

life's but a walking shadow

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life's but a walking shadow

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Summary

While on a routine survey of an uninhabited planet, Scotty and Sulu disappear, with the third member of their party dropping dead as soon as he makes it back to the Enterprise. Determined to rescue them, Jim, Bones, and Spock beam down only to discover that something dark has taken residence on Pyris Seven - and it'll take all their wits to make it out alive.

or

An AOS retelling of the TOS episode Catspaw.

Chapter 1

As the captain of Starfleet's flagship, Jim Kirk is expected to always remain calm, even under great strain. As someone who's fought a time-travelling Romulan and his nightmare ship to stop them from destroying Earth and who's outright died (temporarily, thanks Bones) to save the Enterprise from the lunatic megalomaniac named Khan, this is not ordinarily a difficult edict.

Right now, however, three members of his crew—two being among his closest friends and one a young Ensign who's just begun to show what he's capable of—are on the planet, Pyris Seven, below and not one is answering Uhura's hails. *After* missing a check-in time by a whole half-an-hour.

He's finding it more difficult to stay calm.

'Still nothing?' he asks, fighting the urge to go loom over Uhura's shoulder—she hates it when he does that, and it won't help the situation.

Uhura shakes her head. 'No, sir.'

Jim grits his teeth. This is not good. The Enterprise crew, as they've grown comfortable in their places, has never been strict on regulations. They're more relaxed, more informal, than other ships in the 'fleet. Despite that, one thing Jim's always been firm on is the need for frequent check-ins. He refuses to have any of his people out of contact with the ship for too long. In the three years since Nero—and *especially* in the last year since they began their five-year mission—there've been plenty of examples of why he's so vehement about it. Sulu and Scotty both know better—and Jackson, along with the other new transfers, had to put up with Jim giving them all a lecture about it ahead of time, so he should know better too.

Something's wrong.

'The scanners are still not picking up any life-forms other than the landing party, Captain,' Spock says, turning in his seat to face Jim. 'They may not have anything to report and have thus forgotten.'

This is a weak explanation and Spock knows it.

Jim shakes his head, pushing out of his seat and stepping over to check Spock's screen. 'They're not that stupid,' he says. 'They know the penalty for missing a checkpoint without good reason. Bones is very eager to give his presentation on the many injuries you can acquire on-planet again. He's added new slides.'

Spock's right though. There's no sign of life other than the three they know of, so they can't've been attacked or taken prisoner, right? The only explanation he can think of is malfunctioning coms.

Jim pushes up off Spock's chair. 'Uhura, is...'

He's interrupted by her holding up a hand, eyes lighting up. 'Contact established, Captain!' she says, already opening the channel.

'Jackson to Enterprise.'

Jim is already at Uhura's side, leaning over to speak, 'Jackson? Kirk here. Is everything alright down there?'

Jackson continues to talk, as if he didn't hear anything. *'One to beam up, Enterprise.'*

One?

Jim and Uhura exchange worried glances. 'Jackson,' Jim says, leaning forward again. 'Where are Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott? Status report, now.'

Jackson ignores him. *'One to beam up, Enterprise,'* he repeats.

'Jackson!' Jim raises his voice. 'Where are Sulu and Scotty?'

'I'm ready to beam up, sir.'

Well, at least Jackson seems aware of who he's talking to if not anything else. Jim glances at Uhura who looks as mystified as he feels. 'The connection isn't strong, but he should be able to hear us,' she says, frowning.

Jim nods, shoving off her seat. 'Tell Keenser to beam him up. And tell Bones to meet me in the transporter room, pronto!'

'On it, sir.' Uhura's already in the process of obeying as he finishes his orders and heads for the second turbolift.

It doesn't take long for him to make it to the transporter room, and he hurries up to the door in time to be met by Bones coming from the opposite direction. 'Jim? What's...'

Jim cuts him off. 'In here, come on.'

They both head inside, as Keenser busily operates the transporter without giving them so much as a glance. Jim avoids looking at him—ideal scenario, he won't have to tell Keenser his best friend's not coming back but the thought of it alone is unpleasant enough—instead focusing on the platform as whirling light surrounds one of the pads and Jackson materialises.

'Jackson!' Jim starts. 'Where are...'

He's cut off as the young man collapses off the platform. Bones sweeps forward, catching Jackson in his arms as he snaps a hurried instruction at Keenser to call Sickbay and get him a team here. After feeling for a pulse, Bones curses and sets to work, loading his hypospray and stabbing Jackson with it. With a barked order to Keenser to 'Tell 'em to hurry up!', Bones begins resuscitation.

Jim backs out of the way of the door, eyes fixed on Jackson.

'Captain Kirk!'

The voice makes him jump and he's not the only one. Even Bones freezes, staring at the young man lying in his arms. 'Jim, did he...'

'Captain Kirk, can you hear me?' The strange voice is deep, certainly not Jackson's, though—as Jim realises—that's who it's coming from. 'There is a curse on your ship. Leave this place or you will all die!'

'Who the hell are you?' Jim snarls.

He doesn't receive an answer, as the summoned medical team races inside and Bones re-instigates resuscitation efforts. Jim gets out of their way, mouth dry as he does so. He sends a look at Keenser, who inspects him with his little eyestalks then returns to ignoring him.

'*Bridge to Captain Kirk,*' Uhura's voice comes through his communicator. '*Captain, has Ensign Jackson safely beamed up?*'

Jim grimaces, rubbing a hand over his face before responding. 'The beam up itself went fine but...I'll get back to you on his health status once Doctor McCoy updates me. There is, however...' Jim stops himself; he'd rather explain this—whatever the hell it is—in person. 'There's something I'll need to discuss with you all, but I need to wait for McCoy first. I'll keep you updated, in the meantime I want you to keep trying to reach Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott. Kirk out.'

By the time a downcast Bones exits the Sickbay, Jim's been waiting for about fifteen minutes.

'He's dead,' Jim says. It isn't a question. His best friend's expression tells him all he needs to know about Jackson's fate.

'Honestly, I think we were fighting a battle that was already lost,' Bones says with a sigh, running a hand through his hair. 'He was already in full cardiac arrest when I caught him, but with me getting to him so fast, I hoped...' he trails off, shaking his head. 'Nothing we did had any effect. He didn't respond to anything we tried.' It's clear the failure is bothering Bones more than he would like to admit; he keeps sending glances back at the Sickbay, as if hoping Jackson'll miraculously wake up while he's gone.

'You did your best, Bones, that's all you can do,' Jim says, giving Bones' shoulder a gentle squeeze. 'D'you know what killed him?'

'Not a clue,' Bones says, frustration evident. 'Scans are all clear. There's nothing medically wrong with him, except for, y'know, the fact that he's dead. It's like...I don't know.' He grimaces, rubbing his face. 'It's like his body just decided to stop working.'

'Could it be a toxin?'

'Not unless we've discovered some new-fangled toxin that kills without doing the slightest bit of damage to the body itself and without registering at all on the scans.' Bones shakes his head. 'It's a mystery, Jim. And speaking of mysteries...'

'Yeah. I heard it too.'

'Well, I'm glad of that, anyway,' Bones says. 'I don't have to check myself in somewhere cause I'm hearing voices from a dead guy.'

'No, we'll at least be together in the psychiatric ward,' Jim says.

'Oh, deep joy.'

Jim nudges him. 'Come on, bridge.'

'Do I have to?' Bones makes a face but he falls into step next to Jim anyway. 'Where're Sulu and Scotty anyway? Didn't they go down with Jackson?'

'Yes. Yes, they did. That's what we're going to find out.'

Jackson's death certainly doesn't do anything to raise the mood on the bridge. Chekov sinks lower in his seat, as Uhura closes her eyes.

Spock pauses for a moment to allow the others to take it in before he asks about the cause of death. The response makes his eyebrows raise in that way of his that says he's fascinated, despite the situation.

'There was no damage whatsoever?' he prods, eyes focused on Bones.

'Not a bit,' Bones says. 'He just dropped dead.'

‘That’s not even the weirdest thing,’ Jim says, drawing everyone’s attention back to him. He repeats what the mysterious voice said, word for word.

‘A curse upon the ship?’ Spock raises an eyebrow. ‘Intriguing.’

‘You could say that,’ Jim says. ‘Something bad’s going on down there. Sulu and Scotty are still out of contact, and with Jackson dead we can’t afford to wait any longer. Spock, Bones, you two are coming with me. We’re beaming down.’

Bones sighs without protesting, while Spock almost looks excited. In a very Vulcan way, of course.

‘Lieutenant Uhura, continue trying to hail Sulu and Scotty intermittently,’ Jim goes on. ‘Lieutenant 0718, you have the conn.’

The swirling lights of the transporter beam clear to reveal, well, not much. What little the single moon above does to light up their craggy surroundings is choked by thick motionless fog. The great rocks reach up for the starless sky all around, creating a claustrophobic maze that spiderwebs out from their position atop one big rock.

‘Well, we found Dracula’s space lair,’ Jim says.

Bones eyes their surroundings with deep suspicion. ‘If my blood gets sucked, I’m blaming you, Jim.’

‘Oh, come on, Bones. Let’s see that sense of adventure,’ Jim says with a bright smile he doesn’t entirely feel.

‘Sorry, I left it on the *last* nightmare planet you made me beam down to.’

Jim laughs, before turning to Spock who—as is his wont—has been ignoring them, instead focusing on his tricorder. ‘Spock? Your scans?’

Spock doesn’t look up. ‘It is quite peculiar,’ he says. ‘Neither my scans nor the probe data from earlier indicate conditions that would make it possible for fog to form. There are no clouds, no bodies of water. The temperature is stable, if low. Very peculiar.’ Spock still sounds about as excited as a Vulcan can get.

‘Great,’ says Bones. ‘Now we got ghost fog. This day’s getting better and better.’

‘Technically, it’s night.’

‘I *will* hypo you, James Kirk.’

Jim grins at him, nudging Bones’ shoulder with his own and garnering a weak smile from his friend. ‘So,’ he says. ‘Ghost fog. My Dracula theory’s gaining credence.’

‘I think it best you not submit this hypothesis of yours to the scientific journals just yet, Captain,’ Spock says, voice utterly dry.

‘Hmm. You could be right. We need more evidence.’ Jim straightens, turning to look around. ‘This is where Jackson beamed up from, right?’

‘It is,’ Spock confirms.

‘Then all we gotta do is find where he came from.’ Jim glances down from their own little rocky island. The ground is hidden under the endless sea of fog that surrounds them, making it impossible to tell how high up they are.

It can’t be too high. Jackson made it up here with…whatever was wrong with him. Besides, Scotty and Sulu are out there somewhere.

Jim tentatively stretches out a leg, hoping the ground isn’t too far.

‘Careful, Jim,’ Bones hisses, catching hold of his shoulder.

Jim waves away his concern, lowering his foot until it touches rock, thankfully not too deep inside the fog. He smiles, hopping onto the secured foot and settling the other next to it, turning to face his friends. ‘See! It’s fine, you worry too much, Bones.’

Ignoring Bones’ muttered grumbling as both he and Spock climb down from the rock, Jim turns and takes a few steps to the left, searching for any sign of his missing crewmembers. Not a thing. In one sense, it’s good. He doesn’t want to see any blood or signs of a struggle. At least while there’s none of that, his friends might be unharmed, but it also means they have no idea where to go to find them.

‘Can you find any sign of ‘em on the scans, Spock?’ he asks.

‘Not yet, sir,’ Spock says, before pausing. ‘Wait. I’m picking up life form readings. Twenty-four degrees mark seven. Range one thirty-seven point one six metres.’

‘Scotty and Sulu?’ Bones asks.

‘Perhaps,’ Spock says. ‘I cannot be sure.’

Jim hums, pulling out his communicator and flicking it open. ‘Kirk to Enterprise.’

'Enterprise, Uhura speaking,' comes the response. 'Is everything okay down there, Captain?'

'We're all fine,' Jim assures her. 'How are the sensor readings looking?'

This time, it's Chekov who speaks. 0718 must've switched Jim's call to the central speaker. 'Captain, I am only picking up on the three of you. There are no other life signs.'

Jim picks up on the slight tremble to Chekov's voice with a wince. 'Strange. We're...' He's cut off by a burst of static on the line. He exchanges alarmed looks with Bones. 'Chekov? Uhura? 0718? Are you there?'

Nothing but static responds.

'Fog's getting thicker, Jim,' Bones says, eyeing the rising miasma. 'That could be what's interfering with the coms?'

Jim flicks his communicator shut, frowning. 'Maybe. There's gotta be a reason why the ship's readings are different to ours, and for the communication breakdown.'

'Perhaps this is what occurred to cut the landing party off from the Enterprise,' Spock says. 'It would explain their lack of response to our hails.'

'But not Jackson's death,' Bones says.

Spock tilts his head in agreement.

'Are you still picking up life-signs, Spock?' Jim asks, eyeing their surroundings as he speaks.

'Yes.'

'Well, I guess we don't have much choice,' Jim says with a shrug, as he slides his phaser out of its holster. 'Lead the way, Spock, slowly. Both of you, keep your phasers ready.'

Spock obeys, leading the way through a series of sharp bends, the endless rocks making it hard to navigate directly. As they come out into a somewhat clearer section, a faint sound sweeps towards them.

Jim stiffens. 'Wait,' he says.

When the others stop, he steps to the front, hand gripping his phaser as the noise comes again. A howl, floating on the wind—except there is no wind. 'D'you hear that?'

'Sends shivers up my spine,' Bones says.

'It's a voice.' Jim's gaze traces the mist around them. 'I'm...'

Something comes flying out of the fog, cutting him off, grotesque faces poking out and laughing as they float above them. Jim checks to make sure his friends are safely behind him, as the faces—like witches from old Earth folklore—cackle and circle them.

