably and I want
John sees the but coming from miles away but he keeps his demeanor calm and prompts, lifting an eyebrow as he stares at his superior straight in the eye as if he had nothing to hide, “Secondly?”

“Secondly, and I’m just going to ask this once,” Pike pauses, engages in the staring contest with enough bleakness to make John’s hackles rise. Maybe this isn’t going to go as smoothly as he thought it would, “You will tell me where you served, for how long and under whose orders you did it now or I can assure you I will find out and you are going to see yourself in a world of trouble, Cadet McCoy. It’s plain to me your records are lacking in several areas of skill and experience you possess and Starfleet won’t have one of its assets hiding vital information it could use.”

“You think I’ve got some kind of military knowledge,” John summarizes, unimpressed. “I know you have it. Do you think I would’ve enlisted a simple country doctor that needed years of training to get how things work around here? When I met you, McCoy, I saw you for what you were, make no mistake about it. I saw the bearing you were trying to conceal, the brooding you weren’t doing remembering lost comrades, the weight of lost battles on your shoulders that no amount of bourbon was going to ease. I’ve served my time, just as you have. I could recognize scars of combat with my eyes closed. You’d do well keeping that in mind. I’ve phrased my questions already, it’s up to you to answer them, Cadet, and I’d suggest you do it quickly.”

John should’ve known that sooner or later he’d bump with someone shrewd enough to suspect he’s hiding part of who he is.

Still, it doesn’t mean he can trust Pike. The Captain’s loyalty is to Starfleet Command and he’d rat John and his secret out to the Board as soon as he was done talking. John couldn’t blame him. He followed orders blindly too, for a long time, until his C.O. went apeshit and started killing civilians as if he was stomping over ants.

“With all due respect, sir,” John starts, not dropping his gaze for a second, “I don’t need to be in any army to learn a bit of common sense. That’s something you either have or you don’t. As I’ve already said a hundred times today, we had a situation in the E.R.—“

Pike scowls, cuts right in. “Which you identified in a matter of seconds—“

“—and I dealt with it in the best way I could with the resources I had. I’m a doctor but I can use my head in more ways than one. Unless you have proof of a time in service I never did, that’s all I have to say, Captain.‘

“So this is the way things are going to be,” Pike seems eerily calm all of a sudden. John can almost smell danger in the air. He’ll have to be extra careful from now on, “Very well. You are dismissed, Cadet McCoy,” John stands up, salutes him and is about to step through the open door when Pike adds, “I don’t believe in coincidences. I shall get to the bottom of this myself.”

He’s about to turn around and give in to old habits—disrespecting a Superior Officer is hardly ever a good idea but John is a doctor now, he guesses he can be forgiven for the attitude more than when he was young.

He’s interrupted.

“Bones!” Jim steps right into his personal space, his hands gripping John’s shoulders tight before sliding down his arms, his eyes quick in scanning his body from head to toe, “Are you hurt? I’ve heard what happened, I went to the hospital as soon as I could and they told me you were here so I thought—I mean, obviously you’re not injured since you’re here, but are you—are you okay?”
John can still feel Pike’s eyes on him, realizes he’s still standing in the door frame. He grips Jim by the back of his neck, guides him just a step back so the door can close and hugs him—briefly, but steadfastly, because they both need it.

“I’m okay, Jim,” he reassures Jim, nudging him to the elevator as Jim keeps staring at him with wide eyes, “Come on, let’s go before the Captain changes his mind and decides to debrief me again.” Jim blinks, frowns, mutters, “Oh, no, he won’t,” and makes it his personal mission to get John out of the building in record time.

John lets himself be pulled and led. Jim is so focused on going back to their dorm he doesn’t notice John smiles the whole way there.

*He cares.*

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Jim insists they have to celebrate so they end up in the flat roof after John makes him promise he’ll stop mentioning it every two seconds if they do.

The stars are dimed by the lights of San Francisco and it’s a pity but Jim doesn’t seem to mind at all as he keeps his head up and admires the sky.

“But, Bones,” Jim says before taking a gulp from his bottle. John lets himself appreciate the way his lips enclose the tip, lush and pink and moist, so he doesn’t snap and make yet another person suspicious about his origins, “Those aliens you killed are dangerous as hell, you have to be proud of yourself! They’re not even from this quadrant and you didn’t even know what they were but you beat them—“

“I knew they weren’t patients, Jim,” John sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose and tries not to hate himself so much for the two hours he’s spent lying to Jim through his teeth while Jim recited the data about the Ugegtoo better than the idiots Command sent to question him, “No sane person, alien or whatsoever, goes to a E.R. on a fucking Saturday when there’s nothing wrong with them, unless they mean trouble, which they did.”

It’s the same explanation he gave to the officers in charge of filing the reports for the mess.

Unlike them though, Jim grins and bumps his shoulder, stays close as he says, “That’s still pretty awesome, Bones. Give yourself some credit.”

John tries finishing his beer, counting to a hundred and taking a deep breath, but nothing works and he stands up abruptly, grunting, “No. I won’t. I knew exactly what they were, Jim. I lied. I—“

“Shit,” Jim makes a face, gestures for him to shut up as he runs to lock the door to the roof, “You could get expelled, Bones! Why did you do that?”

There’s no one hearing them. John is sure of it. Still, it’s touching to see Jim checking and leaning on the door as if his presence there could keep prying ears away from them.

“So what if I don’t want them knowing everything about me?” John can’t risk telling Jim the whole truth, not yet, but he doesn’t want to lie to him—not as much as he lies to everyone else, at least. He wishes things could be easy, but they never are, “What if I met those motherfuckers on a trip that’s not on any record, what if I saw what they can do to Humans when they get their clutches on one? What if I decided I wouldn’t let that happen again when I saw them yesterday? What if I wanted to spare myself from retelling the nightmare I had to witness? It’s not helpful information. Everything is on the reports Starfleet doesn’t even bother using anymore, why should I bother?”
His voice gets lower and lower until there can be no inches between them for Jim to be able to hear.

John can’t look at him. It’s not the remembered slaughter what’s making him shake; it’s each and every single one he has ever seen, including the first one—his parents, buried in the place he called Hell in his head long before he confirmed it was—it’s how tired he is of running away, of lying, of never being able to just be who he is.

Sometimes he’s not even sure he knows that anymore.

Who is John Grimm? Maybe the Reaper is everything that’s left of him.

It’s the weight of being an eternal stranger what’s driving him insane.

It’s almost as if Jim knows. He takes John’s hands and yanks until they’re both on their knees, facing each other, and then he guides John to his shoulder, holds him tight enough to push air out of his lungs.

“It’s okay, you’re right,” Jim says against his forehead, “You’re right. You did the right thing, Bones. You did okay.”

No, John, he can almost hear Sam saying, you’re not just a killer, just a codename. You’re my brother. You’re sensitive, smart and once you knew how to smile, too. You could learn again, if you wanted to, if you let someone teach you how.

John holds Jim right back, mindful of his own strength, and breathes deep, shutting the part of his head that wants to analyze every little thing that makes Jim’s scent unique—it’d be the perfect time for that, having his nose at the point in which it’s the purest in the base of his neck, his left supraclavicular fossa even if it’s through his clothing—and just enjoys it; enjoys the closeness, the warmth, the fast beating of Jim’s heart, loud and regular, near and soothing.

The Ugegtoo have a particular breathing that’s oddly similar to the snorting the infected people in Olduvai made. John knows he’ll have nightmares if he tries to sleep.

He holds onto Jim a little longer and hopes this is enough to keep the worst of his demons at bay.

He doesn’t think that’s going to be the case.

He’s just handed Jim a way to find out he’s a lot more than just a doctor on a silver platter.

If Jim doubts him, if he looks up just when the first time the alien race he faced today appeared exactly, he’s screwed.
Chapter 4

John can go with no sleep at all for a week if he’s either chasing something or being chased, if there’s enough adrenaline to see him through the day and the night.

Starfleet Academy is not exactly a dangerous extraterrestrial jungle or a minefield or a foxhole though. It doesn’t require his undivided, constant attention. Keeping track of Jim and giving him his wordless thanks—mostly with food and not complaining every time he calls him ‘Bones’—for putting up with his shit carries him through half the week. The possibility of Jim finding out about his past—because if anyone could, it’d be him, John has no doubt about it—helps quite a bit too, keeps him alert for almost four days before even that starts to pale in the face of exhaustion.

Then both his mind and body betray him and he falls asleep without noticing and with no warning whatsoever.

When he wakes up swinging and with half a scream caught in his throat he’s in bed, the lights are off and he’s dressed up to his boots which he barely manages to stop from hitting—and probably breaking—Jim’s ribs.

_Are you comfy yet, Reaps? Feeling cherished yet? You stupid piece of shit_, Sarge had spat in his dreams, the transformation turning him quickly and unforgivingly into a monster, eyes and teeth popping out wildly, tongue lashing out to tease John as he scrambled to get away from his grasp, _What the fuck do you think you’re doing? A real soldier never lets his guard down. Remember that. Nobody gives a fuck that you’re tired! Nobody gives a fuck you got yourself a pretty bitch to keep by your side! You gotta keep moving._

_No. Not yet._ John bites the inside of his cheek, swallows the blood and makes his breathing even. It’s only then that he ventures a look at Jim and grimaces, remembering waking up after vivid nightmares has never been easy for him, not even before Olduvai.

Jim is sitting on the floor between their beds, staring at him with wide and slightly frantic eyes. He’s breathing hard, his arms and back ramrod straight but when he notices John is looking at him, he blinks and there’s only relief in his smile and his eyes. His posture uncoils until he’s leaning against his bed.

“Well, that took a while,” Jim says, sounding entirely too casual for this, “Couldn’t wake you up, Bones. I was starting to get a bit worried, but hey, you’re up, it’s all cool now.”

“You shouldn’t try waking me up. I could’ve hurt you, Jim,” John states, reaching out to grip the wrist of the arm Jim started to rub in a way that maybe seemed subtle for him, but not for the doctor in him, “Damn it, I _did_ hurt you. Come here. Show me.”

Jim lets John pull him until they’re sitting next to each other and then rolls the sleeve of his red undershirt up. “I scratched my arm with the nightstand, Bones. It’s not a big deal. You didn’t hurt me, see?”

John inspects the wound. It’s lineal, superficial, with minimal bleeding—just an abrasion as Jim described.

It doesn’t make him feel any better. It’s still his fault.

Jim must have incredible reflexes for him to just have gotten a graze out of the deal. The one time Duke tried doing the same, John broke his nose and almost dislocated his jaw too.
He grabs the med-kit he always keeps near his bed and takes the dermal regenerator out of it.

Jim huffs, rolls his eyes and tries to pry his arm away from his hand, but John doesn’t let him. He keeps trying to break free as John passes the regenerator on the scrape but only feebly and once John is done, he sighs and runs a finger on the newly healed skin.

Jim shakes his head, stands up and flops down on his bed, lying on his side to look at John.

He’s smiling now, softly but earnestly, and John can practically feel the last remnants of his nightmares vanishing in the strength of Jim’s warmth.

“Anyone ever told you that you’re a mother hen, Bones?”

“Shut up,” John mumbles crankily, “I’m a doctor, damn it, if I want to heal a goddamn mosquito bite I’m gonna do it and you’re gonna sit down and take it.”

Jim chuckles and starts stripping to go to bed.

John would pretend he’s not staring any other day but today he’s drained hence his eyes linger and trace lines and curves of taut muscle and smooth skin he’s not allowed to touch.

He remembers how close Jim stayed when John needed him and how easy it would’ve been to turn his comforting touch into something else, the only thing stopping him being the fact that then how was he supposed to be sure Jim wanted him too and wasn’t just pitying him? John might be older than the Federation itself, but he’s never been pathetic enough to take a pity fuck, to take pity of any kind from anyone.

He’s quick to avoid Jim’s eyes when he gets the feeling Jim would very much like to cheer him up by sitting in his lap.

John knows than once they cross that line, there will be no turning back.

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The pace in the Academy gets brutal soon enough.

They have tests in their third week. John makes sure to score above the average in everything that isn’t Medical Track and nothing but perfect in what’s related to it.

Jim does the exact opposite. John sort of regrets holding back as much as he did because Jim’s scores are practically flawless but he couldn’t be happier about it, feels a burst of pride so strong he doesn’t even try keeping his grin in check.

He gets a hand on the small of Jim’s back as they’re standing in front of the big screens showing the results of First Year Cadets.

It’s a good thing he does it. Jim is so stunned it seems he’d fall flat on his ass unless John keeps him straight.

“You did great, Jim,” he congratulates him, rooting Jim to the spot when he ducks his head and tries to shy away from his touch. He knows it’s disbelief what’s pushing Jim away and he will leave no room for it. He tugs him closer. “Still thinking you shouldn’t be here? That you owe this to anyone but yourself?”

Jim squirms, shaking his head, but it’s still better than out loud rebuttal of his words and it’s almost
perfect when he beams at him, leaning into him as he takes one more look at the charts.

“He cheated or slept his way to it, obviously,” a voice says somewhere behind them.

A few others give their agreements. John just barely contains a growl, but he identifies the source swiftly and turns around to glare at Finnegan and his escort of dumbasses.

He keeps Jim close to his body and makes sure his friend doesn’t notice the spiteful stares around them.

John won’t let the fuckers ruin this for him.

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It’s another Friday night and Edith insists he should be resting before his shift at the hospital but John is enjoying himself and he doesn’t exactly tell her he needs Jim more than he needs sleep, but he gets the impression the woman gets it anyway. She lets him be with a secretive smile that makes him frown and should worry him but he shrugs it off and goes back to Jim, sipping his third and probably last bourbon of the night; never mind he could drink gallons of it and still not manage to be even slightly tipsy.

Watching Jim never gets old. He’s always stunning and while the kid might think he enhances it by putting on a show for the customers throwing bottles as he mixes their drinks, John has to disagree with him.

Jim is never more beautiful than in the rare moments he lets his mask slip, when he cuts off the act. When he thinks there’s no one to impress, no reason to stand taller, to appear tougher than he is. When he’s lightly snoring surrounded by a myriad of PADDs on the desk; when he’s looking out through the window, his mind in some distant place John doesn’t know about and can’t reach; when he lets himself be hauled back to the present by the touch of John’s hand on his shoulder, smiling up at him as if he’s won something he never thought he would.

John shares the sentiment, vehemently so. It’s been nine weeks and his memory stretches further and further back, not losing track of anything since he can’t really forget. His brain isn’t capable of error any longer and that’s one of the things that alienate him the most. Being able to let go, to take that respite, that’s Human. It’s something beyond his reach now but with Jim by his side it doesn’t feel quite so terrible. He still remembers everything but it’s a petty blur when he compares it to his brief time with his roommate and friend, his could-be-partner-for-life. His mate.

Mate. That’s a word he’s been avoiding using, but that has been swirling in his mind all the same. He’s been rummaging through Sam’s old notes about Olduvai, about what she thought the social habits of Mars’ inhabitants were. She believed they only formed one couple for life, that they lived and died together afterward. Something inside of him twitches when he reads that. It feels spot-on, despite the fact he’s had a variety of partners since his grudged eternity began. He never thought about staying with any of them, or making them stay, aware at all moments it was not meant to last and not wanting it to. Even with Jocelyn, it was more about chasing loneliness away than keeping her by his side. What he wanted was company.

It’s different with Jim. When they’re together, John stops wanting to have a place of his own; a bit of space in the universe carved and meant just for him.

When they touch, John feels he’s exactly where he’s meant to be.

The C-24 in his pocket has never felt so heavy, so full of purpose.
He could bet it’s going to be worth the wait, if he somehow can make Jim stay by his side.

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John comes back from the E.R. at 9 o’clock in the morning feeling more bored than tired, the only excitement in the last 24 hours of his life being two appendectomies he had to perform in two people that decided to ignore their pain until it was too damn late to do anything else than hospitalize them and pump them full of antibiotics prior and post-surgery.

Their dorm is quiet and dark despite of the hour. Jim is usually up by this time and John’s gut tells him that this change of behavior can’t mean anything good, even if Jim seems like he could simply be sound asleep curled on his side with his back to the door and still clad in the clothes he always wears to work at the bar.

His breathing and heartbeat inform John otherwise.

Jim is wide awake and hurting.

John needs to find out where and what he can do to make it better and fast. God only knows how long Jim has been like this.

“Jim?” Why didn’t you look for me? “Are you okay?”

Of course he’s not, doesn’t mean he’ll tell me shit about it. For all the trust they share, Jim can be even more tight-lipped than John sometimes. But it doesn’t matter; John doesn’t need and won’t demand explanations. He only wants a chance to be there for Jim, to be able to soothe whatever ache he’s enduring as much as he can.

“Bones,” Jim acknowledges his arrival coolly, detachedly, and the way he’s completely closed off freezes John in place.

He’s never heard this particular pitch before, not from Jim, never from Jim, not even after the worst of Jim’s nightmares when he’s trying hard to pretend there’s nothing wrong. The realization of how much he’s come to cherish the special and caring way Jim calls him hits him like a brick wall and he reels with it for a bit, his hands hovering over Jim’s flanks unsure about whether he should or shouldn’t touch him now.

John decides to go for it, lets his hands grip Jim and start rubbing lightly, then firmly when he gets absolutely no reaction from him.

Thank fuck Jim just spoke, even if it was just a word, because John would be seriously considering catatonia by now if he hadn’t and he’d be a whole lot more frantic than he already is.

Still, he can’t completely disregard it. He wants to get his tricorder but something tells him he shouldn’t let go of Jim, not right now. He stays where he is and slowly, gently rolls Jim on his back so he can look at his face.

His friend’s features are just as blank as his voice, his eyes a dull hue of light blue that won’t meet his own. “Jim, talk to me. What happened? Are you hurt?”

Jim doesn’t blink, doesn’t move. “No.”

The hell you’re not, John thinks but doesn’t call Jim out of his bullshit, doesn’t reach for his tricorder either. He knows Jim isn’t bleeding from anywhere, that this will be more complicated to fix than that.
With the same gentle tugs, he hauls Jim to a sitting position and cups his face with both hands. Jim is compliant like a ragdoll to everything he does and barely blinks while John glowers and fixes him with a worried look, trying to decide what the hell to do.

It’s obvious enough he won’t get any more words or much of anything out of Jim but he can’t leave him to his own devices to deal with—whatever it is the awful thing that caused this is.

“We’re going out,” John announces at length, pulling Jim to his feet and nodding when Jim keeps standing on his own, “It’s nice outside. We haven’t had breakfast in the docks yet. Time to change that.”

The Jim he’s familiar with would be excited like a child about it and also chastising him for not lying down to rest for a bit first after his shift but this Jim doesn’t. He goes along with John, quiet as a tomb, and the former Marine stops trying to make sense of where his gaze dawdles because Jim isn’t looking anywhere, not really, just the same way he isn’t there with him, not entirely, not yet but John is going to fix that somehow.

He’s going to fix it, it’s a vow that he makes to both Jim and himself.

***

John buys some oysters and clams for him and crab meat for Jim after pointing out every single seafood in the market, asking whether Jim is allergic to it or not and getting a barely-there nod for each of them except for the crabs. He makes a mental note to update Jim’s medical history once they’re back, although being fair whoever put ‘seafood’ in general in it got it almost right.

They walk until they find a small and abandoned but suitably solid pier to sit down and eat. The breeze blowing brings fresh air to them while moving the not-so-pleasant smells from the sea in a nice balance, the early morning Sun keeps them warm and this side of the city is a perfect respite from the noise and general frenzy they’re usually submitted to, the quiet rumble of the waves a rhythmic and calming background sound.

It takes some convincing—and John would fucking welcome Jim calling him a mother hen again but it doesn’t happen—but Jim begins chewing, taking small bites of the meat after John puts some lemon on it and his own food.

John fills the silence telling Jim about the idiotic patients he had to operate and that will remain in the ICU for at least a couple of days (“You’d think people know pain that doesn’t go away with anything and just keeps getting worse is an actual symptom that needs medical attention but turns out some still believe in magic and elves or whatever it is they think it’s going to fix their damn issue instead of a doctor.”) despite the fact that appendicitis in the 23rd century shouldn’t be more than an ambulatory procedure.

They finish eating and Jim still isn’t talking, but he’s blinking more often now and his posture has loosened—if barely just.

Once his hands are free and he’s washed the smell of the seafood off his fingers with more lemon and seawater, he surrounds Jim’s shoulders with an arm and pulls him closer to his side until there’s only virtual space between them.

He expects Jim to tense but acquiesce to the new arrangement. Jim lets out a sigh that seems to come from so deep within his body it leaves him boneless and sags against him instead, burrowing into his chest and neck.
John doesn’t dare disturb the comfort Jim has finally allowed himself to take. He scarcely moves a muscle until Jim takes a PADD out of his jacket and shoves it to his free hand after unlocking the screen with deft fingers to go back to his previous place under John’s chin.

Jim’s inbox is on display. The last message reads ‘Commander Kirk, Winona’ as sender. It’s a holovid sent from deep space and John refrains from opening it. He doesn’t know why Jim handed the PADD to him but he won’t invade his privacy—again—without express, worded permission.

He does get some idea now about what could’ve happened to Jim for him to be so crushed.

Whatever his mother said to him, it wasn’t good.

John holds Jim tighter and waits.

“Could you—“ Jim rasps, pauses and tries again, firmer this time, “Could you delete the last comm, Bones? Please.”

(Of course,” John jabs his finger on the screen quickly, letting go of the breath he’s been holding ever since he found Jim this morning. He’s talking again, calling him Bones and letting him help, “Done.”

_I’d erase your mother too, if I could._ God, but John wants to, as horrid as that sounds.

He hands the PADD back to Jim, feels him twisting to put it back in his jacket, feels his eyelashes against the skin of his neck as Jim blinks. That’s how close they are and John isn’t planning to let go of him anytime soon.

“I thought she was going to be happy,” Jim mutters. His tone is even, resigned, but not detached, “That I’m finally doing something with my life, you know.”

“She should be,” John assures him, “She should be and if she’s not that’s her problem, not yours. You’re doing great, Jim, and if she can’t be proud of you then—“ _what? You’re better off without her? It’s his mother we’re talking about!_ What is he supposed to say? He tries thinking about something Sam would say. She was always the comforting one of the twins, not him.

“She’s going to talk to Pike,” Jim cuts him, “I guess she thinks Pike needs to know what a fuck-up I am so he can throw me out.”

“Pike is fucking _thrilled_ with you. He won’t listen to that—woman,” John snarls, “She can try to ruin this for you, Jim, but she won’t be able to if you don’t let her. And I won’t let _you_ let her, do you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Jim sighs, speaks softly. John hopes he’s smiling even though he can’t see him, even if it’s just a little. “I hear you. Bones?”

“Yes?”

“I’m still hungry.”

John lets go of Jim gradually but never completely.

Jim smiles and it’s small and forced and fleeting but it’s for him and John appreciates it all the same. He keeps a hand on his nape when they’re both standing and walking back to the market.

“Let’s get you more food then.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There’s an outbreak of Rigelian fever in the E.R. He’s sent home early since the whole place is shut down and parts ways with a quarantined Geoffrey after convincing him of—unknowingly to him, of course—injecting himself with John’s plasma.

His colleague had a way too long and close exposure to the index case—while they were still battling to diagnose it, because believe it or not, tricorders don’t do all the work, that’s always up to them—and Starfleet Medical didn’t have the antiserum—the last records of the disease on Earth were 50 years old, but still, John rolled his eyes and cussed—nor did the rest of the hospitals in San Francisco.

So John came up with a story about a little trip to the black market and smuggled a syringe to Geoffrey’s isolation chamber.

“Official aid won’t be fast enough and you know it,” he’d told him, “Just make sure to toss it in the recycler unit later and don’t tell a soul about it.”

“Leonard, you—” Geoffrey had gaped at him, but recovered fast and applied the serum in his arm, “You are a man of resources. I owe you my life. Thank you.”

“You owe me a drink,” John rectified and headed out.

So this is how John finds himself returning early to their dorm on Saturday night. He thinks about changing, taking yet another shower—paranoid? A little bit, yeah, the fact he’s immune to the virus doesn’t mean it’s not on him, although the rational part of his mind knows he took enough decontamination showers back in the hospital to get rid of it—and meeting Jim at the bar.

He thinks about it but doesn’t do it.

Jim is already here, in the bathroom with the door locked, and the smell of blood in the air is thick and unmistakable.

“Goddamn it, Jim,” if he weren’t so pissed Jim didn’t call him, John would definitely be impressed it took Jim almost three months to get into a bar brawl, which is the most likely scenario he can think of, “You’re opening this door right this sec or I’m going to think you’re passed out in there and going in on my own to knock some damn sense into that bratty head of yours.”

He’s ready to use his medical override but Jim acquiesces and the door whooshes open to reveal him standing in front of the sink; chest and feet bare, a long and irregular wound in the left side of his hairline that’s still bleeding and making him squint, knuckles bloody and inflamed, right shoulder dislocated and a collection of bruises on his ribs that judging from Jim’s breathing are just that; bruised. Nothing seems particularly serious.

Small mercies, John thinks bitterly.

“I was going to let you set my shoulder when you got back,” Jim mumbles, low and small, and it’s amazing how much younger he looks bloody and beaten in the middle of all the white of the tiles.

“Oh, were you?” John snorts, looking down at the supplies from his own med-kit Jim has aligned on
the mirror to evidently do the rest of the job himself, “How kind of you, I’m touched.” Absolutely furious, is what I am. I thought you trusted me.

He doesn’t have any fucking right to be mad if Jim doesn’t, though. John hasn’t even told him who he is, how can he demand anything from him? Moreover, he’s aware Jim isn’t used to having someone who actually gives a crap about him, so probably trust has nothing to do with him hiding this from John. It’s just another bad habit that resurfaced tonight.

And of course Jim wouldn’t know a luxation of a joint is a medical emergency—John checked, neurotic bastard that he is, and it wasn’t part of the first aid course all Cadets had to take and he complained to a lot of people about it, including the Head of Starfleet Medical. The nerve damage it can cause isn’t something he can fix later, so this is what John needs to tend to first.

He takes a small towel from the cabinet beside the sink and shoves it in Jim’s face, pressing it firmly on the gash on his forehead, “Well then, Doctor Kirk, let me tell you you’ve been doing a remarkably lousy job so far so I’ll take it from here, if you don’t mind.”

Jim blushes, bristling, but his frown is nothing compared to John’s glower and once he finally looks at John in the face, he goes back to tug his chin on his chest and half-heartedly retorts, “I just got here too, y’know.”

“He takes a small towel from the cabinet beside the sink and shoves it in Jim’s face, pressing it firmly on the gash on his forehead, “Well then, Doctor Kirk, let me tell you you’ve been doing a remarkably lousy job so far so I’ll take it from here, if you don’t mind.”

“Hold this,” John instructs, taking Jim’s left hand to take the place of his own in his head. He does a quick general scan with the tricorder to confirm his diagnosis. He was right, the head wound is minor and can wait, “We’re gonna see to your shoulder first. Come with me.”

He walks back to the room and pats the table for Jim to sit on, since he needs better leverage than the bed to do the maneuver right. Jim, wobbly as he is, is quick to get it and hops on it.

John knows Jim’s medical history by memory, knows he’s allergic to local anesthetics and mild painkillers, knows he can either knock him out cold or cause him pain while he works. But Jim needs to be awake for the setting of his shoulder so he’s going to have to bear the pain.

He grabs his tricorder, makes sure there aren’t associated lesions in Jim’s shoulder he’d be aggravating by treating the luxation in the least invasive way.

“You need something to bite into?” he asks, already grabbing Jim’s wrist. When Jim shakes his head and stiffens, as if he’s waiting for John to do it right then, he realizes this isn’t the first time this has happened to him and that probably all the previous times someone did an awful job and by some miracle managed not to leave Jim crippled, “Jesus Christ, kid, this isn’t how it’s done. Lie down, breathe deep and try to relax your muscles, otherwise this will do more bad than good.”

Jim lies down alright, left hand still holding the towel in place, but he doesn’t relax, not even a bit. The desk is not large enough for his 6 feet, but it’ll have to do. John knows if he tries to take him to the hospital, Jim will bolt.

He sighs, kicks off his boots and starts using the thumb on Jim’s wrist to trace circles on the smooth skin in the inner side. “I’m mad because you didn’t call me, Jim. I’m not judging you. I don’t judge my patients and I sure as hell won’t judge you.”

The emphasis he gave to the word has Jim’s breath hitching but he controls it fast. Despite of it, John knows he caught the meaning of it—that Jim isn’t like anyone else to him, won’t ever be—and attempts to give him a small smile, his fingers still gripping and stroking Jim’s wrist.

“Let me help you, Jim,” he drawls, “That’s all I ask.”
“Bones, I—“ Jim licks his lips, turns his head to the right side of the table where he’s standing. His eyes are bright, fraught and pleading, and John would say yes to anything he asked of him to take the distress from him, “I didn’t ask for this, I swear, but I couldn’t just hide and let them—I mean, maybe I would’ve done it anyway even if I didn’t have to, but that was before—before I met you.”

John is listening—and a surge of triumph, of elation goes through him at knowing that it’s his presence in Jim’s life what has been tempering his need to cause himself harm—but Jim has finally relaxed and he doesn’t know—doubts it will—if it’s going to last, so he has to interrupt him.

“Gonna do it now, Jim,” he warns, stretching Jim’s arm until he has straightened it out completely and putting his right feet on his armpit. He needs to use his whole weight for this but keep his strength in check. “Take a deep breath.”

He pulls Jim’s arm back into place neatly, barely giving him time to grunt and writhe on the table, a staccato of short gasps a telltale of the pain that sings in his nerves.

“C’mon, let’s get you cleaned up,” he hauls Jim back to his feet, holding him by the waist, mindful of his right side and ribs and guides him back to the bathroom.

He drops the towel on the floor and inspect the cut. It’s swelling, but it’s not bleeding anymore, just as he was expecting. “Someone threw a rock at you, huh? Good thing you have a hard head.” Jim huffs out a laugh that dies down quickly and doesn’t reach his eyes. “I think it was a piece of brick, but yeah.”

John raises an eyebrow at that but doesn’t push. He focuses on washing the gravel off Jim’s face instead. His movements are not exactly textbook-methodic and detached, he’s aware of it, and he’s also aware he’s stepping on the thin line that separates comforting from taking advantage of Jim’s vulnerability to touch him.

Jim isn’t complaining, seems to be enjoying the attention as he leans down on the sink, keeping his eyes and mouth closed, and lets John work one-handed while using his other hand to help him hold the uncomfortable position.

Once he’s satisfied he’s removed every scrap of dirt possible, he fishes another clean towel and dabs Jim’s face to dry it. He repeats the process with Jim’s hands, washing the blood and grime off his battered fingers and drying them gently.

He scans him again and the tricorder doesn’t display any warnings, so John leads him to his bed which is closer, sits him down on it and start using the dermal regenerator after giving up on trying to convince him to take a painkiller—Jim is right, it won’t be worse than what he already endured—sitting in front of him and gripping Jim’s chin to keep him still. Their legs touch, almost tangled in each other, but it’s not the right time to enjoy the unusual points of contact and John pushes that to the back of his mind.

“Edith’s ex-husband showed up,” Jim finally tells him, John breathes a sigh of relief at knowing he won’t have to push to get answers, “Guy’s an asshole. She told me to call the cops and wait in the back because he could lash out, but—”

But you couldn’t. John doesn’t need to hear the rest of it. He knows Jim isn’t capable of cowering from anything, of abandoning anyone to their luck, and he admires that from him; his courage and loyalty, knows that it’s one of the qualities that’s going to make him a great leader someday. He knows that Jim won’t leave anyone behind, that he won’t be like Sarge was; just strength and a great sense of humor masking a big ego underneath, masquerading as leadership, as friendship, as something he was ready to ditch whenever duty called him to.
“You did call the cops.”

“Yeah,” Jim answers, even though John’s tone was more menacing than questioning, his thoughts cripplingly entangled with the past, his movements automatic but deft as he knits Jim’s skin back together, “I just beat the crap out of him before they got there too, as soon as he tried to hit her.”

He lets Jim’s voice anchor him to the present, purposefully focuses on the intense blue of Jim’s gaze that he keeps fixed on John as he treats him, eyes wide and bloodshot, but without the edge of desperation they had before. It’d calm John down if Jim weren’t barely cringing and twitching under the regenerator, as if he were so used to its bite he hardly registered it anymore.

“Unless the asshole is laying half-dead in a hospital, Jim, I’d say you got the worst of the ordeal,” John comments.

Jim looks smug now. John rolls his eyes, guessing what he’s going to say. “There were three of them, Bones, and I left them with fewer teeth and broken bones and hopefully smaller egos too.”

“And then you ran the hell away from there,” John finishes for him, at the same time he’s done with the wound.

He gestures with his head for Jim to lie down and scans his torso with the tricorder while kneeling beside the bed. It’s just a lot of bruising, same reading as before.

He sets off on Jim’s ribs and he’s still pissed, that’s why he doesn’t even think before he’s asking, tone taut and sharp, “You know Cadets are supposed to have impeccable behavior, Jim. What the hell were you thinking? What are you going to do if this reaches the Academy, if Pike finds out?”

Jim’s self-satisfaction evaporates so thoroughly it’s like it was never there. He looks upset again.

Ah, so that what was worrying him and John just rubbed it in his face even though Jim did the right thing and knew exactly what the consequences could be.

John bites his tongue but it’s too late. He already put his foot in it.

“I just hope that he lets me explain,” Jim replies, and the way his eyes shut tightly has nothing to do with the pain in his ribs, “that he listens to what I have to say.”

He turns off the regenerator, puts it on the nightstand for a moment, doesn’t think about what he’s about to do either but this time it feels right.

“Jim,” he calls, running a hand through the soft fair hair.

Jim’s eyes fly open, imploring, tilting his head towards him, “Bones, I don’t want to leave. I don’t care if I have to take the Command track even though I’m not sure I’m right for it, I don’t care if I have to spend the rest of the semester and the next washing Pike’s car or something, I just—I’ll do anything to stay.”

“I know you will,” John says gently, and waits until their eyes meet to add, “But if that doesn’t work and you get expelled, I’m quitting.”

Jim sits up, half a breath caught in his chest, and grips his shoulders so tightly John would be getting bruises if he could. “What?”

“I’m leaving with you. Wherever you go, I’ll be there if you want me, Jim.”
“Bones—Bones, you can’t, you—” Jim’s hands loosen their grasp on him, but they stay there as Jim’s eyes get increasingly wet and he looks at John like he can’t believe he’s real, looks around wildly as if he’s expecting a giant clown to pop in through the window and announce he’s dreaming. It breaks John’s heart more than a little. “You’d do that for me?”

John exhales. Jim still has no idea. *I’d do anything for you.* “If it’s space you want, there are other ways. We don’t have to depend on Starfleet. They’ll be missing out, anyway, not us. We’re brilliant, Jim, they need us, not the other way around.”

“Us,” Jim breathes, practically chokes on it, “Bones.”

A small cry of pain makes it out of Jim’s throat but he clings to John’s neck all the same and John is careful to surround his back lower than where his injuries are, right in the small of his back. 

There’s nothing platonic in the posture but John doesn’t kiss the span of skin available to him in Jim’s neck. He simply breathes him in, holds him firmly so he won’t fall off the bed and hurt himself further.

This isn’t a love confession. It goes beyond that. For him, it’s an oath; a promise that he’s going to stay by Jim’s side no matter what.

“I want you there, Bones,” Jim says, voice hoarse but certain, “Here, anywhere, with me.”

“You’ve got me, Jim. We’re together in this,” John pushes Jim up on the bed, sits down with him. Their arms are still around each other, but now John can look at him as he says, “Just don’t do this again, don’t leave me out when you need me.”

“Okay,” Jim nods and for now, John believes him. He’s aware Jim will need reminders of this, but he’s ready to give them as often as he has to.

He finishes up healing him, produces a makeshift sling for his half-healed shoulder out of one of his old t-shirts. He’ll need to sneak him in to the hospital to treat the soft tissue, doesn’t have the equipment to do it in their room. Luckily, Jim’s physical is coming and it’s the perfect excuse, John will just keep that part of the appointment to himself.

Jim doesn’t move from his bed as John changes for the night. He doesn’t push him. Something inside him uncurls as Jim settles on his chest. John doesn’t question it, lets it loose and closes his eyes, a hand firm on the back of Jim’s neck. He extends the other to get the covers over them and leaves it out on top of Jim’s back.

The bed is a tight fit for them both, but it’s the best night of sleep John has gotten in his entire life. Neither of them has nightmares that night.

***

“I will talk with Captain Pike myself if I have to, Leonard,” Edith assures him. She’s all apologies and concern next Friday as Jim works and John tags along despite he has a long shift ahead of him, probably a 48-hours one, “I won’t stand aside while Jim loses the best chance of his life because he was defending me. I wanted him to stay out of it because I knew what would happen. I can take a few punches, Ben wasn’t going to go further than that.”

“That could help, I guess,” John says, skeptical. It’s been a week already and if he were naïve, he’d think Pike doesn’t know about it but the man could be waiting it out so they felt safe. “But if he doesn’t believe Jim, he won’t agree to see you.” *And if he doesn’t believe in Jim anymore, he’ll want*
“Then it’s going to be okay, right?” Edith takes his hands on hers, squeezing tight, and John tenses, but doesn’t pull away. Jim is the only one whose touch he enjoys, but he can compromise when someone else needs comfort and Edith is a strong woman but guilt is a strong poison too, John knows that from experience, saw it tormenting his sister for years. “He’ll understand Jim didn’t mean to disappoint him, that he was just looking out for me.”

He squeezes back, briefly. “Hopefully, he will.”

“Sorry to interrupt, guys,” Jim cuts in, sauntering behind the counter to get a couple of bottles and pointedly not looking at any of them. He sounds cheery, but John knows each and every kind of smile in Jim’s store and that one—*shit, no, Jim, it’s nothing like that*—is his I’m-hurt-but-I-don’t-want-you-to-know-I-am smile, “I’m stealing the vodka and the gin. Please, continue, don’t let me ruin the mood.”

Jim walks away as quickly as he came. John is so mad he could throw his glass against the wall and then destroy half the place, but he pinches the bridge of his nose and hits the table instead.

“Godfuckingdamn it.”

Edith is covering her mouth with a hand, seemingly horrified. “Aren’t you going after him?” she asks.

“He won’t listen to me right now,” John explains, downs his shot in one go and stands up, tossing some credits on the counter, “I’ll wait for him outside.”

He leans against the wall beside the back door, rubs his face with both hands and wonders if this is going to be the night when Jim is going to hook up with some chick, some alien chick or both or worse; if he’s going to pick a man to go home with, right in front of John’s face.

He knows the particular rumor about Jim sleeping around is true, if hugely exaggerated. Being Jim’s roommate, he knows Jim actually doesn’t spend every night having wild and acrobatic sex, as everyone else seems to believe at least partially.

It’s only one night of the week and Jim never brings anyone to their dorm, always chooses to go where his conquest lives and it’s not Friday night, when John is usually around to banter with him in between orders and to throw a bright grin to across the bar when he’s too busy to talk.

It’s Saturday night, while John is working in the E.R. Not today. And John is more than slightly worried, doesn’t know how he’s going to react to someone else touching Jim. He’s used to Jim doing the touching, sure, but those touches are always passing and always have a purpose, are always meant to get something from people, even if Jim hides that well.

His gut is telling him it won’t be pretty, that it will end badly for whoever the sorry fucker who’s trying to get lucky is but, damn it—he has no right to make a scene if he’s not going to kiss Jim within an inch of his life after that and he can’t do that right now. He needs to share his secret with Jim first and he’s not ready to do that, not yet.

He stupidly thought that was okay, that he had time, that until they acknowledged the indescribable thing they have John would be able to get his shit together and tell Jim exactly who—*what*—he is.

Jim has proven loyal and wonderful and he might even be ready for him. This is all on John; he’s the one slowing them down.
It’s not the fact Jim has sex with lots of people what bothers him—okay, he’s not exactly happy about that, he admits it, but Jim’s 22 and completely incapable of keeping still; a dazzling and continuously moving force and he needs an outlet for at least a part of all that energy. What bothers him is that he can’t stop him without starting something between them—something that, if he’s honest with himself, started the moment he laid eyes on him—and he can’t do that with any other name that isn’t his own, not even Bones.

Jim deserves to know everything. They deserve the best beginning they can have.

Lies will get them nowhere. Lies could destroy them.

John has already lied for too long. He can’t risk that.

Chapter End Notes

In Star Trek canon, the cure for Rigelian fever is discovered much, much later (over a hundred years later) but let’s assume in AOS at least something went right and they found it sooner (I mean, they're going to lose Vulcan, let's cut the universe some slack).
It’s close to 4 in the morning when John finally admits Jim isn’t going to give him a chance to explain. Not tonight and definitely not later, not unless John himself brings back the topic and how is he going to do that exactly? He’s the one with feelings that go beyond friendship—as far as he knows—not Jim. Jim could be jealous of Edith, for all John’s gut insists it isn’t that, that it’s about him, about them and what John keeps and will keep ruining unless he comes clean to Jim.

He’s rubbing his eyes with both hands when the back door opens.

Edith looks at him, shakes her head. “Jim just left through the front door, Leonard. I’m sorry.”

John sighs. He isn’t surprised, but there’s something he needs to know. “Edith, has he ever flirted with you? I mean, has he done it and meant it?”

John has his answer in the harsh features that quickly take over Edith’s face. “If you think this is about me, you are not the man I thought you were, Leonard McCoy.”

* * *

His enhanced endurance comes quite handy the next couple of days. He doesn’t sleep before his long shift, can’t leave the E.R. until Monday morning and has to rush to start the new classes of the Medical track.

By all means, he should pass out somewhere during lunch and go back for his afternoon classes barely resembling a conscious Human being, but he’s too busy cursing his luck—the same luck that made Jim walk in the exact second he was just trying to be comforting, not trying to get laid, damn it, and the same that made his mad and almost completely different from Jim’s schedule start today, of all days— to feel even remotely tired.

He supposes he should be more worried about the possibility of Pike finding out what he only trusted Jim with but he isn’t.
At this point, he’s starting to think it’d do less damage to all involved if things between them didn’t work out, if somehow they weren’t meant to be after all. Spending a couple of decades missing something he never truly had, missing the phantom of a relationship he was never brave enough to start—well, that isn’t ideal, but it’s better than a lifetime of regret after dragging Jim into the mess that’s his own life, into the mess that is him.

God knows the kid has enough messes of his own to deal with.

John is getting cold feet. And he’s not feeling nearly as selfish as he should be to keep Jim by his side.

If Jim wants out, John will—miss him forever, until he finally figures out a way of dying and staying that way. A couple of decades? That’s a good joke, but not enough time to forget the warmth Jim has brought to him, the sense of belonging and rightness he’s been searching for his whole life, how Jim feels between his arms—let him go.

The sky on Earth will remain forbidden to him because it’ll be Jim’s eyes haunting him wherever he goes. John will leave Earth and never come back, find his next mission and hop to the next one right after that. No breaks in between and definitely no more longing for someone who could make him feel as if he was worth every tear, every ache, every nightmare.

Was he really going to convince Jim to take a decision John was never given? Would Jim really have a choice or is he just as helpless as John to stop feeling like his only rightful place is by John’s side? Would he give up everything, including his humanity, to be with him?

Did John really want to know?

***

So you are running again, Sam says to him that night. It’s a dream, it’s a nightmare, it’s something in between because his sister looks angry and disappointed and John remembers exactly when and why she was looking at him like that when she was alive.

Apparently his mind has decided to use old fuel to try and make John want to fight for Jim now that he’s giving up at the first obstacle they’ve encountered, now that Jim has been out of John’s sight for long enough he can think straight again, even if there’s a deep sense of dread growing in him at the mere thought of leaving Jim.

You’re running, aren’t you, John? Like when we were little and you left me because I wanted to follow our parent’s footsteps and you chose the army instead. You chose a life of denial, a life away from everything you loved so you could forget mom and dad weren’t with us anymore. You left me.

I didn’t leave you! We wanted different things, Sam. I never stopped writing to you. John tries to explain but it’s bullshit. Of course it is and Sam knows it. This part of the dream is pure memory and Sam gives him the same sad look she did back when they discussed this.

Once a year on our birthday, yeah, I know. And I know you didn’t mean to leave me, John, that you thought I’d be better off without you and how you refused to think about what had happened but you never stopped to think that I didn’t mind helping you, that I just wanted my brother with me, no matter the shape he was in.

I needed you, John. You told yourself you were protecting me, giving me a chance to have a normal life, but I had the same chance you did to have one; none. You didn’t protect me, you didn’t protect yourself, you just ran and made it all worse. For both of us.
The room changes then. It’s no longer the house Sam and him shared until she died, it’s the dorm in the Academy and she’s sitting beside John on his bed, practically translucent with the street lights on her back. John blinks several times, frowns and tries to move an arm, a finger, knows that if this is a dream then he’ll be able to touch her, but he can’t move and he isn’t sure anymore. Is this his sister? Is it a ghost? Is he finally going insane?

_We know how good you are at running, John. Don’t do it again, not this time. If you can’t stay for you, do it for me. I need to know my little brother is okay and you’re not okay, John, You haven’t been okay for so long and you won’t ever be if you don’t allow yourself to heal. Jim needs you and he is everything you need, do you think that’s coincidence? You think he’s going to be better off without you too? Look at him and tell me he doesn’t need you. Look at him and tell him you don’t need him._

“Bones?”

John blinks, takes a gasping breath and straightens up on the bed so fast his spine pops.

Sam has vanished and in her place is Jim and he’s as corporeal as John hoped Sam would be, his shoulders firm and warm under John’s grip.

He’s still in his Cadet Reds and John has sweat through the t-shirt and sweatpants he wears to sleep so thoroughly they’re clinging to his skin, tingling.

Jim’s eyes follow the lines of his body quickly, as if he’s not sure he’s allowed to do so despite of all the previous times he’s blatantly and unrepentantly ogled John. John sees his cheeks blushing pink in the low light, sees how he deliberately keeps focused on his face when he speaks.