'Captain Kirk!' they each shriek and Jim shivers.

'How do they know my...' he begins.

'Go back! Go back!' the witches continue to howl. 'Remember the curse!'

Jim scowls, aiming his phaser and sending off a shot—not aimed at them, more as a warning. They continue to flutter, unconcerned. 'Where are my men?' he demands. 'Are you the ones who took 'em? Where are they? Hey!' He fires off another shot, this time aiming at one of the faces. The phaser shot sails through it. The witch in question is unperturbed.

'Wind shall rise!' one cries.

'And fog descend!' says another.

'Leave here, all, or meet your end!' The last one howls, before all three sweep away, vanishing into the darkness.

Jim, Spock, and Bones are left, stood there, staring.

'What,' says Bones, 'the *hell* was that?'

'Terrible poetry,' says Spock solemnly.

'Spock, I wasn't asking for your damn literary analysis,' Bones says, glaring at him.

'I take it back,' Jim says, interrupting their spat before it could get started. 'This isn't Dracula. It's Macbeth. What the hell?'

'They were some kind of illusion,' Spock says, eyebrows microscopically drawn together—his version of a frown. 'Though how they were cast, I do not know. Perhaps there is a form of advanced technology here that we do not have the capacity to pick up on our scans.'

'The life-signs are still there?' Jim asks.

‘Yes, Captain. They appear inconsistent but are nonetheless present.’

Jim nods, straightening his back. ‘Lead on, Spock. The sooner we find Scotty and Sulu, the sooner we can go home and never talk about *that* ever again.’

‘Amen,’ says Bones.

Spock is leading them towards another thick outcropping of rocks, when the empty air picks up speed, a gust of powerful wind slamming into them and sending them flying backwards. Jim tries his best to keep his feet, as somewhere behind him, Bones cries out in pain.

‘Bones?’ he calls, as the wind drops as suddenly as it came.

‘Here!’ Bones’ voice comes from somewhere Jim can’t place. ‘Further down, Jim.’

Jim looks, frowning, as an opening in the rocks around them becomes visible. He hurries over, squeezing through to find Bones already on the other side. ‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, just got knocked through there by the wind,’ Bones says with a wave of his hand. ‘That’s not important right now. Look, Jim, there!’

As Spock comes through the opening behind them, Jim obeys.

And stops short. ‘Is that...is that a *castle*?’

‘Looks a hell of a lot like one, doesn’t it?’ Bones says. ‘Even got those funny up-and-down edges along the walls.’

‘Crenelations,’ Jim says without looking away from the hulking structure. ‘They’re called crenelations.’

‘Course *you* know that.’

‘Jim,’ Spock says, before Jim can think of a response.

Jim turns to him, frowning at the faint note of urgency in Spock’s voice. ‘Yeah?’

‘This building appears to be the source of the life-signs my scanners picked up.’

‘I thought they were thataway,’ Bones says, pointing off to the left.

‘They were,’ Spock says. ‘Yet now they are here.’

‘Is it the castle itself throwing off your scanners?’ Jim asks, glancing at the giant building. ‘Maybe that’s what cut the landing party off from us.’

‘Perhaps so,’ says Spock. ‘Yet I remain unsure. There is nothing about this building that should suggest such capabilities.’

‘Same’s true of the planet,’ says Jim wryly. ‘Yet here we are.’

‘Funny-looking building to end up on an alien planet,’ Bones says. ‘It’s an Earth design, right? But Earth’s never made it out here before. Besides, *who* built it if there’s no life-signs other than our own people? D’you reckon they just built it and left?’

‘Or died,’ says Spock.

‘Real optimistic, Spock,’ says Bones.

‘It is neither optimism nor pessimism, merely logic. Though, I know you cannot understand such things, Doctor.’

‘Why you green-blo...’

‘Regardless,’ Jim says, interrupting Bones. ‘Something or someone here is screwing with us. And whoever or whatever it is has got Scotty and Sulu.’ He gives a sharp grin. ‘I don’t take well to that at all. Let’s go get ‘em back.’

Spock and Bones both acquiesce and, together, the three make their way towards the stronghold. They reach the door and Jim heads in first, heaving the solid wooden door open with a grunt. ‘Man, this place, at least, has gotta be real,’ he says, groaning. ‘That thing’s way too heavy to be fake!’

He creeps further inside, hand on his phaser.

A hissing screech comes from nowhere and Jim almost falls over—and, embarrassingly, also drops his phaser—catching himself on the wall. ‘What the...’ he trails off as he catches sight of a black cat, with an emerald-embedded black collar around its neck.

Bones pokes his head through the door. ‘Congratulations, Jim. You got beaten by a kitty.’

‘Shut up, Bones,’ Jim says, snatching up his phaser. ‘Come on in, guys, unless you’re too scared of Muffins here.’

‘Did you...name the cat Muffins?’ Spock asks, as he follows Bones inside. ‘That seems illogical.’

Jim shrugs. ‘Seems like a classic cat name to me. Don’t you think so, Muffins?’ He hunkers down to scratch it behind its ears. It’s not happy about it, hissing and swiping at him with its claw.

‘That is not the point,’ Spock says with a tone of deep Vulcan weariness. ‘Why, precisely, are you naming a cat you discovered in dangerous territory?’

‘Also,’ Bones says. ‘Pretty sure Muffins hates your guts, kid.’

‘Oh, she’s just prickly.’ Jim raises his eyebrows at Bones. ‘Kinda like someone else I know.’

Bones rolls his eyes. ‘Oh, ha ha, Jim. She’s a girl now?’

Jim shrugs. ‘Felt right.’ He stands up, running a hand through his hair. ‘This place gets weirder and weirder. First witches, now a black cat. Seems like someone’s doing their best to make a Halloween planet all for themselves.’

‘Halloween being the holiday celebrated on Earth based around supernatural forces, yes?’ Spock says, falling into step with him as Jim heads into the castle.

‘Yeah, that’s the one,’ Jim says.

‘This place is just a haunted house from back home, except there’s fewer teenagers in monster masks,’ Bones says, following behind.

Spock inclines an eyebrow. ‘Fascinating. Why are these teenagers wearing masks in such an allegedly dangerous area?’

‘Not *those* kinda haunted houses, Spock,’ Bones says with a laugh. ‘These ones are set up to scare people, lots of masks and fake blood and whatever. People pay to go in ‘em.’

‘...Why?’

‘To be scared,’ Jim says. ‘It’s fun.’

‘Humans are...most peculiar,’ Spock says. ‘I must ask Nyota about this later.’

‘What, d’you think we’re screwing with you?’ Jim asks.

‘That is always a logical conclusion to consider when it involves you, James Kirk.’

At that, Jim laughs. ‘Yeah, you know me well.’ He adjusts his grip on his phaser. ‘Alright, impromptu Earth cultural lesson over. Let’s spread out, see if we can find either Scotty or Sulu, we’ll meet back here in fifteen minutes. Do *not* go too far and if you get in trouble, just yell real loud.’

‘Believe me,’ says Bones. ‘That happens, I’ll be yelling alright.’

The corridors within the castle are long and eerily empty, thick with cobwebs and musty air. Jim shivers against his will. It’s odd, he’s been in far more terrifying situations—Uncle Frank, the Narada, the warp-core, hell *Tarsus*, and the list could go on—yet something about the total silence of this place makes his skin crawl. He’s never been a fan of silence, too much room for him to think about things he tries not to think about, but this. This is something else. There’s no sign of life, no animals, not so much as a draft. If it weren’t for the slight noise Jim himself is making, he might believe he’s gone deaf.

Haunted houses back on Earth are missing a trick. Total eerie silence is the way to go.

He keeps a close eye on the time and is happy to make his way back to the meeting spot when it’s time. Thankfully, both Spock and Bones are there and fine—without anything to report.

This time when they set off, they do it together, Jim taking the lead as they head further into the castle.

‘More cobwebs,’ Bones mutters, waving in front of his face to try and clear them away from his path. ‘Does it seem odd to anyone else that there’s a million spiderwebs but not a spider in sight?’

He makes an excellent point. Jim frowns, gaze darting around.

‘Maybe...’ He’s cut off by the sharp yowl of a cat. ‘Muffins?’ he says, squinting into the darkness. ‘That you?’

A hiss is Muffins’ informative response.

‘Jim, you’re not adopting the cat,’ Bones says.

‘It was once tradition for a ship to have a ship’s cat,’ Jim points out, snickering at Bones’ annoyed expression.

‘To hunt *rats*, Jim, there are no rats on the Enterprise!’

‘That we know of.’

‘Any form of Earth vermin,’ Spock says. ‘Would be highly unlikely on a starship, Captain. Besides which, one could assume this cat already has an owner.’

Given the big old emerald on her collar, this is true. Jim doesn't give in so easily. 'We could find alien rodents somewhere along the way. You can't say for sure.' He catches sight of Muffins' tail flicking around a corner. 'Ah, there she is.' With that, he hurries after her.

'Jim, why are we chasing a *cat*?' Bones calls after him—though both he and Spock are following.

'She *is* the only sign of life we've seen in this whole place,' Jim answers, slowing to let them catch up. 'Maybe she'll lead us to her owner.'

Which will, hopefully, lead them to Scotty and Sulu.

Muffins darts around another corner and Jim goes after her, this time with Bones and Spock close behind. They come out in a wider corridor at the end of which stands Muffins with her tail flicking to and fro.

Jim beams. 'See. She likes me!' he says, continuing forward.

Spock stiffens. 'Jim!' he starts, but he's too late.

The floor crumbles, collapsing under their combined weight. The sickening jolt of falling is met with a sharp pain in the back of Jim's head and everything goes black.

Chapter 2

‘...im.’

Something nudges his leg and Jim shifts, his head and body aching. ‘Jim. *Jim!*’ a voice hisses.

Bones. The instinctive recognition jolts through Jim’s foggy thoughts. That’s Bones, Bones needs him. His head throbs harder as he shifts in place, his shoulders screaming in pain at the movement. Cold metal around his wrists, a concerningly familiar feeling, tells him that they’re chained—and he’s hanging from them. Again. Great. This whole five-year-mission thing seems to consist mostly of getting captured and chained up. That wasn’t on the Starfleet Academy brochure. Not that Jim ever got a brochure.

‘Jim!’ The nudge comes again, harder this time. ‘Dammit, Jim! I swear, if you don’t wake up right now, I’m telling the damned hobgoblin about the Betazoid incident from second year.’

This threat clears the remaining confusion as fast as Jim used to flee Gaila’s dorm the second Uhura got back—and, for that matter, as fast as he and Bones ran from that Betazoid. Jim jolts awake, stumbling as he tries to find his footing. He manages it, gritting his teeth. ‘Don’t you dare, Bones.’

‘Jim! You alright? Can you see okay?’

Jim shakes his head to clear it. ‘I’m fine,’ he says, opening his eyes in a squint. The light from above makes his head pulsate. ‘Ow. What hit me?’

‘The floor,’ says Spock dryly. ‘We fell through it.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Jim grimaces, opening his eyes fully to see both Bones and Spock chained in the same manner on either side of him. ‘We got betrayed by Muffins.’

Bones rolls his eyes only to wince. ‘Well, your memory’s fine, at least,’ he says, shifting closer to Jim.

Jim nods, assessing their surroundings. There’s a hole in the ceiling from where they must’ve fallen through, though the rubble is gone. He gives his friends another once over and it’s then that he notices why Bones is trying to move towards Jim. A complete human skeleton hangs from its own set of chains right next to Bones, who looks displeased with his new roommate situation.

‘Who’s your friend?’ Jim can’t keep the smirk off his face.

Bones sends him a poisonous glare. ‘Don’t start.’ He gestures further into the dungeon. ‘Whoever the hell put us here, they’ve rolled the whole parade out for us.’

Jim winces at the wide array of nasty medieval torture devices that litter the rest of their cell, including a gruesome iron maiden presently seeping bright red blood. ‘Hell of a welcoming committee,’ he says, trying not to think about either Scotty or Sulu being shoved in that thing. ‘Have you seen anyone?’

‘I only woke a minute or so before you,’ Bones says. ‘Don’t reckon Spock’s been awake that long neither.’

‘That is correct,’ says Spock.

Jim yanks on his chains. They’re solid. ‘Dammit,’ he says, stopping his efforts and thinking longingly of the lockpicks sewn into his command-shirt hem—out of reach, he should’ve thought that bit through. ‘Chains are real, if nothing else. What the hell’s going on? Iron maidens are an Earth thing, aren’t they? What’s one doing all the way out here?’

‘It is, solely, an Earth concept,’ Spock agrees, eyes flitting about the dungeon. ‘And not one that is likely to have ever been in active use, even there. This dungeon, it is very...human.’

‘Wonderful,’ says Bones. ‘So they’re tailoring the experience.’

‘It appears so.’ Spock’s eyebrows draw together. ‘Is this still within the remit of your “haunted houses”, Doctor?’

Bones grimaces. ‘Yeah. A haunted house like this’d make a killing.’ He winces retroactively at his word-choice.

‘This whole place,’ Jim says. ‘It’s like it’s been built specifically for me and Bones. It’s a specifically Western concept too, so it’s not like it’s drawing from all humans. It’s like it’s drawing information out of us and bending to accommodate what it thinks we expect.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that.’ Bones once again tries to shift closer to Jim—and away from the skeleton.

‘Yeah, can’t say I’m much of a fan myself.’ Another pull fails to loosen the chains. Jim sighs. ‘Right, well, we...’

A loud groaning creak interrupts him, as the door right in the back swings open. There, stood in the doorway, are Scotty and Sulu, exactly as they were when Jim bid them goodbye a few hours earlier.

‘Scotty! Sulu!’ Jim cries, relieved. ‘There you guys are!’

‘Captain.’ Spock’s voice is steady yet cautious.

Jim glances at him, then back at Scotty and Sulu who both walk into the dungeon, faces lit by the light from above. 'Guys? You okay?'

The two reach them and Scotty stops, holding a phaser on them, while Sulu brings out a key.

Ordinarily, this would be cause for celebration. Except that, in coming closer, they've allowed Jim to get a good look at their eyes. Their hollow, blank eyes.

Jim has known both Sulu and Scotty for just over four years—not including the period when he and Sulu were at the Academy together, since they didn't speak much. They've been through hell and back at his side and he is unbelievably privileged to be able to count them among his closest friends—his family. Right now, however, there is no trace of the friends Jim knows inside those eyes at all.

Scotty's warmth and passion. Sulu's poise and care. Scotty's imagination and good humour. Sulu's courage and intelligence. It's all gone. There's no sign of the Scotty who loves to build inventions that are not remotely permissible under Starfleet regulations, no sign of the Sulu who has such passionate opinions about all things Tolkien.

There's nothing at all.

A cold fury brews in Jim's chest, lancing through his whole body, building, building. Someone did this to them. Someone hurt his friends and brainwashed them, ripping out everything that defines them.

Whoever's done this will pay.

Sulu goes first to Bones, unlocking his chains and pushing him over to Scotty, who holds the phaser on him. They aren't being unkind or cruel about it, but somehow that might be worse. Jim meets Sulu's eyes as he releases Jim's manacles, hoping for something—anything. His chest constricts.

There's no recognition, no emotion, nothing. It's like Sulu's soul has been expunged, leaving his empty shell to be used whichever way its puppeteer wishes.

Jim hates it.

Oblivious to Jim's thoughts, Sulu shoves him over to join Bones. While Sulu frees Spock, Scotty keeps his phaser levelled at them.

Forcing a smile, Jim stands up straighter. 'Hey, Scotty. Don't suppose you could tell us anything about this place, could you?'

Scotty doesn't react.

Jim's smile slips. He gets no opportunity to try again, as Spock joins them—Sulu drawing his own phaser—and their two brainwashed crewmates push them towards the door. Jim exchanges glances with first Bones, then Spock. He nods—he doesn't like fighting his friends, but they don't have a choice.

In unison, they strike. Bones grabs Scotty's phaser, straining against Scotty's—admittedly superior—strength to force the emitter upwards. Jim does the same with Sulu's, while Spock moves in to deal a nerve-pinch to Scotty from behind.

The dungeon warps around them, switching itself out for a massive and opulent throne room as an unfamiliar voice rings out. 'Stop!'

The sudden transition makes Jim's stomach roil and he can't help gawking. Sulu takes advantage of his distraction, ripping his phaser out of Jim's grip and shoving Jim to the ground in the same movement. Bones receives the same treatment, leaving both staring down phaser-emitters.

'I wouldn't move if I were you, Commander Spock,' says the new voice. It's coming from the left. 'They will not hesitate to shoot, I assure you. Order him to stand down, Captain Kirk.'

Jim grits his teeth and meets Spock's eyes, giving him a sharp nod of assent.

Spock obeys, a slight shift in his jaw the only sign of his frustration, as both Jim and Bones rise, phasers still aimed right at them. Jim raises a questioning eyebrow at Bones, who raises his chin in a slight nod. He's alright.

Jim steps around Sulu and stops, staring. A short bald man, wearing a golden gown, sits in a golden throne on the raised dais at the foot of the throne room, holding a wand in one hand and looking like a complete loon. Muffins sits in his lap; it's all very supervillain of him.

'I take back my last theory,' Jim says. 'Now we're definitely in Minas Tirith.'

He peeks hopefully at Sulu—who, on a normal day, wouldn't be caught dead ignoring a good, or bad for that matter, Lord of the Rings reference—only to be disappointed. Sulu doesn't even blink.

Jim's chest constricts further but he ignores it as he turns on his heel, glaring at their captor. 'I demand you tell me what the *hell* is going on here. What've you done to my men?'

The man smiles an unpleasant smile. 'Why, Captain Kirk, there is no need for such aggression. After all, it was you who disobeyed my order to stay away.'

'I'd say there's a whole lotta need,' Jim snaps, glaring at him. 'Tell me. Who are you?'

'I am Korob,' says the man. He strokes Muffins' head methodically as he continues. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Captain.'

'You're the one who killed Jackson, aren't you? What'd you do to *them*?' He points at Sulu and Scotty. 'You've brainwashed them, ripped everything out of their minds!'

'No, no, Captain Kirk, you misunderstand. Your men are well, only controlled,' Korob says. Muffins meows in his lap and he gasps. 'Ah, quite right, my dear. I am being a simply dreadful host. Please.' Korob rises to his feet, allowing Muffins to skitter away from him. 'Captain, Commander, Doctor. Have a seat at my table. Let us eat.'

With his wand, he gestures at a table further into the room, surrounded by luxurious dining chairs. He waves his wand once more and food materialises out of nowhere, taking up much of the table.

'Fascinating,' Spock says, eyes fixed on it.

Korob waves towards it. 'Please, gentleman. Have a seat.'

'We're not hungry,' Bones snaps.

Korob's expression tightens. 'Doctor McCoy, I'm afraid I must insist.'

Spock and Bones both look at Jim who nods, telling them to play along. All three take their seats. With the table hiding his lower half, Jim's fingers brush the hem where his lockpicks are sewn. They're not hard to get out, it's doing it without Korob seeing that's the problem.

'This system,' Spock says, eyes focused on Korob. 'It has been charted before, yet Pyris Seven has never shown signs of life. How did you remain hidden?'

Korob smiles that unpleasant smile once again. 'Oh, this is not our home, Commander, but that is of no concern to you.'

'You're from outside this galaxy,' Jim says, staring at him while beginning to pick at the stitches on his hem.

'It is of no concern,' Korob repeats, his smile not wavering. 'Please. Eat. Please, try the wine.'

Jim examines the food, bits of old Earth folklore surfacing in his mind. Eating food that'd appeared as if by magic was never a good idea in any of those old stories. It's stupid that he's worried about it, but everything else about this planet's so insane that he can't dismiss the thought.

He sits back in his chair, not touching any of it and continuing to fiddle with his shirt-hem casually. Both of his friends follow his lead. 'Quit trying to distract us, Korob. I want answers, now. What's going on here?'

Korob's smile doesn't change. 'Is this spread not appealing to you, sirs?' he asks. 'Does this please you better?' All the food vanishes with another wave of his wand. In its place sits three plates filled with jewels, one in front of each of them.

Jim picks up a ruby. 'I'm not sure,' he says. 'Will you be offering us dental reimbursement if we break a tooth?'

Korob freezes, blinking. 'I...I'm sorry?'

'You know,' says Jim. 'We could break a tooth on one of these. I assume you'll be willing to pay to get any damage fixed?'

'I...' Korob stares at him, mouth open. 'They aren't intended for eating, Captain, what...?'

Muffins meows and darts out of the room. A moment later, a woman—tall and dark-haired, beautiful in a serial-killery way, wearing the same emerald pendant as Muffins—strides into the room. 'He is playing with you, Korob,' she says, disgust evident in her voice. 'Don't you see that?'

Jim grins and sits back. Now, they're getting somewhere. He's not sure if this is the real owner of Muffins—or if she is Muffins because, again, insane planet—but she's definitely in charge. 'I assume you're the brains of the operation, ma'am,' he says. The hem at his fingertips tears, warm iron brushing against his skin.

The woman draws herself up. 'I am Sylvia,' she says, looking down her nose imperiously at him. 'And you are playing Korob for a fool. You know what the jewels are for. Take them and leave.'

'Can't do that, ma'am,' Jim says.

'And why ever not?' Sylvia asks.

'Because,' Jim says. 'You have two of my men. Release them from your control, return them to us unharmed, and maybe we'll think about it.'

Korob scowls. 'Captain, please. Be reasonable. These jewels are real, I assure you. They are...'

'Useless,' Spock finishes. He picks up a single emerald in his long fingers. 'The Enterprise can manufacture a million of these without difficulty. They are quite worthless.'

'Besides which,' Bones says, somehow glaring at both Korob and Sylvia simultaneously—it's an impressive feat. 'No amount of money or jewels would make us abandon our friends.'

'Quite so,' Spock assents, a dangerous look in his eyes.

Korob opens and closes his mouth. 'I...Captain? Perhaps you...'

'You heard 'em,' Jim says, putting his feet up on the table and leaning the chair back on its hind-legs. 'I have nothing more to add. Let Sulu

and Scotty go, then we'll talk.'

He slides the lockpicks up his sleeve. To his relief, neither of their captors notice.

Instead, Sylvia's eyes glow. 'How...fascinating.'

Korob claps his hands, a bright smile on his face. 'Why, gentlemen,' he says. 'You have passed the tests! I will admit that, perhaps, I made a small error in the value of these trinkets, but nonetheless...'

'Tests?' Jim inclines an eyebrow. 'What tests?'

'Tests of character, my dear Captain. You were warned to stay away, yet you came here for your comrades. That proves loyalty and courage. And, despite my minor research error, it appears you cannot be bribed.' Korob smiles wider. 'In many ways, you are quite admirable.'

'Oh, yippee for us,' Bones mutters.

Jim sits forward, letting the front chair legs drop back to the ground. 'Does that mean you'll release my men?'

'Not quite.' Sylvia gazes at him, a strange twist to her lips that sends a stab of shivery unease through Jim. 'Gentlemen, you wanted to know what we did to Mr. Sulu and Mr. Scott. It is simple. We merely probed their minds.'

Jim's hands curl into fists, hard enough to hurt. How dare she talk about taking over his friends' minds with such cold casualness?

He peeks up at her, then checks where his brainwashed men are; Scotty's behind Bones while Sulu's on the other side of the table. Catching Bones' gaze, Jim flicks his eyes up to Scotty and back to Bones, who inclines his chin in a microscopic nod. Leaning his chin on his left hand, Jim meets Spock's eyes and moves his finger in a tiny circle. Spock's eyebrow twitches in acknowledgement.

As Jim slips his other hand under the table and holds up three fingers for Bones to see, Spock sits up straight. 'You used some form of hypnosis or telepathy?' he asks.

Jim puts down one finger.

'Not exactly, Commander Spock,' says Sylvia. 'As you yourself know, telepathy does not imply control but I assure you, I have total control over your friends. Hypnosis is, perhaps, closer to the truth, though still not correct. Simply put, a human's mind is an easy thing to enter and to gain control of.'

The second finger goes down. Jim meets Bones' eyes and puts down the final finger.

Bones strikes out, grabbing Scotty's phaser and twisting it, this time successfully getting it out of Scotty's hands. Simultaneously, Jim slides under the table and into Sulu's legs, knocking him to the floor and the phaser out of his hands. Jim snatches it up, levelling it at Sylvia, while Bones levels Scotty's at Korob. Spock is already on his feet, moving to stand behind Bones, focused on Scotty in case he attempts to retaliate.

'Release Scotty and Sulu, now!' Jim orders, meeting Sylvia's eyes.

Korob stammers in surprise. Sylvia seems more annoyed than concerned. 'Put those weapons down, both of you,' she orders.

'Yeah, right.' Jim rolls his eyes.

Sylvia smiles, showing off her eerily perfect teeth. 'Perhaps a demonstration is in order, Captain Kirk.' She raises her hand and—out of nowhere—she holds a thin necklace-chain at the end of which hangs a tiny model of the Enterprise. 'On your planet, I believe you refer to this as "sympathetic magic". Jackson, the crewmember who returned to the ship. You wondered what killed him. I made an image of him. In the essence of my thoughts the image was Jackson. And when I killed the image and knew that it was dead, he died.'

Jim's heartbeat pounds in his ears. 'You...you killed him. Why? What possible reason could you...?'

'It was a warning,' Sylvia says. 'A warning you, Captain, ignored. But that is not important at present...'

'Not important?' Jim snarls. 'A kid is de...'

'As you can see,' Sylvia interrupts. 'I have here a perfect image of your ship. If you and your doctor—' she flicks a glance at Bones who's holding the phaser with white-knuckled hands '—do not put down your weapons, then I will be forced to do something drastic. Allow me to demonstrate. Korob? The Captain's communicator.'

Korob hesitates, looking between them. Finally, he removes Jim's communicator from somewhere in his gown and places it on the table. Jim snatches it up without lowering his phaser.

'Now,' Sylvia continues. 'Hail your ship, Captain.'

Jim grinds his teeth, his jaw aching under the pressure. Still, he flicks his communicator open and raises it. 'Kirk to Enterprise. Enterprise, come in.'

'Enterprise here, Captain,' comes Uhura's voice, relief dripping from every syllable. In his peripheral, Jim sees Spock relax the minutest amount at her voice. 'Uhura speaking. Is everyone alright? Have you found Scotty and Sulu?'

'We...'

Sylvia cuts him off by moving the little model so it's hanging into the open flame of the central candle on the candelabra in the centre of the

table.

Korob stiffens. 'Sylvia!'

An alarm rings out, loud and piercing, on the other side of the call. The Red Alert. Spock's back snaps straight, his eyes widening, while Bones loses focus on Sylvia, staring at Jim—or more accurately, at the communicator in Jim's hand—instead.

'Nyota! What's going on?' Jim raises his voice, trying to regain her attention.

It's 0718 who responds. 'Sir, the temperature on the ship is rising. Chekov, reading!'

'We've gone up by sixty degrees in the last thirty seconds, Captain!' Chekov calls out.

Jim's mind whirrs. '07!' he says, cutting 0718's name in half, doubting he'll mind under the circumstances. 'Channel bypass power into the heat dissipation units!'