“You okay? Bad dream?”

John nods, even though he’s not sure if that’s what it was, and sighs when Jim’s fingers find their way to his nape, steadying him as Jim’s other hand mirrors John’s on his shoulder, “Jim,” he rasps, “You’re home.”

Jim seems to approve of John’s choice of words, judging by the way he gives him an eye-crinkling smile, “Yeah, I am. Long weekend, huh? You look awful.”

He’s definitely screwed if not even three days without Jim are enough to make him look like a mess.

“Thanks. You should’ve seen me in my first year of internship,” _fresh as a daisy_. The rest of the lie comes out of his mouth without permission, a speech he learned 3 lives ago. “I didn’t need a Halloween costume, had a permanent one after the first month of sleep deprivation and crappy food and gurneys that aren’t beds but are better than the floor.”

Jim laughs, of course he does, and John feels like the cheat he’s always been forced to be and that only now he’s considering to stop being. “I’m sure you made a nice zombie, Bones. C’mon, up, up. Go take a shower. I brought take out and it looks like you need it.”

Jim smiles all the way through their late dinner. John gets the impression he’s trying too hard to be pleasant and wants to say something, wants to tell him there’s no need to fake anything, that John will take what he has to give even if they’re not smiles and laughter; that if there’s something bothering him then John wants to help but doesn’t.

Chances are John is the thing bothering him, that Jim can’t figure him out and there’s a multitude of questions he wants to ask that are variations of what are we doing? and what are we? and John can’t answer any of them, not right now.
Sam—the Sam he remembers, the spirit of his twin who can’t yet move on to the next life because John refuses to live this one that seems to have no end, a hallucination of his sick mind, all of them, maybe he doesn’t want to know which one it was—is right.

He can’t run. They wouldn’t survive. None of them would. It’s too late.

It was already late since the moment John tried to scare Jim away and Jim stuck around anyway.

***

Jim is on the Command track now and the rumor mill is having a field day.

For reasons John won’t ever get, everyone says Jim is going to fail at being better than his Father—as if that’s actually Jim’s goal instead of finding a path he wants to walk on his own—or worse, that he’s going to put his family to shame by taking rash decisions that will get people killed because he’s nothing but arrogance and carelessness to them and John doesn’t think he’s ever heard so much bullshit coming out of supposedly smart people’s mouths.

He stops trying to control his temper by the third time he hears something similar to it and he’s not exactly proud of making some Cadets cry but defending Jim—Jim is—is his priority and he’ll be damned if he’s not going to do it right and make sure no one utters the same blatant lies twice.

Jim catches him correcting people sometimes—says Bones isn’t correcting anyone, that he’s intimidating everyone instead but doesn’t complain or tells him to stop—and presses close to his side, gazing at him as if John were that one thing he’s always missed but never thought he’d be able to find and keep.

John wraps a hand around his waist and doesn’t stop talking until the Cadets nod and apologize profusely to Jim, practically running away from them afterward.

***

John is taking notes in his Xenophysiology class when a merry Jim Kirk sits beside him as if he didn’t have anything better to do.

John raises an eyebrow at him and keeps writing down in his PADD for a minute, sighing when he notices the Instructor won’t notice Jim since they’re in the last row all the way to the top of the classroom and Jim seems to be stealthy when he wants to be.

“What are you doing here, Jim?” he asks in a whisper.

“Keeping you company, Bones,” Jim replies cheerily in a low voice, “The grumpy Cadet—that’s you, by the way—can’t be grumpy all day, his super power will run out. He needs to laugh every now and then.”

Despite of himself, John has to ask. “Super power?” Jim nods enthusiastically and gestures to his own eyebrows as he glowers in what John assumes is an impersonation of his frown. He rolls his eyes, “Jim, you won’t understand a thing here. Go study, I’ll meet you in our room.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jim scrunches his nose as he stares at the projection of a Tellarite bladder, “I understand everything. That’s totally a heart—or a liver, huh, or a lung. Or hey, maybe it’s all three! Kinda greenish, must be Orion. Am I right or what?”

John snorts, “That wasn’t even a nice try, Jim, and that’s a—“
“Cadet McCoy, come down here and describe this organ’ functions to the class since you seem to be getting bored of my lecture,” the Instructor—a tough Asian woman who is at least fifty but looks like she’s half of it and ready to kick anyone’s ass at a moment’s notice—orders.

John swears under his breath and scowls at the space previously occupied by his best friend who is no longer in sight. He gives a hasty affirmative and goes down the steps, feeling the eyes of his classmates drilling holes in his head as he explains what they should be hearing from their Instructor and not from him.

He knows he did a good job when the woman gives him a curt nod and sends him back to his seat, picking up where John left.

Jim is giving him two thumbs up from the floor when he reaches the last row. “That was awesome, Bones. You’re going to ace this class.”

“No if you give the Instructor reasons to hate me, Jim, no,” he tries to keep his face blank, but that’s always hard when Jim is grinning at him so obviously impressed and pleased, “Shouldn’t you be in Tactics or something?”

“We had a surprise test and I finished already,” knowing Jim, he was probably done in ten minutes and was growing so restless in his place his Professor practically begged him to leave early. “So I’ll stay here and wait for you, how about that?”

John sighs dramatically but pats Jim on the head—a little too hard, maybe, enough for Jim to look down as John bites back a smile—and moves his bag so Jim can sit closer to him as his class continues.

***

He’s been avoiding the bar where Jim works—he didn’t want to, since it meant even more time he had to be away from Jim on top of all the classes they don’t share now—but it’s only when it’s been two weeks of that strategy that he understands he just made it worse.

“Bones, you know I don’t mind if you go to see Edith instead of me, right?” Jim says, “We could chat a little while you’re with her. It could be nice, it doesn’t have to be awkward.”

Of all the things he could say or ask, the first one that comes out of John's mouth is, “Awkward?”

“Yeah, like the first time I saw you holding her hand. I was surprised, I mean, I thought that you—but that won’t happen again. Have you talked about alien politics with her, Bones? Man, she has a lot of interesting stuff to say.”

“Jim,” John pinches the bridge of his nose briefly, gestures Jim to sit back down on his bed where he’d been tying up his boots. Jim looks up at him with wide, expectant eyes and John should’ve seen this coming. He really needs to stop running, “I’m just going to say this once. I’m not interested in Edith. She was feeling guilty about what happened with her ex and I was trying to make her feel better, that was all you saw and there will be nothing else.”

Jim frowns. “So you don’t like her? You didn’t spend that night with her? You could really use getting laid, you know, Bones. You’re so uptight.”

John ignores the bait and speaks as patiently as he can despite how fucking frustrated he is. “No, Jim. I spent that night waiting for you to come back and when you didn’t I went to work. I haven’t talked with Edith ever since.”
Jim stares at him for almost a minute, long enough to convince himself John is being honest or to decide to confess what he says next in a quiet tone, “Actually, I talked to Pike about what happened. I thought he was going to kick me out the moment I was done telling him, but he didn’t. He seemed—pleased? That I told him at all. That’s weird, isn’t it? But he didn’t—kick me out, I mean. He just told me to be more careful and call him the next time I’m in trouble.”

John is sure Pike is more than glad to have earned Jim’s trust somehow, even if maybe Jim was half hoping he’d get expelled and never see John again, the same way John was expecting to get called and kicked out after Pike connected the dots with Jim’s help, to never have the chance to share his secret with Jim and ruin his life as a result.

It seems like they’re two of a kind and there’s no way around it.

“It’s not weird, Jim. He recruited you because he believes you can make a difference in the ‘fleet. He’s not going to fling that out the window the minute you screw up. You’re Human, Jim, you’re allowed mistakes every now and again. You’re the only one who thinks you need to be perfect to be worth it,” he almost wants to laugh. Maybe he’s not only trying to cheer Jim up, maybe he’s talking to himself too, even though he’s not Human anymore, “You’ve done a fine job impressing him so far, a few punches thrown for the right reasons aren’t going to change that.”

“Okay,” Jim grants, unsure, making an abortive motion to reach out to John and looking down.

“Hey,” John calls, makes Jim stand up after squeezing the hand he was going to grip him with, “Look at me, Jim. Will you try to remember that?”

Can he ask Jim to do that when he himself can’t do it?

“Yeah,” Jim nods a bit too easily, but smiles at him, “Yeah, I will. Thanks, Bones.”

*I’ll try too,* John thinks, promises, *for you.*

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry for taking this long ): in my defense I can say I’m graduating from college in a few days and I should be focusing on that instead of this. I hope this chapter didn’t suck so much.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Belated Christmas (sort of) chapter because I fail.

Happy holidays!

John settles more comfortably against the back of the chair, his eyes never straying from the sleeping form of his roommate; his best friend, his could-be mate, Jim.

Almost four months have passed since they met. Holidays are approaching fast and the Academy Campus is already half-empty, students and instructors both—everyone who has a home, really—taking a break from it to visit family and friends they’ve been neglecting because of duty.

A weary sigh slips from him. He thinks ruefully Jim and he have that in common, too, that none of them has a home to return to. And he shouldn’t be glad about it but he is, in a way. It means John can build a home around Jim; a home for him, for himself, for only them to share and cherish, and that Jim will see it for what it is—a desperate, but brave attempt to connect with the only one who could ever understand him.

He wonders if his plan for the winter break will spook Jim instead of bringing him closer to him. It’s a risk he wants to take all the same. He’s tired of the loneliness, tired of his head being full and his heart being empty to the point the frayed edges of the spaces all the people he cared for and that are now gone—have been for years, centuries—used to occupy gnaw at him, scarring him and making him shy away from everyone even though he wants nothing more than to have someone to care for again. Someone who, with any luck, will love him too and forgive the seams dripping with desperation and paranoia that his emotions have, that John doubts he’ll ever be able to smooth.

Jim shifts in his sleep, his limbs stretching towards John as if he can feel him, feel the echo of pain reverberating on the walls around them and chase it back to the source. Jim is so attuned to him he doesn’t even have to be awake to sense John needs him close and that—well, that scares him, but enthralls him too.

What is he doing to Jim? How close are they going to be if John confesses everything to Jim and that’s not enough to drive him away, if Jim accepts him for whom and what he is? The farthest they’ve gone so far is chaste cuddles whenever one of them needs a good night’s sleep, something to keep the nightmares at bay. They don’t ever talk about it in the morning, not even when they both wake up in the same bed in a position that’s far too intimate to be friendly but that’s not lewd enough to be blamed on arousal.

He leaves the PADD he hasn’t touched since Jim’s breath evened out on the desk and stands, circling the bed as he tries to push away the memory of Sam begging him to open up to Jim. He’s been refusing to ponder on what that encounter—if that’s what it was—meant.

He knows his body isn’t capable of having mental illnesses or illnesses of any kind, so even if he feels he’s going crazy it’s only an expression, a way of saying bitterness is burying whatever good qualities the C-24 identified in him and deemed him worthy of being super-Human instead of a monster.
It isn’t a matter of him believing in ghosts or not—because if monsters exist, if aliens exist, then why not spirits? Why would he refute the possibility of Human souls not moving on when they’re supposed to? God knows he’s more than aware of what it’s like to have unresolved business—it’s the fact he doesn’t want to believe his sister has been around the whole time to see what a mess John has become, how he’s been doing nothing but getting worse at adapting and better at running.

He thinks of Jocelyn and lost chances, remembers how Joanna felt in his arms, light and tiny, how her little giggles sounded like—how having a family, even a borrowed one, felt like.

He looks at Jim and sees a chance at redemption he’s not sure he deserves.

A long life of hiding and lying can’t be changed just like that. A few months aren’t enough to shake off old, embedded habits that were created to protect himself in the first place.

But this isn’t only about him. This is about Jim too.

John might want to run and spare him but he doesn’t want to leave Jim alone.

He made a promise. He’s glad he did.

It roots him to the spot, will prevent him from doing something he could regret forever.

He lies down at Jim’s back, his arms searching to hold him at the same time Jim’s body presses back to him, both inviting and welcoming the embrace.

John wants to kiss him but contents himself with nuzzling Jim’s temple and letting sleep claim him too.

***

“Bones!” Jim almost tackles him when he’s leaving his last seminar of the year. The few Cadets that are still around part and stare as Jim all but clings to his neck and laughs, “Are you free now? Got a special present for you.”

“Do you now?” John huffs, wishing Jim didn’t like to play this game in which he fools everyone into thinking they’re together when they’re actually not. Not yet. At the same time, he’s kind of fond of it. If it makes people think twice before getting themselves involved with Jim, then John is glad. Jim is his and one day John won’t allow them close to him anymore. He curls a hand around Jim’s waist, lets his voice drop low as he says, “I can’t wait.”

Jim gapes a little at him—he always does whenever John decides to play along with him instead of rolling his eyes at his antics—but recovers quickly and starts dragging him down the hall with the confidence and fast stride of someone with a purpose.

John enjoys the faint blush he can see even on Jim’s neck, wonders why Jim wants to give him a gift so soon. It’s not even Christmas’ Eve and John has done nothing for him to think he’s going anywhere without him.

But, as he realizes when they’re in their dorm, he hasn’t exactly shared his plans with Jim either. He wanted to surprise him and maybe that wasn’t the best strategy to take, if the nervousness Jim is showing as he scratches the back of his neck—cheeks still pink if he looks close enough—and points to a box sitting on John’s bed is anything go by.

The box is plainly wrapped with brown paper, which goes just right with the lack of Christmas decorations in the room. Whether they were being practical deciding they didn’t need a tree or tinsels
or wanted to avoid smothering the other with too much red and green—with too much, too soon, too close—John can’t tell.

“I—huh—didn’t know if you were going anywhere later so,” he gestures to the gift, ducks his head and adds, “Actually, I did know, but you can just take it with you and open it there. You can tell me if you like it when you get back.”

That leaves John more than a bit dumbfounded. He’s quick to decipher what Jim meant and scowls. “Did you hack my PADD, Jim?”

Jim doesn’t even flinch. He shrugs, the same poorly disguised sad tone in his reply, “Just wanted to know if you had plans.”

“You could’ve asked.”

“You could’ve told me.”

They glare and accuse each other for what seems like minutes but are only seconds. John exhales firmly through his nose to get rid of the anger he feels at knowing Jim is still good at hiding things from him if he wants to, if he feels he needs to do it to shield himself from hurt and rejection.

“So help me God, Jim, if you think I’m taking Edith with me—“ he doesn’t finish the sentence, skips to another instead, “Or did you do a lousy job at hacking and didn’t notice I’ve made plans for two and not for one?”

Things are still tense between them at times because of it, even though John has gone back to the bar every Friday night and hasn’t exchanged more than a few pleasantries with Edith.

Blue eyes fix a hopeful look on him. John’s temper deflates. “For some reason I thought surprising you could be a good idea. My bad,” as Jim gawps, he asks, “Would you like to spend the holidays with me?”

Jim beams. “Yes, yes I’d love to.”

“Well then,” John raises an eyebrow, crosses his arms, “I’d tell you we’re going hiking and you need to pack for tomorrow, but you already know that.”

He’s glad he left transportation for the last minute.

He can still rent a bike and Jim won’t know a thing until they’re about to leave.

***

He can tell Jim eyes him with a mouth full of unasked questions, but he seems happy to wait, too excited about the prospect of their vacations to voice any of them and risk ruining the mood.

Jim doesn’t stop moving, barely sleeps a wink but still has energy enough—and plenty to spare, too—to bounce on his feet and toss his bag on one shoulder as he waits eagerly for John to be ready to go.

“We’re just going to Stinson Beach, Jim,” John reminds him. He can’t decide whether he’s touched or worried about how thrilled Jim seems to be about such a simple panorama.

“I know, I know!” Jim replies impatiently, “Are we leaving now? Are we taking a bus? We could hire a car, Bones! I think I have enough—“

“Oh, I think you’re gonna like what I planned better,” he throws his luggage on his shoulder after
putting on his leather jacket and cocks his head to the door, “C’mon. Let’s get going.”

Jim practically trips over his own feet to follow him. John shakes his head, decides he’s touched and worried about Jim’s reaction to this.

He has the feeling this is going to be the first Christmas and New Year Jim will actually enjoy.

***

“We’re wearing helmets and you’re not driving over the speed limit unless you want me to take over. Understood?” John throws the keys to him and Jim is quick to pick them in the air.

“Jesus, Bones,” Jim breathes, stunned, his left hand caressing the handle as his eyes trace the rest of the black motorcycle, “Didn’t know you were a bike sort of guy.”

John puts one of the helmets on Jim’s hands and nudges him to the bike. “And I just knew you were,” he says, unimpressed, “So, did I make myself clear?”

Jim chuckles. “Don’t worry, old man,” he straddles the bike and smiles playfully at him, “I’ll go easy on you.”

John rolls his eyes and puts Jim’s helmet on his head a little bit too forcefully, making him yelp. Satisfied of his retaliation—even though old man is kind of accurate to describe him—he appreciates the highlighted curves of Jim’s body as he leans forward on the seat and rides behind him, hands gripping Jim’s shoulders as he starts the engine.

***

They reach the inn John booked a room in at a leisurely pace, almost as if Jim wanted to delay arriving so they could be close for a little longer.

John squeezes his shoulders once, lingering a little too long. He’s loath to part with Jim too but forces himself to do it. He gets down the bike and takes both bags with him as he walks in, expecting Jim to follow him.

He’s aware this setting could be the perfect one to tell Jim everything but at the same time, he doesn’t want to ruin their first holidays together.

As Jim chats animatedly with the old lady who runs the inn with her husband, John chooses to wait. What are a few more days when it’s taken him months to even consider himself mildly ready—as ready as he’s ever going to be—to start using his own name again, even if it’s just with one person?

Jim is the only thing that matters to him. He deserves to spend a peaceful break.

He knows he’s stalling and making up nice excuses for it.

***

They start the hike early on Christmas Eve, as soon as they’ve left the few things they brought with them. He grabs a med-kit just in case Jim gets hurt, some sandwiches he asked the inn lady to have ready for them and Jim insists on carrying the backpack with water. John indulges him, for a while, thinking the extra weight might help settle Jim’s nerves if barely just.

Jim is as tireless and keen as John expected, if not even more so. There doesn’t seem to be an end to his energy and John contemplates bipolar disorder for a few minutes before shaking his head and
discarding the thought. It’s not the first time that diagnosis has crossed his mind while interacting with Jim, but if Jim isn’t going to rub John’s untreated PTSD in his face, then John won’t do that to him either.

They quickly lose sight of the beach on their backs and make it to the hills. It’s of course deserted except for them and John enjoys the echo of Jim’s laughter and chatter through the woods, quietly amazed at how fast and in shape Jim is. Even as he’s panting and leaning on his knees, he’s grinning and teasing him to go even faster and John can only glower and swear as he forces him to take it easy and sit for a bit to eat and drink.

“Bones?” Jim calls, after swallowing a mouth full of chicken sandwich. He’s not looking at John while he speaks, but the soft smile on his face is earnest enough. John fools himself thinking he hasn’t noticed how his eyes are bluer than the cold sky of December and stops chewing, waiting for him to go on, “Thanks. This is—this is really nice.”

There are a lot of things John could say in response but he doesn’t. He looks at Jim knowing for certain he’s the one who should be saying thanks, because he’s the one who got a gift he never thought could even exist.

He’s suddenly glad Jim has a special name for him. Hearing ‘Leonard’ right now would ruin the moment, would remind John just how much of a liar—and a coward too—he is. Maybe it’s the holidays spirit talking, but Bones is growing on him.

He won’t be saying that to Jim anytime soon, though.

When Jim meets his gaze, his breath hitches and he laughs nervously, ducking his head as he takes a rushed bite of another sandwich. “Kinda makes me want to go back in time, you know, and spend more time choosing a gift for you so it could be even half as good as this.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, Jim,” he reassures. Then, to lighten the sudden maudlin mood, he teases, “And if I don’t like it you can just clean our dorm for the next month to make up for it.”

“Haha, you’re funny. Too bad last time I checked slavery wasn’t a gift.”

It’s not about the presents, really, it’s about the people you spend it with. Having Jim with him is more than enough for him. That’s what he wants to say but he saves the words for another time.

Stealing another glance at Jim and seeing him relaxed and grinning again, John thinks Jim somehow gets it anyway.

He hopes so, at least.

***

They make it all the way back around 2 in the morning. Jim face-plants on one of the two beds in their room with a long, sated sigh after barely taking off his boots.

John is pleasantly sore but doesn’t sleep, checking a few maps on his PADD instead. He has more routes for them, plans to avoid thinking about anything related to Starfleet until New Year.

He has to be back at the hospital on the 2nd. Jim still has a few more days off, but hopefully he’ll want to go back with John then.

***
Jim’s gift ends up being an old-fashioned black leather suitcase filled with items people used to practice Medicine with in the 20th century.

“I know it’s lame, Bones. Sorry,” Jim mumbles, face flushed with embarrassment and chin tilted down to avoid his eyes, “I can still be your house-cleaning elf for a month if you want?”

John shakes his head, inspects the old stethoscope and saturometer, the reflex hammer and the portable sphygmomanometer. There’s even a diapason for neurological tests as well.

He wonders how much time—and money—Jim spent on this. How he was even aware John liked antiques in the first place.

He used to collect old things when he was a kid. Ever since Sam became an anthropologist, he’s been denying he’s interested in how people made things work before—before technology—too.

“I like it, Jim,” he says, his voice sounding odd to his ears. There are memories pressing in all directions but he squashes them, takes a deep breath and swings the hammer near Jim’s elbow, chuckling as he gets the triceps reflex since Jim wasn’t paying attention and had his arm loose enough for John to grip it and hit him there, “Oh, look, it works.”

“Ow! Warn a guy, would you?” Jim frowns at him, rubbing his skin, but John can see he’s fighting off a smile and raises his eyebrows at him.

***

Jim has been acting a bit weird every time they come across other guests in the inn. It takes a couple of times in a row—as they’re going down the stairs to have Christmas dinner—for John to understand why and when he does, he’s nicely astonished.

There’s mistletoe hanging on every doorframe in the house and what Jim’s been doing is making sure he’s not under any of it at the same time anyone else and really, Jim Kirk avoiding a good excuse to make out with good-looking strangers? No one would believe John even if he felt like telling someone, which he doesn’t.

Each time it happens he’s more than a bit tempted to push Jim underneath it and kiss the breath out of him, only to smirk afterward and blame it on tradition. It’d be nice to finally know if Jim’s lips feel as soft and plush as they look and it takes a lot of resolve for John not to do it.

And maybe he should’ve slept for a while, because Jim catches him unawares just as they’re about to sit on the table with the old couple who owns the place and the other four guests that are currently staying at the inn.

Jim grabs his forearm as John steps under the last mistletoe, the one over the door to the dining room. John’s eyes widen and he tenses even as his arm circles the small of Jim’s back to guide him closer to his body.

It’s all instinctive, including the way his mouth parts in anticipation, only for Jim’s lips to kiss the corner of his mouth lightly but leisurely, his warm and fresh breath teasing his lips as he whispers, “Merry Christmas, Bones.”

Disarmed, he follows Jim to the table. Jim looks up innocently at him from his seat, right through his lashes, just a tad of smugness in his eyes and the lines of his mouth betraying his mischief.

John supposes it’s fair he’s the one gaping this time.
Mrs. Sanders politely asks one of them to sing a Christmas carol for her. John is relieved when Jim agrees to do it immediately. He’s heard him singing before and not only knows what to expect, but also welcomes it. Jim is a great singer, has both the confidence and the deep voice to be one, and John always enjoys the rare occasions he picks up a guitar to not only get a few notes from it but also from his vocal cords.

There’s no guitar here, but a piano in front of which Mr. Sanders sits, looking at Jim for direction on which tune he should play.

“You should join me, Bones,” Jim says playfully. None of the other people in the room are paying attention to them, too engrossed either drinking or chatting with each other, or that’s what John wants to think.

“Trust me, Jim, you don’t want to hear me sing,” he warns in a low tone, squeezing Jim’s right shoulder as he settles next to the small vertical piano, “Just do your thing.”

“I’m sure you’d do nicely with your husky voice and a bit of whisky and hey, you already had eggnog so,” he insists, wrinkling his nose, “Not singing, exactly, you know, just—whispering. But okay, suit yourself. Next time maybe.”

Jim picks Silent Night. The female population of the living room predictably swoons but John is the one who can touch Jim—and he does, putting an arm around Jim’s shoulders, making him smile as he keeps singing—so he doesn’t feel annoyed.

He wonders if Jim would like to do something like this next year—if there’s even going to be a next time for them at all after John finally shares his story with him.

Jim won’t take it well. Of that John is more than certain.
Chapter 8

I needed a little pick-me-up to keep writing, so I made a fanmix. You can listen to it [here](#).

Please note I changed the rating of the story before reading this chapter.

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Water is the reason they’ve made it this far, Jim knows it.

He’s kneeling in the borders of a creek, up enough in the mountains to avoid all sort of nasty stuff that has been poured into the water down below.

He checks the smell constantly, each time he fills one of the few bottles they’ve managed to obtain.

The climb up here is harder and lengthier each day that passes, Jim’s thin body screaming and begging for him to slow down and stop only to be ignored and pushed further. Soon the day when he can’t climb will come.

I’ll be dead that day, Jim thinks. There would be no other way to stop him from coming, from offering the children the one thing they still have.

The weather on the planet is unforgiving, either too cold or too hot for it to be ideal for Human inhabitants any longer. What was once the most beautiful land Jim ever laid eyes on is now nothing but a constant threat of death and pain (the people who taught him what kindness and happiness were, here in this once idyllic place, have been dead for weeks now).

It has been this way ever since the crops died. Maybe the weather generator malfunctioned prior to that, too, maybe that’s what caused all the crops to wither at the same time but that’s a useless question (the reason doesn’t matter, all that matters is the terrible outcome that is now their reality) that Jim won’t trouble himself with.

He has enough troubles as it is.

Kodos’ sentinels won’t venture outside in this cold and dark, but there are other things lurking in the night. The few animals that have escaped the colonists’ pots and grills aren’t exactly friendly. Jim has learned this the hard and fast way, as everything else in this crash survival course, but he never makes the same mistake twice (he’d be dead by now, if he did and with him all the children he’s trying to protect) and the kid he brought here the day the beasts decided to attack (Adam was so proud of being picked to come with him, he was still smiling when he died. It was that quick, that senseless) didn’t die for nothing.

Jim remembers and won’t forget why he has to come up here each night (sometimes days, too, but that’s riskier and not worth it most days. Dehydration and blisters are bothersome things he as a leader has to evade to be able to function) alone. He’s faster and smarter and he won’t hesitate to kill if he has to (his first kill was the guard who was trying to keep the children in order to properly shoot them to death and his second and third were just as instinctive, the knife he keeps in his boot just as effective), if that means he’ll breathe for another day.
Two months have passed. He still stumbles in the shadows, if less so since he has paths now that he alternates to avoid the unlikely case of having someone close on his heels. He still can’t see in the dark, he’s way too malnourished for it, and that won’t change so he doesn’t expect it to. His eyes are something he still uses but can’t depend on when it matters the most (if he opens them when he has to go out for water in daylight, he’s truly blind for days until the burns ebb and he can see again).

It’s been eleven days since the last time they had meat to eat (it seems both rats and birds have learned to stay clear of Jim’s presence by now, no matter how careful he is and the designated hunters of the group haven’t been luckier than him in that account, although Jim doesn’t let them go very far and never on their own), four since the last time they had anything at all to consume.

Water is the one thing keeping them alive and Jim isn’t so naïve to think the day when every body of water in this godforsaken planet is festering won’t come. It’s a fear that doesn’t relent until he sniffs at it and tastes it, until he knows for sure they’ll be okay if just for one more day.

They were 37 when this started. There were more children (Jim tried, but most of them were out of his reach when he realized what was about to happen and he couldn’t go for them without jeopardizing the ones he already had with him, so he squared his shoulders, gave them his back and ran trying to mute the screams he can still hear when it’s quiet enough, the screams that are only in his head now, the screams that won’t stop) but those are long dead now. They died with their parents and Jim sometimes wonders if that wouldn’t have been better—a mercy, a fate almost gentle compared to the blows Jim’s charges have been taking because they survived.

They’re 18 now. Jim can’t tell who he’s going to fail next. He can make guesses, though, and his guess for today is Ann. It’s not the fever she’s been running what alerts him of the possibility, but the absence of her small but strong smile and how much Jim misses the few giggles he was still able to hear not even two days ago.

The meager meals Jim has been organizing and getting for them aren’t even close to being enough. They’re all growing up, all needing more than what is available in the colony even to the lucky adults who are important, who have been selected and granted their lives in exchange of the death of others less useful, less fortunate and to the few children who were deemed worthy of that luxury, too (Jim ignores the fact he was supposed to be one of those. It’s been mentioned by some of the oldest children but they let it go once Jim denies it firmly and Jim can’t have them thinking he’s a traitor, can’t lose their trust to suspicion and doubt if he wants to keep them alive a little longer so he has no option but to lie through his teeth).

It’s natural selection, plain and simple. That’s the law in the caves they’ve been hiding in. Rations are equal amongst them. Age doesn’t matter. Sickness doesn’t matter. Last names don’t matter. It’s up to their bodies to make do with what they got.

Jim can’t give more food to the weak and sick, can’t ask to the oldest to give up the little they have for themselves (he can suggest it, but can’t blame them when they keep eating. The only ones who have willingly decided to have the smallest portions are Jim and Kevin Riley but Kevin is only 8 and Jim drops food on his plate whenever he’s not looking) and he can’t help but feel he’s just a miniature version of Kodos with too much power over things he shouldn’t have any over. Denying and granting food is just another way of saying he’s condemning some to death and helping others to live in the extent he deems best but that is all he can do and guilt is something he won’t (can’t) trouble himself with.

He has enough troubles as it is.

He avoids the new carnage on his way back. It’s hard, running blind, but the snarls and yells are clue enough. He doesn’t wonder what is going on in the main colony for the people to escape to the
forest where it’s bleak and dangerous. It can’t be anything good and it can’t mean anything good for
them either, but Jim will deal with that when the time comes and not a moment sooner.

Living day to day is hard enough.

He makes sure to steal another bottle of chloride too. The smell makes the kids sick, but keeps the
lion-wolves-lizards (those beasts the dome kept at bay until Kodos disabled it, probably to force
people to remain loyal and close to him but it seems like that didn’t work after all, seems like
somehow Kodos is worse than facing death by claws and fangs, worse than being killed quickly if
you’re lucky and eaten alive if you’re not so lucky) from scenting them.

He wishes there were food to steal too, but there isn’t.

Jim is just in time to wet Ann’s lips and give her hair one last ruffle before she’s gone. Her last
words were for asking him for a song to help her sleep and Jim lets his voice soothe the rest of the
children, if not the girl who is no longer there to be soothed (he doesn’t have a guitar here, but they
need something to quieten the roars of their empty stomachs and the crying of the kids who just
won’t stop asking for their dead mothers. They need something to forget the starvation and slaughter
all around them, if only for a few seconds). He can’t raise his voice much anymore, but it doesn’t
matter. They’re all quiet, some sobbing and others just staring and Jim takes a mental note to talk to
the last ones when he’s back. He can’t have them disconnecting from what’s happening because
numbness means clumsiness and both of those can make you die (get you killed) faster here.

He closes her eyes (green and gentle no more, only cold and cloudy now) and picks her body up,
leaving another two kids in charge while he’s away. He swaps leadership while he’s out between
everyone, even the little ones, because he knows having a purpose makes things easier, if only for a
little while.

His purpose is clear, unchanging (and cruel, and unwanted) and he doesn’t allow himself a moment
to pause, doesn’t delegate tasks that no one else can accomplish.

Disposing of the bodies is one of them.

Jim takes them all to a cliff, throwing them over the edge after rasping out the one last thing that he
can do for them.

I won’t forget you, he says, and breaking promises made to dead children would be easier than
breaking them to alive ones but Jim will keep to his word at best he can and will remember their
names, their faces, their voices and cries and laughs until he’s gone too.

He’s broken enough promises as it is. For as long as he’s able to, he will keep these and he will look
down to the fallen children he brings here each time until their bones rattle and break on the ground
below because it was him not keeping his word what caused this in the first place. Because he didn’t
try hard enough, because it should be someone else fighting for these sweet, young and bright
children but Jim is all they have and his best isn’t good enough, but it’ll have to do because there’s
no one else.

He knows his Father would’ve done a better job, would’ve taken the children to safety by now. It
bites, eats away at him and no matter how many weeks go by that truth doesn’t have softer ridges.
He can’t wonder if his Mother will forgive him (he has more important things to wonder, like what
they’re going to eat now that there are so few things left that dirt and green berries have started to
look tempting, like it could be a good idea after all if only to die with a full belly but no. Jim doesn’t
want that. He won’t have that. They’ve gone through so much a quick death would be mockery now.
They will keep going. They have to) but he can wonder where the hell Starfleet is.
Where are they? Where is the Federation’s most disciplined and brilliant taskforce when they need it the most? Are they coming at all? Do they have better things to do?

The part of him that’s going mad with hunger whispers that even if they do come, they could agree with Kodos and wipe them all out once and for all but Jim doesn’t listen to it.

He clings to the last shred of hope, of strength he has and fights and waits.

He’s there on the edge, Ann’s skull so cracked it’s hard to know who it was even though Jim knew it for sure not even a minute ago.

But he blinks and she’s someone else. She’s a boy now, a boy whom Jim once knew and loved fiercely and meant the world to him (I can’t be a Kirk in this house, Sam had said when he was leaving instead of staying and being the big brother Jim thought he was, that he wanted him to be) and he’s dead, body shattered and bloody, face twisted and accusing as his dull eyes look straight up at him and Jim knows with a sharp pang in his heart that he did this, he killed Sam the moment he stopped believing he was coming back, the moment he stopped looking for him to tell him he still loved him, that he was everything he had.

He blinks again, forces his eyes to hold so many tears inside it seems like his chest is boiling with grief, and Sam is gone. Jim sees his Father instead, the hero he never knew but loves all the same, the dead man he wants to make proud (maybe if he managed that, his Mother would look at him differently, maybe she could love him if Jim just knew how to make them both so proud they’d forget how much of a mess he’s always been) more than anything in the world and even his lifeless face is gentle and caring and all the things Jim always thought a parent was ought to be.

He blinks again and screams. The corpse of his Mother is crawling up so fast it doesn’t matter how quick Jim is in scrambling back. She grabs his ankles, squeezing tight enough to bruise, digging her nails until she scratches bone and she’s shrieking, always shrieking, but Jim can’t (doesn’t want to) hear what she has to say.

Now more than ever, he’s a failure and she knows it. He struggles but it’s all for nothing. She tears him apart, saves his eyes for last.

Jim is still conscious when she carves them out with blunt fingernails (the sharp points ran out while she was scratching his chest raw) and cradles them lovingly before eating them whole like a snake.

He’s still conscious when she starts eating him next, feels her teeth piercing his cheek, hears the wet chewing close to his ear.

There’s someone hugging him tight enough to prevent much air from entering his lungs when Jim blinks again.

It takes him a moment to stop thrashing. He’s 22 now, not 13, and this isn’t Tarsus IV. This is Starfleet Academy and Jim still hasn’t forgiven or forgotten what they did—rather, what they didn’t do—but he has nowhere else to go, just like the man he met in the ride to this place.

Bones’ arms are steady around him, but they don’t stop Jim from trembling, don’t stop the unrelenting fit of nausea that hits him.

Bones knows best—he always does—and he already has a bin for Jim to throw up in.

It’s the strangest thing, feeling so weak and pathetic and yet so cared for, Bones doing most of the work in keeping him straight as Jim gags.
There are no pleasantries coming from Bones’ lips, no empty reassurances. There’s only quiet understanding and this is one of the things Jim likes the most about him; that he doesn’t lie to him, not even to make him feel better.

When he’s done and Bones has wiped his mouth and face with a cool, wet cloth, he gingerly touches his eyes and cheeks with his fingertips. He gasps sharply, but doesn’t start retching again so he counts it as a win and sags against Bones’ chest, tipping his head on Bones’ shoulder until his nose is buried in his neck.

It’s the smell what helps him settle in the end.

Bones’ scent is nothing like Tarsus. He doesn’t stink of decay and disease, of blood and filth. Jim doesn’t know why, but the distinctive smell of hospital—that one Bones can never wash out because he’s a doctor and that’s ingrained in his skin by now—is different in him; it’s pleasant, safe, comforting.

He closes his eyes, the shaking lessens and he tells himself he’s safe now, careful to just breathe in and keep his mind blank of any images that want to rush back in.

Bones leaves him for a bit to wash the bin and comes back with a fresh cloth and a glass of water.

Jim hasn’t moved, hasn’t dared to, wanting and waiting for Bones to resume his position behind him in the bed.

He’s not disappointed—he never is with Bones—when he’s back and holds him close, calls the lights off and sighs deeply, as if he’s the one in need of comfort and Jim’s very presence between his arms is enough for him.

Jim is drained enough to let that stray thought go without contradicting it. He mumbles apologies to the dark and lets sleep claim him again, knowing nightmares won’t get to him with Bones besides him.

Whether Bones is awake enough or not to hear him, Jim needs to apologize.

He’s lost count of all the things Bones has done for him and yet he can count the things he’s done in return with a hand and have plenty of fingers left to spare.

He knows he has to change that if he wants to keep Bones around, if he wants to stop him from leaving him.

Jim wouldn’t—couldn’t—blame him if he breaks the promise he made to go wherever Jim goes.

Jim is—still is—nothing but a mess, after all. The one thing he’s good at, that he has to offer and is confident enough to know it wouldn’t disappoint is something Bones doesn’t seem to be interested in, not really, never mind the mixed signals Jim sometimes thinks he gets from him.

He tells himself it’s alright. They don’t need sex to be—what they are. To be this, which is exactly what Jim needs.

Still, if Bones ever changes his mind, Jim will be right here ready for it. And—oh, who the fuck is he kidding? If Bones doesn’t change his mind soon, Jim will go crazy. He’s never wanted someone so much in his whole life. He’s more than impressed with his own self-restraint and he’d be more impressed if he weren’t holding back because he’s determined to make this—whatever this is—last, determined not to drive Bones away, not so fast, not when Jim doesn’t even remember—or know anymore—how he ever lived without him, because he’s scared shitless of screwing up and losing
him.

He doesn’t want to—can’t—lose the one thing he’s been looking for his whole life.

Bones is the first friend he’s ever made, his best friend and roommate, he’s both walking promise and menace of a future Jim has never bothered contemplating before because he never had anyone who cared enough for him to think that hey, maybe things will be different if I stick around, maybe what I end up doing in five years from now will be important to someone. Hey, maybe I’ll be—still be—important to someone then, maybe I won’t be alone.

Trust is a knife with two edges. For once, Jim doesn’t mind if he’s cut by the sharper one. His heart is exposed and wide open for Bones to add scars to Jim’s old ones, if so he chooses, if Jim’s trust ends up being yet another mistake in the long list that is his life or if trusting Bones like he’s never trusted anyone before will be the one thing that he does right.

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Jim’s been running himself to the ground lately, that much he’s got to admit if only quietly. He’s lucky Bones doesn’t share many classes with him anymore and that he seems caught enough with his own tests and duties to notice Jim has almost more responsibilities than he can handle or—no, he’s being unfair, Bones is like a hound to detect this sort of thing, but Jim hasn’t let him. He’s a grade A faker and can step up his game to prevent Bones from finding out what he’s doing before it’s ready.

But he won’t—can’t—disappoint Pike and for that he needs perfect grades, for that he needs more than perfect. He needs to be surprising, inspiring, he needs to be prepared for anything. He needs to stay ahead of schedule and read and reread and review everything he can get his eyes on while he’s awake because the moment Pike stops believing in him, that’s it, the deal is off and Jim is back on the street doing absolutely nothing with his life.

He really doesn’t want to find out if Bones would follow him. Although—no, that’s a lie, he does want to find out, but not like that. He doesn’t want to go back to nothing, to being nothing—not that he’s someone right now, but chances are he will figure that out on his way to being a Starship Captain, if he ever makes it that far.

And he can’t keep taking advantage of Bones’ good heart—as grumpy as he tries to be, Jim is surprised no one else seems to notice how gentle and selfless Bones can be—he has to do something for him. He’s been working to accomplish that, wracking his brain for something Bones needs and Jim can help with and he’s figured out months ago what that is but it’s only now when they’re about to finish their first semester that he’s ready to deliver.

A tiny voice in his mind insists this is just as selfish as everything else he’s ever done, but Jim ignores it—or tries to. He’s doing this for Bones, he’s going to help him get rid of a fear that could affect his ability to perform in the job he chose, he’s doing this to make sure Bones is as happy as he can be in this new life he started when he joined the Academy (oh, but Jimmy, you’re forgetting that in doing that you’ll also be helping yourself to ensure Bones follows you to the black, aren’t you? You’re as selfish as ever, always going to be selfish and Bones will notice one day and he will leave) and well, if he also has other motives that he needs to keep quiet about, that’s his own problem.

This is for Bones and will only be about Bones. Being a Starfleet Officer with aviophobia can’t be an easy thing and Jim is going to do his damnedest to make it better for him.

He’s been doing extra homework for Pike, reading dissertations and writing essays only for him to read and assess. He’s been spending every hour he can spare running every piloting simulation he’s
found and reading about shuttle accidents in the last 20 years. Jim asked him to introduce him to someone who could give him permission to pilot a shuttle—or, at least and only temporarily, an advanced simulation of one—and Pike had stared at him long and hard when Jim refused to tell him why. Bones had been loud enough about his phobia, but Jim didn’t feel like it was any of Pike’s business so he’d kept his mouth shut and stated it was important to him and that he could prove himself responsible enough if he gave him a chance.

He knew he was asking for too much, too soon but he wanted Bones to have time to adjust to the reality of flying everywhere they went and the sooner they started the better.

It’d taken him four months, but he convinced Pike he was serious and the Captain took him to meet Admiral Archer, a Starfleet legend with an also legendary love for Beagles.

Jim had been more than a bit annoyed and frustrated when Archer had barely uttered a word to him and ordered him to walk his litter of puppies and take care of his dogs every Saturday. He lost count of the hours he spent biting his tongue to try and have a talk with the man so he could maybe get closer to his goal.

It was only a hunch what had him silent and meek every Saturday as he wasted the day away playing with the dogs and teaching them the tricks Archer had asked they learned.

Jim was a lot of things, but dog trainer wasn’t one of them so it’d taken a while for him to figure out what to do and how to do it right but having lunch with Bones at the hospital had kept him grounded and every Saturday it was easier to just take things in stride and wait for whenever Archer decided Jim was ready to be—interviewed? Tested? Whatever it was that was supposed to happen instead of the silence and all the doggy kisses Jim was getting for his trouble.

Then last week, completely out of the blue, Archer had said. “Your piloting simulation scores are one of the best I’ve ever seen. Your attitude needed a bit of polishing, but I think my boys did a good job on you and you’re ready. How do you feel?”

Jim had tried not to gape, closed his mouth with a click and asked, flushing, “I’m—I’m fine. You already knew why I was here, sir?”

Archer snorted, waved a wrinkled hand at him. “Of course, but I was not about to hand access to a real shuttle to a Cadet that wasn’t even done with his first year yet. For all purposes, you’re about to be, being in the fast track to graduate as you are, so I think you’re ready. I also think you’ll be stuck in the sims first. Cognitive therapy is all about taking it slow and recognizing where exactly the problem is, right? Your friend won’t be ready for the real thing for a while, I bet. I wish you both good luck.”

Jim knew Pike had to know why he wanted to pilot a shuttle so soon, but having this kind of confirmation wasn’t what he was expecting. He made a face, hoped Bones wouldn’t be so embarrassed if he ever found out about this. “Thank you, sir.”

Jim thinks he’ll make time to go visit the dogs every now and then—he misses the little guys, alright? He’s never had any pets and those dogs are fun and their levels of energy aren’t a problem for Jim—but that’s going to be later.

Right now he needs to plan things carefully so Bones doesn’t suspect what’s coming.

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In the end he decides he has a reputation to maintain and does a silly thing.
“Bones, do you trust me?” he asks on Sunday, when they’re both ready to go out to the city for a walk and grab a bite to eat.

Bones scowls right away, suspicion written in the curve of his eyebrows, but his hazel eyes are warm and not really as annoyed as the rest of his expression aims to be. “I do, Jim. God help me, but I do. What’s this about?”

“Uh-uh-uh,” Jim admonishes, dabbing Bones’ nose and making him roll his eyes, “You’ll just have to trust me on this one. Close your eyes.”

Bones huffs, but complies. As Jim is tying a blindfold around his eyes, he grouches, “What are we, five? I’m not gonna peek, Jim. If you’re gonna drag me all across Campus to wherever it is with my eyes closed, please keep it a little less S&M.”

“Oh?” Jim perks up, “Okay then, no blindfold. Got something better than that.”

Jim stands at his back and splays his hands on Bones’ face. Bones sighs in defeat. “Of course you do,” then he adds, infusing a bit of bite Jim doesn’t buy in his tone, “I can keep my goddamned eyes shut on my own, you know.”

Jim chuckles and opens the door of their dorm to start leading Bones to the simulations building. “But this isn’t an exercise about me trusting you, is it? Now, get moving, we don’t want to be late.”

“Right. Late for what, again?”

“You’ll see.”

Most people ignore their antics on their way there. Jim grins and winks at the ones who don’t, who include an exasperated Uhura that shakes her seamless ponytail at them and keeps walking.

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The place is empty—although it is Sunday, so that wasn’t so hard to get—exactly like Jim asked.

He has to let go of Bones’ face for a bit to key the entrance code but he guides him until they reach the correct room, only then letting him go for real.

“Okay, we’re here!” he announces, locking the door and fixing a measuring look on Bones, “Open your eyes.”

Color immediately drains from Bones’ face. It seems like this place is way too close to the real thing after all, with all the exact modifications to make it look like the inside of a shuttle.