'We've done that, sir!' 0718 responds. 'No effect!'

Jim growls and tosses the phaser onto the table. 'I'll handle it,' he says into the communicator before flicking it shut. 'Bones?' Scowling, Bones relinquishes the weapon to Scotty, who snatches it back. 'There. You win,' Jim says, glaring as he snatches the precious model from Sylvia's hands. 'Happy now?'

Sylvia's lips curl into a facsimile of a smile. 'Very much so, Captain. Your ship is safe. For now.'

The threat makes Jim stiffen. He doesn't show it. 'What do you want from us?'

'You have now seen something of our science,' Korob says. 'Now, we ask that you show us yours.'

'Science?' Bones scoffs. 'Magic more like. You said it yourself.'

He glares at Sylvia who tilts her head. 'Indeed,' she says. 'But magic and science are not so dissimilar, you know. Now. I demand that you explain your own.'

'You kept Sulu and Scotty alive on purpose,' Jim says, ice spreading from his head and down his body. 'You wanted us to come after them. How'd you know we'd do it? You did send us a pretty extreme threat warning us against it.'

'We didn't need to know,' Korob says. 'They knew.'

Scotty and Sulu.

Jim bites his cheek hard enough for salty blood to seep onto his tongue, using the pain to focus. 'If you know that, then you know you can't keep us here. The rest of our crew won't sit back and leave us behind, like we wouldn't have left Scotty and Sulu. You'll have a landing party at your gates within hours—and this time, there'll be a whole bunch of angry Security officers with phasers.' He smirks. 'It'll be fun to introduce you to Cupcake, you'll hate him.'

'That won't be a problem, Captain,' says Sylvia. She waves her hand and a rectangular block—frigid to the touch, and alien in texture—materialises around the little model in Jim's hands, startling him. 'As you can see, your ship is now surrounded by a force-field. It's fully impenetrable and will not allow either shuttle or transportation beams to or from it. The ship will remain safely in orbit, but no one can leave.'

Jim grips the block tighter. 'You said you wanted to hear about our science?' he says.

'That is correct, Captain,' says Korob.

Jim straightens his back, smirking at them. 'Screw you.'

Sylvia's eyes go cold. 'I would advise cooperation, Captain. Our methods of forcibly extracting information are not complicated, but they are extremely painful. And it does, of course, have a certain side-effect.' She waves at both Scotty and Sulu. 'As you can see.'

Heat floods Jim's body. So. She didn't only brainwash them, take control of them. She tortured them.

He'll kill her.

'Sorry,' he says. 'But I don't think you heard me. Screw. You.'

Sylvia remains unperturbed. 'Very well, Captain. In that case, you two.' She indicates at Sulu and Scotty. 'Take Captain Kirk and Commander Spock back to their cell.'

The world around him sharpens as Jim tenses in place. No.

'But,' she continues, her lips twisting into a cold smile. 'Leave Doctor McCoy here.'

Blood rushes in Jim's ears and, before he's had a chance to think, he's over the table and shoving Bones behind him. 'Hell no!'

Under no circumstances. Nobody will harm Bones, not on Jim's watch.

'Jim,' Bones says, an undertone of desperation to his voice. 'Jim, kid...'

'Shut up,' Jim hisses at him. 'Stay the hell away, both of you!' he snaps at Sylvia and Korob—who seems to be finding the garish tapestry on the wall behind them riveting.

Hands grip his biceps from behind; electricity shoots through him at the touch. 'Jim, stop,' Bones snaps. 'This isn't...'

'They aren't touching you!'

'Jim!'

'I believe the Captain has made his wishes clear, Doctor,' Spock says, a firm and reassuring presence at Jim's side.

'Dammit, Spock, shut up!' Bones forces his way past Jim, meeting Jim's eyes. 'Jim, please, it's alright, please just...'

'No, Bones! Get behind me, that's an order!'

Spock moves from Jim's side to defend Bones from the other side. Jim doesn't have to look at him; he and Spock are on the same page here.

Bones grits his teeth. 'Dammit, both of you just...' He stops, eyes widening. 'Jim, watch...'

Pain explodes in Jim's head, black spots overwhelming his vision. He's on the floor, his cheek rubbing against rough carpet. Something pounds in his head, banging, banging—bringing with it a tidal wave of pain. His arms are grabbed; his eyes won't open to see who by.

The last thing he hears, before everything fades, is Bones screaming his name.

He forgot about Sulu and Scotty.

That's the first thought that Jim registers. He was so focused on Sylvia and Korob, so used to having his crew at his back and knowing—unquestioningly—that he can rely on them, that he forgot that neither Sulu nor Scotty is themselves right now. One of them hit him from behind, they must've done.

And Bones...

Jim forces his eyes open, breathing through the pain in rapid gasps.

'Jim.' Spock's calm voice is immediately reassuring. 'Take care not to move your head. It looks most unpleasant.'

Blood drips into Jim's now-open eyes as he tries to make them focus enough to glare at Spock. 'You think?'

'I do,' Spock says, expression sombrely sarcastic through the blurriness that's taken over Jim's entire field of vision.

'Great.' Jim manages to get his feet under him, relieving the pressure on his shoulders. 'Who hit me?'

'That would be Mr. Sulu,' says Spock.

'Huh,' Jim says, thinking back to his practise bouts with Sulu in the gym. 'Checks out. Ugh.' He draws in a breath as nausea builds in his throat. 'Damn it. Can't believe I forgot about 'em.'

'Captain?'

'Sulu and Scotty.' Jim grimaces. 'I forgot 'em, forgot they weren't on our side at the moment.'

There's a short silence. 'Do not blame this entirely on yourself, Jim,' Spock says. 'I believe all three of us made that particular error. I too failed to consider those additional...factors when I did as I did.'

'Yeah, well, Bones's the one paying for it.' Jim shakes his head, trying to clear it and only succeeding at making the world swim around him. 'Is Bones...'

'Doctor McCoy was physically well when I last saw him,' Spock says carefully. 'He did, however, appear...distressed.'

'Distressed?'

'Over your injury more than his own peril, I believe. He was...attempting to aid you but Mr. Scott was holding him back.'

Shit, Bones.

Jim closes his eyes, letting his head sink back against the wall. 'He was okay though?'

'At that point, relatively speaking, yes.' Spock pauses for a moment. 'While I could, perhaps, have overcome Mr. Sulu, Sylvia had retaken the Enterprise trinket. I could not risk the ship by continuing to fight.'

'Good,' Jim says, letting out a sigh and opening his eyes. 'That was the right thing to do.' He sets his jaw. 'We need to get out of here, Spock.'

'I concur, though I fail to see any way of doing so.'

As Jim shifts, the metal of his lockpicks rub against his left bicep. Not the most ideal position, but at least they're still there and more accessible than before. Forcing himself to ignore the pain still hammering in his head, he grips his chains and pulls on them, heaving his body upwards.

'Jim?' Spock says. 'Might I ask what you're hoping to accomplish?'

'Just gimme a minute, Spock,' Jim says, gritting his teeth as his head pounded from the exertion. 'Hey, how'd Sulu take me down?' His elbows are above the manacles now, just a bit closer...

'He hit you in the head with his phaser. Jim, I fail to see...'

'He didn't shoot me with it?' Jim pauses his attempts at worming the lockpicks down his sleeves in his surprise. Sure, that's what makes sense with his injury, but really?

'No, he did not,' Spock says. He pauses. 'In fact, if I recall correctly, I do not believe they've fired the phasers once since we arrived. The last time we ourselves fired them, it was you against the illusions outside.'

'So, why would Sulu not fire the phaser?' Jim says, gasping at the effort it's taking to stay where he is as he restarts worming efforts. 'He could've set it to stun, wouldn't've killed me.'

'Unless, by some chance, our captors are unaware of the stun capabilities—' Spock narrows his eyes in thought '—Which is unlikely based off everything else they know, then there is only one reason I can think of.'

'They're not working,' Jim finishes for him.

Spock smiles that slight smug smile of his. 'Precisely, Captain.'

Now that. That's interesting.

Jim grins back at Spock and heaves himself further upwards. This time, he's rewarded by the sensation of metal falling down his sleeve. He drops back down just in time to catch the ring of lockpicks in his hand.

'Jim. Are those...lockpicks?'

'Yes. Yes, they are,' Jim says, grinning wider.

'...Why do you have lockpicks?'

Jim shrugs. 'Look, I've spent a surprising amount of time over my twenty-eight years of life getting handcuffed or locked up. You live and you learn. And *I've* learned to always carry lockpicks.'

'...I see.' Spock draws in a breath. 'In that case, might I also presume you know how to pick a lock?'

Chapter 3

Following a brief, fierce debate, they settle on Jim picking Spock's manacles first. Jim's argument in favour of this is that, frankly, he's had his head whacked twice, thus it'll be easier for Spock to overwhelm whoever comes to fetch them next.

Spock is visibly displeased, even as he gives in. Having won the argument, Jim pulls himself closer and sets to work on picking the first of Spock's locks. He realises about five seconds in that he'll never reach the other manacle.

He'll talk Spock through the lock-picking procedure. Guy's got a brain the size of Jupiter, surely he can figure it out.

That decided, Jim continues, trying his best as the lock goes in and out of focus. Thankfully, he has experience picking locks whilst having a concussion (examples include that time Uncle Frank beat him within an inch of his life and locked him in the shed, and the Great Texas Bar Brawl Extravaganza, amongst many other incidents), so he's not completely lost here.

'Any clue what that Sylvia lady was going on about?' he asks as he continues to work. 'What'd she do to the others?' What's she doing to Bones right now, he doesn't add. He doesn't have to.

Spock stays silent a moment, thinking. 'As far as I understand, she appears more akin to Betazoids than Vulcans, though not even a Betazoid could do precisely as she has done. It must be an extremely advanced form of telepathy, though she denies the use of that term. She takes over their bodies and removes, or perhaps buries, their true minds.' He stops, tilting his head to the side. 'It is a unique ability. I do not believe any other species we know of can achieve such complete control.'

'Think you could break 'em out of it?' Jim asks, hissing as his lockpick slips out of the lock. The jolt sends a nauseating spike of pain through his skull. Jim ignores it. He's had worse. 'With your touch telepathy, I mean?'

'Perhaps. It would likely require a full mind-meld if it were indeed possible. I doubt their minds are close enough to the surface to be picked up through simple touch.'

Jim pauses. 'You think a mind-meld'd do it?' He returns to work, berating himself internally for stopping. He hasn't got time for this.

'I did say "perhaps", Jim,' Spock says. 'As these are entirely new lifeforms to my species, I have no way of being certain. It would, however, be logical that a mind-meld would at least assess the state of a victim's mind, if it couldn't restore said mind completely.'

'Sounds worth a try to me,' Jim says, as a satisfying click comes from within Spock's manacle and it opens. 'Yes! Here, Spock, take the lockpicks. I'll talk you through the other one.'

Spock obeys.

Uniform footsteps come from outside before Jim can begin.

'Shit!' He glances at Spock, but makes no attempt to reclaim the lockpicks. 'Quick, pretend you're still chained. Hopefully, they won't notice. Listen, try and pick the lock yourself. I want you to try and find the others and break 'em out of Sylvia's control. If you can't, knock 'em out and come for me.'

It's a gamble, admittedly, to assume that Spock will be the one left behind, but Jim is almost certain that'll be the case. A theory has been brewing away in the depths of his mind since they took Bones, that, for whatever reason—be it his telepathy, his mental shields, his sheer infuriating Vulcanness, whatever—Sylvia doesn't want to delve into Spock's mind. Why else would she go for Bones—the Chief Medical Officer—before Spock—Chief *Science* Officer—when their stated goal's to learn more about Federation science? If Jim's right—and he hopes he is—then the mind-meld plan is that much more likely to work.

Spock smoothly slides his hand back into the manacle, as a slight wrinkle appears in his forehead. 'Jim, what if I...'

Cutting him off, the door opens.

Jim straightens his spine, as Spock falls silent.

Into the dungeon come three people whom Jim knows all too well. Scotty, of course, and Sulu. And...

'Bones.' The nickname catches in Jim's throat.

Bones is, indeed, standing right there. However, in the place of Jim's best friend, an empty stranger stares at Jim out of Bones' painfully familiar eyes. Everything has been sucked out of him, leaving a hollow vessel behind.

Spock is motionless beside Jim.

Unable to tear his eyes away, Jim watches as Bones unlocks his manacles. He can't even take pleasure from his theory being right. No, as Bones prods him towards the other two, as Jim's stomach rebels at the sudden movement and throws up the remains of his breakfast, as Bones—who should be nagging at him, holding his hair out of his face, checking his pupils—only pulls him away from the vomit and out of the cell, all he can process is Bones.

She hurt Bones. She took him and drained him of himself. She stole everything from him.

Bones. Jim's best friend. His *first* friend; the first person to ever look at James Tiberius Kirk and see someone worth loving. Not for who he could be, not as a reflection of some greater man who came before him, simply for who he was, without asking him to change a thing.

Jim loves every member of his crew dearly, but every bit of it—the close bonds he’s gained with Spock and the rest of his senior crew, the affection and protectiveness he feels for even the greenest Ensign onboard the Enterprise—is only possible because of Bones. Because he did it all first.

From the first day they met, when Bones plonked his drunk ass down next to Jim on the shuttle and ranted on about the myriad dangers of space, Bones fought his way past Jim’s defences. He saw past the layers upon layers of masks that Jim’d long since built up around himself right to the tiny, broken core inside and refused to look away—teaching Jim for the first time in his life how to care and be cared for in turn.

He may’ve already signed on for the Command track before they met, but Jim doesn’t want to know what kind of Captain he’d be without Bones.