Jim winces in sympathy and tries to appease him. “Bones, this thing can’t really fly. We’ll be stuck on the ground for as long as you need. It’s just a simulation room and we’re the only ones here. I’ll be piloting until you’re ready to take over, then we can move to the real thing.”

“The real—” Bones rubs his face with a hand, rough and quick, and Jim is starting to worry a little bit. He knew Bones wasn’t going to react well, but this is getting ridiculous.

“You got access to a real shuttle too? You’re a Cadet, Jim, not a pilot. How the hell did you manage that? And how were you able to get us in here with no one around to supervise us?”

“Why, I just asked very nicely,” Jim pats his shoulder, smiling fondly when he understands Bones is freaking out about what he did to get this instead of freaking out because they’ll be fake-flying for
the next few hours. Typical. He can’t focus on himself even if he’s terrified about what’s coming.
“C’mon, Bones, sit and tell me all about these horrendous facts you know about shuttles, like how our blood will boil in 13 seconds if there’s a crack in the hull. I’ve been reading a lot of statistics about it, I’ll give you a run for your money.”

He takes a seat in the passenger area for the time being, looking expectantly at Bones to do the same.

When seconds tick away and Bones doesn’t, just keeps staring at him like Jim has suddenly developed antennae, Jim huffs. “Oh, would you let it go already? So I owe Pike a big one, so what? I know Medical track Cadets don’t learn to pilot until last year but I think it’s important you have more time to deal with that. I’m a good pilot, Bones, I’ve been practicing, okay? You have nothing to worry about—well, except, you know, your own—”

Bones looks like Jim has spent the last ten minutes kicking him in the nuts. Jim’s stomach drops. “Jim, I’m not—I don’t have aviophobia.”

It’s a good thing he’s sitting. He licks his lips, frowns. “Come again?”

“I’m sorry,” Bones finally sits next to him, grips his arms tightly as if he’s making sure Jim won’t go anywhere. He still looks awfully pained and it’s all Jim can do not to stop looking at him in the eye, “The things I said that day on the shuttle, they’re not true. I was trying to scare people off. The phobia, the divorce, none of that is real. I’m sorry, Jim.”

“You lied to me?” Jim hates it sounds like a question, hates how it sounds like he’s pleading Bones to tell him he’s just kidding and of course it was all real, “You lied to me for six months? What if I didn’t bring you here, when were you going to tell me? Were you going to tell me at all?”

“I didn’t know you back then!” Bones snaps, “I was just trying to cover my back!”

Bones winces and Jim knows he’s opening his mouth to apologize again, but he doesn’t want to hear it. “Let me go.”

“No,” if anything, his grip turns firmer, “There’s more you need to know, Jim.”

“There’s more?”

“My name is not Leonard McCoy.”

“What?”

Disbelief isn’t what makes his voice crack, but Jim won’t think about how hurt he is. He won’t think about how fooled, betrayed and stupid he feels. He won’t think about how much effort it took to get permission to pilot both the sim and the shuttle so Bones could cope with his fear at his own rhythm. He won’t think about how much he wanted to be useful to someone he cares about, just this once.

But he isn’t. He never is. He’s an idiot, a naïve idiot if that’s even possible after all he’s been through.

Bones doesn’t need any of this, therefore it’s all useless.

He’s useless. How is he going to make Bones stay if he’s—

What you want doesn’t matter. You’re no one.

“I’m sorry, Jim. I know I should’ve told you sooner. But please, be mad at me later and let me
explain,” Bones isn’t raising his voice, but Jim stifles a cringe, “My real name is John Grimm.”

“John? Well, that’s appropriate,” Jim scoffs but there’s no bite in his tone, only strain, “Because apparently I don’t know who you are.”

“You do,” it’s Bones who is pleading this time and Jim wants to laugh in his face, but he can’t find it in him to do it. He still wants to believe him, to believe in him, but he doesn’t even know who the guy that’s in front of him is. “You do. You know me better than anyone has ever done. There’s a story I want you to hear, and after it, if you’re still mad then I will give you space, but please—“

Jim pushes until Bones has no choice but to let go of him. He stands up and starts pacing, already feeling bruises forming in his arms, a part of him insisting this has to be important, that there has to be a good reason, that Bones wouldn’t do this to him if there wasn’t and he should shut up and listen because he owes him that much after all he’s done for him but the rest of his mind is reeling, heaving in the knowledge this man he’s been sharing everything he can share with hasn’t been doing the same with him.

Bones stands too, but doesn’t try to grab him again. He looks afraid and it’s not a look Jim likes on him. It doesn’t suit him.

Whoever John Grimm is, Jim is scared to lose him.

He tries to bite his tongue, but isn’t quick enough.

“What makes you think I want to listen?” he spits out. He ignores the flinch his words cause, keeps going, “You lied to me ever since we met! I didn’t even know your name until today and the whole reason I know it it’s because I brought you here and you couldn’t keep lying in good conscience! And now that you want to talk just because I drove you to it, I’m supposed to listen? Tell me something, John, when were you going to tell me if I didn’t do this? Tonight? Tomorrow? Next week? Whenever it became relevant? Never?”

“Jim, it’s not like that! I haven’t lied to you all the time! And I was—I was trying to find the right time to tell you. I know that was never going to come and that I made a huge mistake waiting so long, but what I have to tell you isn’t easy and I wasn’t ready to do it. I’m so sorry.”

Anger slips through Jim’s fingers, no matter how hard he tries to hold on to it. He collapses back on a chair and blinks.

Why can’t be he angry a little longer? Why does he have to be miserable now?

He just wanted to help Bones. He just wanted to be good enough.

His chest hurts and it’s funny how it can feel so full when there’s nothing inside anymore because Leonard McCoy doesn’t exist. His eyes prickle to spill tears Jim will keep holding inside, because that’s what he does, because by now he doesn’t remember how to cry. His fingers itch to key the code that can get him out of the room.

In a bit, Jim thinks, I will get out of here in a bit.

He doesn’t know where he’s going to go, just that he can’t keep looking at Bones right now.

“Secrets are never easy. If they were they wouldn’t be secrets, would they? You wouldn’t need to hide them. Secrets I can get. Lies? Not so much. You think I don’t have secrets too? I never asked you to share them, but I thought—I thought what you did tell me was true, that it was real, that it was about you.” I wanted to know you, not the façade you built to hide whatever it is you had to. I let you
I see through mine as much as I could and you... didn’t.

It’s a long moment before Bones speaks again and a hundred questions explode in Jim’s head, all at the same time, the walls around him almost flip and won’t keep still.

What would Bones say if he found out Jim hacked into the Academy system to get him as a roommate? What did he really think those first few days when they were getting used to each other? Did he want to get rid of Jim, to get him off his back? Was he sorry all his lies didn’t work and he wasn’t alone like he wanted to?

Did he really want to be left alone?

“You’re right. I—I don’t know what else to say. What can I do, Jim?” Bones’ voice is quiet, wrecked in ways that make something inside Jim twist and sing in understanding but Jim swallows and crushes it.

“Keep your story,” it’s not like he wasn’t doing an amazing job at it, anyway. Jim had no idea. He knew Bones had his secrets and respected them, but lies? A forged identity? He didn’t see that one coming. “Keep your secret. You were waiting for the right time. This isn’t it. I need to go.”

It hurts, knowing Bones needs him and Jim is turning his back on him but who is Bones? Who is John Grimm? Which parts of Leonard McCoy live in him? Is Jim in love with him or with a man who is a mixture of pretense and reality, a man who never truly existed?

Jim leaves him standing outside the building, stops himself every time he wants to look at him in the eye again but can’t stop looking back before Bones is out of his sight.

Bones is looking at him too.

Jim turns around the corner and walks away, already aching to get back to him—to Bones, to John, to whoever he is.

If that makes him needy and pathetic—well, what else is new?
Keep your story, Jim had said, a terrible pain embedded in his every word, in the tension around his mouth, in the gloomy and wet glint of his eyes. A pain no one but John had put there. Keep your secret. You were waiting for the right time. This isn’t it.

He watches him go, bears how Jim walks away from him when everything he wants to do is crawl on his knees and beg for forgiveness he knows he doesn’t deserve.

He respects Jim’s wish for space and stays rooted to the spot outside the simulations building, doesn’t move a muscle until the sky is growing as dark as his thoughts, as dark as his hope, and only then he bends his knees and sits on the stairs, eyes still fixed in the spot where Jim disappeared from view.

In the forefront of his mind, between the pain and the fear that threaten to consume him alive, shoving the red-hot fury he feels against himself, there’s a vast awe in Jim and all the wisdom of his short 22 years of age.

You think I don’t have secrets too? Jim had said and John wonders what kind of secrets could’ve given him a perspective that John with his 236 years still hasn’t gotten.

He underestimated Jim, misjudged the source of the anger he’d feel once John came clean to him, didn’t take into account all the hurt he heard and saw in Jim’s every breath and grimace when he’d felt pushed to tell him part of the truth.

He’d been so eager to help John overcome a phobia that was nothing but another part of his elaborated cover, a cover that Jim was able to peek through almost constantly without knowing he was glancing into John’s core, into his true self, because he hadn’t known John was lying, because John hadn’t told him and now John has no easy or quick way to convince him he’d always been the same to him, that a name and a background he still doesn’t know about haven’t changed that.

And it could’ve been so simple to be honest without giving explanations he wasn’t ready to utter yet if he had known Jim wouldn’t demand any, that he’d listen to everything John had to say without asking for anything else because he knew perfectly what it was to carry a heavy and invisible weight on his shoulders.

He knows now that Jim would’ve waited his whole life, wouldn’t have pried even if it meant he was never going to know all there was to know about John and his past. He knows now that there are beasts prowling in Jim’s own past that have taught him to be understanding, to always remember he’s keeping things to himself so other people have the right to do the same.

Perhaps John’s tragedies will pale in comparison with the suffering Jim has endured. Perhaps he will never know, now that he’s broken the deep trust that came natural to them, now that he’s failed Jim and became another disappointment in the probably short list of people he’s tried getting close to, having nothing but an absent mother and a runaway brother to call family and no reference to know what it is to be cared for, to be taken care of, to be loved.

It’s grief what slows down his movements, but his senses are always razor sharp and he jumps out of the way of a kick, adrenaline quickly saturating his blood and making him focus on the fight that has fallen on him.

He’s on his feet in less than a second, dragging the offending foot by the ankle and throwing the organism attached to it away from him. There’s a second attacker launching itself at his back before
he’s even done with the first and John braces for the hit as he’s turning around but it never comes. Another stranger—another alien, from a different race—diverts its movements, gives John enough room to deal with the first one that has already recovered and it’s on its way to retaliate.

It’s growling something this time, the foreign and long-since-last-heard language taking a few seconds to click in John’s head. But it does, and he understands as he’s alternatively blocking kicks and measured blows to his chest that are designed to incapacitate him, to keep him alive. That tells him something as well.

For one, that these aliens have been looking for him for a job; that they know him from his old mercenary days when the pain of losing Sam and still being irrevocably alive was too much to handle and he tried with all his might to ignore it by using the same super human abilities that he’s always hated to keep being a soldier, to maintain the only lifestyle he knew back then, the last relic of familiarity he was allowed to keep from his old life; that they know him as a capable and strong warrior but know nothing about what makes him that way, what makes him impossible to be destroyed.

“Black Cutter,” it grumbles at him. There’s no word for Reaper in the Muliaks’ mother tongue. Its large black eyes stare at him in barely concealed rage as John flings it on its back, its dark olive skin turning blacker in all the places John has managed to graze it, “You must come with us at once.”

John raises an eyebrow, supervises the progression of the combat next to him with his peripheral vision. He decides that his masked ally—a Brakanlian, if John’s glimpse of his breathing device is correct—can hold his ground on his own and resumes a fighting stance as his opponent takes a break to apparently have a little chat with him.

“All seven feet of the creature loom over him as it keeps roaring-shrieking something so fast it’s lost to John’s ears. He considers his insult as effective and waits until it calms down. Surely, being called a big bag of worm’s shit isn’t as terrible, even if said worms are one of the few things that are considered non-edible and therefore cursed in its world.

“Come with you at once?” he barks back and it’s a pity, really, that there aren’t many curse words in this language that he can use. Most of them are unpronounceable for Humans. “Who do you think you’re talking to, you oversized scum of oshnrot? My contract with your people has long since expired and I won’t be going back to make a new one. Go back to that stinky ship of yours and tell them I’m not interested.”

John forces himself to stay still, not to kill it just yet, and scorns in feigned nonchalance. “I don’t have a mate,” he lies. It has to be a bluff, they can’t possibly know about Jim, how could they? “Your data must be wrong.”

It’s laughing now, the sound a clicking cacophony in the sudden silence of the night. “Data? No. Smell. It reeks of you, that pretty little whore. We waited until you were weak and then we took opportunity. You are coming to Hoshlisia and assisting us to end the new war that has sprouted, as you did last time.”

Regretting the decision he took back then to offer his services as a soldier to any race willing to pay him enough—so long ago that the Federation didn’t even exist—John judges he won’t get any more useful information out of the alien and kills it, a hand deft and deadly as it closes around its muzzle and crushes it after hopping in the air, using the momentum to apply more than enough force to break its windpipe.
It drops to the ground, heavy and inert. John takes a ritualistic knife from the scabbard on its belt and slips it in his jacket. The Brakanlian shoots it with a phaser in maximum setting, evaporating the body and the one of its assistant.

John nods at him in thanks and gets ready to run—to search and destroy, as would have been his orders once upon a time. He knows Muliaks travel in groups of three so there must be another one close.

“Reaper,” the tall, thin and purple-skinned alien bows deeply to him, speaking in accented Standard, his silver rounded eyes watching him closely, “K’Dhatia greets you. I am Commander Aston and I am here to serve you.”

John bows slightly in acknowledgement. K’Dhatia was one of the few planets in which he didn’t make any enemies, earning the sincere gratitude of the inhabitants after helping them get rid of a sudden and merciless invasion of their world by another alien species.

It seems they were serious when they assured John they would be forever in his debt.

“I thank you for your assistance, Commander,” John replies formally, “You are free to go. I can take care of the rest.”

Aston shakes his head, his mask clouding as he exhales. “There is a matter you must be aware of first. My ship intercepted a message these beings were trying to send to their home world. It contained a holopicture of a young Human male with the Earth’s Sun in his hair and the Earth’s sky in his eyes, identified as James Kirk and listed as a highly valuable treasure to you. The message also stated that you are still alive. If this description fits your mate, his existence has been disclosed and endangered. You are still wanted in worlds outside of the Federation, worlds that would use any advantage they could find against you, worlds that haven’t made a move because they presume you dead.”

When John finally came back to Earth and met Jocelyn, homesick and tired of fighting after 46 years of nothing but bloodshed and solitude, he thought that maybe someday this could come to bite him in the ass and possibly—mercifully—one of the aliens would find a way to kill him and make him stay dead.

But it was supposed to be a long shot. Aliens of the Alpha Quadrant knew Humans’ lifespans were short, they wouldn’t think John was still alive after so long, not unless they’ve somehow figured out that he didn’t age while he was under their service and that’s not possible. John never stayed with any of them long enough to raise suspicion and never let them see how he could never get any lasting or lethal injuries.

He was suicidal but not dumb. No one can know there’s such a thing as an essentially immortal Human creeping around in the galaxy. That’d turn mankind as a whole into lab rats for other alien races, just like John would turn into a lab rat if any Human that didn’t care about him found out what he is.

He closes his eyes briefly, remorse turning the air he’s breathing to something acrid and dense.

*Jim*. Even without colors that are incomprehensible concepts for Brakanlians just as gender is for Muliaks, John understands the report and yes, it’s accurate. It sounds somewhat poetic too, would probably make him smile in another kind of situation.

“I thought you said your ship *intercepted* the message,” he remarks at length, annoyed.
“We have no means to be certain it was the only transmission they sent. Had they sent another today, it’d take 5 of your years for it to reach Hoshlisia but significantly less if there are ships between the two planets.”

“You could have the means if you boarded their ship,” John points out. He feels bad for taking advantage of the Brakanlians, but he needs help in this if he wants to make sure Jim is safe and remains that way, “If you find it orbiting Earth, beam to it and let me know what you find.”

Aston bows again in farewell. “It shall be done, Reaper. I will inform you of our results.”

He mutters in his own language to a communicator hidden in his sleeve and is beamed back to his ship before John can thank him, but it doesn’t matter.

John is already dashing to the one place where he thinks—hopes—Jim would’ve gone in his upset state, right hand still stained with yellow-green blood.

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John sucks in air when he spots Jim sitting in the docks, still safe and sound. His shoulders are slumped and shake from time to time, his knees close to his chest and his arms cover his face. His whole posture makes something in John ache and screech in need to comfort him and it’s hard to fight that back.

But he stomps on that urge, repeats to himself there’s a more pressing one at the moment. Hurting as he is, at least Jim is alive and John has to keep him that way, has to make sure the remaining Muliak doesn’t kill him in retribution for John murdering its comrades and refusing to serve them.

It shouldn’t be hard to finish this. If this particular alien species lack of anything, if there’s a reason they need Reaper so much to win their war, it’s exactly this one; they are nothing but brutal force, completely unfamiliar with the notion of planning and strategizing. And for it he’s thankful, because if they were—well, he’d probably be on his way to their home planet while they tortured and kept Jim trapped and away from him.

He fingers the blade concealed in his forearm, the hilt not designed for the frail and thin skin of a Human palm digging into him and causing bleeding that stops quickly and restarts in a cycle that will repeat itself until John lets go of the stolen weapon. The pain sharpens his already acute senses and he waits as close to Jim as he can risk without being discovered.

At least Jim is in the open, so John knows he’ll have enough time to see when the Muliak comes and tries to get to him.

He lurks behind a column, wonders if it’d be too dangerous to just walk to Jim and explain the situation to him. By now, Jim must suspect John is some kind of criminal, that he’s committed crimes that force him to have a fake identity, so going to him and telling him he’s put his life in danger by staying close to him wouldn’t surprise him, not so much.

He hopes Jim isn’t so mad at him that he won’t let John protect him, that he doesn’t try to run away at the sight of him.

He’s ready to leave his vantage point and start making amends by telling the truth when he hears a hover car approaching. It parks just a few meters from Jim and John curses under his breath, watching as Captain Pike gets out of it and walks to Jim.

This is it. His cover—Leonard McCoy’s existence—is blown if Pike witnesses his unnatural aptitudes. He’ll have to leave everything behind again, he’ll have to flee and create a new name and
life in which he can hide again.

He doesn’t want to think about the possibility of Jim refusing to go with him if that happens.

He won’t.

Jim barely jerks when Pike sits beside him, barely reacts when the Captain puts a hand on his shoulder. John can’t hear what they’re saying, but he can bet most of the talk is done by Pike. He wonders if Jim will tell him they’re having issues and if Pike will share his own reservations about McCoy with him, if he hasn’t already.

John can’t see the expression on Pike’s face but his body language speaks of genuine concern for Jim and that appeases John more than he wants to admit to himself.

Jim has so few people in his corner. He could do with another, especially someone as influential as Pike.

An hour goes by, another half until John creeps closer after hearing something coming. He takes the dagger out of his sleeve and grips it firmly, ignoring the blood prickling down his arm to his elbow.

Come on, motherfucker, he thinks, you wanted the Reaper. Here I am. Let’s get this over with.

“Son,” Pike is saying, “Whatever it is, it’ll look better in the morning, once you’ve eaten something and rested for a bit. Come with me, don’t make me say it again. And please, don’t make me order you. I can do that, if you don’t leave me another choice.”

Jim turns to the Captain, his profile bemused and open. John has the inkling this is the first time he’s been called son by someone who isn’t saying it in passing because Jim is young and rash, by someone who could perhaps actually mean it.

He wants to be wrong. His heart is already clenching just thinking about the possibility, remembering his own Father, always so proud and warm to him and Sam until the day he died.

And Jim never had that.

“We’re not in Campus,” Jim mumbles, head lolling back to his knees, “and I’m not in uniform.”

“A Starfleet Officer is never really off-duty,” Pike counters.

“I’m not a Starfleet Officer,” Jim retorts crossly, huddling up even tighter than before.

“You’re a Starfleet Officer in training,” Pike replies, his bearing still calm despite of Jim’s tone, “And as such, yes, I can order you to come with me. I’d rather not, if it’s all the same to you, so are you coming or not?”

There’s a beat in which John hears the smallest hint of footsteps, feels the tiniest shift in the air. Then Jim sighs, frustrated, and gets up. Pike follows him and they walk to the hover car and it’s then, as Pike surrounds Jim’s shoulders with an arm and keeps talking, that John finally sees the alien and lunges.

He sees it ready to grab Jim and tear him apart and Pike too as collateral damage, ready to do it with its bare hands which are more than enough arsenal to split a feeble Human in two or as many pieces as it wants.

The Muliak never reaches its target. John stabs him right in the center of the abdomen where its heart
is located, uses his other hand to break its jawbone so it can’t scream as it’s dying and pushes him
towards the edge of the quay, leaping down with it firmly grasped by the middle so their bodies
won’t disturb the water beneath and reveal their presence.

He grips the old wood of the dock with a hand slippery with blood and holds his breath, listening to
any sign of either Jim or Pike knowing what happened behind them.

There is none. The hover car starts and drifts away.

Grunting, John drops both the body and the knife—still speared in it—and pulls himself up.

He’d curse his luck if that hadn’t gotten old decades ago. Even if it hadn’t though, he wouldn’t do it.

Jim is alive. Everything else can be fixed.

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“Tell me you have good news,” he says as soon as Aston reappears by his side. He’s still in the
docks, has already washed as much blood off him as he can and gotten dry while he waited for the
Brakanlian to come back. While he doesn’t doubt he could beam down directly to the Academy, he
doesn’t want to risk being discovered. Dawn is close now.

“Good news,” he repeats, blinking his inner set of eyelids, “Yes. I have good news and bad news.
Which ones—”

“The good ones,” John cuts in, needing even the tiniest ray of sunshine in the clusterfuck he’s in,
“Tell me the good ones first, Commander.”

“There were no additional broadcasts divulging your condition and the identity of your mate.”

John doesn’t think any bad news can thwart his relief over hearing that, so he gestures Aston to keep
going and rubs his face with a newly-healed hand from which he finished taking splinters out of just
a while ago.

“However, there was a safety mechanism in the ship that activated auto-destruction and it was
discovered by Starfleet’s patrols once it exploded.”

John doesn’t need the Brakanlian to tell him it’s unclear whether Starfleet is going to recover enough
parts of the unknown vessel to assemble it back together, access to its memory banks and find out
about John who has looked basically the same throughout his long life and can’t change his
appearance not even with plastic surgery.

They’d cross-reference the new data with all their records, including the ones of the Academy, and
find him and start asking too many questions about his association with the Muliaks, questions that
John can’t answer, can’t even let them ask.

“Define ‘exploded’,” John orders, aggravated, “How likely is it that Starfleet Intelligence finds me?”

There’s no pause, no hesitance in the Brakanlian’s reply. “Highly unlikely,” he declares, “Their ship
was shattered starting from the bridge in a divergent pattern and my people recovered most of the
pieces of the black box from the wreckage.”

John almost curses him from making him so nervous over nothing, but he remembers how fanatically
fond of definitions their species are and that was, in the strict sense of it, bad news. “Okay,” he
breathes, “Not as bad as I was fearing then, Commander. Thank you.”
The alien tilts his head, pleased. “We are at your service, Reaper. We don’t forget.”

John won’t deny he’s touched, but there’s one thing bothering him about it, one thing that’s been bothering him ever since the Muliaks pointed out how easy it was to spot Jim in ways he doesn’t understand.

“Commander, how did you find me? And how did they find Jim, do you have any idea?”

“Jim?”

John sputters a little. This is the first time he’s had to say it out loud and after what he’s done, he doesn’t think he deserves to do it, to claim Jim as his own.

“James Kirk. My mate.”

The Brakanlian officer takes a deep breath through the device firmly clasped in the lower half of his face and nods, “If there’s anything the Muliaks are noteworthy for is their instinct and sense of smell. They needed your services and they had a—feeling that you were still alive. We knew you were alive because we can sense once a debt has been fully paid and yours hasn’t been squared yet. They seized one of our vessels and accessed your file to be certain of your state. Once we realized we’ve unwillingly leaked this information to them, we set course to your home planet and pursued the Muliak ship we came across, knowing they’d find you sooner than us once we arrived. Both of our vessels were small enough to pass through Federation’s outposts without raising any alarms. I beamed down and followed them. It didn’t take them long to follow your trail and get to you and then to your mate, in whom your scent was especially concentrated. My species can’t sense this without equipment, but we verified their findings and we were ready to let you know of the upcoming threat, however—”

“They attacked me and you ran out of time,” John interrupts, not needing the rest of the story to understand what happened, “I see. I hope it’s not much to ask you to erase any kind of records about me you and your people have. I don’t want this happening again. I’m retired and for all purposes dead to anyone who’s looking for me.”

Aston nods again. “That is most understandable. I will see it done, Reaper. K’Dhatia will remain on your side. If you ever have need of us again, don’t hesitate to call for our aid.”

John smiles slightly. Hopefully I won’t ever need it again. “I will keep that in mind.”

He stands up to dismiss Aston properly. God only knows he couldn’t have done all of that so fast and stay under the radar at the same time.

“This one will not forget,” he chants, bowing in the customary salute of K’Dhatia, both arms crossed forming an X on his chest, palms wide open and facing the other. His tongue is a bit awkward forming the words in their fizzy language, but they’re clear enough and Aston responds swiftly, mirroring his pose.

“This one remembers.”

Alone with his thoughts again, John sits back on the pier. His head hangs miserably, the surface of the sea and the sky at sunrise doing nothing to improve his spirits.

He can’t believe he’s already condemned Jim to be with him, that he’s apparently claimed him without his knowledge or any of his say in the matter.

“What have I done?” he asks no one, bending in half, clawing at his face with both hands, “Jim.”
Sam’s files about the population of Mars weren’t enlightening at all, beyond the mate-for-life detail he got out of them, he knows nothing of their reproducing habits therefore he knows nothing about himself now.

*It reeks of you, that pretty little whore.*

He infers the C-24 has also enhanced his pheromones along with everything else, so much it’s not even necessary that he has sex with Jim to leave a mark on him, a mark that will identify him as *his* to anyone sensitive enough.

It fits, he thinks bitterly. Jim unusually and exquisitely attuned to his moods and needs, just like John is to his; both of them searching each other’s company, always finding excuses for little touches that settle them; how they usually prefer sharing a bed over sleeping apart, how Jim has been having sex with less and less people despite of his active libido and lack of formal attachment to John, how he *never* picks a sure thing over him when they’re in a place together, how bitter and mad with jealousy John gets just thinking about Jim *touching* others.

It’s happened already, what he thought he was preventing by not initiating anything romantic between them. It’s probably incomplete, but it’s started and it’s final. It can’t be undone.

They’re mates.

How is he going to explain this to Jim when he doesn’t want to hear a thing from him?

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He tosses the clothes he was wearing in the recycler unit even though there’s not much blood left on them. One can’t be too careful, especially not when there’s a body in San Francisco bay that the sea may not be generous enough to take far away before it’s found.

He can’t sleep, can’t even close his eyes for longer than a second. He knows—intellectually—that Jim is safe with Pike and that there’s no other hazard closing in, but that doesn’t stop his *want*, his *need* to have Jim by his side—in his arms—and make things right again.

By sheer force of will and a healthy amount of paranoia, he suits up in Academy Reds and attends his classes. Mondays are busy days filled to the brim with important subjects and seminars and a short shift of clinic duty in the afternoon and John goes through the motions on autopilot, almost getting a diagnosis wrong on a pregnant Andorian woman for having his head not exactly where it should be.

It’s Geoffrey who saves his ass, elbowing him discretely before the woman leaves and whispering the very obvious signs he just missed.

“Happens to the best of us,” he assures John once they’re both alone filling clinical histories of the patients they saw, “We all have bad days and distracted days and worse days too. Don’t worry, I’ve got you covered. Do you need to leave early, Leonard?”

John gives his colleague a grateful look. He pinches the bridge of his nose briefly, the fact his physiology doesn’t allow him to have headaches easily doesn’t mean he can’t give himself any and he’s doing a wonderful job so far; the discomfort behind his eyeballs almost a palpable thing as it throbs, every beat of it reminding him of his mistakes, both old and new.

“If leaving early could fix things I wouldn’t be here,” he mutters.

Geoffrey tosses him a sympathetic look before going back to the files in his PADD. “That bad, I
He’s not expecting Jim to be there when he’s back to their dorm in the evening, but he feels the pang of disappointment as if he were.

He sees movement for an instant through the corner of his eye and spins, a blonde silhouette vanishing faster than he can catch it.

“Sam?” he calls out. At this point, he’s got nothing to lose so he keeps looking and calling softly but there is no answer and he eventually gets tired of waiting for something he doesn’t want, not really.

He misses his twin, he always will, but he’d rather have her as a figment of his imagination, as a vivid memory, as a clever trick his mind plays on him, than trapped here because of him.

He tries to convince himself Jim will be back in a while, that maybe it’s not too soon to start apologizing again with something more meaningful and less useless than words.

He spends a long time going through his things even though he knows exactly what he’s looking for and where it is.

When he finally rips the fabric of one of his bags and retrieves his dog tag from the inner side of it, he closes his fist around it and squeezes, slowly loosening his grip to read the inscription as if it could bite him.

His name, codename, ID number and blood type greet him with coldness, if not malice. He hasn’t worn it since the massacre in Olduvai, but he’s always carried it with him, always kept it close despite it has no use for him. He can’t die so there won’t be a body that needs identification. He doesn’t need any kind of medical treatment so the scant information on it won’t ever be required.

But it is a part of him, a part of the real him, an item that represents a life he doesn’t have anymore that has always helped him remembering who he is regardless of how much it hurts to know and how many names he’s worn throughout his existence.

It doesn’t even look as old as it should, just like him.

He leaves it on Jim’s pillow and goes to the rooftop.

“What’s this?” Jim asks briskly, strolling towards him and stopping ten steps from his back.

John turns slowly, not wanting to spook him with his eagerness to see him and talk to him again.

Jim is extending the dog tag to him, a closed-off expression on his usually so open face. He’s clearly not willing to come any closer or to speak any more than necessary.

John feels the distance he put between them like a punch in the gut. He swallows thickly, doesn’t focus on the irony of how much he’s choking to tell Jim everything now that he can’t do it.

“My dog tag,” he replies quietly.

Jim immediately bristles. “I know that! I meant, what the hell is this supposed to mean, John? What am I supposed to do with it? Do you want me to turn you in, is that it?”
He hates how his name sounds like an insult in Jim’s lips, hates how Jim twists it so it seems he’s yelling *whoever the fuck you are* instead of saying a name.

But he deserves that, so he won’t complain. At least Jim is talking to him.

John shakes his head slightly, keeps looking at him, chagrined but hopeful, guilt-ridden but pleading. “No, I was hoping you’d keep it safe for me. I’d like you to have it so if someday you change your mind and you want to hear my story, you can just give it back to me and I’ll understand. I’ll tell you everything. You can do anything you want with it, but that’s why I gave it to you.”

Jim stares at him and for a second, his mask crumbles. John can see how shocked he is as he stands there, wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape, and how much he wants to believe in this show of trust no matter how let down he still feels because of what John kept from him for too long.

Then Jim slams it back into place and all John can see are guarded eyes and a clenched jaw.

“What if I don’t want it?” he asks, tone clipped.

“Then I take it back,” John replies, lowering his gaze because he won’t be able to handle this, not if Jim just gives up on him, on them, “And I stay out of your way, but near in case—in case you still want me around.”

There’s a long, loaded pause. John closes his eyes, waits for the blow to come, for Jim to throw the dog tag at him and walk away. After all, why would he want to forgive him, why would he want him close? John is nothing but a criminal and a liar on top of that for him.

If he ever was something else for Jim, he ruined it with his silence and his lies.

He hears Jim taking a shuddering breath, opens his eyes to see him glaring at the chain as he holds it tightly in his hand.

“You promised me,” Jim says hoarsely, “You promised me you’d go wherever I go and I don’t know if that’s true, Bones, but I still want you to prove it. I want you to stay and prove it to me.”

“I meant it, Jim,” he swears, daring to close the distance between them and hold Jim’s hand in one of his, “I meant every word and I will prove it to you.”

Jim doesn’t react to his touch, doesn’t look up at him, but he doesn’t push him away either. It’s more than he can ask for.

“And no more lies?”

“No more lies,” John promises anew.

Jim’s hand goes slack in his, the chain falling to his palm. John would be panicking if Jim’s eyes weren’t boring into his, if he weren’t speaking, softly this time.

“Okay,” he says, cerulean eyes still shielded but promising, shining brighter than every light in the city and the sky above them, “I’ll keep it safe.”

Slowly, John holds the string up and waits for any sign of Jim not wanting him to do this.

He gets the opposite. Jim tilts his chin down expectantly and John puts the chain around his neck, careful to avoid touching him despite of how much he wants to.

Jim slips it under his uniform and steps back, turning on his heels to get back inside. He pauses to
give John one last, long look and the door slides behind him, leaving John alone again.

He wants to follow him, to run to him and hold him, to kiss him and whisper all the things Jim should know about him since the moment John knew they were meant to be together, that John should’ve told him before they ended up in this mess because of him.

He doesn’t.

He stays in the roof for most of the night and vows this is the only and last time he’s failed Jim.

Whatever it takes, he’s going to keep his promises.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I made another fanmix. You can listen to it here.

Thanks for all your comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John has been Jim’s primary physician practically since the day they met. He’s been in charge of his monthly physical exams since he started working in the clinic and he can bet he’s the only doctor who’s ever treated Jim since he arrived to San Francisco and possibly long before that as well.

Knowing all this, he’s still surprised when he comes into a private examination room and sees Jim sitting on the bio-bed.

“I want sleeping pills,” Jim says without preamble or even raising his head to check it’s him who came in and not someone else.

He sounds dog-tired and looks the part too, which surprises John none. He knows neither of them have slept at all in the past three—probably four—days.

He crosses his arms, heaving a sigh as Jim keeps refusing to look at him. “Is that so?” he asks, barely able to suppress the annoyance from his tone.

He understands Jim is still mad at him and will continue to be that way for who knows how long, but really? Sleeping pills only to avoid the possibility of John comforting him if he has a nightmare? He’s not about to hand potentially addictive substances to Jim because he’s fucking sulking.

Instead of snapping, Jim simply elaborates meekly. “You know I have nightmares. They’re always worse when I’m—when I haven’t been able to sleep for too long. I just want to avoid them.”

It’d be easy to pretend he buys that and give Jim the pills with just enough refills to last for the week but John is aware it’s him who Jim wants to avoid taking them and he won’t make it easy for him.

It’s one thing to be ignored during the day in the few activities they share in the Academy and another to accept this—this which feels worse than a slap in the face—without a fight.

“Jim, your sleeping habits are the worst I’ve ever seen. Without aid, you hardly sleep at all. You take catnaps here and there plus a few hours of shuteye every couple of days. Don’t go blaming me for that. What’s changed now is that you don’t want the fix we found for it which is me. That’s what this is, that’s why you want the pills.”

Jim rubs his nose harshly with the back of his hand, his face impassive but his eyes cold as he ventures a look at John.

“Which part,” Jim states, punctuating every word, “of I can’t sleep you didn’t get, Doc?”

Doc? Well, that’s a new one. He raises an eyebrow. “The part where you act like it’s a goddamned newsflash even though I’ve been there and I know better, kid.”
Jim huffs and makes a face. “Could you just give me the stupid meds? Just for a couple of weeks.”

“Days.”

“Oh, come on—“

“Days, Jim, or you’re going without. You’re welcome to make an appointment with another doctor, see if they cheerfully comply to your request like you expect me to instead of asking you questions that I’m sure you wouldn’t even answer to me if I did. And of course, signing you up for therapy sessions while they’re at it.”

He’s expecting Jim to yell at him, to cuss and kick his way off the bio-bed and out of the room, but Jim scoffs and lies down, curling on his side in the position he always favors when he’s sleeping alone.

“Would you close your eyes, Bones?” he asks quietly, eyes wide and unblinking, bloodshot but still so very blue John could recognize him in the dark if he had to just by looking at them, “Would you close your eyes if you knew there are only demons there to welcome you, that they won’t let you get any rest no matter how long you try to just sleep?”

John gets closer little by little, giving him plenty of time to recoil from him. He sits on the bio-bed after checking it’s off and tentatively squeezes Jim’s shoulder, leaving his PADD in the space Jim’s legs aren’t occupying.

He wants to scoop him up in his arms and lull him to sleep, but that’s a right he’s lost.

“I would,” he replies slowly, “If I had someone who could keep the worst of them at bay. I have my own demons, Jim, you don’t know what they are but you know they’re there. You scare them away, I scare yours. Now, I know I lied to you and that you’re angry, but I didn’t fake that. No one can.”

“You don’t need me,” Jim mutters, shuts his eyes tight, probably thinks John won’t hear him if he’s quick and quiet enough, “Three days in and I can’t fucking sleep and you’re—you, normal, and I bump into everything and my head hurts and I don’t know what to do—“

“Jim,” John squeezes harder, leans down to fit into Jim’s field of view, “I need you. I have more endurance to lack of sleep, that’s all. You don’t go through Med-school without developing that skill,” that’s not the whole truth, he’s acutely aware of it and he tries a few words in his head before settling with something that won’t make him sound like he’s from the Beta Quadrant, “Even before that, I needed less sleep than the regular John.”

Jim halfheartedly laughs at the pun, looking up at him through his lashes.

John’s pulse quickens, both with hope and desire, and he takes the PADD in his hand again only to have something to do other than kiss Jim right then and there.

He fills the prescription without making Jim ask him again.

Hopefully, his anger will temper soon and they’ll be able to talk.

***

That night, he watches Jim drug-assisted rest.

Jim still moves, still searches for a presence beside him that’s not there, his pretty face contorting every time he feels the absence—John’s absence.
He knows Jim will kick him out of bed if he wakes up to find John wrapped around him, knows that’s what Jim tried to prevent by taking medication.

He misses him even though they haven’t been physically apart for longer than ten hours, at most.

He misses him even though he’s right there.

The bridge of trust he destroyed between them still stings and burns, the flames licking at his insides constantly, going higher and hotter every time Jim rejects him, every time John remembers it’s all his fault.

***

His week ends with a summoning from Pike’s office, the Captain himself calling to his comm. and ordering to see him A.S.A.P.

John is quite convinced this has nothing to do with official business.

Still, he salutes Pike appropriately and makes his best impression of a man who has nothing to hide despite he’s everything but.

“At ease, Cadet,” Pike says, waving a hand for him to take a seat.

John does. It’s minutes of heavy silence until Pike reclines in his chair and fixes him with the same kind of determined and daring look he threw in John’s direction the last time they were alone.

“Kirk has shared a few interesting notions about you with me, McCoy,” Pike states aloofly, “I think it’s time for you to stop lying. I’m willing to go easy on you, if you do.”

John sneers, not a beat passing before he’s replying complacently, “You must be real desperate, Captain, if you think I’m going to fall for that. Jim has told you nothing, but if you want to play this game, I’m willing to indulge you. Pray tell, what interesting notions did you find out, sir?”

It seems that months of fruitlessly digging into his past have frustrated Pike a great deal. It’s almost hilarious to witness him fuming and grasping for a retort, but it’s reassuring more than anything.

If a man like Pike can’t find out who—what—John really is, then no one can. He’s safe. He gets to stay with Jim in the Academy and in Starfleet for as long as his nonexistent aging process allows him.

That’s ten years, at most. Ten years to convince Jim to join him in eternity.

In the end, Pike spreads his hands in defeat, a corner of his mouth quirking up as he stares at John. “I’m not above trying, McCoy. As the saying goes, I had nothing to lose. Sure, I don’t know anything about your background yet, but I do know something happened between you and Jim and if he weren’t so exceedingly loyal, I’d have you in my pocket right now. Did you show him your true colors, Doctor, is that what happened?”

Pike is sadly not so far off the mark. That infuriates him. “That’s none of your business,” John spits out, “I will report you for harassment if you keep snooping about my relationship with Jim.”

“Fair enough,” Pike agrees, “Just one more thing, Doctor. You pull another trick like the one you did this weekend and I cast you out of Jim’s life. He’s here to achieve great things, not to lose his mind over some mysterious man that he thinks is worth his time.”
Beneath Pike’s big and expensive desk, John’s fists tighten. It’s hard to fight the urge to beat Pike to a pulp just for implying he could take Jim from him, but he manages.

It helps remembering Pike is doing this to protect Jim, not threatening John so he might confess, even though he could if he weren’t such an honorable man.

He smirks threateningly and stands up, doesn’t even wait to be dismissed. “That’s a very bad idea, Captain,” he warns on his way out, “I wouldn’t try that at all.”

*Jim is mine,* his attitude screams, *and no one can break us apart.*

***

Pike is not the only one who tries biting John’s head off that day.

“Look at him. You’re breaking his heart,” Edith says accusingly, facing away from John, gaze fixed on Jim a few tables down, “You should be ashamed of yourself, Leonard.”

“I am,” John concedes, sipping his third bourbon of the night with a grimace that has nothing to do with the burn of it in his throat.

*You’re breaking his heart.*

Could that be true? Jim sure as hell is breaking his.

“Is it because he’s a boy?” Edith inquires, “You’re one of those utterly and hopelessly straight men, is that what this is?”

“You don’t believe that,” John remarks, exasperated, leaving his empty glass with a loud clunk on the counter, “You’ve been teasing me about looking at him too much ever since we met, Edith! You know that I—“

“Want him? Yes, of course,” she fills in, “I thought that you loved him too. Dearly, if I may add, but perhaps I was wrong. I’m going to tell you the same thing I told you once; stop waiting. Whatever it is that’s holding you back, get rid of it. You’re going to lose him.”

*That can of worms has been opened already,* John thinks.

He signals her to give him one more drink and says nothing.

“He’s going home with someone tonight,” she guarantees, looking disapprovingly at him as she pours him another shot, “That Orion girl, most likely, or that older Cadet that always tries to be charming but does nothing except give me the creeps.”

“He’s young,” John shrugs, pointedly overlooking the jealousy clawing at him, “And he’s single. He can do as he likes.”

Edith raises her eyebrows. “Is he?”

John frowns at her retreating back as she goes to attend more costumers.

It’s a busy night at the bar and Jim isn’t thriving in the activity and attention as he usually does. He’s off somehow; his limbs are too tense, his smile is too tight, his eyes are too dim.

John doesn’t stay to find out who ends up being Jim’s hook up.
His control is slipping. If he doesn’t watch his actions, he’ll take Jim home himself and sort things out between them with his dick.

He doesn’t think Jim would complain about that, exactly, but it’s a patch that wouldn’t last in the slightest and not what they need at all.

Patience and strength are both things he has aplenty.

Or so he tells himself.

***

The weeks prior to Jim’s birthday are long and dull.

They argue, they shut the other out when it hurts too much, they quip and banter in their best days for little periods of time but don’t share a bed again, not even once, which isn’t so shocking when John counts the nights Jim hasn’t arrived to their dorm at all.

The day before the Kelvin massacre Jim doesn’t go anywhere. John thought he was going to get piss poor drunk but he’s underestimated him yet again and he’s here, quietly attempting to study or at least pretending he is.

When the clock ticks midnight, John sits beside him on the bed and gently pries the PADD from Jim’s fingers.

He feels Jim swallowing thickly as he holds him close to his chest. He doesn’t return the embrace, but John doesn’t expect him to.

If anything, he’s stunned he’s there at all, giving him a chance to be with him in what has to be one of the worst days of the year for him, if not the worst.

He doesn’t wish Jim a happy birthday or says anything. He kneads Jim’s scalp with gentle and tireless fingertips and waits.

There’s no wetness against his neck, not even when Jim’s arms grasp for him and close around him tight enough to hurt.

John wants to tell him he’s grateful Jim got to live that day, wants to tell him how much of a difference he’s made in his otherwise miserable existence, wants to tell him how much he believes this is just the start of something great, something they will experience together and make right for each other.

George Kirk’s ghost is too heavy and doesn’t let him. It chokes them both, the sacrifice he made 23 years ago a palpable thing in the semidarkness of their room tampering every small comfort John can offer.

Jim doesn’t make a sound, but the air overflows with his grief all the same.

John blinks back tears and holds Jim tighter.

***

There’s a ceremony early in the morning. Captain Pike says a few respectful words and asks for a minute of silence for the lost.

Jim keeps his head down and his eyes closed until John pulls him by the arm when it’s over.
He looks around cagily as they walk to their History of the Federation II class.

He can’t shake the feeling something is about to go awfully wrong.

***

The Instructor doesn’t waste a second to call Jim to the front and have him give a fucking exposition about the Kelvin.

John purses his lips, unable to believe someone can be this insensitive. Granted, Jim is a handful in most of his classes, but there’s no excuse for this kind of retaliation. John can’t decide whether he wants to hurt the Instructor until he’s begging for mercy and then just *keep going* or get rid of him quick and clean to pretend he never existed.

There’s shocked muttering all around the classroom. Jim clears his throat and begins with a detailed description of the vessel and its Bridge crew, speaking in a clear if strained voice, his chin tilted slightly down and his gaze focused on the wall in the far edge of the hall.

When he talks about his father, there’s a distinctive edge of admiration in his voice and longing, interest so pure and childlike it hurts to hear it.

John looks daggers at the man in charge of the course until he gets his attention.

He’s mildly satisfied when the asshole blanches and jerks back as if stung.

“Stop this,” he mouths, fury coiling hotly in his gut and shining menacingly in his eyes, “or I will.”

“That’s enough, Mr. Kirk,” the Instructor declares forcefully, “I can see you did your homework. Go take a seat.”

Jim nods curtly and sits by John’s side.

John entwines their fingers together and keeps their linked hands on Jim’s thigh. He doesn’t doubt Jim’s strength to endure this alone, but he wants to be there for him, wants him to remember there’s nothing wrong with needing comfort, with accepting it.

Jim sighs and squeezes back. His eyes are distant and absent, but his grip is steady and assures John he’s at least partially aware of his presence.

If there are people watching, John doesn’t give a rat’s ass.

He keeps holding Jim’s hand until the class is over.

***

John calls Pike later to inform him of what happened.

The next time they have History of the Federation, there’s a new Instructor.

***

John has to admit, all this time on his own is making him antsy.

On one of the nights in which Jim teaches Hand-to-Hand—and boy, isn’t he glad he’s actually good at it, good at offensive but most importantly at defending himself—he decides he’s had enough of this.
He goes to pick Jim up from the gym and possibly instigate a physical fight between them.

Maybe that’ll clear the air between them, maybe it’ll make it worse.

Either way, John has nothing to lose.

He’s got plenty of time. If it doesn’t work, something else will.

***

The class isn’t done when he arrives, so he sits down on the lower stands and watches.

Jim is fast and intuitive; where his technique gets sloppy, instinct backs it up and keeps him on his toes and toughens every muscle of his torso, has him ready to strike back when he gets a chance but also—and fundamentally—ready to protect himself from a lethal blow.

This is what he tries to explain to the fresh faces around him. He uses words as much as demonstrations. He jokes and flirts lightly—of course he does—and seems to have the class wrapped around his finger. They’re all absorbed in the lesson; in the way Jim’s body moves, fluid and unobstructed but with a clear goal in his hands and feet, a target on the opponent’s body that they must reach or pull back and deflect until they can try again.

He’s a sight to behold, his legs and arms and all the muscles of his body twirling and hammering, driving forward to disarm, to repel, to knock out.

It’s no wonder the Instructor chose Jim to be his assistant even though it’s only been months since he arrived to the Academy. Once he was given the proper techniques, Jim’s skill blossomed.

It’s the kind of dexterity that can only be born from constant practice, from necessity and refusal to give up. It doesn’t fail to paint a worrisome picture in John’s mind every time he witnesses it, even as he’s in awe at it.

John’s got years of training and battle under his belt, but Jim is so young.

When did he learn to protect himself? Why wasn’t someone there to keep him safe?

Once the First Years are dismissed, Jim looks at him from the mat and chuckles.

“What’s so funny?” John asks, scowling.

“You there,” Jim laughs again. It’s a dark, sharp sound that has John tensing, “You kept making these faces. You’re dying to teach me how to do it right, aren’t you?”

It’s the opening John wanted, but he doesn’t jump at it. “Actually, I think you did a pretty good job.”

“But you still don’t approve of my technique,” Jim states, scrunching his nose like the word tastes foul on his tongue, “So what if I play dirty sometimes, Bones? Rules, decency—those things can get you killed in real combat.”

“I agree,” John says easily. He smirks when Jim closes his mouth with a click, saving the unnecessary retort to something he didn’t say, “I’m not here to attack you, Jim. Well, unless you want me to.”

He delivers the last line with calculated nonchalance and it has the desired effect. Jim’s stance stiffens, his feet stirring on the mat, his fingers twitching as if the chance of having John close to his fists were too damn good to pass on.
“Maybe I want to,” Jim says, licking his lips. He looks at John with challenge in his blue eyes and grins, “Why don’t you come here and show me what you’ve got, old man? Or is it veteran?”

John chortles, kicking his boots off and tossing the red jacket of his uniform aside. “It’s Sergeant Old Man for you.”

“Sergeant, huh?” Jim’s eyebrows shoot up, “Wow, I’m impressed.”

He makes a show of stretching to warm up, delighting in the way Jim’s eyes follow his every move and linger in places that aren’t really relevant in a fight at all.

He’s aware this strategy has its weak points, its risks, but being careful got him nowhere so he stands his ground on the mat and cocks his head in invitation.

He makes Jim work for it at first, rotating out of reach and blocking each of his blows with brisk, brief hits of his own on his forearms and legs. Jim grunts, jaw clenching in increasing frustration, and keeps charging, his movements honing instead of waning with each strike that doesn’t land where it should.

“What’s the matter, Jim?” John teases after hooking his right leg on Jim’s left knee, messing his balance enough to push him on his back, hearing him fall with a groan, “This more than you can handle?”

John knows Jim has to be exhausted by now. He counts the seconds in his head, gradually and deliberately slowing down as Jim advances on him.

He sees the punch in slow motion, sees as Jim’s upper body turns and his hand comes up directly aimed to his face. He stays put for too long and receives it straight on the nose, the cartilage in it breaking with a squelchy thud, his vision blurring for a second as pain surges in the center of his face and blood pricks down on his mouth and chin.

Jim curses, eyes widening wildly as he rushes to set John’s nose, fingers steadying the bones nicely and firmly. “Shit, Bones, I thought you were going to—Jesus, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

John snorts soggily, gulps down the metallic taste of blood with a grimace. “I don’t believe that, you don’t believe that. It’s okay, Jim. I’m fine.”

Jim has the decency to blush a little. “Here, hold it for a sec,” he positions John’s hand on his nose, as if John didn’t know any better, “Be right back.”

Jim sprints to get a towel from a bag at the end of the pad and darts to the bathroom.

John’s nose is already mended and good as new. He has two options; he either refuses Jim’s attentions, insisting he’s fine, or lets him fuse over him and clean the blood to realize he’s not injured, not anymore.

It’s not much of a choice. He can’t reject him, won’t risk it after everything that’s happened between them.

He lets him gingerly dab his face with a damp towel and waits for the fallout.

“What the—“ Jim drops the cloth, presses his nose with a thumb probably to convince himself that yeah, it’s not even swollen. “You broke your nose. I broke your nose. It should be broken,” he frowns, “Bones, what’s going on?”
“Do you want the short answer or the long one?” John asks, meets his gaze, determined to show Jim his secret since he won’t hear it otherwise.

“I want both,” Jim replies at once, grievously.

John nods grimly and throws Jim off his feet with the preternatural speed and strength he’s been holding back all along. He trusts he can take it, trusts the mat to cushion the plunge and prevent any permanent and serious damage.

Jim gapes at him from the floor, barely scrambling to dodge John’s second assault.

John doesn’t allow him to go far and hurls him over his shoulder and back once, twice, three times until Jim is panting and pale, looking at him like he’s a specter that shouldn’t be real but feels very much so.

He’d rather not hurt him, but this is necessary. Jim won’t believe him if he doesn’t back up his story with actions.

It’s not even a full minute, but he ends the uneven fight holding Jim securely beneath him, legs tangled and locked with his own, arms dangerously close to cut the air from his throat.

Jim keeps gaping, panting hard and not making a move to get out of his grip—not that he could, but he isn’t even trying—and he doesn’t ask the question John is dreading, doesn’t utter what are you or even who are you.

“John,” he breathes instead in wonder, shocking enough the soldier in him to relax his hold of him and taking advantage of it instantly, rolling them on the floor until he’s on top and John is the one gawking at him, “So this is you.”

“Yeah,” he says, throat scratchy and dry, “This is me.”

What does this make me? Who am I?

“You’re really not holding back on me anymore,” a smile curls on Jim’s lips and a part of John, the rational part, assures him he’s dreaming all of this. It feels too surreal; having him so close, so warm against him, so dazzling over him, so trusting again, “I’m not going to say thank you because you were a jerk to keep it from me in the first place, but—“ he pauses, his smile wide and playful, his breath teasing John’s lips to the point he has to blink to stop himself from rising up and capturing his lips in a kiss at last, “I appreciate it.”

“John—“

“John,” Jim interrupts him, eyelids closing to half-mast, “I still want the long answer, but not right now. Right now I want—“

John gets it, doesn’t let him finish.

He grips the back of Jim’s neck and pulls him the remaining inch to his lips, barely waits before using his tongue to open Jim’s mouth and lick his way inside. He groans at the first flick of Jim’s tongue against his, relishes the echoing moan he swallows from Jim’s mouth, and tightens his hold on him, hand digging and spreading possessively on the small of his back.

Jim clutches at his shoulders, drops all his weight on John, makes sure they slide into place—into each other—seamlessly, provokingly close and yet not nearly enough.
For a long moment, John’s mind wipes out.

He can only feel the pressure of Jim against him and the wet glide of his lips on his, the teasing nips of his teeth, Jim’s gasps and shivers every time John sucks one lip and then the other to his mouth.

It ignites something deep within him, something strong and unstoppable, something that has been building since the first time they laid eyes on each other.

It feels like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know if you need me to post what's coming (a somewhat explicit sex scene) separately so you can skip it.

Also, and just in case the lovely person who offered to beta this for me is still around, contact me, please?
Kissing Jim surpasses each and every one of his expectations.

Yes, it’s electrifying and incredible even in the moments they’re too far gone to care about finesse, even when it’s just their teeth and tongues clashing and their lips almost splitting from the urgency and force of the kiss. But it’s like nothing he’s ever felt, it swallows everything up except the shrilling call of want in his veins, enchanting and vibrant and impossible to ignore.

He pants against Jim’s mouth, blinking eyes that feel as clouded with lust as his mind is.

They’re in the gym, for God’s sake, and all he wants is to rip Jim’s sweatpants and tank top with his teeth and have him on the mat again and again until neither of them can walk.

“Bones, dorm, now,” Jim tries to coax, pushing at his chest for John to move off him but stopping and clinging to him instead when John grinds down against his groin and sucks a mark on his pulse point.

They groan with it, hands sneaking beneath clothes to increase the friction and the closeness between them.

John feels the hard shape of Jim’s cock against his and grasps his ass cheek tighter, the loud moan he draws from Jim echoing in the walls.

The footsteps he hears a second later are the one thing that prevents him from flipping Jim and licking him open right where they are.

They stand up and he presses Jim flush against him, hiding their erections between their bodies, and kisses him softly for the first time, his hand reluctantly slipping out of his pants in a poor attempt to appear less indecent.

“Mr. Kirk,” the Hand-to-Hand Instructor calls, “I suggest you take your activities elsewhere. I’ll see you on Thursday.”

There’s amusement ringing in the man’s voice instead of disapproval, which is probably the only reason John doesn’t growl and lets Jim tug him to the edge of the mat.

Jim retrieves his bag from the floor, smiles against John’s lips. “Good night, Mr. Park.”

***

It’s a challenge, the walk back to their room, and they almost don’t make it.

John can’t keep his hands off Jim, can’t stop kissing him except to attach his mouth to warm and sweaty skin that isn’t covered by clothes, can’t help but pinning Jim against a wall every couple of blocks and isn’t slightly satisfied until they’re grunting and rutting like dogs in heat every time.
“Get a room!” a scandalized voice shouts as Jim is keying the entrance code to their building.

“We have one!” Jim replies, his laughter cut in the middle with a sharp gasp when John sucks hard on his collarbone and soothes it with warm lips and wet tongue, “God, Bones, we’re—we’re almost there.”

John hums absently and impatiently pulls Jim the rest of the way inside.

***

It’s been months of foreplay, months of pining, months of ill timing and bad decisions and misunderstandings but it all has led to this, to them touching and tasting each other for the first time.

There’s no going back now. John feels the finality of it in every fiber of his being, in every move they make against each other, knows he won’t be able to let Jim go after sealing the deal between them—after mating—no matter what it’s at stake.

He traces his dog tag resting on Jim’s bare chest with wonder, so touched and downright happy he’s still wearing it and doesn’t seem to have taken it off at all that his breath catches in his throat.

He wants Jim to keep it forever, doesn’t want it back, wants him to wear the last vestige of the man John once was instead of hiding it—hiding himself—ever again.

Jim takes advantage of the pause to pull his undershirt off his body. The kiss he gives John is almost shy then, lips gliding sweetly on his, eyes staying open to watch him, half-lidded and dazed.

“Lights, fifty percent,” John calls out, won’t let Jim use the dimness of the room to conceal his insecurities from him, “Look at me, Jim.”

Jim shakes his head, tries kissing him again—firmly this time—and John lets him, enjoying the heat of his chest against his, the way Jim’s hands are as adamant as his own in keeping him close, in not letting him go.

But he doesn’t like how shaky he is, how suddenly nervous and stunned he is.

He doesn’t need Jim to tell him there’s been no one who has looked at him the way John is doing it right now, knows Jim is both thrilled and terrified about it because it’s just how he feels.

“If you knew,” Jim murmurs against his neck, his damp breath making John shiver with need, the animal inside of him urging him to keep going and save the pep talk for later, for when Jim is truly and unmistakably his, “If you knew everything about me, you wouldn’t want me anymore, Bones.”

“I could say the same to you, Jim,” John assures, tipping his head to kiss Jim’s hairline softly, his fingers tracing the pale and pink scars on Jim’s back, the ones whose origin he’s never dared to ask, to trespass, “And I could tell you that I’ll love you no matter what your secrets end up being, but you wouldn’t believe me.”

Jim does let go of him then, wide-eyed and gaping.

John replays his own words in his head, already missing Jim’s warmth, and winces.

Way to go, he berates himself, he’s already scared shitless of how I feel about him and I say it out loud, just to make it a little worse.

“Bones, you—“ it’s Jim who is tracing scars this time, fingertips caressing John’s chest from his
ribcage to his left hip, eyes following the movement raptly, “You weren’t born with the ability to
heal, were you?”

“No,” John answers quietly, arms falling limply to his sides, not sure he likes Jim got distracted from
his previous breakthrough with this.

The C-24 preserves his body like it was when Sam injected him with it. His torso and back are
grazed with old, faint scars of combat. Some of them are from knives, most of them from being in the
wrong edge of an old-fashioned projectile gun.

The one Jim is fixated on is his nastiest wound, comes with a sour memory of his S.O. in the army
telling him he was much too soft and slow to make a good soldier, that he was never going to come
out of it alive if he let the fact he was cutting and firing on human flesh freeze him for even one
fraction of a second.

John practiced until his speed improved enough to knock the guy out and sharpened his softness until
there was nothing left of it but a memory.

“It’s a long story,” he warns, offering a way out for Jim’s distress but not for his own, “And it could
change everything.”

“Maybe,” Jim says and John almost tenses, but he’s smiling and closing the distance between them
again, holding John’s left hand right on top of his heart for John to feel the fast and unwavering pace
of it, “But it wouldn’t change this, John, nothing can.”

He sighs deeply, his own heart speeding up in his chest, swelling with the promise Jim is making to
stick with him and with the way he utters his name now; low and caring, like a cherished secret that’s
only theirs.

Jim takes the chain off his neck, hangs it around John’s and pulls him to his lips again with it.

John follows his lead, takes Jim’s pants and boxers off with a yank, not surprised in the slightest
about Jim’s agility in getting him naked.

He is surprised with the low growl that booms in his chest and the rush of possessiveness he feels
burning under his skin at the thought of how exactly Jim got this nimble in the bedroom.

Sure, he’s been jealous and bitter about it all this time, but he’s never been this selfish, this petty.

“No more practice,” he rumbles, teeth scraping the shell of Jim’s ear, “Unless it’s with me, do you
hear me, Jim?”

It doesn’t seem his attitude bothers Jim at all. He keens and shivers, clutching his shoulders tightly
and wantonly spreading his legs for him. “Yes, yes. Just you, Bones.”

John kisses him, deep and hungry, and it’s only sweaty, slippery skin pressed close and sliding
effortlessly as they move against each other, eager hands groping and grasping, squeezing and
pulling.
The smack of their lips and their pants fill the room and John is tempted to grip them in his hand and get them off just like this because he doesn’t think he’s capable of breaking apart enough to do anything else, but he doesn’t.

He takes Jim’s length in a sure hand, clever fingers smearing the pre-come steadily leaking from the tip to make the strokes smooth and enticing. Jim cries out, blunt nails scratching his back hard enough to leave angry and red skin that sadly doesn’t last for longer than a second, but the sensation does and John groans, wrist twisting to hear Jim moaning for him again and ease ever so slightly the desire coursing in his blood, persistently chanting to him to just take, take, take, to bend Jim in two and fuck him hard and quick.

John busies himself trailing nips and unapologetic kisses and licks all over Jim’s body. It’s a battle against his instinct, taking his time even for a little bit to appreciate this moment they’re sharing, but he’s a diligent fighter and makes it.

Jim thrusts chaotically into his hand, loud but frustrated moans spilling from his mouth as he lies there and squirms under John’s ministrations.

He’s kissing another bruise on Jim’s hipbone when he hears him stuttering frenziedly. “Bones, if you don’t—if you don’t get on with it I swear to God I will sit on your dick myself.”

John smirks against his skin, tickling the inner side of Jim’s thighs with his lips. Heat is steadily and maddeningly coiling in his groin and he’s thrilled in knowing they’re on the same page.

He closes his mouth behind Jim’s knee and sucks, earning a surprised gasp from him, and straightens on the bed.

“Be a darling and pass me the lube, Jim,” he says, brand-hot hands gripping Jim’s thighs and spreading them further at the same time he guides Jim’s lower body to his lap, tilting his hips up just so to get a nice view of Jim’s entrance, dark pink and waiting for him.

“By then, John is a goner. He’s drunk in the heavy smell of their mingled arousal, high in the noises he draws from Jim, in the salty and heady taste of him on his tongue.

He tears the lube’s package with his teeth, hears Jim’s breath hitching when he licks a wet, broad stripe of skin on his perineum without warning. If he cranes his neck just right, he can see Jim’s face pinched in surprise and pleasure, eyelids fluttering, wordlessly encouraging him to go on, to lap around and on Jim’s creased hole.

He rolls his tongue around Jim’s balls before finally pressing the tip of his tongue in. Jim’s right leg spasms with it, almost smacking him in the side of the head, but John pushes it down again, squeezes his thighs tight to hold him in place as he outlines the rim of Jim’s hole over and over, tongue firm and hot and slowly pushing in, Jim’s frantic gasps and moans going straight to his dick.

It’s intoxicating, having Jim like this, and he squeezes his ass with the hand he’s not using to finally breach his entrance with the tip of his index finger, soaked in lube, circling it gently before pushing it to the second knuckle all in one go. Jim’s body does the rest, gradually giving way around his finger until it’s all in and he can brush that sweet spot inside of him.
Jim’s whole body curls all the way to his toes and he moans louder when John removes his finger and shoves his tongue back in, deeper this time, careful to stop before Jim’s muscles go stiff around him, before the intrusion gets too much and alternates with his finger again, stimulating his prostate to relax him faster.

He loves how tight Jim is. Even if this isn’t the first time he’s done something like this, it’s clearly been a long while, and John thrives in that fact, a pleased rumble making his tongue vibrate in Jim when it’s as far as it can go.

“Oh, God, Bones,” Jim cries out loudly, knees locking on John’s shoulders to practically fuck himself on his face, hips undulating and arms scrambling to find some resemblance of balance on the mattress and somehow make the angle work, “Bones.”

John presses the heel of his left hand on Jim’s perineum, two of his fingers doing the job from the inside to jab at that one buddle of nerves that can unwind Jim, his tongue flicking around them before he takes it out and looks down to see Jim’s face when he comes, which he does as soon as John’s fist closes around his cock.

Jim comes with a shout, comes so hard he hits his own chin with his release, legs twitching weakly when John keeps his fingers in him, unable to disconnect from him.

Jim moans low in his throat, pushes his hips up to meet John’s fingers. He’s so loose from his orgasm and John’s prep his ring finger slides right in with little resistance and John groans loudly, feeling Jim clenching and unclenching around him, teasing and inviting him in.

John slicks himself up with a blind hand, the condom falling forgotten to the floor along with the empty packets of lube.

Aligning his length to Jim’s entrance is easy as breathing and he pushes in slowly, inch by agonizing inch, Jim’s pupils as blown as they can go, the lovely blue of his eyes a thin halo around them, and he’s a mess, thrashing and sticky beneath him, but John isn’t in better shape, trembling each time he has to stop to let Jim adjust to his girth.

When he’s finally balls deep in him, none of them can breathe until he starts moving. It’s a few slow but sharp thrusts until Jim’s legs drop from his shoulders and settle around his middle, heels digging into his back, and they both grunt in approval, mouths searching one another to kiss hotly as their hips buck and slap against each other.

They fall into a rhythm, Jim’s shaft stirring back to life soon afterward, and the world could fall apart without them noticing.

For the first time, John is glad there’s nothing he can forget because Jim has never looked more beautiful than now—flushed and writhing beneath him, mouth slack and wide in pleasure, eyelids damp and fluttering every time John slams in just right, neck and shoulders covered in red marks a telltale of John’s passion for him, short blonde hair plastered to his forehead.

Every time Jim clamps around him, John swears he’s going to have to make the most of the fact his refractory period is still the one of a man in his twenties after coming embarrassingly quickly, but their momentum stretches and lasts, obscene noises filling the air and spurring John to drive in faster, harder, deeper.

Jim has to let go of him to brace a hand on the headboard when John keeps fucking him up on the bed, the other tugging harshly on the short hairs on John’s nape.
John manages to steal one last perfect, breathy moan out of Jim before his hand around him brings him over the edge again. His mate yelling for him—and yeah, after this, there is no way he can keep pretending *Bones* hasn’t grown on him—is what pushes John right behind him, teeth digging into the soft skin on the base of his neck at the same time he spills inside of him,groaning low in his throat when Jim whimpered and arched faintly at feeling him.

He collapses on Jim, heavy and spent, the iron tang of blood making him dizzy, heart pounding deafeningly in his ears, abdominal muscles still jolting in the aftermath of what has to be the most intense, draining climax he’s ever experienced.

“Jim,” he murmurs, sounding every bit as wrecked as he feels, lapping at the wound in apology, vowing he’s going to fix it later even as the notion of erasing it disgusts him in ways he can’t explain, “Jim.”

It’s all he can say, all he can think—*Jim*—and he keeps breathing it out, peppering Jim’s skin with sloppy kisses, rooted right where he is on and in him.

Jim hums, long and pleased and sleepy, like words are beyond him, and curls into John’s heat, not making a single move to shove him off him.

When John can finally move and uses his undershirt to clean them both enough to sleep, Jim is already dead to the world.

John rearranges them on the bed so he can burrow behind him and nuzzle his neck, arms wrapped snugly around Jim’s waist. Jim sighs in his sleep, pressing into him, entwines his fingers with his and whispers *John*, effectively knocking the scarce air John was able to gather after their coupling right out of his lungs.

He falls asleep pecking the mark he made, heartstrings pulling almost painfully but contentedly as he holds this piece of Heaven he’s found.

***

Jim wakes him up with a filthy kiss, all teasing tongue and scrapping teeth, sucking on John’s bottom lip until he groans and fumbles to grip Jim’s hip, letting out an indignant sound when he realizes Jim is in Academy Reds.

Jim’s mouth is warm and welcoming, the taste of coffee and sugar John finds inside telling him Jim went to the cafeteria to get breakfast for them, a quick glance at the table where coffee and some bagels wait for them confirming it.

He’s aware they have classes to attend, aware they even have a test today, but can’t be bothered to care.

“Off,” he grunts, hand spreading on Jim’s ass not leaving a doubt about his intentions.

“Bones,” Jim chuckles, straddling his hips to grind playfully against John’s hard-on through the sheets, “We’re gonna be late. I tried waking you, but you just kept snoring. Not really romantic for a morning after, you know, and we don’t have time—“

“I’ll give you romantic,” John cuts in, hauls Jim off the bed with both hands on his thighs and walks them to the kitchen counter where he props a dumbfounded Jim.

He kisses him to compliance, smirking against his lips when Jim’s hands scramble to unfasten his pants and get his underwear out of the way for John to brush the head of his cock against his
entrance. It’s awkward with him buck naked and Jim fully clothed, that’s for damn sure, but if Jim is so resolute in going to classes, then John is going to give him something he won’t be able to forget during the day, something that will have him hightailing right back to his arms as soon as they’re done with Academy lessons.

Granted, a quickie isn’t exactly romantic, but the desperate impulse to be with Jim, completely frying his reasoning, is and John can feel this is something they both need to go through a long day away from each other.

He uncaps the hand lotion he always keeps around to help with the dryness the powder of the gloves he uses for surgery causes and pours a generous amount to use as lube. He prods Jim’s hole with his fingers, two sliding in easily, and Jim practically mewls, hugging his own legs close to his chest to give him better access.

“I’m ready, Bones,” he pants, a bead of sweat dripping from his forehead, face flushed with arousal almost as red as his uniform, “Fuck, I’m so ready.”

John takes pity on him, undoes the zipper of Jim’s jacket and slips him off his shoulders down to his elbows, and slams home, Jim holding on to him for dear life once he starts them on a rhythm.

It’s Jim who bites hard on his neck this time, his teeth leaving a mark that fades quickly from John’s skin but lingers on his nerve endings.

***

They are so late to Interspecies Ethics that the Instructor almost doesn’t let them take the test, but they ace it in the remaining fifteen minutes they have.

Jim is smiling like the cat that got the cream and John can’t help grinning back crookedly every time their eyes meet.

***

They’re eating lunch on the grass, Jim’s head resting cozily on his lap as he switches from chewing on a sandwich and reviewing some long dissertation about Warp engines on his PADD.

“I’ll tell Edith I’m not going to work tomorrow,” Jim states suddenly once they’re done eating and the lunch break is almost over.

John looks down at him, absently caressing the hickey on Jim’s pulse point with his thumb, making Jim’s breath hitch, “Should I take you on a date?” he quips, more than half-serious, another smile threatening to appear on his face at the thought of Jim wanting to spend more time alone with him.

Jim presses a kiss to his palm when John cups his cheek and takes the chain out of his uniform, fingers closing resolutely around it. “If you’re going to tell me your story,” he says, leaving the dog tag at the reach of John’s hand without taking it off, “Then yes.”

John’s throat goes dry as a desert as his past rears its ugly head, but he swallows around his fear and nods, putting the string back under Jim’s clothes.

“I’ll call Starfleet Medical to let them know I won’t go to my shift,” he says, “I’m 236 years old, Jim. It’s going to take a while.”

“You’re how old? Oh my God, Bones.”
Jim’s immediate response is chuckling, but he sobers up quickly once he sees the grave expression on John’s face.

“Right, okay. Good thing we have time,” Jim sits up to kiss him gently, promises as he wraps his limbs around John’s lap and neck, “I’m not going anywhere, not until you get bored of me.”

John takes his cue to be reassuring, letting all the years of solitude, the yearning for a companion he never truly knew he wanted until he met Jim shine disclosed in his eyes.

He deepens the kiss, arms encircling Jim’s waist, overlooking the audience they might have.

He picks his words carefully, doesn’t want to spook Jim just yet telling him how serious he is about him, about them.

Jim didn’t exactly react well to his unintended love confession, after all.

“Fat chance of that happening, Jim. Fat chance.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

If you haven't seen *Doom*, you're going to get a little lost with some cursive dialogue I took from it. Hopefully the rest is clear enough that you'll understand more about John and what happened to him.

*You will obey the order of your Commanding Officer. Now.*

*No. Go to hell.*

John stops looking through the window, blinking hard to get rid of the vision behind his eyes. He can still hear the voices, hear Sarge killing the Kid—*it was his first mission!*_ without as much as a second thought.

He wasn’t infected yet, John knows that, but the caliber of his heart got measured up right then and there.

It wasn’t worth shit. His best friend was a monster even before he got turned into one.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. It does nothing to relieve the pressure he feels inside, simultaneously threatening to make his head explode and choke him with his own breath.

He was a soldier. It was the life he’d chosen because first and foremost he was a coward when things really mattered and it wasn’t about having someone hot on his heels with a loaded gun and dark intentions.

He didn’t want to follow his parents footsteps, didn’t want to give them a legitimate reason to have left him and Sam as orphans because they loved science too much to back off when things got risky. He tried wiping them from his head, tried to ice his heart enough to get lost in the game, in the orders he was given.

He didn’t have to think. That gave him peace of mind or the closest thing to it he could get.

All those years serving his country for the wrong reasons, he might’ve been doing wrong things as well. God only knew how many sordid calls Sarge had made without telling John or anyone else in the RRTS, God only knew how many innocent people he’d killed without having a fucking clue about what he was doing.

Atoning for sins he doesn’t even know he committed isn’t an option and he’s not planning on it. He only wants to live this life the best way he can without hurting anyone else and without letting his existence endanger the natural course of creation, of evolution.

Maybe somewhere far away from this galaxy there are beings who are eternal, beings who don’t have to worry about disease, about infections and cancers and genetic disorders. But that means nothing. Humans are simply not ready for that, no matter how shiny and high in moral values Starfleet insist mankind is now.

He’s having a hard time believing he doesn’t have to do this on his own now.
He’s spent most of the day avoiding Jim. Jim frowned and looked a little hurt, too, but gave him the space he needed to put his thoughts in order—or at least, to try to do as much.

He doesn’t know what to say. Sam knew everything there was to know about him because she’d been there for most of it, because she was his twin and intuited the rest, the bits John was never able to discuss with her or with anyone.

She knew his unit in Special Ops had been like family to him—a dysfunctional, violent and treacherous family but a family all the same. She knew Sarge had been the closest to him with Duke and Destroyer following close behind. Hell, she knew that even the disgusting asshole that was Portman had been important to him—he’d been a shitty, annoying motherfucker but John had always been able to count on him in the battlefield.

They had each other’s back, no matter what. That’s John’s definition of family.

He remembers closing the Kid’s eyes, feeling like he was also closing his heart for what he was about to do, what needed to be done.

He knew he had to kill Sarge or die trying.

The door to their room whooshes open, interrupting his musing. John doesn’t lift his head, doesn’t turn around, doesn’t need to do any of that to recognize Jim’s presence. They’re completely attuned now and even without the distinctive sound of his feet on the wooden floor or the slightly salty smell of a long day coming to an end mixed with something that’s only Jim, John could tell it’s no one but him.

He breathes in deeply, his hands shaking as he grips the edge of the windowsill. He’s still nowhere near knowing where to begin and he promised Jim today would be the day when he came clean once and for all, when he gets to know who and what his best friend and lover truly is.

“You’re my brother. I know you.”

Sam was right, wasn’t she? He didn’t turn into a monster. He was able to get them out of that Hell, out to safety and to a life in the shadows they were at least able to share until she died.

But what about all the rest he’s done? What if Jim hates him for it just as much as John hates himself for the decisions he took when he was at his worst and for being so fucking blind most of his life?

Jim licks his lips, a nervous tick John is quite fond of but can’t appreciate at the moment. He makes up his mind and seals the distance between them, left hand stroking the back of John’s hand and right carding through the short hairs of his nape.

“If you want me to go, I’ll go, but I’d rather stay with you,” Jim tries again just as softly, lips brushing his temple coyly, like he’s not sure John wants him near, “You don’t have to say anything, okay? I understand if you can’t talk about it, Bones. I know it’s not the same thing as wanting to talk. It’s okay, really. Don’t beat yourself up for it.”

John takes a deep breath, breathing Jim in again, and takes his hand in his, cocking his head enough
to catch his lips in a brief kiss. It’s barely enough to calm himself down, but he won’t allow himself more comfort until he’s done something to deserve it.

If he’s dragging Jim into this, the very least he can do is be honest with him.

“I want to and I can,” John makes himself say, “I just—”

“I don’t want you to hate me, “I don’t know where to start, Jim.”

“Well,” Jim raises his eyebrows, “You could start by sitting your ass down and stop giving me the creeps.”

John snorts, thinks about warning him about things getting worse once he tells him everything, but refrains from it. He sits on Jim’s bed which is the closest one to where they’ve been standing and lets go of Jim’s hand to rub his face and stare at the floor.

There are no voices in his mind this time, no flashbacks, but it takes him several minutes to find his voice and by then it’s obvious he’s not going to hold his chin up while doing this. He’s too ashamed of who he is, too troubled about the consequences it might have in the one close relationship he’s managed to find in all these years.

Jim seems to have a plan to help him with that. He slides from the place on the bed beside him and kneels at his feet, taking his hand to kiss his knuckles patiently and ever so slowly lifts his own eyes to lock them with his.

“John,” the damn kid whispers, knowing perfectly well what hearing his real name does to him, “Talk to me.”

He’s squeezing his knee too hard and Jim is busy coaxing his fingers to slacken when he finally speaks.

“My parents were scientists,” he says, tone distant but eyes still fixed in Jim’s baby blues so wide and hopeful, so empathetic and kind, “Archeologists. There was this big dig in Mars back when space travel was a luxury few people could afford. The Federation wasn’t even a dream yet, Earth hadn’t developed proper teleportation, let alone ships to travel through space. The Union Aerospace Corporation—the UAC—held all the profit and they worked in one of their facilities. The place was called Olduvai. We lived there along with other families like ours. It was lonely, but not so much for me. I had—” it’s him who holds Jim’s hand this time, foreseeing his reaction to what he’s about to say, “I had a twin sister. We did everything together. Her name was Samantha.”

Jim jerks suddenly and gapes at him. “You had a sister? You told me you have no family!”

John sighs. “I don’t. I had a sister,” he confirms, thumbs lightly touching Jim’s eyelids to soothe him enough to continue, “She died, Jim. I told you; I’m old. She died of old age a long time ago.”

“236,” Jim repeats, like the number is engraved in his mind now. He shakes his head, kisses the tip of John’s fingers and resumes his position close to his legs, looking up ruefully, “Sorry. I’ll stay quiet, promise. Go on.”

“You can ask all the questions you want, Jim,” John appeases him, leaning down to press his lips on his temple, “I don’t mind. I don’t have a speech that you can ruin by interrupting. I want you to ask everything you want to know.”

Jim shakes his head again. “I will, once you’re done. Not now, I’m just going to make it harder for you if I do.”
It makes sense, of course it does, and John tries not to feel disappointed at the prospect of not having a goddamn break in the nightmare he’s about to relive.

Jim is right. It will be easier if he just talks until he’s done.

“The dig—there was an accident. It crumbled to the ground. My parents didn’t make it,” for once, he doesn’t hear the screaming while he remembers. Jim’s warmth pressed close to him doesn’t let him, “Sam and I grew distant. When we were old enough to decide what to do with our lives, she left for college to study Archeology and I left to join the Marines. In her own words, I was a talented student, but it didn’t matter to me. I wanted—I wanted to run away and I did. Training and following orders, the risk that came with every mission—it didn’t leave me time to think, I was always on call, always on duty. The Special Ops unit I was in—The Rapid Response Tactical Squad—had few leaves and I never really used them. I stayed put, cleaned my guns, trained some more—“ he lets out a biting laugh, “I think the only reason I had a few girlfriends was because my C.O. dragged me out to bars when he deemed I needed to get laid.”

And there it is. He mentioned Sarge. He might as well keep going.

“I thought he was a good man,” he states, gulping bile that threatens to go up his throat remembering how he killed the Kid, how he was nothing but a big ugly monster by the time he pushed him through the Ark back to Olduvai and blew him to Hell, “I would’ve died for him, Jim. Any of us would have before that day,” he winces, realizes he’s messing up already in his story but Jim only kisses his knuckles again, eyes soft as he waits for him to go on, “We had the highest rate of success in Special Ops and I know why now. He didn’t question anything. We were glorified attack dogs, did jobs no one else wanted or was capable of doing. We were eight and we had a rookie but, Jim—we were good. We were all very different and we had enough issues for twice the amount of people we were, but we were friends too. It wasn’t a quiet life, but I liked it. I liked it until everything went to Hell the day we were sent to Olduvai.”

Talking about this is sucking all the energy he has in him and he doubles over, closes his eyes against the memory of Duke being ripped to shreds by things that were once people but were nothing but cannibal monsters by the time John and Sam returned to Earth.

They were all beyond saving, John had been too late, too slow.

He hadn’t even been able to save his comrades and the people who weren’t capable of getting infected.

“Sam and I—we weren’t in the best of terms,” he starts over, blinking his eyes open to see Jim watching him intently, “I knew she worked in Olduvai because we wrote birthday cards to each other, but that was it. I didn’t want to see her, I didn’t want to go back there and Sarge—my C.O.—he knew it. He gave me the chance to back out but I didn’t take it.”

The infection could’ve made it to Earth if he hadn’t been there, John knows that intellectually, but he still wonders why he decided to hop in the chopper and go with the squad.

He had nothing to prove. Both him and Sarge had made a habit of running from their families, of making their jobs the most important thing in their lives, and no one else knew about John’s past—not at least until Sarge opened his big fucking mouth and told everyone who asked him about it while they were brushing every corner of Olduvai.

Lucy, this is my brother John, another creature from the long, long past.

“Sam was really mad at me,” he raises an eyebrow at the understatement and scowls, knowing she
was hurt most of all and hiding it behind an impressive wall of sass, just like he’d been doing for a long time, “We were all we had left and we hadn’t seen each other in ten years, so she didn’t take it well when I tried playing the smug soldier with her. The place had been quarantined and she’d been ordered to retrieve UAC data. We’d been ordered to contain the thread, whatever it was, to deal with it and stop it from reaching the Earth’s surface using any means necessary but we had to assist her too.”

He sighs, pushing aside the memory of his smart mouth and hers, overlooking the pang of wistfulness he feels because sure, they’d been mad at each other, but Sam still loved him, still worried about him and his stupid life choices.

Does it ever bother you that you could’ve spent your life looking in a microscope instead of a sniper scope?

“I was the one who escorted her to the labs while the rest of the team assessed the situation. She showed me what they’ve been working on in Mars—they’ve been bringing out Humanoid remains of a species that had 24 pairs of chromosomes instead of 23. The extra chromosome made them super strong, super fit, super smart and completely immune to disease. Their cells divided 50 times faster than Human cells, meaning they healed almost instantly.”

He’s aware that with just this bit of information, Jim will figure out he has 48 chromosomes too, that he’s no longer a Human being.

He clenches his jaw and keeps going.

“Sam and her team didn’t know why they’d vanished from existence but it looked nasty, Jim—the first fossil they dug out had died shielding her baby from something. And we—“ he clears his throat, so suddenly dry and constricting he almost coughs, “We discovered what that something was soon enough. Sam didn’t know anything about it but another team had been working in recreating the extra chromosome and testing it in Human subjects. We started finding the scientists we were sent to protect. I had to shoot one of them because he was supping on a fucking rat and seemed to want to have us as dessert. We’d dealt with horrible stuff before, but nothing like that. The ones that weren’t crazy were dead, killed by the monsters their colleagues had turned into when the C-24 had grafted in their cells and deemed them unworthy of being anything but demons.”

“Wait, wait, hold on—you’re telling me Mars was inhabited then? That the population bioengineered their way to a new race of biologically perfect Humans?“ Jim asks, wincing when his curiosity gets the better of him and he can’t keep his mouth shut, “And that they fucked up so badly they got killed by their own invention?”

“I guess you could say they paid a high price for perfection,” John recalls Sam’s rushed explanation after she figured out not everyone could be infected and rubs his face, worn-out as if he’d run a thousand miles instead of talking non-stop, “10% of the Human genome is still unmapped, Jim. Sam thought there was something in that unknown DNA that codified the soul and that the C-24 could only make super Human certain people who didn’t have genetic markers of psychotic or violent behavior—that only good people could be super Human.”

Jim gawks, clutching his hand tight. “That’s—“

John scoffs. He’s thought long enough about it for it to make some sort of sordid sense. “Just, almost poetic? Yeah. The infected transmitted the mutation with a bite to the jugular to the ones they sensed were like them. They killed the rest, ate them too if they felt like it. Not long after we arrived, my whole team was either dead or in their way to being something worse. Sarge was the one who got infected last, but the only one who didn’t fight it. Even before turning, he killed the rookie in our
squad because he refused to kill uninfected people that were hiding from all the slaughter. He shot him, point-black. The Kid was just eighteen. I was bleeding out when Sam decided to inject me with the C-24 and it was a gamble—a leap of faith. I told her I’ve done bad things, but she didn’t think I could become a monster.”

He doesn’t realize he’s squeezing his own knee so tight he’s breaking the bone underneath his hand until Jim crawls to his lap and makes shushing noises, leaning his forehead snugly to his, cupping his head and making impossible for him to keep hurting himself.

He heaves a deep sigh and holds Jim’s waist, thankful for the respite.

“And you didn’t become one, Bones, you’re okay. She saved you,” Jim murmurs, lips only a breath away from his, “She saved you, you’re okay.”

*Five minutes*, he thinks. Five minutes of comfort, of Jim soothing old pains before he resumes the story and finishes it.

*You gonna shoot me?*

*Yeah, I was thinking about it.*

He waits until Jim’s hands drop to his shoulders and they’re apart enough to look at each other to go on.

“I killed Sarge and got us out. Sam and I were the only survivors, but we decided to make it seem like we were dead too. We couldn’t risk them finding out what I’d become, that I was the intended result of the experiment that had caused everything, that the only reason they’d failed to create a super Human was because they used a serial killer condemned to death as subject.”

He can tell Jim is biting his tongue not to butt in again. He brushes Jim’s cheekbones with his thumbs in silent encouragement and permission.

Jim licks his lips, takes his cue to speak. “Were you alive for the Eugenic Wars, Bones? Did Olduvai happen before that and the World War III or after and the UAC was trying to relive old controversy to get money out of it? Money was still a thing back then, right?”

“It was,” John replies, mouth quirking up slightly when Jim starts connecting dots like this is nothing but a puzzle piece he needs to fit in their reality.

John wishes there truly was a place where he could fit.

“I was seven when the Word War III started. Olduvai was operational already. There was no real teleportation technology yet, but the Ark—the portal that led there had been discovered by the UAC. Genetic manipulation to enhance the Human genome was the wet dream of every big scientific organization and they were no exception. They just hid it really well. No one was going to check what they were working on in Mars, after all.”

“The Ark?” Jim scowls, “What was that thing?”

“An archaic transporter pad,” John’s stomach roils at the memory, the taste of one too many half-digested breakfasts during sims to prepare for it still strong in his mouth, “It was like being sucked through a long tunnel to Mars with no air and no pause and a high chance of having your ass transported somewhere else that the rest of your body. I have to admit I like shuttles and modern transporters a whole lot more.”
“Sounds nasty,” Jim comments, making a face, “I’m glad you’re still in one piece.”

“Yeah,” he raises an eyebrow, overlooking the fact he sees what remained of Pinky attacking him in his nightmares in his worst days. That’d been a close call, even if Sarge had been worse, “So we laid low. It took me ten years to realize I wasn’t aging normally, not anymore, so we started moving out to avoid catching people’s attention. Sam worked online as a forensic archeologist consultant, I worked in construction wherever we went. When she got too old for traveling, I introduced her as my mother and stayed with her until she died.”

He can guess what question Jim wants to ask. He’s been asking himself the same question.

“We argued a lot. I felt alienated, even from her. Most of the data about the Humanoids on Mars had been lost and what was left didn’t help me understand what I was. She hadn’t taken enough C-24 to inject herself with it too and I never suggested examining my own genetic code to crack the formula again. I didn’t need asking her to know that wasn’t what she wanted. A race that had extinguished itself wasn’t meant to be recreated. We couldn’t risk it. I didn’t want to lose her but what I wanted didn’t matter. Alone, I had no reason to stay on Earth, no reason to hold back.”

Jim makes a broken noise in the back of his throat—for John it feels like an echo of what his heart is doing; fluttering cripplingly in his chest, squeezed between lungs filled with lead instead of air.

“Bones…”

John shakes his head, pushing Jim off him until he’s kneeling on the bed beside him, no points of contacts between them that could make this any better or worse for him, depending on how his mate is going to take the news that he still hasn’t revealed to him.

He feels Jim’s eyes on him as he’s staring at his fists.

“First contact had already happened a few decades ago,” he rasps, “That meant I could go to any planet in the quadrant and beyond that if I played my cards nicely, to any planet where Humans were nothing but a curious rumor. I didn’t know what I was and I didn’t want to find out so I—I decided to be the same I’ve been training my whole life to be; a soldier, a killer, but this time for a fee.”

There’s a chill in the room, sudden and compressing, when he closes his eyes against both the possibility of catching a glimpse of Sam and Jim’s reaction to his words.

“I don’t expect you to understand, Jim, but it was the only life I knew. I had lost everything else, I wasn’t ready to let that go. In some worlds I did good, in others I did evil. I wasn’t thinking about right or wrong. I wanted to die but couldn’t find a way to do it without reviving the next second. I guess I could’ve been more inventive; cutting my head off to see if that did the trick, blowing a starship with me inside of it. But I couldn’t. I’d promised Sam I wouldn’t kill myself, the only thing I could try was being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

How he never managed to be despite his efforts is obvious enough; he’s still alive.

He rubs his face with both hands before blinking to face Jim at last, his voice dropping to nothing but a hoarse whisper to utter the closest he can to admitting he might as well have loved him since the day they met without outright saying it.

Jocelyn had been important to him, but she’d never had the power to make him feel like he belonged just by looking into her eyes.

“She always told me I needed someone by my side, someone I could trust to share my skeletons with. I never truly believed her until I met you.”
They’re quiet for a while. Jim’s bright blue eyes are a little too wet, a little too wide but there’s no sentence in them, no disgust.

It takes John several minutes to convince himself there’s no double take coming, no outrage he needs to appease, no need for excuses because Jim isn’t asking for any.

He blinks, smiling slightly at John’s stunned expression. “You’re gonna freak out if I touch you?” he asks, voice soft and low, “Consider this my five seconds warning.”

“Jim,” John says, the name rushing past his lips like a prayer, “Didn’t you hear a word I said or are you just dumb? I could’ve killed a thousand people and you act like that’s no big deal!”

“Oh, shut up,” Jim smacks him in the arm, just this side of painful, “You’re dumb.”

He has no time to object to that. Jim climbs back to his lap, arms circling his neck as he kisses him. None of them open their mouth, but it’s an intense kiss anyway because they try to push all the words they don’t want to hear from the other to remain inside.

“I know I was an asshole to you, John,” Jim breathes on his lips, brow furrowing and trembling, “I know I was and I’m sorry but don’t you dare tell me you expected me to leave you because you’ve made mistakes. So you’ve killed people, so what? So have I. I’m not leaving you, God, I—I can’t even imagine what I’d do without you.”

It’s him who hushes him now, tilting his head just right to catch his lips in that angle that makes Jim’s breath hitch. He traces a wet path along Jim’s jaw next, enjoys the smoothness of his skin and the stuttered gasp he gets out of him, and nuzzles his nose as he rebutts that.