Jim forces himself to focus on the present as they reach a crossroads. No matter his anger, no matter the pounding pain in his head, he needs to stay focused. Needs to stay calm.

The route to and from the dungeons is complicated. Jim fights through the grogginess slowly taking over his brain enough to memorise it. Both Spock and the exit are there. Whether Spock manages to carry out their plan or not, he’ll need to know the way back.

Jim can’t let himself hope that Spock will be able to help Bones and Sulu and Scotty. It’ll hurt too much if he’s wrong. All he can do is centre himself in the here-and-now.

Bones pulls him to a stop in front of a wide door. As Sulu goes to open it, a few snappy words come from inside. ‘Don’t try to push me, Korob!’

Sylvia.

Inside, the she-bat herself sits in that stupid throne at the end of the room, glaring at Korob who stands at the foot of the dais, returning her glare. They’re fighting.

Jim conceals his smile as cool adrenaline floods his veins. This is perfect. They’re already fighting. In hindsight, Korob did seem displeased with how Sylvia was treating their prisoners. He wouldn’t look when Jim and Spock fought to protect Bones and he protested against threatening the Enterprise.

Maybe he’s got more of an ally in Korob than he thought. While Jim has no intention of forgiving the man for what he’s done to Bones, Sulu, and Scotty, he’d still appreciate the help.

He comes to a stubborn stop at the foot of the table, despite Bones’ attempt to push him onward and despite the room swirling around him.

‘Leave us,’ Sylvia orders, rising to her feet. Her eyes are unwaveringly focused on Jim.

Jim doesn’t break the eye-contact, arms crossed, as Bones, Sulu, Scotty, and Korob leave the room. The door closes. Neither Jim nor Sylvia move. There’s an unnerving fascination to Sylvia’s gaze that makes Jim’s skin crawl. He doesn’t let it show. Instead, he makes the first move, pulling out a chair and dropping down onto it, putting both of his feet up on the table. He conceals the relief that sitting brings him, aiming a smug smirk at Sylvia.

Sylvia’s lips twitch upwards. ‘It really is fascinating.’

Jim inclines an eyebrow. ‘And what, exactly, is fascinating?’

‘You.’ Sylvia comes around the table, looking him up and down. ‘Doctor McCoy’s memories were so clear, yet contradictory.’

Jim stiffens, keeping his anger hidden with ferocious willpower. ‘I’m a complicated guy.’

‘Indeed, you are, Captain,’ says Sylvia. ‘The good doctor has seen a great many people die, including yourself, yet here you sit. Doctor McCoy’s memories would suggest this to be an aberration.’ She tilts her head to the side, as Jim’s hands curl into tight fists at his sides. ‘Death is fascinating for one of my kind, it is rare indeed for us, you see? Yet you break even your own kind’s rules.’

‘Oh, the little warpcore incident? It’d be bold to call that *death*,’ Jim says with a shrug. ‘It was really more of a cardiac arrest.’

‘Oh, Captain. You should know better than to try and lie to me. I saw it all, you know.’ Sylvia’s smile reveals teeth, more than there should be for the human she’s masquerading as. ‘Poor Leonard was so very heartbroken when they brought your cooling corpse to him. It was like half his soul had been ripped out. I felt it all.’

Something tightens in Jim’s chest; his nails dig deep into his palms. ‘*You* didn’t feel a damn thing.’ He shoves himself to his feet, a wave of nausea crashing over him. Rather than sit back down, he grabs onto the edge of the table to steady himself. ‘You know nothing about McCoy, nothing about any of us!’

‘But I do, Captain. I was in his head, I saw it all,’ Sylvia says. ‘It was in the other two’s minds as well. You and your crew, you came to your positions through blood. So many dead, so many lives blotted out. Commander Spock’s entire planet, for instance. And your classmates, how many of them died out there in the stars, do you think? Doctor McCoy tries very hard to forget the specific number yet the grief remains, ever-present.’ Her smile grows, a sickening delight to it. ‘It’s mesmerising. My kind, our experiences are so...empty compared to yours. We have no concept of grief or love or anger. They’re entirely new to me. They excite me.’

‘*Excite* you?’ Jim’s heart pulses in his ears. He digs his nails deeper.

‘Yes.’ Sylvia steps far too close. ‘I’ve never known anything like it, Captain. I never knew there was so much to feel and do out there.’

Jim takes a surreptitious step backwards. ‘So that’s what you want? You want to tear through our minds, taking our memories, experiencing second-hand emotions?’ He raises his chin, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. ‘It’s not real. You’re not feeling or experiencing anything.’ He leans forward an inch. ‘You’re nothing but a parasite, Sylvia.’

‘Parasite?’ Sylvia presses a hand to her heart, eyes widening in false shock. ‘Captain, I can assure you, I am no parasite. I seek new knowledge, is that wrong?’

‘When you’re ripping it out of people’s heads, yes.’

‘Captain, let me assure you, there is no damage! I drain only knowledge and will.’

Jim leans against the table, letting it take his weight as he crosses his arms, glaring at her. ‘You don’t think that’s damage?’

Sylvia’s eyes flash. ‘It is not *my* fault that my kind cannot naturally experience what you speak of. I have had but a taste and I want more!’

‘Then get it yourself! Go out into the universe and feel for yourself, Sylvia.’

‘I cannot!’

‘Of course you can!’ Jim gestures to her. ‘Look at you! You have a body, a mind. What more d’you need?’

‘It isn’t as simple as that,’ Sylvia says. ‘You show your human ignorance, Captain.’

‘Then what *do* you need?’ Jim scowls at her. ‘What do you want?’

‘I want *you*, Captain!’ Sylvia reaches up to brush her hand across his right cheek, either not noticing or not caring when he instinctively flinches away. ‘With you at my side, I could learn so much more. I could feel so much more! Think of what we could be together. I have never before conceived of togetherness but you make me desire it.’

Jim presses himself more firmly against the table-edge as she comes closer. ‘Yeah, that’s not happening.’

Sylvia pouts. ‘Whyever not? Am I not beautiful?’

Beautiful, sure, the way the wolfsbane flower is beautiful. ‘You’re not my type,’ he says. His type tends to exclude women who’ve tortured his friends. He’s picky like that.

Sylvia’s pout deepens. ‘Does this form not please you, Captain? What about this one?’ She retreats, raising the wand and switching herself out for a younger blonde woman, dressed in the most outlandish outfit Jim’s ever seen.

Jim eyes the wand, taking advantage of her move to get the table between them. ‘Lady, it doesn’t matter how many times you wave your magic wand, it isn’t gonna happen.’

Her face stiffens, as she flashes back to her original form. ‘It is *not* a magic wand! It’s a...’ She stops, pressing her lips together. ‘Captain,’ she says, giving him a sultry—or an *attempt* at sultry—smile. She stalks around the table and tries again to touch his face. This time he ducks away; her smile slips. ‘Captain, what if I offered to allow your men to go free?’

Jim stiffens. ‘And why would you do that?’

‘A token of good will,’ Sylvia says. ‘That is customary among your kind, is it not? I cannot, of course, do it right this moment, but once you and I are safely away, travelling the stars, I would be happy to release them.’

Jim has never heard such a load of baloney in all his life. He suppresses any sign of his disgust. ‘Can’t help but notice that your plan’s only got room for two. What about Baldie? What’s he think of all this?’

Sylvia’s nose wrinkles. ‘You mean Korob? He is worthless, I have no need of him.’

Loyalty certainly isn’t one of her strong suits at any rate. Jim sends the briefest of looks at her not-a-wand. That’s the source of their power, it must be. Every time either of them uses said power, they wield that exact instrument. If he gets it off her...

‘It’s just you and Korob?’ he asks. ‘There is no one else to...get in the way?’ Oh, he feels sick.

Her smile widens. ‘Without the transmuter, my kind are nothing but our essence. They won’t be capable of interfering in our plans.’

Transmuter. That must be the name of the not-a-wand. He’s got to destroy it. That, at least, will render them incapable of harming the Enterprise and prevent further harm to anyone’s minds. He can’t be sure if it’ll release Bones, Sulu, and Scotty, but he has to *try*.

Maybe, if he gives her what she wants, they would be released, but something tells him that letting either of these creatures near any inhabited planets would be a terrible idea. He can, however, play along, even if the very thought makes him physically ill. It’s not a new tactic to him. Once, on Tarsus IV, Jim had to flirt with one of Kodos’ men, keeping him distracted from the other kids long enough for Tallulah—brave, vicious little Tallulah—to smash the guy’s head in from behind.

‘Sylvia,’ he begins, slowly letting his posture relax. ‘You promise my men would be safe?’

‘Of course,’ Sylvia says. ‘I do not lie, Captain. I have already gathered what information I want from them, if I had you, I would have no further need of them.’ She prowls forward, keeping her eyes on him. ‘We could be so great together, Captain, you and I! As two minds made one, we would go anywhere we wished, do anything we wanted. Your knowledge and my power, together.’

Jim carefully moves closer, wetting his lips, meeting her eyes. 'It does sound wonderful,' he lies, letting uncertainty and even longing into his voice.

Sylvia smiles. 'Exactly, Captain.' She presses her palm to his cheek, this time leaving her hand there when he doesn't recoil.

She comes closer, standing up on tiptoes. Jim forces himself to return the gesture, leaning downwards.

It's for Bones, Sulu, and Scotty, he chants to himself, as her lips touch his. *It's for Bones, Sulu, and Scotty*.

Something flutters against his mind. Sylvia's eyes snap open. She stumbles backwards, gasping in air. 'You...you're *lying!*'

Well, there goes that idea. Jim shrugs, hating himself for the relief that floods him. 'Guilty as charged.'

'You're using me!' she exclaims.

Jim shrugs, not at all remorseful. She is *literally* holding his friends' souls hostage. Ethically, he's in the clear here. 'Guess now you know how it feels, huh? New feelings, that's what you wanted from me. I always deliver.'

Sylvia's upper lip curls as she goes to speak again.

The door slams open, soundly cutting her off..

'The other prisoner!' Korob cries, striding in alone. 'Commander Spock! He's escaped!'

Hell yeah, Spock.

Jim pretends to be surprised. Why, he simply has *no* idea how that could've happened. Oh no, where *did* Spock get lockpicks? Alas. Who could've seen this coming?

Sylvia grits her teeth and shoots a suspicious look at Jim. '...He cannot have gone far, not with his Captain here with us. Korob, return Captain Kirk to his cell—make sure he is *properly* restrained this time, please—and guard him. I will take the other three in search of the Commander. Quickly now! If he escapes too, it will be on your head.'

Korob nods and grabs Jim's upper arm hard, dragging him alongside as they leave the room. Jim doesn't struggle until they're well and truly out of Sylvia's sight; Sylvia would gladly harm the Enterprise if he disobeyed, whereas Korob has a weaker stomach for carrying out threats.

Once they're safely away, he strikes, turning on Korob.

Korob stammers, stumbling away. 'Cap...captain! Please, calm yourself, I am on your side!'

'Oh, yeah?' Jim snaps. 'Prove it.'

Korob holds out Jim's phaser and communicator. 'Sylvia has gone mad!' he explains. 'Our mission was never this, it was only ever exploration, to learn more of the universe beyond our planet and bring that knowledge back to the Old Ones. Sylvia is...' Korob stops and shivers.

Jim grits his teeth, snatching both devices. 'Where's Spock?'

'I was telling the truth to Sylvia,' Korob says. 'Your man escaped, an impressive feat. You must find him and escape, quickly. Your ship has been freed from the crystal; I released it myself. Leave, before it's too late.'

'And my men?' Jim pushes.

'They belong to Sylvia now, body and soul. There is nothing I can do. You must go, you and the Commander.'

Well, that's not happening. 'I'm not leaving without *all* of my friends.' Jim examines his phaser as he speaks, scowling when his and Spock's theory is confirmed. The phasers are drained. That means their three brainwashed friends can't use them, which is good, but Jim nor Spock can't either, and that's less so.

'You must, Captain!'

'I won't.' Jim sets his jaw. Leave without Bones, without Sulu, without Scotty? Abandon them to be slaves to that deranged bat? Jim'd sooner blow his own brains out. 'D'you know where Spock went?'

'I do not,' Korob says, looking around anxiously. 'You must find him, regardless. Go, go now!'

With that, Korob turns tail and runs off towards Sylvia. Jim wastes no more time.

Wherever Spock is, he's trying to break through the control on one of the others, whichever one he gets alone. Jim can't help with that, but he *can* make sure Spock gets the time to do it.

Sylvia's on the hunt and right now the one thing that'll distract her from his men is Jim himself.

Jim doesn't go in Sylvia's direction. It's vital that he doesn't get caught, only keeps her busy long enough for Spock to do his magic.

Instead, taking a moment to recall the directions to their cell and the layout of the halls above from their earlier search, Jim heads for the dungeon. It's empty and unguarded, of course, which is exactly what he needs.

He sends a glance upwards. Good, the hole's still there. Frankly, in this place, he wouldn't've been surprised if it'd moved.

That ascertained, Jim gently closes the door and heads over to the rack. He heaves, pulling it across the floor—it screeches as it grinds across the stone, sending further shockwaves of pain through Jim's head—until it sits under the hole above. He assesses the gap between the two and nods with satisfaction.

With that, he races over to the heavy door and yanks it wide open, proceeding to slam it shut as hard as he can several times. The ear-splitting bangs reverberate through the air.

A loud snarl comes from somewhere a few corridors away and Jim grins. Got her attention.

He cups his hands around his mouth. 'Hey, Sylvia! You really shoulda checked me for lockpicks!'

With that, Jim runs back into the dungeon, shimmying up onto the rack—which shakes alarmingly under his weight—then leaping and grabbing at the edge of the hole above. His fingers cry out in pain as they're suddenly forced to take his weight but Jim doesn't let it stop him. He drags himself upwards, making it onto the steadier floor as a cat's yowl comes from beneath him.