“You weren’t. You’ve been nothing but good to me, Jim,” he says, “Ever since that day on the shuttle, you’ve been everything I could’ve asked for and more.”

Jim laughs, a crisp and incredulous sound that makes John glower. He hides in the crook of his neck and John doesn’t have the heart to keep pressing the issue, feels a bit of wetness in the patch of skin the uniform doesn’t cover and knows Jim is trying his damnedest not to cry harder.

He can’t be sure if the tears are from sympathy or regret and he won’t ask, but they feel like a mixture of both; warm and moist against his skin like the dew of a late winter night when you’re finally home.

“I’m sorry,” Jim repeats over and over, “I’m sorry, Bones. I should’ve let you tell me, I couldn’t—I didn’t understand before, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Jim,” he soothes, kissing the top of the fair head and holding Jim as close to his chest as possible, “You had every right to be mad at me. I fucked up. I’m afraid I’m an expert at that.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” Jim says, burrowing into him, “Maybe we should call it quits, could be a dangerous combo, don’t you think?”

John snorts, glad Jim is feeling up to teasing and that he feels every bit as relaxed in his arms as he’s ever been.

“I think that ship has sailed, Jim, that’s what I think.”

“Good,” Jim says, smile bright but eyes a little red, before giving him a small kiss. John watches him closely, sensing they’re back to the conversation they were having, “Bones, you didn’t fuck up. I know you think you did a horrible thing, going off-world to work as a soldier after your sister died,
but I don’t think you did. You said you wanted to die but at the same time it sounds to me like you were just trying to survive, just trying to live the only way you knew how. I think she’d understand, too, that you were trying to find something to fight for.”

It leaves him speechless, how Jim chooses to see his actions in the best light imaginable instead of the worst like John has always done.

He still thinks he did wrong, that it was one big mistake after the other for almost 50 years, but he’s definitely found what to fight for now.

It took him 209 years but it’s worth every day of loneliness and despair he’s ever experienced.

“Did you?” Jim asks, “That’s why you came back to Earth?”

“No. I came back because I was tired, Jim,” he replies, sighing as he stays flushed to Jim’s cheek after pressing a kiss to his scars, “I met a woman when I did, she made me realize I didn’t want to be alone forever but I never really tried fixing that.”

Jim breaks apart just enough to look at him. “So Jocelyn was real.”

John should probably be frightened about how much attention Jim has been paying to him.

“Yeah. Joanna too, but they were never my family. Leonard McCoy was the name of her dead husband. I decided to keep it for later use. When you’ve lived long enough, you’d be amazed how fast you can run out of names.”

“That’s kinda creepy,” Jim states, scrunches his nose, “Also lame. Leonard has to be one of the ugliest names ever, Bones, you could’ve done so much better.”

“Thanks, Jim,” John rolls his eyes, “I’ll make sure to ask for your opinion next time.”

Jim laughs, a clear and merry sound this time, and tucks his head under his chin.

“You better.”

The vial of C-24 that’s safely hidden in his drawer complains in mute but shrill disapproval at his failure of mentioning it.

John looks at the nightstand for a moment but says nothing.

They haven’t even been together for a week. It’s not the time to discuss the possibility of forever.

There’s no doubt in his mind Jim is a good person, what he heard in a rush between words of acceptance didn’t change that.

So you’ve killed people, so what? So have I.

He hopes Jim is ready to elaborate on that, to share his own story with him, someday.

Right now he won’t push. Right now he’s elated.

He’s never felt this light in his long, long life.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I'm really sorry for taking so long to update. It's just been really hard to commit to things that matter to me when I feel nothing I do is good enough but I will get this done eventually.

Thanks to rochester for putting up with me and encouraging me to post this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Will you at least say goodbye?” Jocelyn asks him one morning.

Beside her, John tenses just slightly. He’s been waiting for her to say something about this for months.

She wants to keep him, that much they both know, but she’s a smart woman and she knows that she can’t.

She knows that even holding John’s heart in hers—or whatever facsimile he has left of one—it isn’t enough, she knows that one day John will slip between her fingers and that he’ll never come back.

“I’m not going anywhere yet,” he says, kisses her sunlight-warmed shoulder, his arms tightening around her waist in quiet reassurance because he’s never been a callous man; a killer, yes, but only cruel when he’s forced to be.

She doesn’t press for the answer she didn’t get, turning her head to pepper his jaw with acceptance in the form of light kisses instead.

He leaves that same night.

No matter how many times he looks behind and tries to go back, he can’t and when he can it’s too late.

He wakes up with a wince and a cramp in his neck that shouldn’t be there but is because no bed is comfortable anymore, not without Jim to share it with, and the cots in the hospitals have been designed to allow the staff a modicum of rest, not to tempt them to sleep their shifts off when there’s nothing better to do.

He’d say he doesn’t know why he dreamed about Jocelyn but that would be a lie.

He’s been edgy for weeks now and Jim hasn’t asked but John knows he feels it too, feels it in the connection they’ve been nurturing between each other that’s not exactly telepathic but it’s close enough to it to make it impossible to lie to one another.

So Jim asks ‘Do you wanna talk about it?’ when they’re alone and not buried in PADDs and classwork which is almost never these days, and John replies ‘No’ each time and does not look at the first drawer of the bedside table where the vial of C-24 awaits to be used.

Every instinct he has in his body is screaming at him to turn Jim now that he has a chance. Jim hasn’t
told him in words that he’d be okay with that but John sees it in the smiles and looks that the younger man gives him, in the smiles and looks that are his and his alone.

However, he doesn’t want to condemn Jim to a life of running and lying so soon, not when he’s finally found a place where he could belong.

John is fiercely in love but he’s not delusional. He’s aware Jim has yet to find a home to bloom in and love, has an inkling it’s going to be a less of an abstract place than what his own home is; by Jim’s side and nowhere else.

It’s very likely it’s going to be up there, in the stars, and John will do everything in his power and more for Jim to reach his full potential, to keep him so happy Jim will wonder if he’s dreaming even when he’s awake.

The only problem with that is how very young Jim still is and how unpredictable his future is.

When exactly will be the right moment for John to inject him? How is he supposed to know when it’s too soon? Realizing when it’s too late will be easy enough and that’s what driving him insane, how Jim could be out of his sight for just a minute and dead the next.

Life is such a fragile thing to preserve and if he fails—if he fails to protect the one life that means more than the whole universe to him then he’ll be worse than dead.

He will be a wolf in sheep’s clothing, a rogue and broken shell of a man that won’t turn into a monster outwardly but will be one all the same.

He grunts, willing his mind to just stop for one second goddamn it, swings his legs to the side until his feet hit the floor, puts his shoes back on and strolls to the E.R.

M’Benga snores loudly just as he’s closing the door. John would chuckle if he were in a better mood.

He lets the man sleep.

***

A sleepy but cheerful Jim welcomes him by the door of their room, pulling him in by the collar of the scrubs he didn’t have the energy to change.

“You’re early,” Jim breathes on his lips, “Everything okay?”

John makes a non-committal sound and distracts him with nips along his jaw that make his mate shiver. He’s far from fooling Jim and to be honest his reluctance to answer has less to do with how difficult it would be to explain and more to do with how much he’s missed Jim.

Being together makes him feel like he’s twenty again. He wonders if some of Jim’s libido bleeds into him through the link he has yet to fully understand between them or if it’s something that always happens when an enhanced Human finds a partner.

It’s only once they’re sated and somewhat clean, sharing sheets and body heat, that John notices the cake on their small table and the couple of beers that no doubt Jim sneaked into Campus charming his way through Security.

Something that he refuses to acknowledge flares in his gut but John ignores it. He’s not a fucking Neanderthal. He trusts Jim. He’s being stupid enough without jealousy added to the mix.
Against him, Jim snickers, tantalizingly pushing his body into his and tilting his head back enough to give him a glimpse of playful blue-blue eyes along with the tip of a round, pretty nose.

“I wrapped them in foil, Bones,” he says, fingertips smoothing the lines of John’s scowl, “That did the trick. Simple sensors are really easy to fool.”

“Are they?” John raises his eyebrows, feeling ridiculous, “And what’s the occasion, Jim?”

Jim squirms, turns in his arms so they can be face to face and fucking pouts at him. “Don’t tell me it’s not your real birthday today because I swear to God, Bones, I will punch you in the face.”

John blinks. He can’t remember the last time someone remembered. Jesus, he’s forgotten about it completely, ever since Sam stopped being around to remind him.

He’s never bothered changing the date in his file. Lots of people are born the same day. It’s an inconspicuous, harmless truth in the midst of all the lies that define who he currently is.

“It is,” he announces, placating, and kisses Jim before he can dash out of bed to cut the cake for them, “Thank you.”

Jim beams, slides sweatpants on that hang too loosely on his hips to be his—the gesture makes a pleasant warmth settle in John’s chest—and produces a sparkly and small green candle out of thin air, insisting he has to make a wish after singing Happy Birthday to him in a teasing but lovely tone.

John blows the candle leaning over Jim’s shoulder with his excited whooping in his ear and his hands squeezing his around Jim’s middle.

Time, he thinks but doesn’t specify how much he wants to spend with Jim. There’s no measure in which he could do that so he doesn’t try to.

The cake is a little too sweet, just like happiness feels on his tongue, but it has canned peaches which are a thousand times better than replicated ones and John decides it’s his favorite fruit from now on when he tastes it from Jim’s mouth.

They spend the day making love against all their favorite surfaces of the dorm.

***

By the time the end of the academic year finally comes, they’re both at the top of their respective tracks and Jim has an opportunity to go on his first mission aboard a real starship during summer.

John doesn’t resent him when Jim doesn’t tell him. He’s been keeping things to himself too, after all. It’d be hypocritical of him. He doesn’t ask what Jim has decided about it even though he’s worried he won’t be able to tag along. He asked and all the medical posts are taken.

He is surprised when he turns a corner in the Cochrane building, his pace brisk and purposeful in case someone around gets the awful idea of delaying him with a free consult, when Jim’s voice reaches his ears.

“I’m not leaving without him,” Jim says, “I’ll do it in four years, whatever.”

“I thought you were a man of your word, Kirk,” Pike pipes up, “You said three years and you need the field hours to advance at the necessary pace. Captain Garrovick was looking forward to meeting you. He could teach you a great deal in deep space.”
“That was a stupid bet,” Jim mumbles, “And I’m here, aren’t I? Doing better and everything. I haven’t gotten drunk in like forever. I’ll learn what I have to eventually.”

“You’re really going to stay here,” now Pike sounds more than a bit crossed, “Because your boyfriend can’t go with you.”

“Yup,” Jim replies cheekily, “Unless you can convince the Captain of the perks of having a senior surgeon on board, which I’m sure are many. Sir.”

“You think they don’t have one already?”

“I’m sure Bones is better. He even has a commendation to prove it, doesn’t he?”

“I assume he’s ready to board a starship and a shuttle prior to that?”

“Of course he is,” Jim chimes in, confident, “That’s been dealt with,” which of course it has, given John’s aviophobia never existed in the first place.

John hears Pike heaving a long, weary sigh. “I will talk with Garrovick but you better pass the assignment with flying colors, Cadet, or so help me—“

He can also hear the grin in Jim’s voice. He has to stifle a laugh. “Will do, sir! Thank you, sir!”

Hopefully he is decently surprised when he walks the remaining hall and runs into both of them. Jim’s grin is bright, bordering on ferocious, and it’s hard not to respond to it but he manages somewhat confused pats on his back as his mate clings to his neck and chatters excitedly in his ear.

Pike gives him a curt nod and walks away.

John has the distinct impression of having just missed yet more points in the Captain’s book, not that he actually minds or needs them.

He trusts his competence to take him wherever he needs to be and if Jim will set his mind on being aboard that shiny new ship they’re building in Iowa that Pike will captain when she’s ready and that’s where he has to be, then he knows Pike will recruit him regardless of any personal feelings and distrust he might have in him.

***

They take off without much ceremony and still in their Cadet Reds.

John takes great care in fidgeting just the slightest bit in case someone is looking out for the remnants of his phobia. He’s not come this far by being sloppy and hiding even when no one is looking is vital.

Jim eyes him shrewdly for a second and spends the flight to the space dock half comforting him and half chirping happily as he’s peering out the window.

***

John has studied the blueprints carefully to make sure he knows exactly where he is and where he’s going in the long month they’re going to be in deep space. That doesn’t stop him from reviewing every corner with as passing a glance as he can manage to make sure everything’s the way it should be, to check for exits and weak points in each room and turn.
His military training has never been a hindrance and it’s not going to be one right now. He barely offers Jim a nod as they go their separate ways out of the shuttle bay and if he touches the small vial hanging from his neck before assuming his duties then no one has to know.

He eyes the shuttles with the same practical eye, measures which one is closer to the exit and to the turbolift. Jim sagely didn’t share with either Pike or Archer they didn’t need the sims or the shuttle to train in so he’s a perfectly capable pilot when he’s not even trying, his unnatural reflexes making him a Hell of an excellent one when he is.

If trouble somehow finds them in the confines of this Constellation class vessel, they will be ready.

***

Gold suits Jim in ways John can’t explain.

He moves about his business as Ensign on the ship, most of his time spent beside the Captain’s chair watching how Garrovick works and what it really means to be in that position. He records proceedings and reviews them every night after dinner.

John waits for him in his quarters getting some work done for Second year. As a senior medical officer, he’s granted a single and the bed there is narrower than the ones they’re used to sleep back in their dorm but neither of them complains when no one comments on how they’re bunking together even though they’re technically not allowed to.

It’s more than a relief, not having to be apart from each other.

It’s ten days into their first brief exploratory mission when Jim arrives in a whirlwind of movement; tossing the Command gold shirt over his head as soon as the door starts closing behind him. He kicks off his boots to the other side of the room, the shoes colliding against the bulkhead with a clank.

John lowers the PADD he was reading, turning around from his spot on the small desk of the room to raise an eyebrow at Jim in silent query.

Jim huffs, flopping down in the bed, his legs kicking back and forth in a childish manner that John has long ago figured out means Jim is more upset than he’s letting on.

“I got chewed down on the Bridge.”

John hums noncommittally. “Right, and that’s new how exactly, Jim?”

He has to tread lightly and carefully while acting normal if he wants to learn what happened and how he can help.

It’s a lot harder than it sounds.

Jim glares, more at the carpet than at him. “Ha-ha, Bones.”

“Humor me, would you?” John insists, turning around little by little until he’s facing Jim fully, “How is that different to the Instructors back at the Academy dressing you down on a regular basis?”

“I wasn’t trying to be a smartass,” Jim mutters.

“Oh,” John smirks, “So you can tone it down after all.”

“Captain Garrovick asked me a question, alright? That’s what happened!” Jim bursts out, jumping back to his feet as if spurred, “He didn’t like my answer and told me I’m not cut out for the job if I’m
going to treat a ship with five hundred people on board as a simulation. He made me sound like a
brash idiot.”

“You have a lot to learn, Jim,” John reminds him, “You’re impulsive most of the time but that
doesn’t mean that you can’t—”

“So you don’t trust me either?” Jim cuts him off, the hurt in his voice practically slapping John in the
face, “Well, that’s fucking great to know, Bones, thanks a bunch.”

“Right now?” John tries again, louder, firmer, because this is something Jim needs to understand,
“With a ship you’re not ready to command? No, I sure as Hell don’t trust you with it, but that doesn’t
mean I don’t trust you, goddamn it, don’t be so thick, Jim! It’s not the same and you fucking know it!”

John expects Jim to keep arguing for at least a few more minutes until he finally deflates and he can
do some damage control but something shuts down in Jim’s eyes then and he knows he’s handled
this wrong, that there’s something Jim isn’t telling him that made him put his foot in it.

“Jim, you’ve just finished First year, you’re hardly—“

“Save it,” Jim says, his jaw clicking with how hard he’s clenching it, “You’re both right. I fucking suck at taking care of people, I always have, always will.”

Jim picks up his clothes as fast as he got rid of them. He goes out of the room barefooted and leaves
John reeling, aching to follow him but knowing better than to try so soon.

Flying blind doesn’t come easy, not even when you’re more than human. He’s fucked this up and he
can’t fix it, not without knowing why Jim is so distressed in the first place.

***

John has been on the Bridge of the Farragut two times.

The first time he was there to drag a workaholic Lieutenant with Andorian flu down to Medbay. Jim
smiled at him with his eyes that time, a ball of contained energy beside the Captain’s chair that held
still and professional by some unknown miracle. John found it endearing, not that he was ever going
to say that to Jim, and looked forward to seeing his mate in his territory again.

The second time, he is summoned by the Captain to be a part of an away team that will beam down
to a M-class planet they’ve unexpectedly come across despite its absolute absence on every map
available of this side of the Quadrant. Jim stands at parade rest with the rest of the crewmen that will
go with them, subdued, and doesn’t spare a glance towards him no matter how much John stares.

***

The planet’s atmosphere is richer in oxygen than Earth’s and that means they can’t stay down long
without risking intoxication.

John is there to make sure they get back to the ship in time. He has to monitor the five members of
the team individually since tolerance to oxygen varies widely and there’s no way to tell who will be
down for the count first.

“Come to me as soon as you feel something different,” he says as soon as they’ve finished
rematerializing, “I don’t care how little the symptom you think it is, it could be the difference
between spending the rest of the voyage on low oxygen treatment in Sickbay or doing your jobs like
you’re supposed to instead, that’s up to you.”

It doesn’t take long for Jim to walk beside him. He’s quiet at first, his tricorder raised and working in recording whatever it is programmed to pick up from their surroundings, but soon enough John catches him sniggering, looking at John with his blue eyes lit with amusement instead of opaque like they were the previous night.

Tension leaks out of him quickly enough to be dizzying. He’d scan himself if he didn’t know the C-24 protects him against getting poisoned.

Whatever happened with Jim, he can fix it. It seems he’s been quickly forgiven.

“What?” he asks in a whisper when the Captain is ahead enough not to hear them.

“Your bedside manner,” Jim replies, bumping his shoulder lightly, the fan of his eyelashes down as he focuses on the readings of the tricorder, “I like it when it’s not only directed at me.”

John rolls his eyes. “Of course you do.”

He refrains from the urge to check Jim constantly. Captain Garrovick should be his priority and he’s the first one he exams with his medical tricorder every fifteen minutes. He’s also the first one to express he’s feeling a little lightheaded only to start vomiting violently and almost have a seizure five seconds later.

John curses but hails the ship while his other hand administers an anticonvulsive drug to the man’s neck. He pats him on the arm and informs him he’s to be beamed up this instant and Garrovick seems to have the idiotic thought of arguing but then—thankfully for him—he’s too preoccupied puking to make any sense.

“What are we looking for exactly?” John gripes once the Captain is safely back aboard the Farragut, “I’d prefer not to have a repeat performance of that four times with you all so the sooner we beam up, the better.”

“We’re collecting data for further analysis aboard the ship, Doctor McCoy,” the female Ensign from the Science department answers him, “We need to put this planet on record so we need as much as we can gather.”

“Shouldn’t you be telling us what to do if that happens to you, Doctor?” one of the Security officers asks him, “It looked nasty. Is the Captain going to be okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” John shakes his head, “And no, thank you, I’m the Doctor here so I’ll be the only one practicing Medicine until one of you gets a degree in it.”

“Bones,” Jim elbows him. Instead of chiding John for being a ‘cranky old man’ like he’s fond of doing every now and then, he’s biting back a laugh, “Relax, okay? We’ll go back to the ship before every one of us throws up on your shoes.”

John rolls his eyes, skeptical, and follows Jim quietly as he and the other Ensign talk about their findings.

Even with his squad in the Marines, he was always the one in charge of the injured and sick and he never really had time to be comforting and patient while stitching his comrades up in a foxhole. They certainly never asked for it or complained at all.

Duke used to tell him he’d know the minute he was about to die when John started being nice and
gentle instead of blunt and fuming because somehow they’ve managed to run into a bullet instead of sticking some into somebody else.

Old habits die hard, John thinks, glaring when Johnson fails to let him know he had tinnitus practically since they arrived and almost ends up with respiratory arrest right then and there.

***

It’s down to the Head of Security, Jim and himself when Jim stops dead in his tracks and turns to him with an urgent look on his face.

John has his comm. unit out and open before Jim can even peep. It emits an ugly, jarring sound that doesn’t bode well at all when he tries to call the Farragut.

“We need to get out of here,” Jim says, cursing when his communicator refuses to cooperate too, “The sea level is rising fast. I don’t think there’ll be any ground left to walk on in ten minutes.”

The planet surface is ninety three percent water and from what he gathered of Jim’s exchange with Taylor—before the oxygen levels got to her—all wildlife is aquatic and active therefore diving under the water is far from advisable.

Jim keeps tinkering with his comm. unit, brow furrowed in concentration.

John clasps his Med-kit across his chest tightly. Beside him, Lieutenant Prescott straightens and secures the phasers he’s carrying in his belt.

“There’s some kind of electromagnetic waves coming from the planet’s moons,” Jim notifies them with a sigh, “They’re blocking our communication with the ship.”

“What do you suggest, Ensign Kirk?” Prescott asks. As the only Senior officer in the away team now, he’s obviously in charge and John is glad he’s the type of man who can ask for help instead of pretending to know everything.

“We should dive in now that the currents aren’t so strong,” Jim replies, chin raised as if braced for a rebuke, “There are underwater caves nearby, we were able to get some readings of them.”

John frowns. “How far exactly, Jim? We won’t be able to hold our breath for longer than a minute, not if we’re swimming fast.”

“Around sixty feet,” Jim holds a hand up, wincing, “Hear me out, Bones, it’s not straight down—“

“Oh, that’s good to know,” John grumbles, “Because we’re not making it past twenty feet without feeling we’re being crushed in a meat grinder.”

“I think we can manage, sir,” Jim assures Prescott, “I wouldn’t recommend staying in the surface, I can promise you there will be tidal waves that could whip us to the other side of the planet if we do.”

The three of them take their boots off but are equally reluctant to leave their equipment. Prescott is the first one to plunge into the water, the liquid a bright sapphire color that John supposes would be extremely beautiful in other circumstances, and Jim follows him after taking a deep breath.

John checks the vial around his neck and dives in.

***

After going across the barren surface for almost an hour, the richness of the life underwater comes as
Jim spots a group of creatures that are some kind of odd mix between dolphins and Golden Retrievers. He gestures for them to follow him and John approves of his choice. The animals don’t have any type of gills, at least not that he can see, so assuming they’ll be needing air soon too is the best call they can make.

They hitch a ride the last dozen of feet clinging to their fur and come out in the middle of a vast underwater cave after passing a narrow tunnel through the rocks. The air inside is ironically far better suited for human beings than the one in the surface so they should—theoretically—be fine for a few hours until the tide goes down again.

“Bones!” Jim launches to his arms happily, snatching a quick kiss while Prescott is busy coughing water, “We made it! God, that was awesome.”

John’s mouth quirks up slightly. He won’t admit the adrenaline rush was something he enjoyed. That would give Jim far too many ideas.

He holds Jim by the waist until his chest is against his back and keeps moving his feet to keep them both floating while the younger man strokes one of the animals’ muzzle. Eight more of the fuzzy beings plop around them in merry motions but being surrounded is a red flag that is hard to ignore no matter how harmless they look.

When they start drawing circles around them, John decides he’s had enough. He exchanges a tense look with Prescott and nods when the man hoists himself out of the water and walks farther into the cave.

“What’s a good boy?” Jim coos to another one of the alien creatures, oblivious, “Thanks for helping us, buddy!”

“I don’t think it’s a dog, Jim,” John mutters in his ear, wary, “Plus, if it eats your hand I’m not going to be able to grow a new one for you. I’m a doctor, not a magician.”

“C’mon, Bones, you’re not afraid of them, are you?” Jim tilts his head back to look at him, amused, “They pretty much saved us. Don’t be an ungrateful bastard and say thanks.”

“I’ll say thanks when I’m convinced they won’t try to eat us,” he replies curtly, pushing Jim to the edge, “Now get out.”

Jim puffs. “You’re lucky you outrank me now,” he says, making a face but doing as he’s told, “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

John shakes his head, crawling out after him. “Infant.”

***

Jim spends the time merging their three comm. units to see if he can boost the signal enough to reach the ship.

John does his best to ignore the wheezing sound Prescott’s chest is making every time he draws a breath since the man’s stance tells him blatantly enough that if he wanted medical attention, he’d ask for it.

Thirty minutes in, he gives up. He takes the flash light out of the Lieutenant’s hands so he can rest
properly and glares.

“Smoker?” he asks, “I think I said, and I don’t remember stuttering, that everyone coming down here needed a healthy set of lungs, sir. Care explaining to me why you’re here despite my medical advice?”

The man coughs, the sound wet and deep. Jim looks up in concern but John waves him off and he goes back to work.

“I quit two months ago, Doctor.”

“Oh, two months ago? Good for you, Lieutenant,” John exclaims cynically, “Do you know how long your lungs take to recover enough to function normally again? Nine months. Ten years if we’re talking about reducing the risk of developing cancer so no, you’re not fit and you won’t be for a long time.”

Prescott looks daggers at him. “When we get back to the ship I will have a word with the Captain about your attitude, Doctor.”

John crosses his arms, unimpressed. “I’ll have no problems explaining to the Captain why I won’t coddle people who can’t understand simple orders that have their best interests in mind, not mine. If I wanted an easy job, I’d be treating sneezes and coughs back on Earth, not flying to the second star to the right.”

Growling coming from their backs interrupts them. Prescott takes both of his phasers out and John surreptitiously fingers the hidden knives he keeps in his boots.

“Jim, how much longer will that take?”

“A minute, if it’s ever going to work,” Jim replies, bowing over the mess of wires and circuits he’s aligned over a flat stone. There’s a crackling noise followed by the familiar sound of static and Jim yelps after probably frying a bit of skin off his fingers, “There! Kirk to Farragut, come in, Farragut.”

“Farragut here, Ensign Kirk. Are Lieutenant Prescott and Doctor McCoy with you?”

“They are. We need to be beamed back on board immediately.”

“Acknowledged. Can you hold your positions for the transporter to lock on your signals?”

John jumps to Jim’s side the second Prescott starts shooting at their guests. They don’t have anywhere else to go, not with the new kind of native animals that are creeping into their hidey-hole, some ghastly concoction between shark and seal.

“Yes, yes! Just do it already, do it!”

“Stand by.”

It’s not until the familiar tingling sensation of the transporter settles that John breathes in relief.

***

Garrovick doesn’t give him a lecture about his manners.

He commends both him and Jim instead and doesn’t exactly take back his words about Jim but he pats the younger man’s shoulder in a manner far less condescending than the previous times John has seen him do it and Jim seems to take it as the small victory it is.
He offers them two rotations to rest and John takes them before Jim, overachiever idiot that he is, can refuse to lie down when he clearly needs to.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” Jim comments that night, sleepy and content, “And you said we were going to get bored.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he sighs, long-suffering, “If the fun has fewer teeth next time, that would be peachy.”

Jim chuckles and kisses the side of his neck. “Thanks, Bones.”

He frowns. “For what, Jim?”

“For not treating me like I’m less than you even though I technically am, you know,” Jim elaborates softly, “Thanks for trusting me to make it on my own.”

Jim dozes off just like that, the ex-Marine arms securing him in a deceptively loose hold. Their heartbeats are synchronized and steady but his words have hit home too closely for John to believe he’ll be getting any sleep tonight.

Jim did fine today. Hell, he would’ve made it without a scratch even without John there but if this is an average mission on a Starfleet vessel, then what’s a dangerous one?

It will be the greatest, most important gamble he’s ever done to trust that Jim will come out on top after facing threats, will come back to him time after time, will have luck on his side until the C-24 is written in his genome to protect him when he runs out of it.

And judging by Jim’s words, were John to imply he doesn’t think Jim has it in him—even though luck has nothing to do with skill—he wouldn’t take it well. At all.

He kisses the crown of Jim’s head and swears that he will wait. He will not ruin the life Jim has chosen until it’s absolutely necessary, until it’s the only thing that can keep Jim from dying and leaving him.

Chapter End Notes

I took some liberties and decided to make Bones' birthday the same as Karl Urban's on June 7th. It's basically what they did with Jim and Shatner's birthday in TOS so I felt like I was justified.

You can come yell at me (but nicely?? lol) on Tumblr if you want. Just, please, don't leave passive-aggressive comments on my works for other fandoms. That's not nice.
Hi. Yes, I am—to quote Spock—surprisingly alive. Also busy putting myself down but I managed to write one more chapter at least.

Thanks for still reading this. I'm really, really sorry if it sucks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No.

His chest seizes, the agony rippling through it taking such a strong hold of him he can’t move.

“No,” he hears again. It’s only then he realizes the one word, urgent and compulsory like a plea, isn’t in his head. He’s saying it and he can’t stop, “No.”

He crawls closer, letting the flames flickering everywhere around him scorch his skin.

The fatal wounds he acquired in the explosion are still noticeable, his body hastily mending bone and sinew and viscera as he moves. The thought of looking like a walking corpse doesn’t even cross his mind. There is only one thought in it, one goal.

Jim is in the middle of the deck, unburnt but listless.

His sky blue eyes stare up at John once he reaches him, the spark of life leaking out of them quicker than even John can see.

He brushes the deep gash in Jim’s neck with his fingertips, hot blood tickling from beneath the piece of shrapnel that embedded itself there with the blast.

If he removes it, Jim will die before he finishes taking it out.

If he leaves it there, it doesn’t change the fact he’s been practically beheaded. The fact that he’s—that he’s going to—

Jim gurgles, trying to speak with his mouth chock-full with blood. John shushes him with a finger on his lips, his other hand palming his uniform frantically for the vial of C-24 that he always carries with him and hoping to all that’s good and right in the universe that he still has it.

He does.

“You’re gonna be okay, Jim,” he reassures both his mate and himself, “You’re gonna be okay.”

He prepares the injection, opening the small case and filling the syringe with the serum. He positions the needle over Jim’s arm, almost prickling it, and he’s not sure what happens next.

He only knows he’s on the ground, feeling like every part of his body wants to rip itself to shreds. Blood is pouring out of his every pore, every cut and contusion he’s ever suffered covering him until it’s all he can taste and pain is all he can feel.
He can’t even scream. His jaw is broken and dislocated, hanging open grotesquely as he jerks on the sweltering floor like a fish agonizing out of water.

“Doesn’t work so good now, does it, John?” a rough voice cackles, “You should have accepted your nature, soldier. You are a killer, a monster. You forgot that and now look at you. Look at what you’ve done.”

It takes ten tries for him to lift his gaze and when he does, a wordless scream finally makes it out of his throat.

Sarge is right in front of him, looking down at him with contempt that hurts a thousand times worse contorting Jim’s once beautiful human features into a snarl, into something inhuman and horrifying, sickly pale yellow absorbing the blue of his irises.

“But thanks a lot for this,” Sarge sneers, cocking his head unnaturally as Jim’s golden hair grimy with blood and soot turns black, his limbs growing and his muscles popping out of his frayed uniform, “I’m gonna take real nice care of it for you, John. You can rest in peace, motherfucker.”

No, John hears again, that’s not possible. You’re dead. Get away from him. Don’t ever touch him!

They are his thoughts this time. Mute, despairing thoughts that won’t change what’s happening, won’t change how he brought Sarge back to life instead of keeping Jim alive.

No.

Jim.

***

The bulkheads of his quarters are soundproof so his shouting doesn’t disrupt anyone’s rest except for his own.

He tosses and turns in the bed, drenched in sweat and still reeling from one of the worst nightmares he’s ever had.

It’s oh four hundred—not a decent hour to call anyone anywhere but he makes the computer contact the Gamma shift crewman in charge of communications and asks to be patched through Ensign James T. Kirk aboard the Farragut in such a hoarse, fraught tone the Andorian in the post voices no complaints to his demand and does as told.

He’s on the U.S.S Excelsior, has been for the past couple of days after they had a colossal misfire in Engineering that reached the Medbay and had his own Chief Medical Officer in need of emergency treatment and surgery. The Farragut had been nearby enough at the time that John and Doctor Holley were able to save her C.M.O’s arm, among other things.

It’s his last night on board and he’s glad of it. He’s going to see Jim in a few hours and work as part of the same crew for the rest of their summer assignment.

The weeks following their little adventure haven’t been calm exactly. For an easy mission to train green Cadets fresh out of the Academy, the few things they haven’t found are pirates and world-eating worms. Name another type of crisis a Starship vessel could encounter and the Farragut has probably already fought her way through it.

Jim has shone bright as a sun in every emergency, his quick thinking and instinct saving them all more than one time once Garrovick realized the kid was cocky and reckless but had brains to back it
up and actually knew what he was doing most of the time. The man regards Jim with almost paternal care nowadays and the young man all but blossoms under it, although he doesn’t respond to it the way he does with Pike—not that John is going to inform his personal pain in the ass Captain of that anytime soon.

John sits in front of his terminal, unease still a heavy weight in his gut, and waits for the connection to be made between the two ships.

Soon enough, he has Jim peering at him from his bunk, sleep-tousled hair a light yellow under the blue hue of the screen.

“Bones,” Jim greets, stretching like a cat but not fooling John into thinking he’s had any more luck getting some sleep without him than he has, “Hi there.”

“Hey, Jim,” he sighs, drinking in the sight of his lover safe and sound and letting it chase the worst of his demons away, sagging on his seat as Jim’s eyes twinkle with mirth. “It’s good to see you.”

“Going sappy on me, Bones?” the blonde quips with a warm smile, his eyes darting from him to look at something beside the bed for a second, “Missing me already? It’s only been fifty three hours, twenty minutes and forty—no, forty five seconds.”

John huffs half-heartedly, a smile already tugging at his lips as he raises an eyebrow at his mate. “Really, Jim? And I’m sappy?”

Jim shrugs, unabashed, and stares at him in a mischievous way John knows very, very well. “Maybe I was just hoping for some holo-sex, you don’t know that.”

John has to roll his eyes at that. “These transmissions are monitored, Jim. You know that.”

“So?” Jim leers, “Let’s give them a show. People like porn, Bones, even in the twenty-third century.”

“You mean you like porn,” John shakes his head, amused in spite of himself. He knows that Jim is joking but even the ridiculous idea has him longing for him as if wanting the headstrong and buoyant man was a reflex he’s helpless to stop, “And that you’re a goddamn exhibitionist.”

Jim chuckles. “Oh, I’m sorry, who out of the two is a possessive caveman in the sack? Hmm, let me think.”

John snorts. They’re giving whoever the poor soul assigned to monitoring their conversation is some really private, really secondhand embarrassment-inducing bits of information and of course Jim is enjoying it—the childish, endearing idiot.

“This possessive caveman is regretting this call now,” he deadpans.

“No, you’re not,” Jim grins at him, snuggling into his pillow in such a natural way he almost fools John into thinking he’s right there in the bed beside him, “You called me because you miss me, Bones.”

Not even the obnoxious way Jim dragged out the word ‘miss’ can stop his quiet admission, the back of his eyelids still plagued with remnants of his nightmare.

“I did,” he says, blinking to look at Jim as he grips the arms of the chair just this shy of breaking them, “I do.”
He doesn’t know what his mate sees in his eyes but it must be plenty, his baby blues turning soft and understanding in response.

“I’m glad you’re back the next shift,” Jim states, a self-deprecating smile appearing on his face as he sighs, “I had a nightmare too, forgot you weren’t here—I really, really don’t want to go through that for another night.”

John feels almost guilty for leaving his side but Jim assured him it wasn’t breaking his promise—it was just John doing his duty. Besides, the ships are side by side, it isn’t like they have a galaxy between them.

John wonders if this aching need of being together will cease at some point, wonders if Jim feels it too.

He watches his mate scratching at his chest wearily, the Starfleet Academy tee a little loose on his shoulders and chest telling the ex-Marine it’s probably his and that yes, Jim feels it too.

***

Jim always feels calmer after hearing Bones’ voice so he decides to try his luck again and get some shuteye if he can squeeze it before the start of yet another long, kind of fruitless shift.

He spent his last one picking mineral samples on an asteroid and he doesn’t even get to analyze the data later or test their performance down in Engineering so he’s a little restless and more than a little bitter about it.

Chain of command and track divisions really fucking suck sometimes.

He curls around Bones’ pillow and dreams.

***

Air is foreboding and pungent with the tang of blood and flesh when he breathes and for an excruciating moment, Jim is certain he’s back on Tarsus IV soil.

Except—he realizes as his eyes adjust to the dim, flickering artificial light—this isn’t outdoors. It looks like a facility heavily guarded but vulnerable to a hit nonetheless that’s just been through Hell.

The corpses around him are unmoving, as they should, but so are the creatures that have slaughtered them. They are deformed and gruesome, slimy dark skin and huge heads and shoulders towering over everything, tongues lolling out of their mouths and eyes clouded with death but movements stilted with something other than it.

The scene is unnaturally still. Like a picture but not quite as much—entrails and spit and blood drop from the creatures’ claws and fangs and the lights keep threatening to go out any second, some kind of red alert muted but flashing on the ceiling uselessly because as far as Jim can see there is no one alive in here.

His heart is beating fast between his ribs, his eyes darting around to look for anyone who can tell him what the hell happened here or that needs his help but it’s not until he hears a woman’s soft voice that he gets some answers.

Hello, Jim, Please, don’t worry about all this. These are my memories. There’s nothing you can do to fix what happened, no one you can save. There’s only me and I’m already dead.
Jim turns around, his breath catching when he ends up looking at a beautiful blonde woman who wasn’t there a second ago.

He’s not sure whether she’s a ghost or a figment of his imagination but he’s pretty sure it can’t be the latter.

Her eyes—they’re hazel and familiar. They’re identical to Bones’ warm but haunted eyes.

“Samantha,” he breathes out, looking at their surroundings again and gasping, “This is Olduvai.”

Bones’ twin nods, tilting her head a bit to the side as if assessing him.

_Call me Sam_, she says, her voice ethereal even though she’s right there. _I didn’t die today, of course. John saved me. You know that._

“Yeah,” Jim licks his lips as if that could help making his voice less raspy, “You saved him first though.”

She’s dressed in light, creamy colors smeared with dirt and red. She looks so at ease beside him despite of that, even among the carnage, like she belongs here and he’s so busy staring he hardly feels the hand on his shoulder.

It’s warm and solid and he has to bite his tongue not to spook her asking questions he won’t get answers to.

She’s not smiling at him, not exactly, but her eyes are approving.

_You want to see him?_

He nods and the sight around them changes in the blink of an eye.

It’s no longer static either. They’re in a smaller room, some kind of lab or infirmary, watching as a group of soldiers along with Sam work frantically to save one of their own who is bleeding on a table.

Bones’ hair is shorter and there’s scruff on his face but there’s something about his gear and the weapons strapped to him that makes him look younger, somehow, even though his face looks about the same.

Maybe it’s because he’s clearly in his element, barking out instructions as he tries to restart his comrade’s heart. He may have fooled Jim into thinking he was a doctor too, even back then when he was part of the RRTS.

“Sam, give me a shot of adrenaline.”

When he looks up in his direction, Jim’s breath hitches—he knows he’s looking at his sister but his heart flutters all the same.

“We lost the pulse.”

“Okay, let’s defib. Clear!”

_He wasn’t—he was just gifted in it, enough to be in charge of the medical attention his unit would require on the field. He was smarter, more compassionate, but refused to give up his gun for a stethoscope._
“You can hear my thoughts?”

*I’m in your head,* she sasses him, *what do you think?*

“Why—” Jim stammers, looking back at Bones and getting closer to him when the action around comes to an eerie halt again, “Why are you showing me this?”

He can see a small, old-fashioned LED screen in Bones’ gun. It reads ‘handler ID: Reaper’ and makes Jim’s pace falter.

He feels like he’s intruding even though his impossible boyfriend has already shared as much of this as he could.

*Why do you call him that?* Samantha asks him instead of answering, appearing so suddenly in front of him Jim bumps into her and staggers back.

She doesn’t look mad, just curious, but it gets hard to breathe after Bones and the other Marines disappear from the room.

He blinks, ducking his head. “I guess I wanted him to remember me,” he admits, quiet, “I thought if I riled him up enough, he’d look at me outside of our dorm and—”

*And see me,* he thinks. He doesn’t say it’s the only way he knows how to cause an impression, tries not to even think about it but her face softens and she reaches for his hand, squeezing it gently.

*There is more to you than you think there is. You’re just like John, so convinced he wasn’t worth anyone’s time because of his mistakes. Humans are good at screwing up and forgiving. It’s a good combination, all things considered.*

“He misses you,” Jim tells her. Bones has never said it out loud but Jim has always seen it in his eyes, the same hazel eyes that are staring at him now.

She smiles slightly and her image glitches, hinting the truth for the first time—that she’s not really there.

*I miss him too. But it’s time for me to go. I just wanted to make sure you’ll take care of him.*

“I will,” Jim promises needlessly. He can tell she’s seen right through him and the words make no difference.

She’s already gone.

The live picture of Mars around him dissolves.

***

There are dried tears on his cheeks when he blinks awake, more clinging to his eyelashes as he gasps and lies on his back in the darkness of Bones’ assigned quarters on the Farragut.

A cumulus of glittering particles dances for him outside the small window, floating away gracefully as he lurches to it and stares.

Perhaps humans are truly made of stardust after all.

***

Jim’s duties include anything the Captain may require of him, which unless the ship is about to explode or spiraling into certain doom tend to be menial tasks or simple observation of the activities
on the Bridge.

He can’t complain even with the ridiculous jumpsuit he has to wear. He’d rather be beamed down to serve as human pliers than spend his shift looking over Garrovick’s shoulder.

He doesn’t see Bones until dinner when he finally comes across him in the Mess of the ship. He perks up and practically runs to him, accepting the kiss Bones presses instantly to his lips. They’re an odd couple, Jim is aware of that, and sometimes the whispers around them get to him but he never shows it.

So what if Bones is too much for a fucked-up kid from shitville, Iowa? The older man seems more than convinced Jim is exactly what he wants and Jim will try harder to be more for him, more than he’s ever been before, if that keeps his best friend and lover by his side for just a little longer.

“You look tired,” Bones states, carding his thumbs through Jim’s hair, caressing the sides of his head in a way that has Jim relaxing against him faster than anything else could ever achieve, “Everything okay?”

Jim looks at him in awe, leaning in for just one more little kiss and chuckling when the catcalls start and Bones growls lowly in his ear as Jim burrows into the crook of his neck.

“Maybe we should eat and catch up later,” he offers, the pit of his stomach twisting when he remembers what he vowed to himself he’d do once Bones was back on board. After literally seeing the source of one of Bones’ deepest grieves, he knows what he has to do. He knows he’s up.

A part of him can’t help but believing Bones will understand, won’t leave him no matter how appalled he is with Jim’s story.

He picks at his food even though he’s hungry, too nervous to eat more than a couple of bites. Bones is already frowning at him, hazel eyes shining bright with worry.

Jim ducks his head, feeling heat rising to his cheeks when the doctor laces their fingers together and uses his other hand to feed him a spoonful of the broth Jim should be eating to help with the low temperatures he had to brave all day.

“You want the whole shebang, Jim?” Bones teases, “My airplane noises are a little rusty but for you, I think I can muster some.”

“Ha-ha,” Jim makes a face, wincing harder when Bones just shoves the food inside his mouth and slams the spoon against his teeth, “Ow!”

Bones snorts in amusement and Jim snatches the spoon before he can do it again, glaring at him only for his boyfriend to look at him with the airs of someone who got exactly what they wanted.

Jim eats a little more, momentarily distracted from his apprehension.

“And I’m the infant?” he gripes.

Bones cocks an eyebrow, smirks with a corner of his mouth. “What do you think?”

He reminds Jim so much of Samantha in that moment his breath stutters, crashing against the lump
that forms suddenly in his throat.

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They are short ten days from going back to Earth and he doesn’t miss his home world at all. Perhaps because the one thing he associates with home is right beside him, perhaps because Earth was never his home planet.

He was born in space and working out in the black makes him feel like he could belong here if he tries hard enough, if he decides this is what he wants.

It doesn’t escape Jim’s notice how he feels braver with Bones trapped inside a starship with him, knowing he’d have a harder time leaving him behind but also very much aware the super human could get the Hell out of dodge anyway if he really wanted to.

“Bones,” he sighs, his lover's fingers deft in unzipping his tight-fitting uniform the minute they’re in his quarters at last. He chuckles when the older man gets stuck trying to take it off his ass. “You don’t like it either, huh?”

“I love it,” Bones amends, his voice a husky thing that has Jim’s milky skin flushing down to his chest as the jumpsuit hangs from his hips, his hands hot and firm on Jim’s waist, “Brings out your eyes.”

“Then why—ah!” Jim yelps, chest heaving as Bones shoves him to the small bunk they’ve been sharing and tugs the clothes off his legs unceremoniously.

He lies there, sprawled and puzzled despite all the previous times Bones has manhandled him. He just can’t ever get used to how strong he is, how passionate he always is when they’re alone.

“It’s too damn tight,” his lover says, incensed, and Jim welcomes the hungry kiss he gives him with an arm clinging to the taut muscles on his back, his fingers nimbly finding Bones’ zipper.

They kiss, sucking the breath out of each other’s lungs, as Jim palms Bones’ big cock and smears the pre-come already leaking from the tip.

He doesn’t get to tease Bones about it. The moment they run out of air Bones crawls back to the edge of the bed and pulls Jim’s hips to it, grabbing him by his calves, and mouths at his erection briefly before taking it into his mouth as he kneels on the floor.

His tongue plays with Jim’s frenulum softly, just so to make him lose the little mind he still had. Jim arches off the mattress and spreads his legs wider, knowing before it happens that Bones’ fingers will brush and rub his entrance until it flutters and lets him in.

“Oh fuck,” he cries out, breathing in ragged pants as his hands scramble for something to hold on to since Bones is out of his reach and he can’t fucking move except for writhing and rocking his hips up into Bones’ demanding mouth and down into the finger that’s curling inside him, “Fuck, Bones, yeah—“

Bones sucks him until he’s so close he’s trembling, letting him fuck his mouth as he preps him and uses his free hand to pour lube from the convenient bottle they keep on the bedside table to slick himself with.