He spares a glance downwards, long enough to catch a glimpse of a *terrifyingly* large shadow in the shape of a cat.

'Oh, hell,' he mutters, shoving himself to his feet and running.

The corridors are confusing, even with his mental map of the layout. Jim aims for the door outside. If Sylvia chases him outside, that'll give Spock plenty of time, right? And it'll be a lot easier for Jim to keep away from her out of the closed confines of this nightmare castle.

He skids into a turn as he reaches a familiar crossroads, the exit tantalisingly in view.

Something catches him in the side, clawing through his shirt and into his ribs. He screams in pain as he's sent flying into the wall behind him.

He struggles up to his knees, as an enormous black cat—or, rather, a vague approximation of a cat, with Muffins super-mega sized up, the numerous errors Sylvia's made have become apparent to disconcerting effect—prowls towards him, blood dripping from her left paw's claws. She hisses, showing exactly the wrong number of sharp teeth—why's Sylvia so bad at *teeth*?

Jim leaps out of the way of her next swipe. She growls and prepares to leap at him.

He scrambles backwards, flicking his gaze around for a way out. It's too confined, there's no...

Another swipe comes, this one slicing right across his chest. Blood sprays out and he screams again, unable to keep himself from sinking to the floor. Dark spots blot his vision. *Shit, shit, shit, shit...*

Sylvia-the-cat howls in pain, rearing.

'Jim!' It's Spock, calling for him. 'This way!'

Jim moves on instinct, scrambling around Sylvia as she wails. Spock grabs his left arm, yanking him alongside. To his right, Bones rips something out of Sylvia's rear and races after them, dripping blood as he goes.

Unable to think or process what just happened, Jim keeps up the pace. Down corridors and around corners they run, until they reach a flight of stairs and race upwards.

Once a few corridors into the second floor, Spock finally lets them stop for a rest, apparently noticing that Jim's flagging. Jim sinks to the ground, mind whirring.

'Bones...you...'

'Thank the hobgoblin,' Bones says, dropping down next to him with a wince, glancing at what he's holding before grimacing and throwing it into the other side of the corridor. 'He got inside my head.'

Jim grins, still trying to draw in air. 'Knew...you could...do it, Spock.'

'Indeed,' Spock says, looking distinctly pleased with himself.

'What's...that?' Jim points at the bloody object on the other side of the corridor.

'Oh, it's one of Sylvia's little scare tactics.' Bones scowls at it. 'It's a torture device from the dungeon. Looks kinda like a comb, but way sharper.'

Jim pushes up onto his knees with a wince of pain, trying to see. 'Ah,' he says. 'Spanish tickler. Nice.' He gives Bones a weak grin. 'Think it was also known as the cat's paw.'

'Of course *you* know that,' Bones says, with a shake of his head, but he returns the smile—not much stronger than Jim's but far more than Jim was hoping to ever see again a few minutes ago.

‘We must hurry.’ Spock rises to his feet, forehead wrinkling. ‘She is not far behind us. Do you have a plan, Captain?’

Jim shoves himself to his feet, hugging the wall as the black spots return with a vengeance. ‘Bones all you managed to free?’

‘Regrettably, yes,’ Spock says. ‘The others remained together or with Korob the entire time. I was able to aid the Doctor because Korob left him alone near our cell upon discovering my escape.’

Bones grimaces, rising and leaning against the wall heavily. ‘And let me tell you, that is *not* an experience I’m hoping to repeat.’

Spock stiffens, his eyebrows twitching guiltily. ‘I am truly sorry, Leonard. I would not have done as I did had there been another way to free you. I attempted to keep the meld as surface-level as I could whilst still routing out Sylvia’s influence.’

Bones waves his words away. ‘Wasn’t talking ‘bout that,’ is all he says. He shoves himself off the wall. ‘Jim? Plan?’

‘Their powers come from something called the “transmuter”,’ Jim says, sending a glance back the way they’ve come and gesturing for the others to follow him. Not as fast as their initial escape, but it’ll at least continue putting distance between them and their pursuer. He continues to talk hurriedly as they go. ‘It’s that funny wand-looking thing with the glass bulb on top. I don’t know how it works but Sylvia said that, without it, they’re just essence. They have no power. So, I’m thinking, maybe if we destroy it, then...’

‘We could free Sulu and Scotty?’ Bones says eagerly.

‘Exactly.’ There’s another crossroads ahead; Jim speeds up as they near it. ‘We could, at least, make it safer for Spock to...’

Spock yanks him back as a sword-blade slices through the air, cutting off Jim’s words and almost his head. Out from the left-hand corridor step Sulu and Scotty—Sulu with his retractable sword out and ready for blood, Scotty carrying an enormous mace.

Jim pushes out of Spock’s steadying grip. ‘Sulu, Scotty!’ he calls. ‘Come on, guys! It’s us!’

Their only response is Sulu swinging his sword at them. Jim yanks Bones backwards as the blade comes dangerously close to cutting him open.

‘Spock, can you help ‘em?’ Jim asks.

‘We must subdue them both first.’ Spock dodges out of the way as Scotty attempts to crack his skull open with the mace.

‘Got it.’ Jim grits his teeth, dragging Bones backwards with him as Sulu raises his sword above his head, bringing it down in a devastating slice that only just misses. Bones has gone a peculiar shade of grey, barely aiding Jim in his endeavours to avoid death-by-Sulu. ‘Bones, come on!’ Jim hisses. ‘Snap out of it, man!’

As Spock gains a hold on Scotty’s mace, Bones’s eyes flick to Jim’s, before he cries out, collapsing out of Jim’s grip, hands gripping his head with white knuckles. He writhes in pain, moaning as his skin pales ever more.

‘Bones!’ Jim reaches for him.

Sulu takes advantage of Jim’s distraction, swinging at him and catching his arm with the razor-sharp edge. Hissing, Jim stumbles back, gaze darting from Bones on the floor to Sulu prepared for the slightest weak spot in Jim’s defences. ‘Sulu!’ Jim calls, one hand on his bleeding arm. ‘Hikaru, come on! It’s me, Jim! You know me, man! You know Bones, we’re your friends! Something’s wrong with Bones, you gotta help him!’

There is no sign of recognition in Sulu’s eyes and Jim grinds his teeth together. There’s no choice here. He has to fight back; he has to take Sulu down. It’s what Sulu, in his right mind, would *want* Jim to do.

Sparing a glance at Spock, who’s wrestling Scotty for his mace with renewed vigour, Jim pulls out the (drained) phaser and waits for Sulu to bring the sword sweeping around again. Catching it on the phaser butt, Jim knocks it back and moves under, kicking out at Sulu’s legs.

Sulu falls backwards, tripping over Bones. Bones struggles to his feet, still grey with pain. With fumbling fingers, he gets the sword away from the dazed Sulu.

Just in time, as Sulu recovers and struggles back to his feet seconds later.

‘Bones, here!’ Jim calls out to him.

Bones goes to throw it to him, but stops short, letting out a terrible scream. ‘Jim, I can’t keep...’ he gasps out, before another scream tears its way out of his throat, his back hunching.

As if a switch was flicked, his entire posture changes. His face relaxes—or stiffens, it’s hard to say which, it’s *unnatural* whatever it is—and his eyes go blank, as he straightens up.

‘Bones?’ Jim stares at him, a cold dread clamping his stomach.

Bones doesn’t respond or react. Only turns and hands the sword back to the recovered Sulu, who takes it, moving into a battle-ready stance.

Dammit. Sylvia’s retaken control over Bones.

‘Spock!’ Jim shouts. ‘She’s...’

He chokes back his words as Sulu takes another swipe at him. Jim dodges backwards, the blade brushing ever-close to hitting him. Beyond

Sulu, Spock visibly tightens his grip on Scotty's mace-handle and *shoves* with it, sending Scotty flying backwards.

Spock's on him a second later, delivering a sharp nerve-pinch to Scotty's neck, making him slump. Spock turns and sends the mace flying across the floor towards Jim, who drops to the ground, grabs it by the handle, rolling back to his feet to catch Sulu's next sword-swipe before it can slice his head in two.

Together, they grapple, neither one giving ground.

'Leonard!' Spock's voice comes from behind Sulu. 'Focus on me, you know who you are. *Remember!*'

Sulu—face frighteningly devoid of emotion—brings up his knee, slamming it into the slices in Jim's chest. Jim can't stop the scream of pain that explodes out of him. His arms give out. Dropping and rolling so the sword-blade slams into the stone floor instead of him, Jim comes back up into a crouch.

'Jim!' Spock sounds alarmed.

Bones shrieks. Instinctually, Jim's gaze shoots over to see Bones back to gripping his head in pain.

A slash catches his arm—same one, *again*—and Jim snaps his attention back to Sulu as Spock press his fingers against Sulu's neck in a nerve-pinch from behind. Sulu collapses to the floor and Jim doesn't waste any more time, darting over to Bones' side.

'Bones, what happened, did she...?'

'She's...' Bones cuts himself off with another moan of pain. Jim slides closer, hands going to support him. 'In my head, Jim. I can't...I can't keep her out...Spock, *please*...'

Jim's gaze flits up to meet Spock's. They both know what Bones is asking for.

With a grim expression, Spock nods and reaches out, delivering the gentlest nerve-pinch Jim's ever seen to Bones' neck. Bones collapses into Jim's arms, unconscious. Jim hugs him tight to his chest, fury boiling up inside of him. 'We're gonna fix this, Bones.' He brushes his friend's hair out of his face. 'I promise we'll fix this.'

He glances at Sulu and Scotty. 'Are they okay, Spock? No injuries?'

Spock takes a moment to examine them both. 'No,' he says. 'They remain healthy.'

'I would suggest you try the mind-meld tactic again.' A bitter bark of laughter escapes Jim, as he looks back down at Bones' thankfully pain-free face. 'But I guess we saw how well that goes.'

'Indeed.' A quickly hidden flare of rage shines in Spock's eyes. 'It would seem that we have no other option than to destroy this transmuter you spoke of.'

A hiss comes from further back down the passageway, as claws tap against stone, coming towards them from behind. Jim tightens his grip on Bones, glancing up at Spock. 'What're the chances we escape while carrying three unconscious bodies?'

Spock presses his lips together. 'Infinitesimal, sir.'

'Well then.' Jim squeezes Bones gently one last time, before he rises to his feet. 'Move them closer together. I guess we're standing our ground.'

He drags Scotty over to Bones' side—muttering an apology to him for the unavoidable rough handling—grabbing the mace afterwards, as Spock does the same with Sulu and his sword. 'Careful with that, Spock,' he says. 'Hikaru'll have both our heads if we lose his precious sword. You know he got that specially forged?'

Spock inclines his head. 'I am aware.'

Jim gives him the sharpest grin that he can muster. 'Right. Let's kick that cat's ass.'

Spock returns it with a slight up-tilt of his lips. Coming from Spock, it's practically a blood-thirsty war cry.

The clink-clink of Sylvia's claws draws nearer and she comes into view, a colossal nightmarish mass of black, her bright green eyes shining in the faint light. She's grown even bigger, her bulbous sides grazing the walls. She could go faster, Jim's sure of it, but she seems to be enjoying slowly ambling towards them, knowing they have no way of escaping her.

He grips Scotty's mace tighter and both he and Spock move in unison so they're in front of their unconscious friends. If Sylvia wants to hurt them again, she'll have to kill Jim and Spock first.

The monstrous cat prowls nearer and nearer. Jim holds the mace up, ready to swing. Spock does the same with Sulu's sword.

Sylvia doesn't slow.

Tension ripples through Jim's muscles. Acutely aware of his vulnerable crewmen behind him, he keeps his stance solid.

'Sylvia, stop!'

Korob's voice is so sudden, so loud, that Jim nearly drops the mace. He tightens his grip on it, taking in a deep breath. 'Korob?' he says without taking his eyes off Sylvia, who briefly froze in surprise then continued, moving faster. 'What...?'

'I am sorry, Captain, for my part in all this,' Korob says, striding around Jim and halting between them and Sylvia, who has now fully stopped. 'It is my duty to prevent Sylvia from unleashing further harm to you and your crew.'

Sylvia howls and Korob's back straightens. He holds the transmuter at his side, ready.

For a moment, the two eye each other, frozen in place, waiting for the other to make the first move. Carefully, Jim gestures to Spock to move backwards. Slowly, they retreat, until they're as far from the pair as they can be without standing on the others.

Korob raises the transmuter.

'Sylvia,' he cries. 'I do not want to use this. Please. Let this end!'

Sylvia snarls and leaps forward, swiping at him with her right paw. He waves the transmuter, and a shield of the same material as that around the Enterprise appears between them. It breaks under Sylvia's claws, but Korob remains unharmed.

He waves it again. This time, Sylvia screeches in pain, though Jim can't see any injury. She bares her teeth at him and Korob takes a step back. 'I'm sorry, Sylvia but I must do this! Please, stop!'

Sylvia's back arches, as she hisses in fury.

'Please, Sylvia, please!' Korob calls.

Sylvia bounds forward, swiping her paw anew. This time, her claws land. Blood sprays out into the air around Korob and—for a moment—Jim doesn't know what's happened. Then, Korob collapses to the floor, blood spurting out of his clawed-open throat.

Jim freezes, shock rooting him to the spot. Thankfully, Spock isn't so affected. He's beside Korob before Jim can move a muscle, snatching up the transmuter and racing back to Jim's side.

'Keep a hold of it, Spock,' Jim says, more for Sylvia's benefit than Spock's. 'She'll want that back way more than she'll want anything else from us. Isn't that right, Sylvia?'

Sylvia howls in rage, shaking her fur violently. A moment later, her cat form is replaced by the same female form Sylvia has worn throughout their time here.

'Captain, Commander,' Sylvia says coaxingly, an attempt at a charming smile on her face. Given she tore open her partner's throat seconds ago, it's ineffective. 'Let us not be rash. Give me the transmuter and all shall be well. I will even release your friends, you may all leave. Commander, give it to me, now!'

Spock doesn't move.

Jim scoffs. 'You've already tried that one, Sylvia. Remember how well it went for you?'

Sylvia's lip curls. She reaches up and strokes her emerald pendant and, just like that, they're all back in the throne room. Jim is, frankly, sick to death of this stupid room.

Sylvia reaches out across the table that's now between them. 'Give me the transmuter, Commander Spock.'

Spock inclines an eyebrow. 'That would be ill-advised.'

Sylvia's face twists. 'Captain!' she snaps. 'Order him! You can still come with me, you and I, together! Think of what we could achieve!'

Jim glances at Spock then back at Sylvia. 'Nah, still not interested.'

'Captain!' Sylvia snarls, her face drawn. She reaches into her robes and withdraws a phaser, aiming it at them. 'Give it to me, immediately!'

'You drained those, remember?' Jim points out.

'Not this one,' Sylvia says icily. She alters a setting, before aiming at the three unconscious crewmen that she's also brought with them into the throne room. Before Jim or Spock can move to stop her, she shoots, the phaser beam hitting Sulu. He grunts in pain, though it doesn't rouse him.

'Stop that!' Jim leaps over the table, immediately regretting the movement as his head pounds and nausea swirls in his throat. He doesn't back down though, shoving Sylvia backwards and standing in between his men and her. 'Leave them alone!'

Sylvia inclines her chin, adjusting the setting on the phaser. 'Now it is set to kill, Captain. Do not press me. Give me the transmuter, Commander Spock, and you will not watch your unconscious men die.'

Jim flits his gaze over to meet Spock's, looking to the transmuter and back to Spock himself. He gives a single short nod.

Spock, as ever, remains fully in-tune with Jim's thoughts. In one swift motion, he brings the transmuter down against the table, smashing the glass bulb at the top.

A blinding light swallows up everything as Sylvia screams.

Chapter 4

For one long second, there's nothing. The next, everything snaps back into place.

The endless rocks stick up all around them, cleared of mysterious miasma. Jim straightens, registering the cold metal of his phaser in his hand. Beside him is Spock, sans transmuter and instead also plus one phaser.

There's no sign of Sylvia.

Behind him, someone groans—a delightfully familiar groan. '...Jim?'

'Bones!' Jim spins around. 'You okay?'

Bones nods, pushing himself up out of the pile, as the other two show their own signs of waking. 'I...think I'm alright,' he says, grimacing as he runs a hand through his hair. 'Feels...feels like she's gone.'

She's gone. Destroying the transmuter worked. Only at this exact moment does Jim process how little he believed it would.

He sucks in a breath, choking hard on it.

'Jim?' Bones prods, shoving himself into a kneel as he looks Jim up and down. A familiar worried wrinkle appears in his forehead.

Somehow, the sight of that wrinkle is what Jim needs to force his body to move. He drops to his own knees, the flood of pain it triggers unimportant as he yanks Bones into a tight hug.

His throat closes up on him, all articulate thoughts vanishing from his mind.

Thankfully, Bones has never needed words to understand Jim. Hugging him back just as tightly, Bones presses one hand against Jim's hair. 'I'm alright, Jim,' he says softly. 'I promise.'

Jim draws in a shuddering breath as—to his right—Sulu lets out a groan of his own.

'Did someone whack me in the head?' he says. 'Cause I feel like someone whacked me in the head?'

Forcing himself to draw back from Bones enough to see Sulu and Scotty, Jim smiles at Sulu. 'Honestly, probably not that far off the mark.'

Sulu blinks at the sight of him. 'Captain?'

Scotty sits up, shaking his head. 'Jim, laddie? What're you doing down here? Where's Jackson?'

Jim's smile falls.

'Jackson's dead, Scotty,' he says sombrely. Both Scotty and Sulu stare at him in horror. 'It's a long story. I'll explain once we're back to the ship.'

Scotty and Sulu exchange glances.

'Weren't we in in a castle?' Sulu says with a frown. 'Where'd it all go?'

Jim sighs. 'Everything disappeared when Spock broke the...well, I'll explain that bit later. It...'

'Captain.' Spock's voice draws their attention.

Jim shoves himself to his feet, wincing as his *many* aches and pains gleefully make their presence known. Bones is up and by his side before Jim has a chance to hide it, wrapping his arm around Jim's waist. Jim indulges him. Wasn't that long ago that he thought Bones and his mother-henning ways were lost forever.

Besides, Jim is in a *lot* of pain.

They make their way slowly over to Spock's side, Sulu and Scotty following, all coming to stand in a semi-circle around what Spock's found. At first, all any of them can do is stare. There, by Spock's feet, are two tiny puppet-like creatures: arms and legs thin, blue fur poking up every which way. What passes for their faces consists only of tentacles, like really tiny, really cute Cthulhus.

'It's them,' Jim says. 'Korob and Sylvia. The transmuter was all that gave them their forms.'

'Fascinating,' Spock says, that curiosity reigniting in his eyes. 'They're totally alien to our galaxy, creatures beyond our scientific comprehension. Perhaps if we...'

Before he can finish, the small creatures collapse, smoke rising from the bodies. When the smoke clears, there is nothing left behind.

Spock tilts his head to the side ever-so-slightly. 'Well,' he says. 'I was going to say that we could preserve and study them. That does not appear to be possible. What truly intriguing creatures.'

Bones shivers. 'Can't say I'm disappointed,' he says, shifting closer where he's holding Jim up. 'If I never have to meet another one of them again, it'll be too soon.'

'I second that.' Jim uses his free hand to find his communicator—thankfully restored to him—and flips it open. 'Let's get out of here. Kirk to Enterprise, come in.'

'Jim!' Uhura's voice comes through loud and clear. 'You're alive! What about everyone else, are they okay?'

'We're all fine, Nyota,' Jim promises. 'Mostly anyway. Five to beam up.'

The first thing Jim notices is the familiar beeps and bustle of Sickbay. The building tension is punctured by the equally familiar noise of Spock and Bones arguing over top of him, sending a rush of relief through Jim.

'...I do not believe Jim would wish you to...'

'Yeah, well, Jim can stick his head in a replicator and turn it to spaghetti for all I care!'

This threat from Bones is both unprovoked and confusing—exactly how Bones likes it.

'Wow, Bones,' Jim says without opening his eyes. His head already hurts enough. 'What'd I do to deserve that?'

'You wandered all over a flippin' castle with a damn concussion, that's what you did,' Bones says, relief dripping from every word he says. 'Condition you were in, you should've escaped the second you got the chance.'

'Like hell,' Jim says vehemently, keeping his eyes closed. His head is pounding, nausea swirling around in his throat.

'Yeah, yeah, I know,' Bones says. A hand squeezes Jim's shoulder while another goes to brush his hair away from his eyes. 'Come on, open those eyes for me, you stubborn little idiot.'

A laugh bursts out of Jim, making his chest throb. Nonetheless, he does as he's told—for once—peeling his eyes open in a squint.

The blinding lights of Sickbay have, to Jim's relief, been turned down over his biobed, meaning it's not as painful to do as it could've been. Nausea and stabbing pain crash over him, preventing him from opening them fully. His vision clears to reveal Bones right by his head. Spock's on the other side, leaning in.

'Ugh,' Jim says. 'What happened? How'd I end up in here?'

Last he remembers, they were about to beam up.

'You do not recall?' Spock's eyebrows draw together.

'Not surprising given the concussion,' Bones interjects, his thumb rubbing soothing circles into Jim's temple. 'You fainted straight-out the second we beamed up. Gave us all a hell of a start.'

'Sorry,' Jim says.

Bones rolls his eyes. 'Nah, you're not.'

Jim snickers, slowly trying to sit up. Bones, thankfully, doesn't stop him, instead helping to prop him up with pillows.

'I didn't feel this bad before,' Jim says. 'What gives?'

'Adrenaline's one hell of a drug,' Bones says wryly. 'Kept you going long enough for us to beam up, then it ran out. Transporter beam didn't help either, not in that condition.'

Jim squints at him. 'Huh. Guess that checks out.'

Bones sits back in his chair, shaking his head. 'On top of that concussion,' he says. 'You also had significant blood-loss. Don't suppose you noticed getting your chest ripped open, did you?'

'I did,' Jim confirms.

'Well, you could've mentioned it.' Bones reaches up to massage at his nose-bridge and sighs. 'You'll be alright. I sorted out all the cuts. You'll be sore for a while but they've healed nicely. That said, I don't want you doing any physical exercise for at least a week. Concussion's still there, not much I can do other than let it heal itself. You're off-duty for three days; light duty for four more. Got it?'

Jim's first instinct is to complain—he *doesn't* need that long to heal. Something about Bones' expression, however, stops him. Beneath his friend's usual belligerent expression is something fragile and exhausted, something Jim hasn't seen since Khan.

'Whatever,' he says instead. 'Can I at least leave?'

Bones rolls his eyes again. 'Only if you go right to your quarters and stay there, numbskull.'

'Do I at least get food, oh jailer?'

‘If you behave.’

Jim sighs heavily. ‘Dang it. Spock, will *you* bring me food? Under the table, so to speak.’

Spock inclines an eyebrow while Bones rolls his eyes—*again*, he’s giving his eyes a work-out today. ‘Oh, shut it, Jim,’ Bones says, leaning forward and stabbing him violently in the neck with a hypospray. ‘Cool your heels and *I’ll* bring you something to eat once I’m done with my shift, you idiot.’

Jim frowns. ‘Aren’t you done now?’ He has no idea how much time passed down on Pyris Seven, but it must’ve been a good few hours, on top of the seven hours Bones’d already done.

Spock coughs deliberately. ‘Doctor McCoy has claimed that, as he experienced no injury, he is capable of taking over for the remainder of the second shift that began while we were on Pyris Seven.’ Despite Spock’s avowed disapproval of showing emotion, he loads his words down with a healthy degree of scepticism.

‘Bones!’ Jim scowls at him. ‘You need rest!’

‘Oh and I’m supposed to be taking advice from you, Mr-Mixes-Stims-With-Caffeine?’ Bones scowls back. ‘I’m *fine*, Jim! It’s not like the Sickbay’s that busy.’

‘One could argue,’ Spock says. ‘That is more reason for you to rest.’

‘Shut up, you green-blooded hobgoblin,’ Bones snaps, aiming a venomous glare at Spock.

Jim frowns. That must’ve been what the two of them were arguing about when he woke up. ‘How’re Scotty and Sulu?’ he says, interrupting their argument before it can go any further.

‘They are well, physically,’ Spock says.

‘Scans were all clear,’ Bones adds with a shrug. ‘Brain scans showed some unusual activity but that’s to be expected. I dismissed ‘em both, though they’re off-duty for three days and they’re having another scan at the end of that to make sure nothing changes.’

Interesting how Scotty and Sulu are off-duty while Bones isn’t, despite having exactly the same ailment. Jim and Spock meet each other’s eyes, before looking back at Bones, who’s trying to appear oblivious, checking over the PADD in his hand. ‘Scotty headed down to Engineering, against my orders I might add, though he’s probably happiest down there,’ Bones continues talking without looking up. ‘Keenser went after him. Hikaru’s gone back to his quarters. Pavel was heading over to check on him.’

In that case, Sulu’ll be well taken care of. Chekov’ll probably drag him into some holo-game and he’ll soon be distracted from thinking too much about what happened down on Pyris Seven. Scotty’ll be alright too, he’s never happier than when surrounded by the Enterprise’s beautiful engines—and that liquor distillery that Jim officially knows nothing about (unofficially, Jim was helping him put it together a few weeks ago).

Jim draws in a breath. ‘What did you tell them about my injuries?’ he asks carefully.

Bones and Spock exchange glances. They know what he’s really asking.

‘I told ‘em that you musta hit your head harder than us when we fell through the floor,’ Bones says. ‘Which is true, by the way. Then that you got yourself into a literal catfight.’

‘We decided that it was...’ Spock pauses a moment before carefully saying ‘...unnecessary to inform Mr. Sulu of his involvement in your second head-injury. He and Mr. Scott are aware they were used as guards by our captors. That is all.’

‘Wouldn’t do him or anyone much good,’ Bones adds. ‘It’d only make him feel guilty for something he had no control over.’

Jim nods, satisfied. ‘They don’t remember anything about what Sylvia made them do?’

‘Not a thing,’ Bones says. ‘They remember...her taking control. That’s it, everything after’s gone.’ As he speaks, Bones’ grip on his PADD tightens.

Jim glances at Spock, who inclines an eyebrow slightly. Once more, they’re on the same page.

With a slight tilt of his lips, Spock inclines his chin. ‘If all is well here, I shall take my leave. Nyota wished to spend this evening meal together.’

‘You better run,’ Bones says immediately. ‘Don’t wanna make your girlfriend mad.’

‘I assure you, Doctor, I will endeavour not to do so,’ Spock says. ‘Captain, I will write the report on Pyris Seven for you to read through once you’re able.’

‘Not for at least three days!’ Bones says.

‘*Bones...*’

‘Shut it, Jim.’ Bones turns his glare on Spock. ‘Not for three days.’

Spock tilts his head a little. ‘I expected at least a week.’

Before Bones can stop it, a smile flits across his face. 'Yeah, yeah, whatever. Shoo, you crazy hobgoblin. You got a date to get to.'

Spock needs no further encouragement. He turns on his heel and strides out of Sickbay. Once the doors slide shut behind him, Jim tries to sit up straight. He mostly succeeds.