Jim takes him in with a long, breathy moan. He hooks his ankles on Bones’ thighs and touches his lover's cock thrusting in with his fingertips, groping Bones’ ass to get him deeper as he looks up at him with wide eyes and his mouth slack with pleasure.
Bones kisses him, heated and filthy, as he dives right into pounding him on the mattress and Jim feels like he’s going to burst out. The doctor spreads his knees more, pressing closer onto him, and Jim nips and sucks at his bottom lip with every breath he can spare from whimpering beneath him.

They haven’t had much time for this on board and it seems to finally have caught up with them. The ship could go into red alert and they’d be helpless to separate, too deprived of each other to do anything but remain flushed together until they’re a bit satisfied.

He strokes Bones’ back, blunt nails digging into his skin every time he pushes in and hits right on his prostate, turning his voice higher and breathier with each caress his dick delivers there pointedly.

Bones falls on him for a moment, his arms sneaking between their bodies to grasp Jim’s plump ass cheeks and grind against his hole in undulating, eager thrusts that have Jim tilting his head back to keen indecently as Bones’ broad palms stretch him further around his cock, the kiss they were sharing too much for him to keep engaging in.

His boyfriend is still hard after they’ve both climaxed in and between each other, kissing the line of his jaw sweetly as Jim tries to even his breath.

“Tell me no one helped you into that thing,” Bones grunts, sucking what’s going to be an impressive hickey in the crook of his neck.

“Wha—nngh,” he pants, shivering with the sting that makes the softness between his legs twitch, “The—the jumpsuit? No, of course not.”

“Good,” Bones replies, leaning his hands on the bed again probably to pull out of him but Jim stops him, positions his feet just over the doctor’s ass and grins at him.

“Keep going,” he murmurs, gliding his lips over Bones’ spit-slick, kiss-swollen mouth, “I like feeling you, Bones.”

Bones groans, Jim’s name rushing out of his mouth like a litany, and picks up his rhythm again as Jim just holds on for the ride, sated and deliciously sensitive.

He stops himself every time he starts fearing this will be goodbye.

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He drags Bones to one of the shuttles of the ship because that’s one hundred percent Jim Kirk, always helping the universe to screw him sideways if it feels so inclined.

If Bones wants to go away once Jim is done telling him what he’s done, then he can do it straight away without going into too much trouble.

“Damn it, Jim,” Bones huffs but doesn’t let go of his hand all the same, “If someone finds us here, Garrovick will have our hides.”

Jim waves his concerns off flippantly. “C’mon, Bones. Live a little.”

He chuckles when Bones glares at him, clearly thinking the same Jim knows very well—that he’s lived a lot, longer than anyone ever should, and that he doesn’t even know why he puts up with Jim’s inanity most of the time.

Jim turns on a few lights inside, enough for them to see—or for Jim, he actually hasn’t asked his peculiar partner if he can see in the dark—and not enough for anyone in the shuttle bay to tell there’s
someone in here at first glance.

“John,” he calls softly, enjoying the startled but pleased expression Bones gives him, “Sit down. There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

He’s surprisingly serene even though he’s about to share with Bones something he hasn’t told anyone ever.

He’s far from coming to terms with what happened. He will never stop blaming himself and thinking he could’ve done better but right now his priority is to let Bones know he has Jim’s trust.

It’s been almost a year since the day they met and it’s been by far the best year of his life.

He will take the same leap of faith Bones took for him. It’s the least he can do.

He takes a seat in front of Bones, biting his lip for a moment as he wills himself to speak.

His hands are sweaty and shaking. He hides them in his pant pockets and shuts his eyes tight, Kodos’ speech before he killed half the colony still fresh and cutting in his mind.

*Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore, I have no alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered, signed Kodos, Governor of Tarsus IV.*

He opens his eyes, heart jackhammering in his chest, and looks at Bones. “Have you heard about Tarsus IV?”

Bones’ eyebrow raise at his sudden question. “You mean the biggest disgrace in the history of the Federation? The massacre of four thousand people only for starters because of one foolish man in a position of power? Now, Jim, I might’ve been trying to keep a low profile at the time but I wanted to go and kill Kodos the Executioner myself once I heard the news Starfleet was so desperately trying to conceal from the public. It was only ten years ago. I remember it well.”

Jim’s mouth quirks bitterly to one side. “Good thing you didn’t bother. They found his body burned to a crisp, though I couldn’t tell for sure it was him but they said it was and I like to leave it at that.”

“You couldn’t tell…?” Bones frowns, color draining rapidly from his face. He’s a smart man, probably the smartest. Jim knows he understood exactly what Jim is about to say even if he doesn’t want to believe it, “Jim, what are you saying?”

“I was thirteen,” he starts, looking down as he takes a deep, shuddering breath, “Been living there for two years, since my mom’s husband decided I was too much trouble for him to keep planet side when she wasn’t there and she never was. So he shipped me off to Tarsus. There was—huh,” he swallows, starts over, “This place for young delinquents like me there. They took me right in after Frank told them I drove his classic car off a cliff.”

“You drove a car off a cliff?” Bones echoes, rubbing his face with a hand when Jim dares to look up at him for a second. His tone is bordering on dismayed and Jim tells himself he has to keep going even though that’s setting his nerves on edge and he’s barely started, “Jim, why? How old were you? How badly were you hurt?”

Jim gulps, taking one hand out of his pocket to grip his middle just this shy of bruising. “Eleven. It was my father’s car, not Frank’s, and I didn’t want him to have it. Sam—my brother—he’d just left and I—I’d been good, Bones, I swear to you, I was the fucking picture of good behavior. I had good grades, I washed Frank’s other cars, I did everything he asked me without complaining and he still—
He bites his bottom lip again, harder, backpedals from what he almost says because it’s not what’s important.

What does it matter that Frank beat the crap out of him even before Jim finally had the courage to be a real Kirk?

All those children he couldn’t help in Tarsus, they’re the ones who matter.

“Anyway. Sam was gone so I, huh, left too. I jumped out of the car, only got a few scratches. I had a really nice time in the colony until the crops died. It was a beautiful place, Bones, you should’ve seen it—the colors were so vibrant and the people were so kind. I learned so many things there; how to play music, sing, dance, I even learned a few alien languages from an old lady who was a retired Starfleet officer. Her name was Hoshi Sato and I couldn’t save her—I couldn’t—“ he clenches his jaw, punching the bench he’s occupying with enough force to make his bones rattle, “I couldn’t save a lot of people that day, Bones. When Kodos gave his speech, I was there in the town square. He had me at his side, kept gripping my shoulder so I wouldn’t run anywhere. He liked me, wanted to keep me safe while he had everyone else he deemed inferior killed so we could live. He was really fucking obsessed with Eugenics and kept telling me my genes had to be preserved.”

Jim blinks, surprised his voice is still steady and that his eyes are dry. He glances at Bones and flinches when he realizes the doctor is reaching out to him with a hand.

He plasters his back to the shuttle’s wall and closes his eyes. “Please, don’t touch me yet. I—I need to get this out, Bones. You have to know.”

“Okay,” comes the pained, hoarse reply, “I’m listening, Jim. I’m listening.”

“I saw Kodos’ guards cornering people. They grabbed entire families, Bones, with kids and babies. I knew what was going to happen before he announced it. Some children had been playing in the square and weren’t reunited with their parents before they tried to—so I ran to them. I had a knife on me because Kimura-san—Hoshi-sensei’s husband—was teaching me how to carve wood and I used it. I killed three guards on our way out. I couldn’t stop for my friends or Hoshi-sensei or the other children and they—Bones, they were screaming so much.”

He can hear their voices as if it’d been yesterday and see every little face that died under his watch.

He tried telling Pike he wasn’t good for Command—maybe Bones will understand why now.

“They didn’t deserve to die that way, no one did, but after—after some weeks passed and I realized I had no way to feed the children properly and that they were all slowly dying of starvation, I wondered if—if maybe I should’ve let them die that day with their parents. No matter what I did, they died one by one until they were only eight and I—I counted thirty seven when we were running away. I couldn’t save them, couldn’t even bury them.”

“Jim,” Bones cuts in, enough urgency in his tone to make Jim raise his head and stare almost unw SEEINGly at him, “You gave them a chance to survive. Don’t regret it. You sacrificed your own safety to help them—you couldn’t have known Starfleet was going to take nine weeks to arrive with relief. You did it with the best intentions. You were a—“

“Don’t,” Jim practically snarls, tugging at his hair for a second because he’s just this close to losing it, “Don’t ever call me that. My father was a hero, not me. I made them starve, Bones, do you know what that’s like? Have you ever been so fucking hungry everything looks tempting, makes you think
that maybe if you swallow it you’ll feel a little better, a little less empty? They begged me for food and I didn’t give them any!”

“You didn’t have any!” Bones shouts right back, standing to loom over him so fast Jim starts and blinks up at him, bewildered, “Jim, was this what you meant when you told me you’ve killed people too? That I wouldn’t feel the same way about you once I knew what you’ve done? Because you did not—and you need to hear me out on this or so help me God, Jim, I will keep saying it until you do—you did not kill those children. And those guards weren’t human if they were going to gun innocent kids because they were commanded to, do you understand?”

Jim huddles in his seat, hugging his knees up to his chin, and avoids Bones’ eyes that have so many emotions in them he feels he’s going to go mad trying to discern whether they’re good or bad.

What is he even saying? That it wasn’t Jim’s fault? How—that doesn’t even make any sense.

“Intentions don’t matter to dead people, Bones,” he remarks, throaty, “All that matters are results and I failed them.”

“Jim,” Bones says, dropping to his knees in front of him to get him to look at him in the eye and it’s like a punch in the gut for him, how fucking heartbroken the most important person in his life looks now that he knows exactly what Jim has been keeping from him, “Jim, listen to me. Their deaths—they’re on Kodos, not on you.”

Jim shakes his head, despondent. “The first time maybe, but the second? The time they actually died? That was on me.”

“Look at me,” Bones urges when he tries hiding his face in his legs, reaching to cup Jim’s face and not letting go even though he flinches again, “You were thirteen, Jim, you were just a kid too. Not even an adult could’ve done a better job under those circumstances. Everyone else didn’t even think about doing it, Jim, you were the only one brave enough, the only one giving enough. You saved eight children. They’re alive because of you, Jim.”

Jim almost smiles at that; trust Bones to focus on the one small good thing that came out of it all and make him remember how Kevin and Tom and the others still send him holovids every Christmas and New Year even though Jim has never watched even one of them.

Knowing they’re still alive is enough of a gift for him. He knows he doesn’t deserve whatever kind words and wishes they put in the comms. for him.

Bones brushes his thumbs on his cheeks and Jim blinks—this is the third time he’s cried after thinking there weren’t any tears left in him.

“C’mere,” he murmurs, gently untangling Jim’s limbs to pull him to the ground and into his arms. Jim sags against him, feeling like the conversation drained every last bit of energy he had. He can’t wrap his arms around Bones, not even when he kisses Jim’s forehead and leans his cheek against his head, “Your father would be proud, Jim. You’ll believe it one day.”

Jim sobbs quietly into the crook of Bones’ neck, a part of him still waiting for the catch in all this but the other—larger—one just enjoying it while it lasts.

One day, Bones will leave him. He’ll decide to move on and he said—he said they’re mated and that it’s permanent but Jim is no immortal and he won’t make the man he loves stick around when he’s old and about to die. He won’t hurt him like his sister did.

“Thank you,” Bones whispers into his ear, an amount of minutes later Jim can’t precise, “For telling
me this. You didn’t have to but I’m glad you did.”

He rocks Jim in his arms a little longer, only breaking apart when he seems to be certain the younger man has stopped crying.

Jim looks at him, breath still hiccupping every now and then. “You want to ask me something, don’t you? Shoot.”

Bones shakes his head, guiding them both to their feet. “It’s not about Tarsus, not directly at least. We can talk about it later, you must be exhausted. Let’s just get our asses out of here before we get busted.”

He stands his ground, holding Bones’ hands when he tries to walk to the shuttle exit. “Tell me.”

“What happened after, Jim?” his lover asks, brow furrowing, “I know they brought the survivors back to Earth but what happened to you? Who took care of you?”

Jim stares at him, uncomprehending for a long moment. He knows Bones didn’t mean to make him remember how his mother never came to visit him after everything, not even once, but he did.

He’s always felt like it’s somehow his fault, not being someone she can love and care for.

“I was in a hospital for a month and a half,” he answers, letting go of Bones to put his hands in his pockets again, “Doctors said something about me being a late bloomer so all the—all the hunger wouldn’t affect my growth so much. They fed me, made me sit with shrinks for hours but I never said a word to them or anyone about it. They discharged me anyway after I forged a permission from my mother. I knew she wouldn’t come for me but I needed to get out so I did and I—I got by, Bones.”

“How?” Bones presses, “Jim, you were a kid.”

“At first? Stealing,” he admits, shrugging and kicking an imaginary rock with his foot, “Got used to it on Tarsus, I guess. I got caught enough to get sent to juvie but the food there was nice so I didn’t actually mind. When I got out I knew better. I got a job waiting tables, then bartending, then in construction, then—ugh, I don’t even know, Bones. I drank and partied a lot so it’s a little fuzzy but I never went hungry again.”

He thinks for a second that Bones is finally mad at him but his boyfriend just heaves a sigh that seems to leave him drooping and stares at him in a way that has Jim itching to get out.

He’d been about to tell him he tried drugs too but Bones is his doctor—he obviously knows that already, saw it in the medical history he must have memorized to a tee.

He doesn’t think him cracking a joke about being allergic to having fun for getting anaphylactic shock with coke would’ve been funny to him anyway.

“I wish I had met you sooner,” it’s all Bones says, holding him tight as Jim tries to hop out of the shuttle.

Jim smiles sadly against his shoulder, sharing the sentiment. “Me too.”

They have to run and slide into a Jeffries tube to avoid getting caught but it’s worth it for the look of exasperation in Bones’ face and how he grumbles see, what did I say, Jim? when it takes them ridiculously long to go back to Bones’ assigned quarters without getting in trouble.
Jim will always take that instead of the upset expression Bones had the whole time they talked about his past.

It’s a good thing he’s so good at driving everyone up the wall.

Chapter End Notes

I based a few Tarsus stuff on fanon as you probably were able to tell. I think my biggest influence was Atlas. I read it a long, long time ago and I don't know how much of this is mine and how much it's originally Angel Baby 1's idea (I'm not even sure the stuff I had in my head it's from Atlas but it's the closest bet I can make). Since none of us are making money with this I'm leaving the link here in case you guys are interested and because she deserves the credit. I'm warning you though, it's a Spirk story with practically no Bones in it.

I also had to tweak a couple of previous chapters because I was so preoccupied doing math for Reaper that by the time I made it to Jim's backstory I was like ’Aw, fuck it' and assumed things without checking them. But anyway, now dates fit for both of them.
hey guys. i’m really sorry about taking almost a fucking year to update. i’m too fond of this story to half-ass it and i got a new job with very demanding hours so i’ve been too emotionally and physically exhausted to manage to write anything sooner. also my laptop broke and i don't have money to buy another one yet. i'm not giving up or anything, it's just going to take me a while to finish it.

i’m so grateful that some of you still want to read more of this and remember it enough to be interested after so long. i hope this chapter isn't terribly disappointing. i’ll be going around replying to old comments now that i don't feel ashamed about not updating in ages.

thanks to daze for beating this for me.

It rips a startled laugh out of him, catching Jim running down the corridors of the Farragut wearing a determined but exultant expression on his face along with his Command Gold Ensign uniform.

For once, he looks his age—looks young and motivated with no extra weight on shoulders that have proven strong enough to carry almost anything.

“Bones! There’s a white hole outside, a white hole!” he shouts, turning to look at him as he’s speeding away, “You gotta see it!”

John blinks, pausing before stepping inside the turbolift that will take him to the MedBay. He knows the astronomical phenomenon Jim’s just mentioned has been nothing but theoretical ever since scientists constructed its hypothesis back in the 20th century.

They’re taking something of a scenic route back to Earth, but they’re still deep in the Alpha Quadrant. It somehow doesn’t add up that no other ship has ever encountered it before, if it’s been right here all the time in their own galaxy.

He frowns, shaking his head a little bit. If Jim could hear his thoughts, he’d be laughing at his wariness and calling him an old, grouchy man.

He goes back to healing electrical burns and menial injuries the Engineering crew sustains every day, waiting for his break to go to the Observation Deck and check what the fuss is all about.

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John’s seen more black holes than he’s cared to count, but there’s something terrifyingly humbling, even for a being like him, as he watches the singularity spit out huge arrays of light in varying shades of blues and purples.

He hears the enthusiastic whispering from the crew about its beauty and power, the not very much so prattling of the Science track that’s arguing about entropy and things that shouldn’t exist but are there nonetheless.
Its energy is like a constant drumming under John’s skin, reminding him of the bass notes of a good song that reach deep within his chest but multiplied tenfold.

He feels stupidly comforted by its existence, as if the white hole somehow had a conscience and that conscience could relate to him and his impossible secret of immortality. It shouldn’t exist either, but it’s right there to prove everyone wrong.

It leaves him breathless, and he’s transfixed by it, only breathing again when Jim takes his hand in his and squeezes.

Tearing his gaze from the singularity is not easy, but he manages and has no problem focusing on Jim’s profile as his mate looks at it beside him.

“First time too, huh?” the blonde asks and then adds, a little cheekily, “Good to know.”

John rolls his eyes good-naturedly, not bothering to point out he’s not that old, so yeah, there are things he still hasn’t seen out there in the universe.

They’re eight days away from Earth, but John knows this has only been their first adventure.

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Pike is waiting for them in the Shuttle Bay when they’re back, and Jim freezes mid-step as they’re getting down, turning to look at him in alarm while John reaches to steady him with a hand just below his armpit.

“Shit, what did I do now?” his mate mumbles, brow furrowing in something too akin to distress for John’s liking.

He glowers, dragging Jim the remaining distance to the platform so their feet can be on solid ground.

“Don’t be an idiot, Jim,” he grouses since he’s never been quite good at soothing, “You did plenty up there. He probably wants to hear it all from you; he’s your adviser, after all.”

It’s only when Jim still holds his breath as Pike walks to them that it dawns on him: this must be the first time someone has ever been there to welcome Jim anywhere.

It makes him mad, makes him resent a world that has been too rough on a soul that has been a balm to each of his aches.

He doesn’t bother saluting the Captain. They don’t like each other. It wouldn’t make a goddamn difference, and even if it did, Jim needs his hand at his side a hell of a lot more. He’s still trembling minutely under his touch, still on edge because he’s that sure the sole explanation for the only father figure he’s ever had being there is a bad one.

They lock eyes for a second; Pike’s are cold and assessing, John’s—he hopes—are unafraid but not mocking. Their S.O. gives him a nod, and the contact is broken, the tension between them still there but not so stifling.

“Welcome home, gentlemen,” he says, his grey-blue eyes softening at lightning speed when they fix on Jim, “We have a lot to catch up on, Jim. Dinner at my place at eight sounds good?”

The blonde blinks owlishly, darts a look at John as if searching for confirmation he heard that right. He grips the younger man’s side tighter, and Jim lets out a long, relieved breath, ducking his head and smiling at the Captain with his glass smile, the one that is so tentative even John has problems
“Huh, sure. Sounds great, sir.”

“Good job on the Excelsior, Doctor McCoy,” Pike addresses him again, “I’ve been told you might have the steadiest hands in the ‘fleet, if not the best bedside manner.”

Jim covers a snort of a laugh with coughing, eyes bright with mirth as he turns to the ex-soldier.

John inclines his head in acknowledgement, more than capable of reading between the lines and getting that Pike is telling him he’s just added more proof to his theory about a past in the military that he will never be able to confess.

Shockingly enough, he’s glad the man has the guts to continue rubbing his suspicions in John’s face. At least he’s managed to make his mate smile again.

“I wasn’t hired to coddle officers, Captain,” he points out, meeting the Starfleet officer’s penetrating glare head on, “If they want some good old TLC to tend their wounds, they might as well stay in their quarters and try kissing them better.”

“And don’t come crying to you when that doesn’t work, I presume?” Pike finishes for him, a bit of an amused smirk making it through the seriousness in his expression.

He narrows his eyes, waiting for the punch line that he knows is coming, “Exactly.”

“Spoken like a true army doctor,” the Captain says, sneering at him briefly before turning to Jim, “You should be proud of your partner, Cadet.”

“I am,” the blonde replies quickly, frowning slightly as he seems to catch the weight behind Pike’s words but giving him a toothy, carefree grin as he starts tugging John to the exit, “See you tonight, sir! Thanks for coming to see us!”

John’s nape is still prickling when they make it outside, and they both place their bags comfortably on their shoulders to walk to Campus.

“Gee, Bones, what the hell was that?” Jim asks, obviously worried, “Does he know you—“ he makes a vague gesture with a hand, looking around and still not mentioning John’s past even though there’s only the clear sky of San Fran and the grass as their witnesses, “You know?”

“No, he doesn’t,” he answers, reaching to grip Jim’s arm tight for a moment as they maintain a brisk pace, “He can never know, Jim.”

“You don’t trust him,” it’s not a question but he shakes his head all the same, refuses to linger in the almost hurt glint of Jim’s eyes at John’s apparent rejection of his mentor, “I didn’t know you guys hated each other. What happened?”

“We don’t, Jim, it’s—“ complicated, he almost says, huffing because he doesn’t want to talk about this, “He’s a smart man, he—he figured out I’m hiding something. I can’t very well tell him what. His loyalty is with Starfleet, not with me or you.”

“And since you are hiding something, he doesn’t trust you either,” Jim deduces with a sigh, “Great. You do know we’re supposed to work under him when we graduate, right? On the Enterprise? That’s where the best of each track will go.”

“So humble, Jim,” he teases with a quirk of an eyebrow, “Not doubting for a second you’re gonna
work on the new flag ship, are you?"

His mate rolls his eyes, seeing right through his mediocre effort of changing the subject, “Oh, shut up. You know that’s where we’ll go too—well, unless Pike hates your guts so much he decides not to request you.”

There’s an edge of anxiety in Jim’s casual tone, and he curses the Captain’s shrewdness for the umpteenth time, stepping closer to ease the doubts his barely-polite relationship with Pike have brought.

“He will request me,” he states, and it’s not a promise; it’s just fact. Pike is that professional, won’t let personal feelings get in the way of assembling the best crew in the ‘Fleet, “He doesn’t have to like me to trust I’ll do my job, Jim, and he knows I’ll be the best damn C.M.O. he could ever have.”

Jim lets John press their foreheads together for a moment before resuming their pace and bumping his shoulder with a smirk.

“Now who’s the humble guy, huh?”

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Jim goes to his meeting with Pike with his dog tag peeking a little through his white t-shirt. John surprises himself by not being nervous at all about it.

He knows Jim will bullshit his way out of it if Pike sees it and asks about it and he also knows there are no records—or pictures—to tie John Grimm to Leonard McCoy, to the man he’s supposed to be now.

He invites M’Benga for a drink since in a couple of days the year will start again, and they won’t have time to meet outside of work. He brings John up to speed about things at work, asks about his first voyage in deep space, and it leaves a sour taste in his mouth that alcohol does nothing to wash away, but he nods his head and tells him about their time aboard the Farragut as if it truly was his first experience up there in the black.

His colleague insists on paying since he hasn’t forgotten he owes John his life. He lets him, just this once, and calls it even.

It’s in the walk back to their dorm that he hears it; the distant but still foreboding buzzing of an alien engine, probably some kind of drone that’s programmed to locate a target and kill it on sight.

He starts running towards it before it can do any serious damage to the Campus or anyone in it, grabbing the hidden knife he always carries in his right boot and already knowing it won’t be enough to destroy a—supposedly—indestructible drone.

He plays a little hide and seek with it, luring it to as much of a secluded area as he can get right outside one of the buildings that house the higher ups. It’s nothing but a bunch of trees and bushes, part of the elegant gardens surrounding the complex, but it’ll have to do.

For a robot, it’s pretty outdated; round in shape with a flat surface to hover above the ground as it attacks him from a distance, obviously not designed for close combat.

Its phaser is set to kill, but it seems to run on some kind of battery that has picked the best possible moment to die. John grins wickedly once he realizes it’s only firing old-fashioned piercing weapons instead of vaporizing lasers and then jumps on it to try and pry open the control panel with the blade of his knife—wherever that is, it takes him a minute to find the small rectangle that hides it—so he can disable the machine since he can’t very well smash to pieces the unyielding alloy it’s made of.
He gets shot on the side for his trouble, but it’s worth it; he leaps off the thing, pockets what he assumes are the motherboard and the hard drive, and watches the useless carcass drop to the ground.

He doesn’t resent the pain he still feels despite his genetic advantages—physical pain is one of the very few things that reminds him he’s still somewhat Human, though it doesn’t mean he enjoys the biting sensation one bit.

“Motherfucker,” he curses, pressing the spot where the wound has already healed to make sure no blood leaks to stain the pavement, too close to the site of his impromptu battle to be safe if it’s found.

It was a through and through, and he finds the bullet and its case easily enough. The bullet is bloody and has patches of burned skin attached to it which is no surprise. Its caliber is close enough to 50 by Human standards that it’s clear it was designed to do as much damage as possible on impact.

The slug is buried in a tree, so he has to carve the bark that came in direct contact with it to avoid it being tested. He disguises the ugly hole he makes as something natural, turning the regular borders into irregular ones and expanding it until he can stuff it with grass as if it were a bird nest.

He inspects the scene with a critical eye. He can’t do anything about the charred trees, the phaser marks on the ground, and the general chaos generated by the fight.

It’s as clean as it’s ever going to get except for one little, horribly telling detail. The thing must be covered in his fingerprints from when he hopped on it and held on while it tried to get him off. It shook wildly when John accessed its core and took what he needed from it to turn it off, plus to figure out who sent it and why.

That’s not even mentioning the DNA traces he left on it as a present for Starfleet to discover just what exactly he’s been hiding and hunt him down for it.

He rubs his face tiredly, and after a minute of deliberation, he brings out his comm. and selects his words very carefully.

“Cadet McCoy to Cadet Kirk,” he spits, gruffly, “Meet me at these coordinates as soon as possible. McCoy out.”

He can’t risk explaining anything to Jim over the public frequency, but he trusts his partner will detect the urgency in his tone and deduce what kind of emergency it is.

There’s a mess that needs cleaning up, and the longer it sits on Academy grounds, the closer they are to losing what they have here.

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“Cryptic much, Bones?” Jim complains not even five minutes later, lifting his eyebrows expectantly as he seems to wait for John to come clean.

Pike lives just around the corner in the third floor of one of the buildings, so of course he’d make it here fast but John still fishes for an explanation that doesn’t sound like he’s in the top ten list of wanted criminals across the Milky Way.

Jim’s face softens before he can utter a word, his blue eyes fond but sharp as they assess him and their environment quickly, widening minutely when they land on the inanimate form of the drone.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” he asks in a whisper.
“No.”

“But you were,” he states the obvious, given the hole the ex-marine now sports on his jacket and the blood now dry on his hand, and steps closer to the machine warily, kneeling once he seems convinced it won’t suddenly reset and shoot everyone nearby. “Where did this thing even come from, Bones?”

“That’s for us to find out later, Jim. Right now, we need to make sure it’s not linked back to me,” he sighs, taking advantage of the quiet of the night to listen for any footsteps that could mean they’ve got company, “I don’t suppose you brought any kind of detergent with you.”

Jim grins at him proudly, pulling a phaser out of the back of his pants, “Got something better,” he says, swiftly changing the set of it to the highest level and firing it at the drone.

John watches in a mixture of relief and exasperation as their problem literally evaporates mid-air in just a couple of minutes.

“Where did you get that damn thing, Jim?” he asks warily, already picturing Jim in all kinds of trouble come Monday morning without the year even officially started yet, “So help me God, if you get your ass expelled—”

Jim chuckles, cutting him off easily, “Relax, Bones, I just borrowed it from Captain Pike for a bit. I’ll put it back now, my ten minutes are almost up anyway. I’ll see you back home in a while, okay?”

The blonde pecks him on the cheek after securing the phaser out of sight again by covering it with his leather jacket over the small of his back. He then proceeds to climb three stories with the same straightforwardness a goat would brave a steep mountain with and throws him a cheeky wink over his shoulder once he reaches the corner, disappearing out of his line of sight just like that.

John rolls his eyes, annoyed.

“Borrowed it, my ass.”

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It’s not in binary or ASCII, and of course it isn’t in English either, so it takes him a long while to decipher what the guts of his not-quite-killer were hiding.

For hours, the only thing that he understands out of all the gibberish is his codename; Reaper, glowing in between lines of code as if taunting him.

What did you expect, Reaps? a voice that sounds like Sarge at his most derisive says in his head, threatening to break his concentration and frail the little sanity he still has left, You’ll always be the Reaper. It’ll always come back to bite you in the ass, just like you deserve.

Shut the fuck up, he thinks, not quite speaking out loud but growling instead.

Jim, who’s been immersed in his own hacking job to delete any digital traces of John being anywhere near the place where he disengaged the drone for almost as long as he has, startles and looks at him.

He tenses but doesn’t pause in his furious and fast typing, waiting for the inevitable question about ghosts, about creatures from the long, long past, as Sam would say.

Jim finishes his task instead, turning off his PADD with a satisfied little grin that turns mischievous
and broadens once he stands up and plops himself beside John’s improvised terminal on their small
desk.

John quirks an eyebrow at him and lets him be, both because it doesn’t look like he’s gonna get
questioned after all and because he finally managed to crack the little fucker and is just waiting for
his program to finish translating for him.

“So Bones, I’ve been thinking,” he starts, conspiratorial, “You traveled a lot through space before
coming back to Earth, right? God knows how many alien laws you’ve broken.”

That has him huffing and crossing his arms bitterly, “Why, thank you, Jim, that sounds real nice,
almost like I have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Let me finish, you idiot,” Jim frowns at him but the spark in his eyes doesn’t quite go away, “So
you traveled through space breaking laws, doing whatever you wanted—Bones, don’t you get it?
You’re a space pirate! How cool is that?”

“You mean how ridiculous it is?” he corrects with a scowl, “Pretty goddamn stupid, I’d say, and it’d
be space mercenary anyway.”

“Whatever, it’s a kind of pirate! My boyfriend is a space pirate,” the blonde claims, stubborn as ever,
“I’m so proud.”

“Was,” he amends half-heartedly, his thighs already shifting closer so that Jim can slide from the
desk to his lap in one smooth motion, “I’m a doctor now, Jim, don’t forget that.”

Jim gives him an indulgent smile as John’s hands hold him by the hips. They’re both in their sleep
wear, which for Jim simply means his undershirt and boxers and for John a matching pair of black
sweatpants and a loose tank top.

The array of wires and small screens he plugged together to serve as a computer beeps and keeps
working behind Jim, the bright white letters going a little blurry as he lets his eyes half-close and
breathes him in, leaning their foreheads together.

“You don’t stop being something just because you’re something new, John,” his mate says at length,
calloused fingertips gently scratching his nape in just the way he likes, “‘Sides, I think it all suits you
—soldier, pirate, doctor. You’re all that.”

Because it’s easier to deflect it with a joke than to deal with the fact he’s not ready to be that brave
yet, he says, “For the last time, Jim, it’s mercenary,” and leaves it at that even though his pulse is
racing with how true those words ring, how very right he knows Jim is.

Jim nuzzles his nose, his laughter tickling John’s lips before he speaks in a mocking but soft tone,
“Understood, Sergeant,” and then, more playful than sarcastic, “You really are an old man
sometimes, you know that?”

He snorts but holds the blonde closer, “And you’re an infant,” he remarks, “Really, Jim, space
pirate? I swear you make me feel like a goddamn cradle robber sometimes.”

“Oh, you love it. I keep you young,” his mate teases, making it sound like the most important job in
the world while gently stroking the slight stubble on his cheek that he’ll need to get rid of come
Monday morning.

John cranes his neck just enough to seal their lips in a kiss that’s slow and lazy, and that’s a new one
for them—they’ve never kissed like this, just because they can, and it feels like belonging should,
he’s sure of it, makes him feel warm and content and whole.

His instincts are screaming at him that this is the calm before the storm, his mind reminding him nothing good is meant to last forever, not even when you theoretically have all the time in the world to enjoy it, but for once he doesn’t want to be cranky and pessimistic and slightly paranoid.

He closes his eyes and focuses on how safe and warm his bond with Jim feels, how it’s natural and easygoing but strong and everlasting. He tries to touch it with imaginary fingertips and shivers when Jim’s breath hitches at the same time he reaches out.

He’s stunned for a moment. He doesn’t think he would’ve found a more compatible partner even if he’d tried, that he could be so effortlessly in sync with someone, and he doesn’t know how much of this is the C-24 and how much is just them, but for once, he finds he doesn’t really give a damn.

He smiles crookedly, cupping the blonde’s face when he keeps gawking at him.

“You felt that, huh?” he points out, pleased.

“Look at you, so full of yourself,” Jim chuckles, taking John’s hands in his and turning when his program announces it’s done decoding, “Let’s see if you have another reason to feel that way, huh?”

He should’ve known the motherfuckers from Akodisia V would stalk him even after almost half a century of him leaving that world. He makes a disgruntled sound and glares at the screens, wondering not for the first time since he joined Starfleet why his past has decided to rear its ugly head more than ever.

Murphy’s Law seems somewhat lacking for an explanation, all things considered.

“Sirgas?” Jim reads the alien race aloud, frowning as he balances on one of John’s thighs with an arm around his shoulders while the ex-marine checks the rest of the coding as fast as he can, “How bad is it, Bones?”

“We’re good,” he declares, unplugging everything with one hand and leaving the other around Jim’s waist, picking up the microchips he took from the drone to inspect it absentmindedly, “They’re arrogant assholes. Didn’t think their little drone couldn’t complete his mission, so they’re not expecting it back. It was supposed to self-destruct after killing me. Even if they did want a report, their planet is at the other end of the quadrant. They’d be waiting a long time. These things don’t travel at warp speed.”

“That’s great news!” the blonde raises a fist in the air in celebration, beaming, “Man, I wish I’d seen you fight that thing.”

He sighs, “Of course you do,” he noses the spot just behind Jim’s ear and then brushes the way down with his lips leisurely, wishing for his part that he’d have it that easy when it came to accepting everything he is, everything he’s always going to be.

“We should really get rid of those first,” Jim says, breathy, and he agrees, breaking apart and letting him go to watch him smash the alien devices to pieces with one leg of the table and pick up every little bit to throw in the recycling unit for good measure.

John stands up to rummage through his pockets and toss in the bullet and its shell, along with the bark he had to cut to make absolutely sure no DNA would be left behind.

He ends up dumping his clothes too because he’s made it this far by playing it safe, and he’s not going to stop just because he’s happy now.
“Shit, Bones,” Jim swears, “It shot you with that? You should be—“

“Dead?” his mate winces but nods, going back to his personal space to sneak a hand beneath his tank top and press his palm against the place the hole in his clothes was, “Yeah, I think that was the point.”

Except I can’t die, he thinks, and it’s also new, how relieved and thankful he feels about it this time.

If he died, he would leave Jim alone.

The opposite can still happen; he could lose Jim in the blink of an eye because mortality is that much of a bitch, and Humans are supposed to be born to lose the battle against it.

Good thing he still has one small vial that can trick death in most forms, if not all of them.

“Would you let me turn you, Jim?” he asks before he can think better of it, holding the hand against his skin tightly in his own, “I figured out how to replicate the C-24. You could be like me if you wanted.”

They’re of a similar height but Jim looks up, lifting his chin from his chest and stops pondering about the non-existent wound in John’s chest. He’s speechless, and they lock eyes for a long moment, Jim’s searching his for trust and faith and anything that could make John believe in him this much.

“You really think I wouldn’t turn into a monster,” his partner states, doesn’t ask, and he sounds so grim that John already feels the negative coming, already aches from it.

“You wouldn’t, Jim, I know so,” he presses, “I know you.”

“I’m—I’m not good, Bones,” he rebuts, and he’s so convinced of it, his voice seeping with self-hatred and his eyes so haunted, so troubled, “I might—I might be good for you, for now, but I’m not—you’d have to kill me, Bones, we can’t risk it.”

John sets his jaw, resolute to stand his ground, to make Jim believe in himself even if it’s just a little bit.

“There’s only one bad thing about you, Jim Kirk, and it’s the lack of faith in yourself that you have,” he says and Jim shakes his head, tries to pull away from him, but he doesn’t let go and wraps an arm around him again, whispering close to his ear in the hopes of reaching his heart better, “In this galaxy, there’s a mathematical probability of three million earth-type planets. And in all the universe, three million million galaxies like this one, you know that. And in all of that, only one of each of us. Don’t destroy the one named Kirk.”

Jim shakes in his arms, still resisting. “Stop, just—just stop, I can’t—“

“I know you can’t believe me,” he fills in, gentle, nuzzling Jim’s temple, “I wish you could. Perhaps one day you will, but Jim, if you’re dying, I’m going to inject you with the C-24. I need you to tell me you won’t hate me if I do that.”

“I could never hate you,” Jim chokes out, “If—if I’m dying then—then yeah, you can do it.”

He looks at Jim’s eyes to make sure he means it, kissing him softly to prevent all the unshed tears in them from falling.

He doesn’t have the words to erase the scars Tarsus IV and his own mother left in him, doubts such a thing even exists, but he’ll stick around to make it better and maybe, with some time in their favor,
Jim will hear John instead of his own ghosts.

He knows it’ll take years to undo the damage done to him by neglect and abandonment, knows that healing a weathered heart with little else than rough edges won’t make miracles, but he’ll be damned if he’s not going to try.

He’ll learn to be good for Jim on the go, he swears it.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So um. Hi. I'm the worst, I know. I'm very sorry but back with +20k words to make up for it a little.

Thanks to Daze for betaing this for me and listening to me whining about it while I was writing it. You're the best \o/

I'll reply to comments now that I don't feel so ashamed for neglecting this. Thanks to everyone who left kind words for me, it means a lot :)

Their first academic year at Starfleet ends so swimmingly that the ever-pessimistic side of John is just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Any day now, he thinks, and he braces for it.

Every time he comes across Pike, he’s convinced the Captain will call him out on some thing or another. He might not be able to find any digital trace of the soldier John was—of the soldier he will always be, deep down—but there’s plenty of stuff he could accuse the super human for.

The mess with the Ugegtoos, for starters, or the attack of the Muliaks, or yeah, even the killing machine the Sirgas sent to annihilate him. There is evidence for him to use against the good doctor John plays all too well if he just knows where to look, and a thorough analysis of anything Pike could get his hands on could be Leonard McCoy’s downfall.

Still, it’s Friday, and he shouldn’t be worrying so much.

Edith shakes her head at him as he’s still glowering into the fine scotch he’s treating himself with this evening and points at her own brow before raising one fine eyebrow.

“You’re gonna get wrinkles in that handsome face of yours, Leonard,” she warns.

*If only,* John thinks bitterly. “Hmm,” he acquiesces and takes a deep breath, trying to relax for once.

Jim blows him a kiss from across the bar, one arm raised and skilled in carrying ten Romulan Ales to the loudest table in the whole place.

The ex-marine tries to mute the come-ons half of the guys sitting there—and all the women—throw his mate’s way with little success.

He scowls again.

“He’s a goner for you, that boy,” the owner of the bar and pretty much their only friend reminds him softly. She’s smiling in that way that makes John wonder if she has any Betazoid genes in her because he swears she can read him too well sometimes, “And you for him. There’s nothing for you to worry about, Leonard.”

He smirks into his drink, some primal part of him really pleased with hearing that out loud. “I know.”
“Especially with you prowling around like a guard dog. People do have some self-preservation, after all,” she says lightly before turning away to serve other customers.

Of course, the stool next to his is occupied by one of Jim’s many ex-bed partners and the Senior Cadet laughs obnoxiously at Edith’s joke.

“I think you do well in watching what’s yours,” he approves, makes him feel goddamn disgusting too, “Man, with an ass like Jimmy’s? I’d do the same.”

“No one asked you, Mitchell,” he grunts, regrets not moving when the man sauntered in and chose the place next to him despite the bar was hardly crowded at that time.

He’s never liked Gary Mitchell, liked him even less when he started sleeping with Jim.

Something about him just seems off. John has gotten pretty damn good at recognizing psychopaths when he sees them—a memento from interacting with one for years, thanks a lot, Sarge—and there’s something too cold in those grey eyes to be normal, smiles never reaching them except when they’re tinged with cruelty.

It was the only reason he tried keeping Jim away from him, even back when the younger man’s sex life wasn’t his business. Hell, even Edith helped him out, insisting Mitchell gave her the creeps more often than not.

Jim just shrugged, said Gary was nice to him. That was apparently the only prerequisite one had to fulfill to take the gorgeous blonde to bed before John got his head out of his ass and kissed him.

“You’re right, sorry,” Mitchell agrees, even raising his hands in a ‘my bad’ gesture, which has suspicion blaring all sort of alarms in his mind, “Look, McCoy, I actually came here to propose something to you.”

“Did you now,” he deadpans, narrowing his eyes at him for a moment before turning back to his much more interesting glass, “Well then, the answer is no.”

“Haha, you’re funny,” the guy even sounds sincere, he’s that much of a good actor but the ex-marine can see a vein popping in his temple that tells him he’s not at all happy with him, “Just hear me out, okay? A moment of your time, that’s all I ask.”

He rolls his eyes, waves a hand for Mitchell to go on. “Just out with it, Mitchell. I don’t have all night.”

“Right,” the third-year Cadet grins, leaning conspiratorially close to John, one elbow on the counter as he talks to him in just the right volume not to be drowned out by the rock playing in the background, not that John would have any issues listening to him, “I’m willing to get you anything you want if you let me have Jimmy one night a week. I can give you credits, do homework for you. Fuck, I can even get you some weed or coke if you want and no one will know, McCoy, what do you say?”

There are several responses that come to him, the first and the one he can’t engage in being beating the shit out of Mitchell for even thinking he’d do that to Jim, that treating him like he’s nothing but a thing is even close to acceptable.

He finishes his drink in one sip, snapping the shot back on the counter with a little more force than necessary.

“What makes you think,” he says, very slowly and threateningly, coming close enough to Mitchell
they’re almost nose to nose, “that I would fucking whore my boyfriend out, Mitchell?”

“Oh come on,” Mitchell sneers, doing his best to pretend he isn’t intimidated but the sweat breaking out of his every pore tells John otherwise, “You know he’s broken, McCoy, don’t play dumb with me. He’s just a nice piece of ass, he’s not good for anything else.”

Thinking about the horrified look on Jim’s face if he did indeed murder Mitchell with his bare hands is the only thing stopping him from getting blood on his hands.

He cocks his head, calculating how long it’d take a simpleton to run from there to the door.

“I’ll give you,” he pauses, “Ten seconds to get out of my sight. One…”

“Or what, huh? You’ll punch me in the face?”

John stares at him. He’s been told his glare is a weapon all on its own. He’s seen seasoned warriors from different species sprint the other direction at catching sight of it pointed at them.

“I’m a doctor, Mitchell,” he remarks coolly, “I don’t need to hit you to make you suffer and boy, do I want to make you scream. Five… six…”

He makes it to nine and then the offending Cadet is out of the door like the devil is at his heels.

He still looks daggers at the door for a good minute, only turning back when he hears Jim walking to him.

“Bones, you okay?” he asks, brow creased in concern as he stops right beside him with a tray filled with empty glasses, “What did he want?”

“I’m good, Jim,” he reassures, not missing the way his mate still flinches slightly at his reply.

“He told you something, didn’t he?” Jim prompts, leaving the tray on the counter to support his hands on it, head tipping down in something too close to defeat for John’s liking, “Bones, I—“

He shakes his head, arms already reaching to pull the younger man to the V his legs draw.

“I wouldn’t believe a thing he says, Jim,” he reassures.

Jim scoffs, looks up at him with too much resignation in his baby blues. “He wouldn’t even need to lie,” he states, jumping a little when a patron complains about his drink not being ready yet, “I gotta go back to work.”

He lets the blonde go, a bit grudgingly, deciding to wait until closing time to pick up that conversation where they left off.

Jim might not want to talk about it, but John has a couple of things to say.

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It’s a bit windy but otherwise a really nice night out, nearly early morning as it is. It’s just cold enough to be refreshing and he knows that with Jim’s ridiculous tolerance to low temperatures, it’s not even close to chilly.

The stars are brighter in the path they usually take back to Campus, artificial lights scarce in that part of the city. He’s glad they do because Jim seems to need them more than ever and it’s never been clearer for the ex-soldier that his mate’s home is up there in the black than in that instant.
“I miss it,” Jim admits, quite unnecessarily, sighing as he tears his gaze away from the sky to focus on John instead.

“We’ll be up there soon,” he promises, grips the blonde’s neck with a gentle but firm hand as they keep walking.

Jim stops just as the wind is sweeping loudly through the trees around them, their open jackets snapping a little with it. The doors to the Academy are just a few feet ahead of them and he lets go when Jim looks up again, both to the stars and the high buildings inside.

“You know, there was one test my Father couldn’t pass when he was here,” he says, completely out of the blue, squaring his shoulders to the challenge he’s about to share with John, “The Kobayashi Maru.”

“No one passes that test, Jim,” everyone fails it and the doctor is more than aware of it, Science track or not, it’s that much of a legend among the students.

“No one has passed it yet,” the younger man amends, an excited, toothy grin telling him there’ll be no talking him out of it, “I’m going to study and I’m going to beat it and I want you to be there when I do, Bones.”

“I thought you needed to be third year to take it,” he points out, squeezing Jim’s shoulder to let him know that yeah, he’ll be there, whenever and wherever he needs him to.

“I convinced Pike to let me take a crack at it after I finish this semester,” Jim takes his hand, pulling him inside the gates and thankfully missing John’s scowl at the mention of the Captain.

If he’s right about this, and he really hopes he’s wrong, nothing good will come from Jim trying to outwit his heroic, deceased Father. How can a man as smart as Pike not see that?

Once they’re back in their new dorm—a little bigger than the first one, but not by much, with the luxurious option of actual showers with water that they ration so that everyone can use them every now and then—they lie down for the couple of hours they have to be together until it’s time for John’s shift at Starfleet Medical.

He’s not particularly tired and truth be told, holding Jim in his arms is as good as getting a full night’s sleep for him, so he’s not startled awake when Jim turns a little and leans his chin on John’s chest, fingertips stroking the curve of his eyebrows and the space between them.

“I should’ve listened to you,” Jim murmurs, resting his cheek right over the place where his heart is beating, “Gary—he made me do things, then made me feel stupid for doing them.”

He raises a hand to Jim’s head, caressing his hair slowly as he keeps listening.

He can tell whatever this is, that it’s been weighing on his lover.

“He always told me,” his mate stops to laugh, self-deprecating and low, “How glad he was I hadn’t been picked up enough as a baby, how that made me needy and clingy and willing to do whatever he wanted.”

“He’s a fucking psycho, Jim,” he tries not to growl but it’s a near thing, “Forget everything he said.”

“He was right though,” his mate notes, shifting again to stare up at him from under his lashes, “I did anything he asked because I knew he’d hold me afterward, because I knew he’d be back and I wanted that.”
“There’s nothing wrong with liking sex, with liking to be held too. You just need to find someone who won’t take advantage of that, you hear?” he says, tone leaving no room for argument.

Jim chuckles, lighter this time, as John’s hands hold him tighter, “You think I found that someone, Bones?”

He can see the teasing clear in Jim’s sky blue eyes, all prettier with it instead of cloudy with shame, and he cocks an eyebrow, pretends to consider it for a bit.

“I don’t know, have you?”

He bites back a smile when Jim grins at him, sure and so trusting it hurts a little to look at, and stretches up to nuzzle his nose and sigh against his lips.

“Yeah, I think that I have.”

***

The first half of Second year is such a whirlwind of activity and tests and long lectures and more tests that having a little extra to deal with all that comes in quite handy.

John doesn’t suffer under the stress; he thrives in it, gets a couple more commendations for just doing his goddamn job, including performing an emergency C-section on a woman pregnant with triplets when O.B. don’t arrive fast enough.

It’s hard to pretend he hates what he’s become when he’s actually starting to like it. Helping people has always been his call; he never got into the army for the carnage or the honor, his only wish was to stop people from suffering, even if it was just a little bit and it had to be through violence.

This method—well, he prefers it. Sometimes his hands do get bloody but it’s because he’s treating wounds, not causing them, and he could really make do without killing anymore, revengeful and bothersome aliens notwithstanding.

Jim is preoccupied, absorbing every strategy and maneuver book he can get his hands on, but he still notices the change and smiles at the ex-marine in the few and in between moments they get for themselves.

“It suits you,” he comments one night and he looks at John like he’s not only watching him but something else too, which is a bit disconcerting, “More than that huge gun ever did.”

He turns back to the countless PADDs laying on the desk for him to read, memorize and examine, not paying attention to the way John is drilling a hole in the back of his fair head despite the fact that he can’t stop staring, bewildered.

Is it the link? Does Jim have access to some of his memories now? His firearm—the one that had been designed to identify Reaper and Reaper alone—is not something he’s ever shared with him.

“Bones,” Jim sighs, still not looking at him, “You’re distracting me.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, am I freaking out too loud?” he wisecracks, standing up from the bed where he’d been reviewing the last boring report of the outbreak of Rigelian fever to pace in the narrow space available to him in the dorm instead, “I’ll try to keep it quiet.”

“What?” Jim blinks at him, confusion written all over his young face, “It’s true, why are you freaking out? You never freak out, ever.”
He opens his mouth to scream that he sure as Hell does, only internally, but closes it when he realizes he’s scaring his mate, the same bond he still doesn’t understand flaring inside with something ugly, something he didn’t mean to put there.

“I never told you about any of the weapons I used,” he points out, coming to a halt in front of Jim when he gets to his feet, his quest for knowledge momentarily forgotten.

The blonde pales a little, even takes a step away from him. “Um, I guess I’m just really good at guessing.”

“Jesus fuck, Jim, I’m not mad. I just want to know how you know,” he says, frustration deepening his frown when the younger man shakes his head and retorts, “No, you don’t, trust me.”

The fear he can both see and feel coming off of Jim in waves is bigger than he expected. For a whole minute, it seems they’re both choking with it; with the dread even the possibility of John leaving still ignites in the blonde.

“For f—” he bites the rest of the curse back, makes a conscious effort to stop this from escalating any further.

He’s tired and he misses his lover, misses the nights they used to spend together and the easy silences between them that they haven’t had in months because Jim is obsessed with beating the phantom of a man that he never met but that still managed to ruin his life both with his absence and his presence since he was old enough to understand what was going on.

He’s given Jim all the space he thought he needed but he realizes that maybe, he should’ve been a little selfish since the distance is making his mate doubt his commitment to him again.

“Jim,” he calls, very softly and reaching out with a hand for him to take, “C’mere.”

He goes, melting into him when John simply pulls him into his arms and embraces him, one hand just beneath his shoulder blades and the other snug around his waist.

“I know we’ve both been too busy,” he whispers into the blonde’s ear, “But what you mean to me, darling, it hasn’t changed.”

Perhaps the endearment is a dirty trick, especially with the accent he doesn’t shake not even when they’re alone—a cover is a cover but for him is more than that and Leonard McCoy is supposed to have that sweet, Southern accent that not many can resist—but he doesn’t regret it one bit, not once he feels Jim burrowing into the crook of his neck, arms clutching the thin material of the tank top he uses to sleep.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so awful to you, Bones,” his mate mumbles against his skin, “You’re always here for me and I’m—wow, I suck so bad.”

“You don’t,” he refutes but Jim straightens and looks at him.

“Please don’t hate me,” the blonde pleads, fingers digging into his back as if to keep him in place, “I should’ve told you when it happened, but I didn’t want to make you sad, Bones. You’re always sad when you talk about her.”

“Sam,” he really doesn’t need more information than that, “You saw her? She told you?”

He doesn’t say ‘too’ but Jim seems to get it all the same, his grip loosening and the despair in his eyes giving way to relief.
“She showed me—“ he licks his lips, “She showed me the old you.”

Not a figment of his imagination then, John reasons grimly.

He almost wishes he believed in God, or in anything, so he could ask for Sam to have moved on at long last.

He exhales, long and heavy with remorse and nostalgia, and Jim cringes in his arms, shutting his eyes tight against a physical retaliation that’s not coming.

“She’s gone,” his mate says in a small voice, exactly the answer to the prayer he didn’t make that he was looking for, “I’m sorry.”

He cups Jim’s face in his hands, assures, “Don’t be. It’s what I wanted; for her to rest.” For her to stop carrying the guilt that injecting him caused her, though he keeps that part to himself.

He should ask what exactly his sister showed Jim but he doesn’t really need to.

If she wanted to show the man he’s going to spend eternity with—if he’s lucky—who John was, then it’s obvious; Jim saw Olduvai and most of John’s demons.

He somehow coaxes Jim to get some sleep instead of waiting for his body to drop dead tomorrow or the day after that, soothes whatever nightmare is about to erupt behind his lover’s lids with a brush of lips on his temple, his brow.

His own are lurking in the dark, threatening to take hold of him no matter what, so he stays awake and doesn’t give them a chance, not for now.

He’s already dreamed of Jim dying and his ex-commanding officer possessing his body to rip John into bloody ribbons.

He doesn’t want to know what could be worse than that.

***

The Kobayashi Maru is the name of a civilian freighter that strikes a gravitic mine in the wrong side of the neutral zone, John reads in preparation to assist Jim in his test.

It sends a distress signal that the USS Enterprise is near enough to pick up and near enough for her Captain to decide whether to engage—and endanger the whole crew by violating the treaties that created the neutral zone in the first place—or not to engage in a fight with the Klingons while simultaneously trying to save a doomed ship filled with innocent people.

It’s an exercise in morals, the ‘Fleet affirms, and the best way to test the Command style of its future officers.

It’s a fucking cruel game, John concludes after finishing the material he’s given, an exercise in hopelessness and there may be many a green Cadet who needs to be introduced to the brutality of real life with such a simulation but it’s not Jim’s case—fuck, but it’s not Jim’s case at all and he doesn’t want his mate to go through it.

Uhura is there, of course she is.

John wonders, not for the first time, what he missed in the exchange between them for her to act like Jim’s very existence irritates her.
“I can’t wait to see you fail, Kirk,” she taunts, waiting for them just by the door.

“I’ll do my best to disappoint you, Uhura,” Jim vows with a grin but it’s a fragile one and it crumbles the minute they’re in the simulation chamber.

He takes his place in the pilot’s station—apparently, that’s where Jim wants him to be—after squeezing the blonde’s shoulder in quiet support.

It’s about the first and the last useful thing he’ll do here, he’s sure of that.

Their fellow Cadets pile in to take their own places, Jim waiting until every station is manned before taking his seat in the Captain’s chair.

He squares his shoulders and every trace of joking or smugness is washed from his expression, leaving only steely resolution behind. He nods, looking up to the one-way window where John knows some Instructors—plus Captain Pike—will be watching Jim’s performance and turns to Uhura as she informs them of the distress signal.

The ex-soldier did a little more digging about the test, knows most of them last anything from two to five, maybe eight minutes.

Jim lasts fifty-nine minutes.

He saves his crew from the vicious attacks of three Klingon warbirds but the ship ends up badly damaged and they have many casualties.

The Kobayashi Maru goes up in flames for his effort.

Not even Uhura can mock Jim after they literally witness how he uses every trick in the book, every tactic and command he can possibly give to save everyone and still loses most of the imaginary lives he’s trying to save.

They’re all silent, glued to their stations.

The way Jim is clenching his jaw and lowering his head breaks his heart.

“... has ever been that close,” someone is saying in the other room, “... nice catch, Christopher...”

“... guess you were right after all, he does have potential.”

John strains to hear but stops in favor of following Jim outside.

He knows, from the younger man’s posture alone, that he will break into a run as soon as he’s out of the room.

He can’t really blame him. That was even worse than what he was expecting.

And he’s right, but a hand grips his arm when he’s about to pursue.

“Tell Cadet Kirk I expect him in my office, twenty-one hundred,” Pike orders him, his voice all business but his eyes soft and concerned, his tone changing to low and secretive as he adds, “And Doctor, do not leave his side today.”

He raises an eyebrow at his S.O, surprised he’s trusting him with Jim this much when usually he’s not all that happy with John and Jim’s closeness.
“I won’t,” he swears, dashing after his lover fast enough to see where he’s going, but not fast enough to raise suspicion about his abilities.

***

He finds Jim in the same pier he ran to after the fiasco with the shuttle sim and his non-existent aviophobia, crouching and drawing schematics on the old wood with a piece of charcoal.

“It should’ve worked,” he’s muttering, squinting at his own small representation of the fight in the neutral zone, “Why didn’t it work?”

John heaves a sigh, squatting next to the younger man and letting him keep mumbling to himself as he adds more details to the sketch.

He can’t imagine what it must be like; trying to beat a test that pretty much describes the impossible situation his own Father faced and died in.

When Jim finally tires himself out and falls silent, he raises a hand slowly—making sure not to startle him—and grips the crook of his neck, thumb pressing softly onto the rapid pulse underneath.

“You were very close,” John notes, “Closer than anyone else’s ever been.”

“That’s not enough,” the blonde frowns, biting his lip when it starts trembling, “That’s not good enough.”

“It is,” he counters gently.

“I still failed, Bones,” Jim says, head still lolling between his shoulders, gaze fixed in the rudimentary draft beside their feet, “I don’t understand. I did everything right and nothing changed. The result was the same.”

He doesn’t want to say what he’s already inferred; that the program is highly likely made to be unbeatable, probably exists for the sole purpose of teaching Command track Cadets how to lose.

“It’s a no-win scenario, Jim,” he says instead, “Nothing you can do to change the outcome.”

Jim visibly flinches at that, the spark in his eyes that had been wiped out by his recent failure coming back to life like a lightning bolt.

“There’s no such thing,” his mate states, looking down at the drawing for the last time before standing up, “I’ll win, next time.”

The ex-marine follows, the hopeful, small smile in Jim’s face worrying him more than a little.

He lets the blonde pull him by a hand back to the Academy so they can change out of these awful blue jumpsuits.

***

Finding someone to cover his shift at the clinic is unexpectedly easy. He gets messages from M’Benga and Chapel asking if he’s all right, which he answers curtly, his focus on Jim’s precarious mind state and when he’s going to break again.

His lover has gone right back to his PADDs, right back to plot and strategize even though he won’t be allowed to take the Kobayashi Maru again until he’s well into third year.
“Pike wants to see you at nine tonight,” John informs, standing next to where Jim is working at the desk, “He’ll be waiting in his office, he said.”

“Yeah, sure,” Jim agrees, his face tinted with the blue hue of the screen in front of him, eyes avid and quick in scanning the page contents.

He raises both eyebrows, crossing his arms and betting the younger man didn’t listen to a word he said.

“So you’re gonna go?” he asks, doubtful.

The blonde nods, absentminded, and that’s about it.

John resigns himself to drag him there if he has to and it looks like he will.

***

Pike stares when he sees the doctor literally pulling Jim in by an arm.

At the last minute, his lover had decided he very much did not want to go get dressed down by his mentor, never mind that John is pretty certain it’s going to be the opposite.

“But I failed,” Jim kept mumbling, so morose the ex-marine felt like finding whatever poor bastard had programmed the Kobayashi Maru and make them fade out of existence.

“You did your best,” he reminded him each time.

He salutes Pike and takes a seat in the lobby after the Captain gestures for Jim to go in with his head.

Half an hour later, he convinces his mate of going out to get Chinese for dinner. It’s been months since they’ve had any time to do something like that and John has a Surgery II exam the next morning, but if scoring less than outstanding is the price to pay to get Jim out of his head for a bit then so be it.

He doesn’t ask but he really fucking hopes Pike talked Jim out of taking that nasty test ever again.

***

He bumps into Gaila a few weeks later. He’s in the break room, trying to drink a concoction that some people call coffee but that makes Starbucks look good.

Super human or not, he does need the caffeine so he just keeps sipping, making a mental note to bribe one of the interns to buy decent coffee in a few hours.

She beams at him, sneaking inside the room with a wink.

“Doctor Bones!” she calls, sitting beside him, red curls bouncing behind her.

He rolls his eyes, not even bothering to complain about her using Jim’s nickname for him since he knows it won’t make her stop, “Gaila.”

“I need a favor,” she confesses, going straight to the point which is one of the things he likes about her, “It’s for Jim, actually.”

He raises an eyebrow, ignoring the pang of longing deep in his marrow at the mention of his lover.
He misses the attention Jim used to pay to him when they were in First year. If they didn’t live together, he’s sure they wouldn’t even see each other in days. Probably whole weeks too.

“I’m all ears.”

“Nyota told me about the Kobayashi,” the redhead pauses, looking around to make sure they’re the only ones present apparently, her expression turning uncharacteristically serious, “I don’t think it can be beaten by anyone, not even by Jim.”

“Yeah,” he agrees sourly, “Try telling him that.”

“But I can help!” she assures him with a bright smile, “I could create a subroutine that allowed for a victory, just once.”

He knows she’s in the Engineering track and quite great at it, if Jim’s awed babble about her is to be believed, so he doesn’t doubt she can actually do that.

Still, he scowls at her. “You mean you could help him cheat.”

“Oh, Doctor, don’t be like that,” she counters, frisky, “I just want Jim to be happy again, don’t you want the same?”

A wave of Orion pheromones hits John in the nose like a sucker punch. He blinks, thinking how on Earth normal people refuse this girl anything.

“He told you no, didn’t he?” he guesses, “That’s why you came to me.”

“Please, help me convince him,” she pleads, her green eyes welling up with tears, “Don’t you miss him too, Leonard? I miss him so much it hurts.”

He avoids her piercing gaze, repeating in his head like a mantra just how bad of an idea this is. They could get expelled, both of them, and for what?

Beating George Kirk in an imaginary scenario won’t do Jim any good, he’s sure of that.

“We could get him back,” Gaila pushes, “If we do this—“

“No,” he replies, final, “We can’t help, Gaila. He has to do this on his own.”

“But he won’t win!” she cries, “Without changing the parameters of the test, it’s impossible to win and I can do it. I want to do it.”

He shakes his head, draining his mug and leaving it on the table, getting up from the couch to pace around the room.

“Let him try again and fail,” he says, forbidding, “Hopefully, they won’t let him come back for thirds.”

She stands up too, frowning at him, “But—“

“The board would kick you out, Gaila,” he cuts her off, too worked up to stop his arm from accompanying his words, “Jim would never forgive himself!”

“I love him,” she declares, so fierce and sure John feels like an asshole for thinking Orions could only ever feel sexual attraction for anyone, “And I hate seeing him like this so I wouldn’t regret it.”
He rubs his face with a hand, shutting his eyes tight against the decision his heart wants to take.

He ought to be grateful, he thinks, that Jim has this kind of loyalty from his friends.

“Doctor McCoy,” Chapel opens the door, poking her sophisticated, graceful hairdo in, “Compartment syndrome in OR 3.”

He nods, “I gotta go,” he tells Gaila. To his head nurse, he asks, “Patient?”

He hears the redhead sighing as Chapel starts explaining and they walk briskly out in the direction of the OR, “Thirty-seven year old male, Construction worker, fell from ten stories three days ago. Got a compound fracture in both the right tibia and femur. Ortho put fourteen screws and two plates in each bone. He did okay until today when he experienced severe pain and swelling beneath the cast.”

He spends the rest of his shift trying to save the man’s leg, fighting with the blood clots that keep popping everywhere in it and keep increasing the pressure in the limb to dangerous levels.

After five fasciotomies and lots of cursing, the man is stable enough to be moved to the ICU.

***

“I’ll talk to him,” he mutters to his comm. unit as he returns to their dorm.

He still thinks it’s a stupid idea but he wants Jim to be focusing on something else, something that doesn’t eat at him every day and barely allows him to be himself anymore.

“Thank you, Leonard!” Gaila cheers through the frequency, “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

He’s going to need it.

***

“You don’t think I can beat it on my own?” Jim asks, tone small with hurt and shock, “You think I need help?”

He looks incredibly vulnerable too, on top of exhausted and stressed.

John feels like the galaxy’s greatest villain.

“Jim, that’s—” he tries again, frustrated, “It’s not about that. The test itself is unbeatable. You proved that last time. You did everything right, you said that yourself, and you still failed.”

The blonde shakes his head, turning back to his collection of digital knowledge.

John can still see his eyes, wide and preternaturally blue, when he’d shared Gaila’s idea.

“There’s stuff I haven’t tried,” the younger man announces, strained, “I don’t need you or Gaila to do anything, though it’d be real nice for you guys to believe in me for once.”

“Damn it, Jim,” he swears, “That’s not what I said. Of course we believe in you.”

“Oh yeah?” Jim looks at him over his shoulder, belligerent and closed-off, “Then why are you so fucking convinced that I won’t be able to do this?”
“Because—“ he throws his arms in the air, “You know what, forget it. Go on, do whatever the Hell you want but don’t expect me to be there for a second time ‘cause I won’t be.”

Jim gives him a sardonic smile. “Yeah, you will.”

John scoffs and decides to leave until the urge to break everything in sight vanishes.

Yes, he will be there.

***

The next few months are tough in ways he is and isn’t expecting.

Sure, his subjects are harder and harder. He has to study for real and there are things that are so complex he has to read them twice—seriously, Vulcan anatomy and physiology will be the end of him—and it’s nice, to feel challenged, to feel like he’s improving instead of moving backwards but it’s almost impossible to feel that way when on the other hand, things between him and Jim keep nosediving no matter how much he tries to fix them.

It’s not the sex he misses, but the closeness they shared even before becoming lovers. They’re distant now, although not strangers. They know each other too well to ever go back to being that.

Jim still wiggles under his covers at night—when he sleeps, that is—and snuggles into his side like there’s no other place in the world where he can find any rest.

It’s a comfort, to still be somewhat needed, but he doesn’t know how much longer they can survive this.

“Trouble in paradise?” Uhura smirks at him in the Mess, because everyone and their mother wants to come and tell John how much better he’d be without Jim, “He’s cheating on you, McCoy, that much is obvious.”

He snorts, “Yeah, with his books,” he picks up his tray and sneers at her, “His mistress is the Kobayashi Maru so I’ll see you there when he takes it again.”

“What?” she glowers, shouts after him as he snickers under his breath, “I’m not going to waste my time again, tell him that!”

Pity that she literally can’t refuse to be there.

***

The holidays arrive quite fast.

He doesn’t try to take Jim anywhere. He’s too much of a coward to deal with rejection and he knows his mate is in no mood to go any place that isn’t a library or a sim room.

Jim surprises him decorating their room and asking him to be home for Christmas and New Year’s Eve, a million-wattage smile on his pretty face and warmth in his baby blues enough to last John years.

He can’t actually say no—he’s that whipped and that’s no secret—and for a few days, it seems they’re good as new.

Jim drags him to places around the city they haven’t visited before, they feed seals at the docks, he calls him John again with a flirty, dirty little thing of a smile and they make love so many times it’s
like the other will disappear if they dare to let go for even a minute.

“M sorry, Bones,” the blonde whispers into the skin of his neck, their limbs still sticky and tangled. He’s a little drunk for the both of them, since there is no escape from sobriety for someone like John, and his breathing is a messy, hiccup-y sound in the darkness of their dorm, “I’ve missed you, so bad, but I need to do this.”

He sighs, weary, and just holds his lover a bit tighter, a bit closer to him, “I know you do.”

“I need to prove her wrong,” Jim slurs, “If I can’t, then I should—shouldn’t be here.”

He waits for the younger man to keep going, staring up at the ceiling when he falls asleep instead, deep and calm and completely spent.

The ex-marine kisses the top of his head, lets the cracking of the fireworks outside lull him to sleep too.

***

The recording of Jim’s first try at the Kobayashi Maru has been analyzed and praised in every course of Tactics currently open at the Academy.

Maybe that’s exactly why no one bats an eyelid at him asking to take it again.

John can hear the Instructors settling in the observation room as the Cadets fill their stations.

He has no delusions about the result, he just hopes this time Jim understands that short of cheating his way through it, there’s no way for him to win this thing.

It lasts forty-seven excruciating minutes. They manage to blow one of the Klingon vessels but there are still two others that destroy the Kobayashi Maru and that chase the Enterprise out of the neutral zone kicking and screaming, ingenious and risky maneuvers not making a goddamn difference.

He doesn’t follow Jim this time. He understands by now that there’s no comfort he can offer that will make this right, that will prevent the younger man from punishing himself for a third time and another one and another until he either wins or is forbidden from taking the test ever again.

It's the worst timing too. The anniversary of the Kelvin Massacre—which happens to be Jim’s birthday—is the day after tomorrow and his mate is already a mess during it under normal circumstances.

He doesn’t want to think about what it’s gonna be like this year.

***

Geoffrey convinces him to get some drinks after a dreadful shift—shuttle crash, viral infections galore, just to name a few of the highlights of the day—and the taste, if not the alcohol in it, puts him a little bit at ease.

Whether Jim is waiting for him back home or not, he’s still going to be helpless.

His colleague has left by the time a familiar figure straddles the stool next to him.

He tenses. It’s the first time he’s encountered Pike in neutral grounds, if there’s even such a thing.

“A beer, please,” the man asks the bartender, “Whatever you got on tap.”
“Captain,” he acknowledges, wary.

Pike studies him for a long moment, only stopping when his drink is in front of him.

He downs half of the tall glass in one go, tips it slightly towards John as he offers, “Truce?”

He sighs, raises his own glass to seal the deal.

They drink in silence for a while. It’s eerie but he supposes he shouldn’t be so surprised. This is the closest bar to Campus and Captain or no Captain, Pike is entitled to take a break.

“I’m worried about him,” his SO admits, three beers and a shot in.

“Yeah, join the club,” John says dryly.

“There’s something we’re not seeing,” Pike insists, “Something we’re missing.”

“Can’t you stop him from taking it again?” he asks, frowning, “It’s not doing him any good and it’ll only be worse the longer he’s at it.”

The man shakes his head, “It’s not up to me, Doctor. I wish it was because enough is enough and you’re right.”

“I think,” he purses his lips, can’t believe he’s having this conversation with someone that hates his guts, “I think his mother has something to do with it.”

“Well shit,” Pike gestures for a refill, gives him a mildly impressed side-glance, “That explains it. Jim is a genius, he belongs in Starfleet, but she just can’t see it. It’s been two years and she’s still having a hissy fit about it.”

“You talk with her?” he asks once the bartender leaves.

Pike snorts, “We argue via holovid every couple of months. She’s a brilliant Engineer, one of our best, but she doesn’t know her son at all.”

“Jim said something about proving her wrong,” John confides. He might not trust Pike with his own secrets but he cares about Jim so much that he doesn’t doubt it’s a good call to share this with him, “The messages she sends, they always hurt him. I don’t know what she said this time, but it wasn’t good.”

The Captain sets his jaw, resolute. “I’ll deal with her. Do me a favor and make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid.”

Jim is a force of nature and he’s pretty sure Pike knows that. John can’t tame the wind any more than he can hope to tie Jim.

“I’ll try my best.”

***

“My Father—he named me, you know,” Jim tells him conversationally the second the door slides shut behind him, “It was the last thing he did, I guess.”

He takes his jacket off slowly, approaching the blonde like he would a wild animal.

It’s still not midnight, but there’s a storm brewing in Jim’s eyes already. He’s not flushed, not like he
is when he’s been drinking too much, and he doesn’t smell the part either.

He sits beside him, every part of their sides brushing against each other, right beneath the only window of the room.

It’s like Jim is avoiding light, even artificial ones, with all his might.

“My mom—she’s never called me Jim. She told me it’s what he wanted, but she’s never—“ his lover sniffs, not quite crying, just a loud, raggedy intake of breath, “I’m always Jimmy to her. It’s like I’ve never given her a reason to believe I deserve it.”

He wraps an arm around Jim’s shoulders, waits until the younger man leans into him and burrows into his neck to speak, “This is why you want to beat the Kobayashi Maru.”

All these months, thinking it was about proving he’s better than his Father and all Jim’s been trying to do is get his own shit excuse of a mother to love him.

Jim laughs under his chin, pressing closer to him as the sound dies down like a small flame against gale, “Well, that came out great, didn’t it? I guess I’ll never be good enough for her.”

He kisses the blonde’s forehead, warm and lingering, and wishes he was better at this.

Comforting is still not his strong suit but he’s pretty much all Jim has. He’s the only one who ever sees him this open, this wrecked.

“She doesn’t know you,” he says, remembering Pike’s words, “I don’t think that she wants to, but that’s not on you, Jim, that’s on her.”

His mate doesn’t answer but he does weave his arms around him and stays close, which he takes as a good sign.

John waits until it’s his birthday to press another kiss to his temple, and say, low but sure into the night, “You’re enough, Jim, you’re more than enough.”

***

Jim, always unpredictable, stops obsessing so much with passing the Kobayashi Maru after that.

It’s still a thing on his mind, John could bet on it, but it doesn’t consume him anymore. He’s back to being his cheeky, unapologetic, genius self.

The ex-marine is so happy about it he even teaches him some useful moves one night at the gym after Jim’s Hand-to-Hand class.

His lover smiles up like a loon at him from the mat, practically drunk in adrenaline and something else, something that might be the way John nuzzles his face, teasing him with a kiss that he’ll only give him back home, and pulls him up on his feet.

“Not fair,” the blonde complains, almost in a sing-song, following his lead with no problem.

***

He’s not surprised at all when Jim proclaims he’s taking the test again out of the blue.

They’re about to graduate, after all. His stunning, cheery, obnoxious at times—but always by choice—boyfriend can’t leave anything he cares about enough alone.
Unlike the previous times, Jim is cocky and showy, munching an apple seemingly without giving a damn about the test.

John doesn’t need any more clues to know this will end quickly and not in the way everyone must be expecting.

There’s a brief glitch in the monitors and then Jim is patting his shoulder after beating the Kobayashi Maru, the test no one has ever passed.

Until now.

He exchanges an incredulous look with Uhura and stomps after the blonde, who exits the room with a grin and a little bow towards the observation room.

“You f—“ he bites his tongue and drops his voice, there are still other Cadets around and he doesn’t want anyone to hear, “You idiot! You cheated, didn’t you? Damn it, Jim, you’re going to get expelled two months before graduation!”

“Relax, Bones,” his mate tries to reassure him, “They won’t kick me out. I had a good reason to do it.”

He huffs, exasperated. “Right. Did Gaila help you?”

Jim frowns at him. “No, of course not,” he winces a little, “Well, I did use her account to hack into the system but she didn’t know about it. She should be fine if the Admiralty doesn’t like my little stunt.”

“I don’t think they’re gonna like it much, Jim,” he remarks wryly, “I don’t think they’re gonna like it at all, actually.”

“Bones, that such a test exists should bother all of us, just think about it,” the blonde halts their steps, gripping his arm as they stand outside of the building with a sunny day shining bright over their heads, “They’re teaching us that there’ll come a moment when we’ll be incapable to help, to do our duty and that it’s okay to accept that. They’re teaching us no-win scenarios are something we should expect and concede to instead of teaching us we should fight them until we find a way to beat them, a way around them that allows us to keep moving forward. Can’t you see how wrong that is?”

He stares at Jim, astonished.

Leave it to him to try to stir a revolution over something so simple as an Academy simulation.

***

Despite being caught with his guard down, his mate does remarkably well in front of the council.

He’s calm and polite and for a moment, John thinks he’s worried sick over nothing.

If Jim explains to them what he already explained to him, then he should be all set to win this.

That fucking Vulcan looks almost jolly as he points out, “You of all people should know, Cadet Kirk, a Captain cannot cheat death.”

“I of all people?” Jim repeats, voice slightly choked, head hanging down as if the weight of that was just too much.

He clenches his fists, can’t believe anyone decent would use such a low blow—literally rubbing
Jim’s Father death right in his face—to win an argument.

He sticks around after the hall is cleared and everyone leaves to prepare to answer the distress call from Vulcan.

He reaches out carefully, pressing a hand to the small of Jim’s back.

His mate is always brittle after George Kirk and his great sacrifice are mentioned.

“Who was that pointy-eared bastard?” Jim asks through still gritted teeth.

“I don’t know,” he cocks an eyebrow, tries to joke about it, a bit stiffly, “But I like him.”

It’s worth it just to see the light coming back to Jim’s eyes to glare at him.

***

Starfleet brass is even dumber than he thought.

If they’re going to ground their best Cadet during a planetary crisis then John doesn’t want to know what they’d do if things were a-okay—throw him in a brig? Jesus Christ.

“Jim, the board will rule in your favor,” he pauses, tries not to look at the defeated drop of his mate’s shoulders because if he does, he won’t be able to leave him, “Most likely,” but of course he looks and seeing Jim like that has always upset him. He huffs, tries to keep his composure as much as it pains him, “Look Jim, I’ve gotta go.”

Instead of a goodbye kiss, the blonde gives him a handshake and a forced smile.

“Yeah. Yeah you go, be safe,” he’s sincere and even tender, but John can see right through him, can practically stare at Jim’s fear of being left behind right in the eye.

Still, he walks away from him—just a few steps, while every instinct in him is screaming at him not to leave Jim alone.

He has to stop, takes a minute to make sure this isn’t some fucked-up biology thing courtesy of the C-24.

It’s not a physical ache, what he feels, it’s just a hunch—one that he’d be a fool to disregard.

“Damn it.”

He knows exactly how to get the blonde on board.

He grabs Jim’s arm and meanders through the crowd, tugging him insistently until they reach a medical storeroom that has the exact vaccine he needs.

“What are you doing?” Jim exclaims when he gives him his back.

He glowers, already looking through the cabinets, “I’m doing you a favor. I couldn’t just leave you there, looking all pathetic. Take a seat.”

Jim obeys immediately, strangely subdued.

If only he was this well behaved during his physicals, the doctor thinks sourly.
“I’m gonna give you a vaccine against viral infection from Melvaran mud fleas,” and he does, no questions asked.

“Ouch!” the younger man grimaces, rubbing the place where John applied the injection, “What for?”

“To give you the symptoms,” so I can smuggle you on board, you idiot.

It takes Jim a little bit to catch up with the program, even after John is done describing what will happen to him.

He’s not quite sure whether his mate is meek and quiet afterward because he finally got what he’s trying to do or because the vaccine is already wreaking too much havoc in his system.

Jim is wobbly on his feet and squinting, looking for all the world like he’s sick as a dog, by the time they reach their shuttle.

The pesky, minuscule Commander that informed him he’s grounded until the Academy board rules tries to block their path and John kind of loses it.

“Medical code states the treatment and transport of a patient is to be determined at the discretion of his attending physician,” he explains, irritated and firm, adjusting his grip on Jim depending on how close to falling on his face the blonde is, “Which is me, so I’m taking Mister Kirk aboard.”

The little man looks overwhelmed enough—and slightly disgusted by Jim’s incessant grunts and sweating—but he keeps going anyway, just to be safe.

“Or would you like to explain to Captain Pike why the Enterprise warped into a crisis without one of its Senior Medical Officers?”

The Commander yields, letting them through, “As you were.”

“As you were,” he grouses, literally hauling Jim to his seat.

“I might throw up on you,” Jim mumbles to him, huddling like if he makes himself smaller, maybe he’ll feel better.

That makes John’s lips curl in a corner, remembering their first conversation.

Staring at the Enterprise from outside, waiting for them to board her in all her glory, he doesn’t regret bringing Jim along one bit.

Jim doesn’t seem to care about how awful he must be feeling, either.

***

He helps the blonde change into clothes that aren’t soaked in sweat, which happen to be black pants and a black undershirt, no shirt to put on top to show his rank since he’s a stowaway, and brings him to Medical Bay.

Jim complains every step of the way so John is pretty certain he’s feeling better.

He accelerates things by knocking him out cold with a sedative anyway.

***

“May I have your attention, please?” an Ensign from the bridge says from every screen around just
as he’s finished changing into his new if temporary uniform, “At twenty-two hundred hours, telemetry detected an anomaly in the neutral zone.”

The kid has a thick Russian accent and looks no older than eighteen but John still listens, Chapel and M’Benga at his sides.

He can hear Jim squirming and hissing in his bio-bed. He checks his vitals as the Ensign keeps talking.

“What appeared to be a lightning storm in space. Soon after, Starfleet received a distress signal from the Vulcan High Command that their planet was experiencing seismic activity. Our mission is to assess the Condition of Vulcan and assist evacuation if necessary. We should be arriving at Vulcan within three minutes. Thank you for your time.”

Jim does jerk awake as soon as the mission broadcast is over, muttering something about a lightning storm while having the most severe allergic reaction John has seen in all his years, before or after he became a doctor.

Being a preemie and Tarsus IV did the younger man’s immune system no favors, that’s for damn sure. The Melvaran mud fleas vaccine is one of the safest—if nastiest—inoculations ever designed, genetically engineered to stop exactly something like this from happening, and Jim is about an inch from having a full out anaphylactic shock all the same.

He’s frowning while running a tricorder on him, trying to come up with a drug that isn’t epinephrine to counter the reaction since Jim’s heart rate is already through the damn roof, when Jim slaps his giant, inflated hands on his face and states, frightened but final, “We gotta stop the ship.”

Of course, he breaks into a run exactly one second later, John hot on his heels.

He lets the blonde continue his wild goose chase through the ship, applying corticoids—that will slowly start to kick in, too fucking slowly for what he needs—and epinephrine along with a selective beta blocker to counter the effect on Jim’s heart when he sees his heart rate skyrocketing to 180 bpm, before he gets an arrhythmia that could send him into shock or worse.

It’s not the recommended procedure to do but people who wrote the algorithms John is supposed to be following never had Jim Kirk and his crazy physiology as a patient so they can kiss his ass.

He’s relieved when his next readings are better but not distracted enough not to hear Jim’s talk with Uhura and connect the same dots Jim already did minutes ago.

Suddenly, the younger man’s mad claim about them flying into a trap doesn’t sound so mad after all.

***

Pike is livid when they barge into the bridge, as he should. If they weren’t in serious trouble for sneaking Jim on board before, they are now.

That pointy-eared bastard—Spock, he does his level best to stop Jim from speaking up but the blonde powers through it all and demands everyone’s absolute attention in such a way that no one can deny him, not even that Vulcan know-it-all.

“Based on what facts?” Spock asks, infuriated.

“That same anomaly, a lightning storm in space that we saw today, also occurred on the day of my birth before a Romulan ship attacked the USS Kelvin,” Jim pauses, turning to look at Pike in the eye
intently, “You know that, sir. I've read your dissertation.”

That dissertation is one of the things John read when he was pointedly trying not to invade Jim’s privacy. It’s public domain and well-known, every fact in it proved, and adding that to Spock’s praises of his—obvious—girlfriend’s xenolinguistics chops, Pike and every person in the room are very much sold.

It’s an ominous sign that they pick up no transmissions at all, the other starships either blown to all Hell or engaged in a difficult battle, and John is relieved when Pike orders the red alert.

John leaves the bridge to take his battle station with one last look at Jim.

Good luck to them all, God knows they’re gonna need it.

***

There is nothing but debris and death around them when they arrive at Vulcan.

All the ships—the Farragut and Captain Garrovick, the Antares, the Hood, the Wallcott and most of their classmates—are in pieces and Jim can’t believe it, as sure as he was of what they were going to find here.

“Full reverse, come about starboard ninety degrees,” Pike orders swiftly, “Drop us down underneath them, Sulu.”

Gaila, Kevin, even Gary and Finnegan, everyone—they can’t be dead. It’s just too cruel.

He hates himself for not realizing this sooner, for not getting to them in time.

The Enterprise is getting hit by hit and there’s not a thing they can do to stop that massive, more advanced ship from doing to them what they did to the Kelvin.

He swallows, racking his brain for something, anything they can do to buy time but in the end, he doesn’t need to; the crazy Romulan who’s attacking them stops because apparently, it’s way more important to make Spock watch whatever it is he’s got planned next than finish them off.

They’re that insignificant to him; an ant under a boot, a mosquito against a windshield.

Jim’s been in love with the Enterprise ever since she was being built back in Iowa and she’s as powerless as his Father’s ship was twenty-four years ago.

Fuck if Jim’s going to just stand still while that bastard tries to kill Pike too though.

“He’ll kill you, you know that,” he says, low but certain and aching just thinking about it.

“Your survival isn’t likely,” even the infuriating Vulcan who insists on disagreeing with him every step of the way actually thinks the same.

“Captain, we gain nothing by diplomacy,” he presses, every muscle in his body coiled for a fight that probably won’t even happen, “Going over to that ship is a mistake.” You’re going to die if you go there.

“I too agree,” Spock grants, “You should rethink your strategy.”

Pike stares at them, solemn, “I understand that.”
Obviously, the Captain has a plan. That’s why he’s in charge and Jim is just a snotty Cadet who will get expelled the minute they get back to Earth, field promotion to First Officer notwithstanding.

Luckily, it looks like that fight Jim is already itching for is going to happen after all.

He really hopes Bones isn’t too mad at him.

He’s been really stupid on the worst day ever to be stupid on.

***

He’s still woozy from the mixture of drugs Bones pumped into him to smuggle him aboard and then counteract the temper tantrum Jim’s body decided to throw about it.

Not that he’s going to tell Pike about any of that, especially the woozy part.

It’s all his fault. He’s the one who cheated on the test, the one who was grounded for it. Really, he’s grateful—and he does owe Bones one—to be here at all.

Space-jumping doesn’t help to clear Jim’s head—shocker, right? It takes him a few seconds to blink enough times to see and by then they’re five thousand meters to the target.

Jim pulls his chute when Sulu does. Pike said to wait as long as possible but they don’t want to end up burned under the propulsion of that thing.

Which is exactly what happens to their Chief Engineer, his cut-off scream not something Jim will forget any time soon. Or ever.

Sulu and his fencing end up kicking serious ass. He’s pretty sure that’s the only reason they manage to destroy the drill using the very sophisticated method of shooting repeatedly to it.

That tiny thing they launch at the hole created by the drill doesn’t look like much but it must be, since they start pulling the drill up as if their job there was done.

Sulu falls, shouting for him.

He jumps after the pilot without thinking about it. He can only hope his chute is enough for both of them, otherwise they’re screwed.

***

Fuck, but falling without a chute and then being beamed up at the last possible second is not something he wants to do again ever.

***

John knows a thing or two about annihilation but what Nero does to Vulcan is unspeakable.

Millions and millions of lives swallowed by a black hole, millions of hearts silenced forever, consumed by a void that was never supposed to be there.

As Acting CMO his duty is to treat the worst injuries, which he does seamlessly. If his mind strays for a second or two, it doesn’t make a difference. This is too much like a battlefield for him to do anything wrong; he’s been in the middle of one for most of his life, he knows what he has to do.

Deep down, everything he wants to do is to look at his mate’s face for a second, just a moment, and
treat his wounds that he’s willing to bet hurt a lot worse than he’s letting on.

***

He goes back to the bridge as soon as he can be spared in Sickbay.

He’s one of the few senior officers that are left and he’ll be damned if he’s not there when they make a mission—and life—altering decision.

They haven’t talked to each other at all, there hasn’t been any time to, but just seeing Jim there soothes him enough to try to think rationally again.

They’re facing a genocidal Romulan who comes from the future. There is no way in Hell the Enterprise can beat his ship. And as a crew made mostly of Humans, they’re outmatched and outnumbered in that front too.

Unless he himself sneaks into the Narada and kills every single rogue Romulan in sight and somehow manages to find Pike—assuming he’s still alive and for Jim’s and everyone else’s sake at the moment, he really fucking hopes so—they have no chance to win.

He can’t exactly volunteer for that. No one would approve of it without knowing his secret first and the weight of it, once everything was said and done, would be too great.

He’d have to run and they’d most likely catch him, especially if he’s running away with Jim. They would know who he is, if not who he was, and they would know *what* he is once they caught him and cut him to look under a microscope.

He knows that Jim is right, that Earth is Nero’s next target, but if an ex-marine who should be long dead is their only hope to save their home world then it’ll be done exactly in the same way the RRTS used to operate.

In the dark.

Of course, his childish, at times idiotic but more often than not brilliant moron of a boyfriend doesn’t even look at him when John needs him to.

He just yells at the Acting Captain, like that’s a good idea, “Every second we waste, Nero's getting closer to his next target!”

“That is correct and why I'm instructing you to accept the fact that I alone am in command.”

“I will not allow us to go backwards,” Jim states, loud and unyielding, “and cower from the problem instead of hunting Nero down.”

“You have to at least acknowledge, Spock,” he starts, having to physically stand between him and Jim to be heard and stop them from turning a serious discussion into a fist fight apparently, “That by the time we come back with the rest of the ‘Fleet, Earth will most likely not be there anymore.”

He raises an arm to stop the blonde from talking again, pushing him slightly back as he holds Spock’s gaze.

“That is a possibility, yes,” the Vulcan admits, grudgingly.

“A rendezvous in the Laurentian system might be our only chance, but it’s not Earth’s,” he keeps going, “You heard Sulu, the only reason Nero had to want Pike aboard that monstrosity is to torture
him for information and there are ways, Spock, ways of making any man or being talk no matter how much they try to resist.”

Sulu cocks his head in John’s direction, agreeing, “We have to assume Earth’s defenses are as good as useless, Captain.”

“Have you or have you not plotted a course for the Laurentian system, Mister Sulu?” Spock asks, clearly on the edge of losing it.

The helmsman blinks, “Aye, sir, I did, but—“

“My decision is taken,” that pointy-eared and now distressed bastard says, “I will not change my mind and any more arguing about this matter will be taken as mutiny and handled accordingly,” he tacks on, pointedly looking at Jim.

“Mutiny?” Jim sneers at him, “Sign me up, Captain, since you’re dead set on making the wrong move.”

Spock doesn’t even hesitate. “Security, escort him out.”

His mate finally looks at him as he’s being apprehended.

John tilts his head, trusting Jim to understand.

They need to get off the ship and sadly, the fastest way to do it—and to do it causing their fellow officers the least damage possible—is to be literally thrown out.

It’s extreme but there’s regulation that allows, under extraordinary circumstances, for the Captain to maroon officers in M-class planets as long as there’s a Federation base somewhere on the surface.

Jim beats the living daylights out of the poor couple of Security officers that try—and fail—to put cuffs on him.

He stops Spock from touching the blonde just as he’s reaching for his shoulder, with just about enough strength to make him pause.

“If he goes, I go,” he declares, gripping the Vulcan’s wrist for a second too long before letting go, “I brought him aboard, you wanna get rid of him? You’re gonna have to get rid of me too.”

The Acting Captain appears thoroughly unimpressed at his boldness.

“I was hoping, Doctor McCoy, that you’d be more reasonable,” he deadpans, “Your duty is with every patient and officer aboard this ship, not with Mister Kirk.”

He strolls to stand by Jim’s side and replies, “M’Benga is just as good as I am at my job and he will be far more loyal to you than I’ll ever be, Captain.”

He hears Jim’s breath hitch at the same time Spock orders, “Get them off this ship.”

***

They’re on separate pods since they’ve been designed to hold just one passenger and of course that green-blooded hobgoblin doesn’t care about whether they land one mile or one hundred apart from each other.

He finds Jim just as he’s done climbing the hole his pod dug into the ice and fumes.
“Did you just crawl all the way up with your bare hands?” he gripes, “Damn it, Jim! I don’t have any medical supplies with me and you already have frostbite? Only you, Jim.”

Jim actually chuckles at him, pulls him in for a cold but sweet kiss that he probably can’t feel much since he doesn’t even have his coat on, the infant.

“Easy, tiger,” he whispers against his lips, “I don’t have frostbite. I could’ve slipped with gloves on, y’know. Don’t be mad, Bones.”

John leans his forehead against his after taking one good look at him.

Just by touching him, he can tell the younger man is telling the truth since his hands are warm and soft, still tender in the places a bandage used to be in his left one.

“You’re okay?” he asks anyway.

“I’m fine, Bones,” his mate assures, standing behind him as he rummages through Jim’s bag to find the thick winter coat and gloves he should’ve had on since the beginning.

Jim lets him fuss over him, helping to get his arms in the clothing too clumsily for the older man to be convinced he’s really fine.

“You really wanted us off the ship, right?” the blonde asks him then, squinting at him as John brushes his thumbs over his lashes, already covered with tiny snowflakes, “This is—this is okay?”

“Yeah, Jim, it is,” he appeases, “I need to get inside that ship.”


“Do you have any other idea?” he prompts, annoyed, “Yeah, I didn’t think so. I don’t want to either, Jim, but I don’t see we have any other choice.”

“I’m going with you,” Jim affirms, literally stomping his foot on the ground to make his point.

“Oh, no, you’re not,” he rebuts, gripping the younger man’s shoulders and shaking him a little to make him understand, “Jim, you have any idea how many Romulans—”

“I’m going with you,” the blonde repeats, “You’re not going there alone, Bones. I don’t care how super you are, you’ll still need help.”

“I’m not risking you, Jim,” John insists.

The younger man scoffs, pushing away from him and starting to walk quickly across the tundra after hastily putting on winter boots that are a little too big around his slim legs.

“Good luck getting there, then, ’cause I’m not gonna help!” he yells, not even turning around to look at John.

The ex-soldier rolls his eyes and tags along, “Jim, come on, you have to understand—“

“I thought we were in this together,” his mate says, tone dreadfully blank, “If you’re going to treat me like I’m useless, I’m going to act the part, John.”

“Let’s talk about this later, okay?” he gets no answer and after a whole minute, raises his arms to the
sky, “Really, Jim, the silent treatment? What are we, five?”

They have fourteen kilometers to cover on a planet that’s been deemed unsafe by the database, so that’s comforting. Jim soldiers on, doesn’t even look at him no matter how many times he tries to start another, more peaceful conversation.

It takes half of it for John to break.

“Jesus, okay, fine, you can come with me, you infant,” he concedes reluctantly, “But if anything happens to you—”

“You’ll have the C-24 to fix me right up,” Jim butts in, still stern despite getting his way, “You have it on you, don’t you?”

John huffs, “Of course I do, what do you—“ he pauses, heavy steps loud on the frozen surface distracting him, “Something’s coming.”

He takes Jim’s hand and dashes in the opposite direction of the noise, which conveniently is still northwest.

“Bones!” the blonde shouts and turns his head to see what’s chasing them, “Shit, it’s a drakoulias! And It’s coming fast!”

Yeah, no shit, he thinks, and pushes Jim to the side forcefully to do a back flip and kick the beast right beneath its muzzle hard.

It tumbles back about ten feet, screeching, and he curses under his breath as he pulls his knife out of the hidden pocket in his right boot.

Too bad prisoners aren’t exactly allowed to leave a ship armed because a phaser would come in really fucking handy right now.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he mutters, watching Jim stumbling to him with his head tilted and his ears focused on the bubbling underneath the ice.

Apparently, there’s water beneath them and something else—something bigger and probably nastier—is swimming up, beelining to them.

The murdering polar bear he just hit starts barreling towards them again so he lets Jim pull them both to their feet and pushes him to speed up even more.

They avoid the second creature—something huge and red and with too many eyes to count—by the skin of their teeth and for a glorious moment, it looks like it’ll stay behind to eat the drakoulias instead of them.

That’s until it roars and skulks right to them at an alarming velocity.

He grips the handle of his only, pathetic weapon and grunts when Jim keeps pulling him forward.

“You’re not fighting that thing with a toothpick, fuck you!” he yells through the chilly wind, with feeling.

He makes an excellent point, if it weren’t for the unavoidable fact that the hengrauggi is going to catch them sooner rather than later.

“Damn straight I am if it’s trying to eat us!” he argues, just as loud.
They keep losing ground against it, tumbling down a steep cliff that it’s impossible to see through the hail until they’re already falling.

John jumps on the creature’s back, taking advantage of the moment it lands flat on its belly to stab it in what he believes is the neck.

He must be missing, somehow, because the thing keeps moving and chasing Jim as John pierces its thick exoskeleton with his blade over and over again.

He’s obviously not reaching far enough, the itty bit of green blood oozing from the wounds not nearly as much as he’d need to see for it to be fatal.

Jim screams, rushing through the storm into a cave. The hengrauggi grumbles again, weaving a long tongue around the blonde’s ankle before John has a chance to hop off and cut it.

Turns out, he doesn’t need to keep maiming the thing. An old Vulcan with a torch scares it out, makes it let go of Jim and crawl right back out.

“James T. Kirk,” the stranger greets, his eyes so filled with emotion as he looks at the blonde John almost bristles.

“Excuse me?” Jim pants, frowning up at the Vulcan, and leaning into him when John helps him up.

Only then their savior’s attention falls on him and he frowns, his gaze fixed on the blade already incrusted with frozen blood in John’s hand.

“Leonard McCoy?” he asks, reaching to him and brushing the ex-marine’s wrist with a finger for a scant second, “I don’t know you.”

“And we don’t know you,” Jim points out, “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“I am Spock,” the elder says, looking straight at Jim, “I am and shall always be your friend.”

His mate blinks, considers this for an instant.

“Bullshit.”

***

Together they collect a few twigs, enough to light a small fire that will keep the predators of this world at bay.

They sit around it, still clad in their winter wear, he and Jim opposite to the Vulcan.

Old Spock—assuming he’s who he claims to be—is quiet for a while but his brown, expressive eyes don’t stray from Jim, not even when John begins to clean and sharpen his blade against a rock after making sure the younger man isn’t hiding any grievous injury from him.

The hengrauggi saliva worries him since it’s known to be toxic but he can only hope Jim’s clothing protected him from the worst of it.

His skin won’t show signs either way until many hours from now.

“It is remarkably pleasing to see you again, old friend. Especially after the events of today,” the Vulcan admits.
There’s a certain kindness to his voice, something that compels anyone who listens to believe his words.

He’s more than proud when Jim still doesn’t buy it, springing to his feet and pacing the little room they have in the cavern.

“Uh—sir, I appreciate what you did for us today but if—if you were Spock, you’d know we’re not friends,” Jim stresses, “At all. You hate me. You marooned me and Bones here for mutiny.”

“Mutiny?” the Vulcan questions, surprised, raising his eyebrows at the both of them.

The blonde still looks a little pleased about it, “Yes.”

“You are not the Captain?”

Jim sighs, ducking his head for a moment, “No. You’re the Captain. Pike was taken hostage.”

It appears that’s all the information ‘Spock’ needs to understand what the Hell’s going on. “By Nero.”

He exchanges a look with Jim, encouraging him to keep talking to the old Vulcan.

Even if he’s crazy, they might still get some information about their enemy and anything is better than squat.

“What do you know about him?”

“He is a particularly troubled Romulan,” their host says.

John snorts, stretched on the cold ground with his elbow supported on one bent knee, “Yeah, that’d be the one bit we already got, old man.”

He’s mildly concerned, but not enough to retrieve his knife from where he saved it, when the Vulcan stands up and walks to Jim with a hand outspread before him.

“Please, allow me,” he asks, “It will be easier.”

“Wow, wow,” Jim says, taking a step back and raising his hands to defend himself, “What are you doing?”

“Our minds, one and together,” the old man explains.

John is on his feet in less than a second, stopping the Vulcan from melding with Jim for about a hair.

“Now you wait a goddamn minute,” he grumbles, keeping the younger man safely behind him, “What’s wrong with just telling us?”

Old Spock blinks at him, his hand still stubbornly reaching towards Jim despite John is a tangible shield between them. “You would not believe me. You already doubt who I am. Besides, this way will be quicker.”

“And forcing a mind-meld on Jim is better?” he asks dryly.

“I am familiar with Jim’s mind,” the Vulcan assures, “You may have reservations about this, Doctor, but I will not hurt him.”
“Bones,” Jim grabs his arm, looks resolved when John turns to stare at him, “Let him. We’re wasting time.”

He nods, grudgingly walks away a few steps as the old Vulcan’s hand finds the psi-points on Jim’s face and starts the mind-meld.

It’s over in less than a minute, so it was quick all right.

Jim comes out of it like he does after a horrible nightmare, gasping and in the verge of tears.

“Forgive me,” the Vulcan asks, “Emotional transference is an effect of the mind-meld.”

He approaches his mate gradually after he puts distance between them, still visibly shaken by the meld.

He grips his side, the way he does when Jim needs to be reminded he’s not alone.

“Jim?” he calls out gently.

“I—he’s—“ the blonde stutters, panting, “I’m fine, Bones. He’s telling the truth. He’s Spock.”

He cocks an eyebrow, glaring at the older version of that asshole, “Well, that’s just what we needed. Two of him.”

“We need to go,” Spock urges, “There’s a Starfleet outpost not far from here. From there, we will be able to return you both to the Enterprise. Jim can tell you about what I showed him on the way.”

This wasn’t what he had planned, to follow the lead of yet another Spock, when he left the ship but if Jim trusts him—and he does, judging by how fast he moves to get out of their shelter and right back into the bleak tundra of Delta Vega.

It takes Jim about ten minutes to summarize the story for him. Spock and Nero came from a future that will never happen now, a future where Romulus was destroyed by a supernova before the Vulcan Science Academy could arrive with the red matter in a small but fast ship manned by Spock to prevent it.

Nero, certified psychopath that he is, blamed him and made the most of the fact they were dragged into the past by the black hole that swallowed the exploding star. He kept both versions of Spock alive so they could feel the same pain he felt with the loss of his home world.

It’s the saddest story John has ever heard and he can’t help but develop some respect for the older Spock. He’s still up and fighting, not crushed and suicidal with guilt, and that’s commendable. It’s the mark of a true soldier; to keep going until the battle is over even though they’re bleeding out inside.

He walks guarding their backs quietly afterward, trying to give them an illusion of privacy when Jim asks about his Father, about how things would’ve been between them if Nero hadn’t come around to steal everything from him.

Spock answers patiently, gazing at him with the same kind of unconditional affection he’s been doing since they met.

The small base is visible in the distance by the time Spock deliberately slows his steps, letting Jim get ahead with the wind conveniently blowing in their faces so their voices won’t carry back to him.
“You are not Leonard McCoy,” the Vulcan states, “I would recognize him and the rest of my
crewmates anywhere, in any universe, but you—you are a mystery, Doctor. You may have his name
and his responsibilities and even Jim’s love and trust, but you are not him.”

There’s no question for him to answer—not that he would—so he stays silent, assessing Spock
through the corner of his eye.

“You’re gonna rat me out?” he asks, doesn’t beat around the brush.

“No,” Spock replies, “Jim would not forgive me if I did.”

“Good,” he’d shake the old guy’s hand but the Vulcan looks cold enough so he offers a slight smile
instead, “Then maybe we can be friends, Mister Spock.”

Spock smiles again, eyes and all, in that way that seems so comfortable to him and so real.

“I would like that very much, Doctor.”

***

A tiny alien welcomes them at the station. He leads them to a man that Spock recognizes—calls
fascinating too—and debates about physics and space travel with.

It’s background noise for him, busy as he is looking for some basic form of a med-kit. By regulation
it should be here, somewhere, and John is worried about both Jim’s possible injuries from the fall and
Vulcans and their miserable tolerance to cold.

He finds it eventually, running a tricorder on Jim first and scowling deeper when he confirms that
yeah, his mate is bruised and scratched all over and didn’t say a damn thing about it.

The recently healed fractures in his left fingers are holding so far but the tissue is new and frail and
probably won’t handle much more abuse. That’s not to mention the hairline fractures around his left
eye and the cracked ribs that no one had time to run an osteogenerator on.

He checks his ankle, both with his hands and the tricorder. Jim indulges him absentmindedly, most of
his attention in the conversation between Spock and Scott.

That there’s nothing major for him to treat calms him a whole lot.

After scanning Spock, he realizes the Vulcan is far more resilient than he appears. A hot cup of tea
should do the trick to warm him up.

***

The Scottish man comes around once Spock shows him the equation his own future self conceived.

There are only three transporter pads in the ancient Starfleet outpost and Jim falters, looking at the
Vulcan with a level of anxiety John is not used to seeing on his face, not so openly.

They’ll stand a better chance if they come back to the Enterprise. They’ll have more weapons at their
disposal and the option to hail to be beamed back to the ship once they’re done with Nero.

Pike will stand a better chance too, if he’s still alive. He needs to get his ass back on board to treat
him as well. He’ll do better with two senior medical officers working on him than with just one.

This is the only reason he’s being patient enough to hear Spock’s nonsense about destiny and
universe-ending paradoxes.

No one is asking John but he’d be willing to bet the old man’s priority is getting Jim and Spock—the younger one—to work together.

“So you’re saying that I have to emotionally compromise you guys?” Jim sums up, making a face.

“Jim, I just lost my planet,” Spock replies, “I can tell you, I am emotionally compromised. What you must do is get me to show it.”

He raises an eyebrow at Spock, makes sure he knows the doctor is calling bullshit on everything he’s saying.

The Vulcan stares back at him, almost daring him to intervene.

Thing is, he really doesn’t mind. Jim could do with more friends.

If Spock can change from being a green-blooded asshole to being like this more mature version of him, then maybe he’ll be a good friend.

He’ll probably get jealous but he can learn how to deal.

It’s not like he can be replaced in Jim’s life—or Jim in his.

“You know, coming back in time, changing history, that’s cheating,” Jim comments.

Spock gazes at him warmly, nodding, “A trick I learned from an old friend.”

***

Beaming aboard a ship without a proper receiving pad is not an exact science.

They prove this empirically when Scott almost drowns the second they rematerialize back on the Enterprise.

John shakes off his black, heavy coat and runs after Jim as he aims for the turbine release valve.

He only gets about twenty seconds to check on the Engineer who’s soaked to the bone and probably a little traumatized but fine.

Then they run into Jim’s biggest fan at the Academy.

“Come with me, Cupcake!” Hendorff barks, has probably waited about three years to use the nickname that he couldn’t shake after meeting Jim on him.

They go willingly to the bridge.

There’s no doubt in John’s mind that Jim will be able to expose Spock’s emotionally unstable state.

His mate has a knack for getting under people’s skin and this time, that’s actually in his favor.

***

Spock doesn’t take the bait at first, turning quickly to Scott to get the answers he’s demanding.

“Under penalty of court martial I order you to explain to me how you were able to beam aboard the ship while moving at warp.”
“Well—“ the Scottish starts.

“Don't answer him,” Jim interjects.

“You will answer me,” Spock assures tersely.

“I'd rather not take sides,” Scott concludes.

It’s working a little, if the stunned glare Spock directs at the Engineer is anything to go by.

Jim steps into Spock’s personal space, adding another stress factor to the how-to-get-a-pissed-off-Vulcan formula.

“What is it with you, Spock?” he asks, low and conceited, “Your planet was just destroyed, your mother murdered, and you're not even upset.”

“If you are presuming that these experiences in any way impede my ability to command this ship, you are mistaken,” he affirms, every word carefully uttered.

“And yet you were the one who said fear was necessary for command,” Jim rubs their argument at the Academy hearing right in his face, “I mean, did you see his ship? Did you see what he did?”

“Yes, of course I did,” Spock replies, his voice somehow smaller.

“So are you afraid or aren't you?” Jim prods.

“I will not allow you to lecture me about the merits of emotion,” Spock threatens, louder.

“Then why don't you stop me?” the blonde dares.

“Step away from me, Mister Kirk,” Spock warns.

“What is it like not to feel anger or heartbreak?” Jim asks, brash and callous, “Or the need to stop at nothing to avenge the death of the woman who gave birth to you?”

“Back away from me,” the Vulcan mutters, voice cracking.

“You feel nothing! It must not even compute for you,” Jim keeps attacking him, finally finding his soft spot, “You never loved her!”

The furious shout Spock lets out just before punching the younger man in the face is exactly what they needed and he knows, intellectually, that he must not stop him but his fingers still curl into fists, his body still wants to protect his mate.

The bridge needs to see how far off the deep end their Acting Captain is if Jim has any hope of occupying his place.

The idea never was for Spock to kill Jim though so he’s ready to pull the Vulcan away from him when his own Father interferes.

“Spock!” Sarek calls out.

It still takes a few long seconds for his son to come back to himself, Jim’s larynx sounding badly bruised judging by his rough coughing.

The Vulcan surprises him, walking to him slowly and taking himself out of duty before exiting the
He supposes he’s as good as reinstated as Acting CMO.

“You okay?” he whispers to Jim, helping him back upright from the console he’s sitting on.

He gets nothing but a nod, Uhura stepping behind him to say her piece to the blonde, “I hope you’re happy, Kirk. We have no Captain now, and no First Officer to replace him.”

“Yeah, we do,” he counters, still panting, climbing into the Captain’s chair just like the other Spock wanted him to do.

“What!” Uhura inquires crossly, “You’re a stowaway! You can’t take command of the ship!”

“Actually, he can,” Sulu fills in, “Pike made him First Officer before going to the Narada.”

The Acting Head of Communications sets her jaw, “I sure hope you know what you’re doing, Captain.”

Jim looks up at her, conceding, “So do I.”

***

Most of the ORs they counted with blew up during Nero’s attack but they still have one operational. John preps it for every kind of major surgery there is, waiting for the worst.

In the event that there are more wounded that need surgery, they can always set the sterile shield around any bio-bed. It’s not the ideal scenario, but it’ll do.

“You think the Captain is still alive?” M’Benga asks him as he’s setting the last changes on the bio-bed.

John doesn’t look up, just states, “If he is, we’ll do our best to keep it that way until we reach Earth.”

He’s met a few Romulans in his trips, although he’s never actually fought one. They have the strength and intellect of a Vulcan and none of the self-control.

That makes them potentially great at torturing living beings, sadly.

***

Jim taps the small control panel on the arm of the Captain’s chair, biting his lip before saying, “Kirk to Sickbay. Doctor McCoy, I need you here.”

“Coming, Captain,” his boyfriend replies, unwavering, and his voice makes it sound almost good, almost like he deserves the title.

Jim is not delusional though. He’s an ass alright, but he knows the only reason he’s Acting Captain is because they couldn’t be more screwed and a Vulcan that came from the future and met a Jim Kirk that was probably less broken than Jim will ever be somehow convinced him he’s about their only chance at survival.

Bones comes back fast, standing by his side just like Jim needs him to.

The doctor gives him a look that lets him know their plan B is still up, if the plan A that they haven’t
even figured out yet goes south.

“Captain Kirk, Captain Kirk!” Chekov chirps, patting his shoulder to get his attention.

He has to admire the kid’s enthusiasm. It makes Jim’s head hurt and his ears ring, but it kind of warms his heart as well.

Once Chekov breaks his plan to them and Scotty approves of it, he feels like he can finally breathe again—never mind his chest hurts every time he does that.

Ignoring pain is something he’s used to do.

Bones doesn’t seem very convinced but Jim shuts him up with a look.

Spock being back on the bridge catches him unawares, but his idea sounds even better than what he and Bones wanted to do as backup—which was pretty much go in, guns blazing, and in Jim’s case, try very hard not to die before they found the red matter and Captain Pike.

He pats the Vulcan on the shoulder, just to rile him up a little, and gives the conn to Sulu so he can go get chewed up by his—much better fit for the job and actually immortal—best friend for volunteering to go without him.

Bones surprises him by not following him to the turbolift.

He steps into the transporter room just as Jim is about to step onto the pad to leave.

He waits, swearing his spine aches not from the fall he took in Delta Vega or any punch he’s taken today, but for doing this to the man who’s done so much for him Jim couldn’t even count if he tried to.

“Just—” Bones breathes in messily and Jim closes his eyes for a moment as his arms go around his back to pull him into a hug that could very well be their last one, “just come back so I can fix you, Jim.”

He nuzzles the older man’s nose, wondering if they’re allowed to say goodbye properly.

“Will do, Bones,” he promises, clutching the blue shirt in his hands even though his left one complains at the movement.

He looks at Bones from under his lashes, releasing the breath he was holding when the doctor gives in to the kiss Jim wanted all along.

His hazel eyes look accepting, if still alight with worry.

Jim understands with a jolt that he’s counting on none of them making it if he and Spock fail.

_I wanted to die but couldn’t find a way to do it without reviving the next second, _Bones shared with him once, _I guess I could’ve been more inventive; cutting my head off to see if that did the trick, blowing a starship with me inside of it._

They’re all going to end up just like the rest of the ‘Fleet around the space where Vulcan used to be if they can’t beat Nero.

He really hopes they can’t put Bones’ theory to the test.

***
Between Nero and his second in command, he’s amazed he gets to Pike at all.

He’s a little sore.

A little.

Hopefully Spock didn’t get his ass handed to him too.

His mentor is so badass he still has razor-sharp reflexes after being tortured for who knows how long.

“Enterprise, now!”

***

“Jim!” the doctor runs right to him, steadying their true, actual Captain between them.

“Bones!” he greets him with a grin, touching his boyfriend just to make sure this is all real and they’re actually winning.

“I got him,” Bones reassures him.

And it is.

***

He runs to the bridge with Spock, where they have a very short but enlightening exchange with Nero.

“Arm phasers. Fire everything we’ve got,” he orders, sitting back on the chair feeling like he won the right for a little while.

“Yes, sir,” Sulu replies, the glee on his face as he punches the buttons to activate every weapon they have something Jim definitely can relate to.

These Romulan bastards have done enough damage.

They deserve to die screaming.

***

It’s his second to worst case scenario.

Captain Pike’s spine is severely injured, the Centaurian slug Nero used to pry information from him having eaten—and dissolved—his way through his T1 vertebrae to release a potent neurotoxin that damaged every single piece of spinal cord and nerve it touched.

The hole it dug is littered with bone fragments that he takes out as fast as he can after cutting through the skin and muscle. The bug surges to defend its new home the second he’s done but he’s ready to grip it with a set of pliers.

He removes the parasite with a grimace, tossing it into a jar Chapel has prepped especially for it. She puts the lid on it quickly and they breathe a sigh of relief.

It’s still alive and kicking, its pincers clicking in the confinement it’s in.
“M’Benga, you need to develop an antidote for that little fucker’s toxin,” he instructs, his tone breathless since he barely dares to take a breath with both hands occupied applying neuroregenerators to the most compromised patches of Pike’s spinal cord, “If you can’t, this will all be useless.”

His colleague nods and sprints out of the OR, taking the container with him, “I’m on it!”

“My God,” he mumbles more than once, almost every time he’s finished with one place and stumbles into another that is about the same all over the Captain’s central nervous system.

There is no visible damage, not even with Pike lying on his front—except for the one he did to fix T1 and remove the parasite from him—but the tricorder tells a different story and he’s always thought the worst wounds are the ones you can’t see.

The Captain is lucky that damn insect didn’t party a little higher, up in his brain stem for instance.

He’s setting the osteoregenerator using the biggest piece of vertebrae he found as starting point when the comm. crackles to life.

“All decks, be advised—“ Jim’s voice stammers, “Just hold on, hold on to something!”

John doesn’t exactly do that, but he does take away his hands and tools from the vicinity of the Captain’s back right before the ship experiences a harsh jerk.

He goes back to work as soon as he’s sure things are stable again.

***

It’s four gruesome hours of surgery but the readings look great so he tells Chapel to stop the midazolam and propofol drips immediately.

Fortunately the injury wasn’t high enough that he has to worry about Pike’s breathing so he pulls a chair close to the bio-bed and waits for the man to wake up.

It doesn’t take long.

“Captain, you’re in Medbay,” he informs Pike, who is blinking and panting and almost tries to move from the position he’s in, “I’ll allow you to move in a few hours, for now I’d prefer your back to take a break.”

“How are you feeling, sir?” he asks. His patient’s vitals look good but it’s a question he always makes all the same.


“That’d be the fentanyl,” John raises an eyebrow, having expected their SO to focus on the fact he probably can’t feel a damn thing from the waist down, “I can fix that.”

He taps the PADD in his hands, adding a low dosage of metoclopramide to Pike’s medication.

He hears one of the nurses moving to prepare it outside of the privacy curtains.

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“The ship?” Pike rasps.

“Everything’s under control,” he replies, “I’ll call Jim so he can bring you up to speed, sir.”
It’ll serve the dual purpose of getting the idiot here so John can check on him too, not that he’s going to tell the blonde that.

“All right,” Pike agrees, staring up at him, “What’s my prognosis, Doctor?”

“We removed the Centaurian slug successfully and synthetized an antidote for its toxin but it destroyed your T1 vertebrae and caused a lot of neurological damage. You won’t run anymore, but you’ll walk,” he sums up swiftly, “You’ll probably need to use a cane, but with a few weeks of PT you won’t need a wheelchair in the long run.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Pike concedes, “Care to explain to me, Doc, why I can’t feel my legs if that’s the case?”

“Feeling and movement will come back slowly during the next hours, Captain,” he looks straight into Pike’s eyes, confident, “You know I wouldn’t sugarcoat things for you or anybody.”

Pike sighs, “So the chances of you clearing me for duty anytime soon—“

“Same chances you got at tango right now. Sir,” he points out, just a little sassy.

The Captain does chuckle at that, “Understood.”

***

Jim comes into Sickbay literally at a run, sliding into a halt when he sees John looking at him in disapproval.

“Where is he?” the younger man asks.

The ex-soldier tilts his head towards the bio-bed in the middle of the room, “I’ll let you talk shop with Pike as a courtesy to him, Jim, but he’s supposed to be taking things easy so do try not to stress him out.”

Jim is nodding before he’s even finished speaking, “Yeah, sure.”

***

He doesn’t feel comfortable on the chair since the Captain is lying on his stomach and has to look up at him all the time.

He sits on the floor in front of the bio-bed, smiling at seeing Pike awake and without that green thing oozing out of his mouth anymore.

His back complains, the scabs he can feel tugging his skin opening a little if the tickling and sting are anything to go by but he doesn’t let any of that show.

He tells Pike everything, starting at the beginning, including Old Spock. His mentor goes a bit red in the face at times and he winces, bracing for the lecture he knows is coming once he’s done.

“So we beamed aboard their ship. Spock went for the red matter and got it and I went in for you, sir,” he concludes softly, “We had to, um, eject the warp core to escape the gravitation pull of the black hole,” he squints, “So now we’re kind of limping back to Earth but the hull’s holding and the repairs are going well. Our ETA is seventy-five hours, thirty-so minutes.”

The silence that follows his unofficial debriefing makes him sweat.
“I see,” Pike says at length, “What about our primary fleet?”

“We reestablished communication with them,” Jim almost groans at realizing he forgot that part, “They’re on their way to Vulcan’s—to where Vulcan used to be, sir, to look for survivors of the ships Nero destroyed.”

Pike frowns, “Whose idea was that?”

He flinches, hopes the Captain didn’t notice that, “Uh, mine, sir.”

“Kirk, the chances of anybody making it, judging by how things looked when we were there are—“

“I know that, sir,” he butts in, “But we didn’t have any time to scan for life signs and I think—I think it’s the least we can do. Sure, there might be no one there, but what if there is and we don’t look? Dying alone in the blackness of space—“

“I got you,” his adviser smiles at him, a real, eye-crinkling smile and he has to blink several times to convince himself it’s there, “You did good, son. I’m not going to dress you down. You saved us all. I’m proud of you.”

He’s never—wow, no one has ever said anything like that to him and he doesn’t know which part of all that upsets him the most.

He didn’t—he got lucky, that was it. Without Spock—both of them—without Bones, without Sulu, Scotty, Uhura and Chekov, they’d still be dead.

He doesn’t deserve the praise, he fucking knows that, but he still drinks it up eagerly.

He scratches the back of his neck, ducking his head when Pike just keeps looking at him too warmly and even patiently.

“Thank you, sir. It was, huh, team effort. I didn’t do it on my own,” he mumbles belatedly, “I—I’m gonna go now. I’ll come back later.”

“You better,” his mentor groans, “I’m gonna get bored out of my mind here so some company would be nice.”

“You’re in the best hands, Captain,” he reminds Pike, “Bones will take good care of you.”

“Yeah, I know,” Pike agrees, “You take good care of my ship, Jim.”

Jim scrambles to his feet, nodding even though things are spinning around him more than he’s comfortable with.

Maybe he salutes too, he’s not sure.

“I will.”

***

“Okay, that’s it,” John grumbles, barely able to hold Jim and stop him from faceplanting as he stumbles through the curtains, “I’m pulling you out of duty.”

His mate pales more at that and it’s a wonder that’s even possible since he’s as white as the walls around them already.
Jim tries to break out of his grip, trembling, “Bones, please—“

“No, Jim,” he cuts him off firmly, “You’ve been up over forty-eight hours and I’m not even counting the hours I know you didn’t sleep back on Earth.”

The blonde shuts his eyes tight, swaying on his feet but still refusing to listen to him, jerking his arms away weakly.

“But—“

John sighs, taking a quick glimpse around to make sure none of his staff is paying attention to them.

If they are, they’re doing a good job pretending they’re working around them so he cups Jim’s face in his hands and whispers, “No one is going to take your place, Jim. You saved us, not even Spock would dare say otherwise. Let me treat you, get some sleep, and you’ll be back on the bridge in no time.”

The blonde chews on his bottom lip, his blue eyes shy as his hands reach up to hold on to John’s wrists, “You promise?”

“Yes, you idiot, I promise,” he grousers, rolling his eyes before tugging him gently to the bio-bed next to Pike’s.

He picks up the PADD there, activating it along with the privacy curtains and watching Jim fixedly until he gets the memo and hops onto it.

It starts beeping in shrill censure instantly, the bio sensors in it picking up the mess that Jim’s system must be after fighting non-stop for two days.

He mutes the alarms, his hands guiding Jim to remain sitting as he reads the monitors.

BP one hundred over seventy, HR one hundred twenty, RR twenty, T° 36.7, O₂Sat 99%. Pretty good, all things considered, but that’s about where the good ends and the problems start.

Severe bruising around the larynx and trachea, skin infections on the back and a worse one around the right ankle, remade hairline fractures around the left eye, two broken ribs on the left side and one on the right, and a moderate concussion. His hormone levels are all over the place, between the severe allergic reaction he had to the vaccine at the beginning of their voyage and all the acute stress he went through.

It’s a wonder his overachieving idiot of a lover still has any energy left to be awake instead of passed out from sheer exhaustion and a nasty combo of injuries.

“You’re giving Pike the good stuff, aren’t you?” Jim asks, squinting at him, “’Cause he didn’t even yell at me once, Bones. I mean, wow, can you believe that?”

“Yeah, actually, I can,” John replies, any anger building in him from Jim hiding how bad he was feeling vanishing out of existence at the blonde’s self-deprecation, “Except for cheating that goddamn test, Jim, you did nothing wrong and that’s history by now.”

Jim swallows, the red and purple bruising on his neck probably making it painful and he decides to start off with the things he can fix without putting him under.

He selects everything he’ll need on the PADD with some fast typing and leaves it aside before regarding the younger man, “I’ll call Chapel to help me, Jim, if that’s okay.”
The blonde shrugs, eyelids finally starting to droop.

He nods at the Nurse when she steps inside the curtains, taking a bag of saline and a pair of scissors from her to cut through Jim’s undershirt that’s caked with blood on the back, sticking uncomfortably to the deepest cuts there so soaking them first and pulling the fabric off later is the best, least painful way to go.

“I’m going to clean some of these and get samples, Jim, it’s gonna sting,” he announces as he changes his gloves to sterile ones and pokes here and there to drain the little amount of pus that’s been collecting on the biggest wounds.

Chapel hands him more saline and hydroxide peroxide and he gets to work.

He selects two of the cuts and draws into a syringe a bit of fluid for culture. Jim isn’t suffering from a grave infection but it’s procedure for injuries sustained on away missions and he supposes being marooned on a giant icy death trap can be considered one.

Jim doesn’t even hiss, staying mostly still for him and only glancing back sheepishly every couple of minutes.

“Nurse Chapel, prepare 1 g of vancomycin,” he orders once he’s done and can apply the dermal regenerator to Jim’s back.

“Here, doctor,” she says, picking the hypospray with the antibiotic from the tray she brought in since she’s that efficient and giving it to him right away.

He brushes with a thumb the only patch of healthy skin that’s left on Jim’s neck and applies it there, deciding he’ll administer the rest of the meds on his arms when he huddles in pain instead of complaining loudly like he usually does after being stabbed with the needle.

He seals most of the wounds neatly, having to dress the two he took samples from since they’ll take a couple of days to heal completely even after the aid of the dermal regenerator.

“You can lie down now, Jim,” he prompts, silencing the alarms quickly when the change in position has them blaring again, “We’re going to work on your neck now. It’s going to hurt a lot so I’d rather do this with you asleep.”

The younger man blinks up at him, “‘Kay,” he says, way too easily for John’s liking.

He frowns but still applies the sedative on his bicep, “Jim?”

“I don’t have quarters, Bones,” his mate reminds him in a small, raspy voice, “I’ll have to sleep here so yeah, knock me out.”

“Yeah, you do; mine,” he counters, smirking when the blonde’s eyes brighten at that, “But I’m knocking you out anyway. Night, Jim.”

“Bo—“

It takes a little bit longer for the shot to hit but Jim sags, dead to the world, in less than a minute and he attaches the osteoregenerators around his ribs with Chapel’s help, giving him another shot with corticoids to reduce the swelling in his throat and attaching dermal regenerators there too.

He leaves Jim’s face alone; it’ll have to heal on its own, they can’t accelerate the process for a second time so soon.
The skin on Jim’s right ankle is blue and cold to the touch, the hengrauggi’s tongue latching there frying many blood vessels beneath the epidermis. He attaches vascular regenerators to it and asks Chapel to put an IV line to hydrate Jim with a saline drip while the regenerators work. His electrolyte levels and kidney function are normal but his rapid heartbeat is most likely indicating he’s dehydrated so John is not going to wait for those readings to deteriorate to act.

***

He checks on Pike one more time before going off duty, a corner of his lips quirking when he catches the man wriggling his toes while staring at his feet.

“Well, that’s good to see,” he compliments.

It’s been a little under five hours since he last examined him but his readings are a lot better.

He’s been lying on his back with no issue for a while too.

“I do feel better,” Pike says, smiling at him.

John nods, cancelling the ‘good stuff’ on Pike’s list of medications.

He doubts their SO’s demeanor changes without the opiate but he’ll make sure one silly Acting Captain doesn’t think he’s high as a kite anymore.

***

He replicates new clothes for Jim, a size bigger than what he usually wears so he can rest comfortably in them.

He dresses him without hurrying, expecting him to stir awake any minute. His skin and bones are as mended as he can get them for now and it’s time for a much needed break for the both of them.

He double checks the monitors when the younger man doesn’t rouse. Everything looks fine so it’s probably just fatigue.

He deactivates the curtains, switches the bio-bed off and picks Jim up, cradling his head gently until it’s safely tucked under his chin.

“Doctor?” Chapel asks, “Wouldn’t you prefer a gurney to transport the Captain?”

“It’s a short trip, we’ll be fine,” he answers, already sauntering to the exist as he calls over his shoulder, “Go to sleep, Chapel, that’s an order!”

She nods, biting back a smile—whether at the picture they make or his temper, he doesn’t know—and John finally leaves the Medical bay after what feels like days.

Probably because it’s been days.

The members of the crew he finds on the way to his quarters smile at seeing them, whispering to each other and staring a bit too much but he can’t say he cares about it. He’s not going to put Jim on a gurney for the twenty meters between the CMO’s quarters and Sickbay.

Chekov runs into them—quite literally—as the ex-marine is punching his entrance code on the door, keeping Jim flushed to him with an arm.

“Take good care of the Captain, Doctor!” the Russian exclaims, grinning at them and rushing past.
“Go the fuck to sleep, Chekov!” he shouts to his retreating back.

***

He lowers Jim onto the mattress gently. It’s a bigger one than what they share at the Academy; the pros of being a Department Head, he guesses.

He takes a few minutes to collect Doctor Puri’s things and put them in a box, hiding it in the closet more for Jim’s sake than his own.

They didn’t bring anything with them so there’s nothing to unpack.

He takes a sonic shower despite the panel shows two water rations available for use. If anyone needs to have a proper bath, that’s Jim.

He had a change of uniform and some clothes to sleep in back in the original quarters assigned to him but he’s not leaving Jim alone when he could wake any second so he replicates some and lies down beside him, pulling a light comforter over them and gathering the blonde in his arms.

It doesn’t happen often but he’s out like a light.

***

A gut-wrenching scream wakes him up.

His eyes adjust to the dark fast; he can see Jim curled into a ball at the other end of the bed, shouting himself hoarse in his sleep.

“Jim,” he calls out, crawling to him and cupping the younger man’s face firmly in his hands, mindful of the injuries there, “Jim, wake up!”

It takes some shaking and shouting, but the blonde opens his eyes and falls quiet even though he seems to stare right through him.

“You’re safe, Jim you’re on the Enterprise,” he reminds him gently.

“Billions of lives lost,” Jim murmurs croakily, “Because of me. Because I failed.”

He scowls, doesn’t like those words at all, “Jim, look at me. Can you hear me? Jim!”

His mate gasps, blinking several times before finally meeting his eyes.

“Sorry, I—“ he winces, licks his lips, “I’m fine, Bones.”

“The Hell you are,” he retorts, “Do you remember what you said?”

Jim squirms in his hold so he takes it as a yes and relents, hugging him close but not enough to lose eye contact with him.

“Jim, Vulcan’s implosion—that’s not on you, it’s on Nero,” he states, matter-of-fact, “It’s not your fault, do you understand?”

The blonde furrows his brow, looks at him sheepishly, “I—I know that but I still—maybe I could’ve stopped him, Bones, maybe—“

“You did all you could,” he says pointedly.
He’s about to keep pushing when he feels Jim’s body drooping.

“Let’s try to sleep a little longer, okay?” he suggests, lying back down and taking the younger man with him.

Jim nuzzles against his neck, the way he does after a nightmare to calm down, and weaves his arms around John’s middle.

His heart is still beating fast from whatever horrors his mind was torturing him with; a drum that marks a rhythm that John wants to follow.

It was the hardest thing he’s ever done, watching Jim go confront that genocidal maniac and having to trust him to come back to him.

He doubts he would’ve been able to keep his cover if Nero took Jim hostage or worse; there’s always been madness pressing in at the edges of his conscience, ever since Olduvai, and the closer he is to loneliness and the farther he is from mankind, the least the protection his improved genes offer matters.

Perhaps that’s what mating for life really means; to depend so completely on someone that you lose yourself if they’re gone.

For John, that would mean becoming the same type of monster that chases him in his darkest nights.

“Bones,” Jim murmurs, making a soft, approving noise when he starts to stroke his back over his baggy undershirt, “Thank you,” the blonde raises his head, searching for his eyes until his eyes adjust to the low light, “For trusting me. I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

He huffs. That’s an understatement, if he’s ever heard one, “Guess I’ll have to get used to it, Captain.”

Jim makes a face, smacking him in the chest lightly with his good hand, “Don’t—don’t tease me, damn it. You know how much I’d give to keep her?”

“The Enterprise?” he questions, “Why? She’s damaged goods now, Jim. I’m sure you can ask for a better ship. It’s not like you just saved, I don’t know, the whole Federation.”

“I fucking hate you,” Jim mumbles, burying his face in John’s chest after blushing like a Christmas light.

John chuckles, curling around him when the blonde sneaks a leg between his.

“Bones,” he breathes out, stretching to press warm pecks on the ex-marine’s neck, “Fuck me?”

He huffs out a laugh, “Now that’s romantic.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mister Sensitive,” Jim teases him, pausing to tip his chin up and look at him, “Please make sweet love to me, is that better?”

He feigns to consider it, “Hmm, no and no.”

His mate outright pouts at him, “Why the Hell not? I’m awake, you’re awake, we got time—“

“Because you’re going to fall asleep on me, sweetheart,” he guarantees, “And I’m not into that sort of thing.”
“Shame, Bones,” the blonde kisses him, just a brief glide of lips on lips, but pulls his bottom lip between his sensually before pulling away which gets John’s gut to heat about twenty degrees in half a second, “You’d be a hot kinky bastard, if you were. Hell, how do you even know you don’t like it? Have you tried fucking—“

He chase his mouth with his, both to shut him up and to satisfy the sudden want rushing through his veins.

Of course he ends up being right, and Jim dozes after some groping and a few more kisses.

***

Two hours later Jim screams so loud he wakes himself up.

By the time John manages to soothe him enough to stop shaking, it’s almost Alpha shift again.

“I—I don’t think my head’s right,” Jim gulps, glancing at him as they’re getting dressed after showering together since his lover refused to use all the water alone and promised to behave.

“It’s called a concussion, Jim,” he replies, smoothing the blue shirt of his uniform over the undershirt, “You’ll feel better in a couple of days. Be grateful I’m letting you go back to work so soon.”

The Command Gold shirt that he replicated for Jim is in a heap against the bulkhead, probably wrinkled beyond repair.

He knew he should’ve gotten him one with Lieutenant stripes but what’s done is done.

***

“Bones, how’s Spock doing?” Jim asks during lunch.

The Mess is depressingly empty, which does not bode well for when they return to the Academy.

He cocks an eyebrow, “How would I know?”

“You’re the ship’s CMO.”

“M’Benga did an internship on Vulcan,” he tells Jim, shaking his head and rolling his eyes when Jim keeps stealing food from his plate instead of eating from his own, “He’s his attending physician while we’re on board. And I couldn’t tell you even if I did treat him, you know that.”

The blonde pauses in his scavenging for tomatoes in John’s meal, “I just want to know if he’s okay.”

“Why don’t you ask him? You work every shift together.”

Jim scrunches his nose, picking at his own food when he realizes there are no more things he likes in his, “He wouldn’t tell me. He still doesn’t like me. He doesn’t talk to me while we’re on duty unless it’s strictly necessary and he never takes his breaks at the same time I do, not even if Uhura does,” he points at the Lieutenant chatting with Sulu at the other end of the Mess as if to prove this, “See?”

“He’s traumatized, Jim,” he can’t believe he’s defending the son of a bitch, but he’s a doctor and he has to acknowledge the obvious, “He just lost his whole planet. And his mother.”

“You think I don’t know that?” the blonde drops his fork, hitting his thighs with his fists in frustration, “You have no idea, the things Spock—the other one—was feeling, they were overwhelming and horrible, Bones. If this Spock is feeling anything like that, then he needs help.”
“He has his father and Uhura, Jim, even the rest of the Vulcan elders here,” he points out, “You could still just ask him.”

“Yeah, after the things I said to him?” his lover laughs so mirthlessly the crewmen on the next table stare a bit, “I wouldn’t blame him if he punches me again.”

He stares right back and they go back to eat hurriedly.

He goes back to his food, chews for a bit, “You apologized.”

Jim glares at him, “Yeah, because that makes it all better. He didn’t say he forgave me, you know, just that he understood the logic behind it.”

“Hmm, there’s a good question. Do Vulcans forgive?” he teases, “I mean, I’m sure they don’t forget. I guess you’ll have to find out.”

“You’re such an ass.”

He smirks when Jim finishes his food just out of spite and stops hanging his head so much.

Whether Spock welcomes his concern or not, he’ll make sure Jim doesn’t get sad about it.

***

Pike is doing slightly better by the time they arrive to Earth.

He sits on his own and even stands for a minute or two if he pushes himself hard enough. In a couple of days, he’ll be taking his second series of first steps.

The debriefings drag from the first morning to that evening.

They seem the most concerned with Delta Vega and the injuries he and Jim sustained there.

Turns out the good and proper Mister Spock didn’t have enough to justify throwing prisoners there after all.

“To be fair, we did provoke him and he was emotionally compromised,” it’s all he says in Spock’s defense.

It’s not like they’re going to demote him or anything; the guy has lost enough as it is and they know it.

The investigation isn’t so grueling as he thought it’d be.

They have Old Spock to thank for that. He arrived long before them in a ship that was called in from the Laurentian system specifically to pick him up and smoothed all the board’s ruffled feathers.

He can’t say he’s surprised they’re going to keep Jim as Captain; everyone else got to keep their field promotions and they’d be fools not to do the same with him.

He’s there when Jim leaves the auditorium after being told, a small but sincere smile on his face.

He’s been doing better ever since he saw Gaila, bruised and battered but still the dazzling and playful girl they know and care about.

She and a few others did survive the ordeal and that somehow makes it better for Jim.
“They said I could recruit anyone I want,” he says, a little dazed, “I hope you don’t have any plans for the next year, Bones.”

“I’ll check my schedule,” he deadpans, surrounding Jim’s shoulders with an arm as they start to walk.

The blonde beams at him, John’s own miniature sun shining in delight just as he’s always been meant to do.

“You’re gonna have to make nice with Spock.”

“No, I’m not. He’s not going to work with you, Jim. Last time I checked, he still hated you.”

“Shut up. He will.”

***

He’s not supposed to be on the bridge but bite him, he waits for Jim there all the same.

The whole crew and even Uhura address the youngest Captain in the history of the Federation respectfully.

Beating a bat shit crazy Romulan together, mostly because of Jim’s prompting, can change people’s minds quite a bit.

Still, Jim’s eyes fix only on him.

“Bones!” he greets cheerfully, patting his shoulder before sitting on his chair, “Buckle up.”

He’s like a kid in a candy store now, God help them all, the only thing missing being a certain green-blooded hobgoblin that chooses that moment to grace everyone with his presence.

The joy of everyone on the bridge is almost a breathing, tangible thing as Jim commands, “Maneuvering thrusters, Mister Sulu.”

The little shit gives him a self-satisfied grin.

He sighs, pretends to be slightly exasperated, and braces himself for a future that he can’t predict but that doesn’t paralyze him so much, not after all they’ve been through.

Together not even death will tear them apart.

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