'I'll head back to my quarters, I guess,' he says, swinging his legs out to hang off the bed.

Grumbling, Bones assents. 'Fine. Don't keel over.'

Jim grins. 'I would never!'

With that dramatically ironic comment delivered, Jim rises to his feet and topples over onto Bones, who squawks in concern as he catches Jim.

'Maybe I was too confident,' Jim says.

'You're always too confident,' Bones says snidely.

Jim allows his weight to fall more heavily onto Bones, going floppy. 'Mean.'

'But true.' Bones scowls, eyeing him worriedly. 'I might need to run a few more scans if you're feeling this weak...'

'*Bones.* You've already run every test possible on me, I'm sure. I just need rest. In my quarters. Please?'

Bones frowns—it's his contemplative frown—and finally sighs. 'Okay, fine, whatever.' He shoves the PADD onto the biobed with his other hand and hefts Jim up so Jim's arm is over Bones' shoulders. 'Come on, I'll get you back to your quarters, since you're *clearly* not making it there on your own. Infant.'

'Jackass.' Jim returns, taking back some of his own weight to help out.

'Baby.'

'Quack.'

As they continue to bicker, Bones steers them towards the doors out of Sickbay. Jim glances over his shoulder. Chapel's watching them, a relieved smile on her face. When their eyes meet, Chapel mouths "thank you" at him and Jim briefly lets a victorious smirk flit across his face in answer, before he returns his attention back to Bones, who's continuing to grumble, oblivious.

Victory is Jim's. Sure feels good for *something* in this day to go right.

Acting like some kind of three-legged beast, they manage to reach Jim's quarters. Once inside, Bones eyes the small lounge, then looks through towards the bedroom. 'Bed or couch?'

In answer, Jim lets himself flop onto the couch.

Bones heaves a sigh. 'Right, there you are. Now.'

Before he can leave, Jim clings to him like a koala bear to a eucalyptus tree. 'Nope, no escape. You fell right into my trap.'

Bones scowls, shoving at him. '*Jim*, what the hell? I have work to do!'

'I promise you that Chapel's already signed you off. A hundred percent guaranteed.'

'Jim!'

'Bones, seriously. You need to rest. Come on, how about we watch a holo?' Jim pulls on his arm.

'No screens or holograms with a concussion,' Bones says sternly. 'Especially not those flashing-light extravaganzas you're obsessed with.'

'They're action holos,' Jim says. 'And they're fun. But we don't have to watch one of those. How about one of your period holos? You love those!'

Bones freezes, eyeing him with concern. 'That concussion must be messing with you worse than I thought.'

'*Bones.*'

Bones rolls his eyes. 'Jim, you know I can go sign myself back in. Christine can't stop me.'

Jim scowls at him. 'In that case, Captain's orders. No more working for you.'

Bones splutters. 'You can't do that!'

'Yeah, I can. Captain, remember?' Jim grins his best Cheshire Cat grin. 'I win.'

‘I overrule you in medical matters.’

‘Not in your *own* medical matters, idiot.’ Jim pulls on his arm. ‘Come on. Let’s have a nice evening and enjoy one of your stupid period holos.’

Bones grits his teeth. ‘I need to go get you your meal,’ he points out.

If Bones escapes this room, he won’t easily come back in.

‘I’m not...’ Before Jim finishes his (admittedly blatant) lie, there’s a knock on the door.

They both exchange glances, before Jim pulls away from Bones and goes to answer it. There stands Spock holding a tray of food (consisting of two main meals, two drinks, and two desserts).

Spock inclines an eyebrow. ‘Might I presume you successfully got the Doctor into your quarters?’

‘Naturally.’

Behind him, Bones squawks again. ‘You two were scheming right in front of me!’

‘Yes. Yes, we were.’ Jim grins widely, as he takes the tray of food. ‘Thanks, Spock. Go enjoy your meal with Nyota.’

Spock nods. ‘And you with Doctor McCoy.’

With that, he leaves, looking pleased with himself.

Jim closes the door and plonks the tray on the coffee table. ‘See, Bones? Problem solved. No more excuses. You’re staying.’

Bones gives in, dropping onto the couch and scowling at the food as though it personally ruined his day. ‘I’m guessing Spock didn’t actually need to leave when he did.’

Jim shrugs, taking the seat next to him and wincing when his chest flares up at the movement. ‘You would’ve made Spock help me.’

‘Too right, I would’ve.’ Bones eyes him maliciously, sitting forward and snatching one of the plates—they’re both the same, mac and cheese, presumably using replacement dairy products, since it’s one of Jim’s many allergies—and shoving it at Jim. It’s followed up by a fork. ‘Eat. You pest.’

He follows it up by grabbing his own plate and Jim relaxes, beginning on his own meal. They work their way through the tray’s contents in silence and, after that, Jim flicks on the holo-projector, swiping through until he lands on *Good Old Danny*, Bones’s favourite period holo, set during the Earth 1980s in the old USA (allegedly). It’s incredibly cheesy, incredibly inaccurate to the period in question (they somehow managed to mix up costume-styling from all across the 20th and 21st centuries; even some 19th century garb has gotten in there on occasion), incredibly badly-acted and over-the-top (there’s this one Vulcan actor who absolutely refuses to put in the least bit of effort to deliver his lines in any way other than flat; he’s Jim’s favourite character), and also totally nonsensical in plot.

Bones absolutely adores it. So do Uhura and Gaila, for that matter, Jim’s heard the three of them arguing about the latest episode (it’s been running for ten long, *long* years) over food in the mess hall, both here on the Enterprise and back in the Academy, many a time.

Selecting the one of the more recent episodes—it doesn’t matter whether Jim has seen any episodes leading up to it; the plot’s so convoluted and illogical that things like context don’t exist—Jim sits back and lets it play.

The lights have dimmed around them and Bones has slowly relaxed by the time the latest episode ends. Jim doesn’t attempt to turn the light on. Things like this have always been easier in the dark.

‘Bones?’ he says quietly. Nothing more needs to be said.

Bones lets out a sigh. ‘I’m okay, Jim.’

‘Liar.’

This prompts another sigh. ‘What d’you want me to say, Jim?’

Jim doesn’t say anything for a long moment. He flexes his hands in his lap, thinking carefully through his many hours of therapy—he needed and still needs so freaking much, it *should* make itself useful one of these days.

Be honest, Enid would say. Alright.

‘I didn’t know if I could save you, Bones,’ he says.

‘I never doubted you.’

‘Well, I doubted me!’ Jim stops himself and refocuses. ‘Seeing you like that, it *hurt*, Bones.’

Bones lets out a short, sharp, hurting laugh. 'Yeah, you made your opinion on it pretty clear down there.'

'You mean when I defended you?'

'I mean when you threw yourself into harm's way in a fool's attempt at stopping the inevitable,' Bones snaps. He stops, drawing in carefully paced breaths. 'What the hell'd you think you were doing? You were never going to stop them, Jim!'

'I wanted to protect you!' Jim snaps back. He digs his nails into his palms, forcing the pain to centre him. No. Now isn't the time for *him* to flare up. 'Bones, I wasn't gonna stand there and let her do that to you...'

'No, instead, you made me watch you be dragged from the room with blood pouring outta your stupid head.' Bones growls under his breath, shoving himself to his feet and clapping his hands to turn up the light. For a second, Jim's sure he's going to storm out. He doesn't. Instead, he paces, hands running through his hair. After a few back-and-forwards, he stops. 'They wouldn't let me help you, Jim. I didn't know if...I couldn't...' He chokes and carries on pacing.

'I'm fine, Bones,' Jim reminds him gently.

'Well, I didn't know that, did I?' Bones stops short, glaring at Jim. 'For all I knew you could be dying and I couldn't do a damn thing to stop it! I couldn't go after you, couldn't do anything except sit there and let that *witch* into my head!'

'You didn't "let" her do anything.'

'I could've...' Bones trails off. 'I...' He lets out a sharp groan and sinks back down to the couch. 'I should've stopped her.'

'Then *I* should've stopped her from taking you.'

'What the hell are you going on about? She was way too powerful for you to take out like that, course you couldn't've stopped her.'

Jim scowls. 'I'm the Captain. It's my job to protect my crew. If *you* should've stopped her from getting inside your head, then *I* should've stopped her from getting that close in the first place.'

'That's not...' Bones groans. 'Jim, that's exactly what made you pull that stupid stunt in the first place. You can't protect us from everything!'

'And you can't fight off everything.'

A long silence stretches out around them, one that Jim finally breaks. 'Bones, no one expects you to be able to fight off an attack like that. I certainly couldn't've.'

Bones lets his head sink back against the back of the couch. '...So I just have to put up with the idea that any old creep with psychic voodoo-whatever can walk into my head and make me turn against my closest friends with no resistance from me whatsoever?'

Jim swallows at that. 'Bones...' he starts.

Bones cuts him off. 'Even once Spock'd "broken me free" I couldn't keep her out, Jim. I remember it. I was fighting and fighting, but I couldn't stop her. What's that say about me except that I'm too *weak* to...'

'You're not weak!' Jim snaps. He grabs hold of Bones' upper arms, forcibly turning him to face Jim. 'Bones, I saw you! You fought as hard as anyone could've asked of you. *No one* could've done better. Even while you were in agony, you didn't give up.'

Silence.

'...I couldn't help you, Jim,' Bones says finally, meeting his eyes. 'You were bleeding, and I couldn't help you. Then you were fighting and bleeding *again*, and I still couldn't help you.'

Jim's jaw tightens, painfully. He doesn't know what to say. There's nothing he can say to fix it, to make it so Bones didn't have to live through that. So *Jim* didn't have to live through seeing his best friend drained of himself while unable to do a damn thing to stop it.

So he doesn't say anything. Instead, he drags Bones into a tight hug. Bones stiffens initially, before sinking into him, hugging back.

'I'm sorry,' Jim whispers, the words terribly loud in the ensuing silence.

Bones chokes on a slight sob. 'Me too, kid.'

They stay like that for a while. Jim has no real idea of how long if he's honest. Time fades at the edges around them. The lights have once more dimmed—on an automatic timer, thanks to Bones' convincing Chekov to help him hack Jim's quarters to annoy Jim into not pulling all-nighters.

Jim ends up the first to break the silence, pulling out of the hug as he does so. 'Spock could provide some lessons on mind shields. That's a Vulcan telepathy thing, right?'

Bones coughs. 'You want me to ask the *hobgoblin* for help? Seriously?'

'Come on, Bones. You going to tell me that you dislike Spock *so* much that you don't want anything to do with his help?' Jim prods him in the side.

Bones makes a face. 'He'll *crow* about it.'

‘Spock never crows.’

‘Oh, he’ll crow alright,’ Bones says, scowling. ‘He’ll do it in a very Vulcan way, of course, but he’ll give me with that superior look that says he thinks he’s proven himself right about something.’

Jim snickers, slinging his arm around Bones’ shoulders. ‘Okay, yeah, he will do *that*. It’ll be fun, Bones! You, me, Spock. We could invite Sulu and Scotty. And we might as well invite Uhura, Chekov, and Gaila too. It’ll be a proper party!’

‘Hurrah.’ Bones’ voice remains utterly monotone.

‘That’s the spirit!’ Jim grins and lets his head fall back against the couch, closing his eyes. ‘But that’s a tomorrow-us problem. For tonight, let’s sleep.’

‘You know you have a bed right through there?’

‘Meh. Too far. I’m tired.’

Even though Jim’s eyes are closed, he can sense Bones rolling his eyes. ‘Honestly, Jim.’

Jim finds himself heaved up and, somehow, deposited on his bed. He has no idea what happened in between; he’s not kidding when he says he’s exhausted. There’s a shuffle of fabric and Jim sneaks his hand out to catch hold of Bones’ arm.

‘Jim, for crying out loud...’

‘D’you really wanna walk all the way back to your quarters? *Really?*’ Jim opens his eyes to fix his friend with a beseeching look that always works on Bones—because for all Bones likes to complain at him, he’s terrible at saying no to Jim in matters unrelated to his health.

‘My quarters that are right down the corridor?’ Bones aims a critical eyebrow-raise at him.

‘It’s further than staying here,’ Jim points out. ‘Sides, don’t I have a concussion? Don’t you need to keep an eye on me?’

Bones huffs. ‘I wouldn’t’ve let you out if I was worried about that, doofus.’

‘*Bones...*’

‘Fine, whatever.’ Bones gives in with a groan. ‘If it’ll shut you up.’

Rather than harping on it, Jim rolls over to make room on the bed. Bones slides into place. There’s no problem with him fitting; these beds are way bigger than the ones at the Academy dorms at least.

Despite Bones’ grumbling, he drifts off to sleep quickly. It takes longer for Jim to follow him. Memories of Pyris Seven—and far older ones that it’s reawoken, of Tallulah, of blood and a leering smile, of Frank smashing a bottle next to his head—hover at the edge of his mind, daring him to fall asleep. Eventually though, he slips into sleep, old and new memories alike soothed by the warmth of his best friend next to him, safe and sound.

Despite not being allowed back on duty, Jim’s out of his quarters not long after Bones leaves—thankfully, not for a shift, Bones has finally seen reason and agreed to give himself the day off. If he hadn’t, Jim would’ve used his Captain powers to intervene.

After popping into the mess hall for breakfast, Jim’s first port of call is visiting Sulu and inviting him and Chekov—who’s already there (or perhaps never left last night)—to a Lord of the Rings night in Jim’s quarters. Sulu—worn and sickly-looking—agrees readily. Chekov is quick to chime in with his own acceptance of the offer. With his invitation delivered and confident that Chekov has Sulu well-taken-care-of, Jim heads off into the bowels of the Enterprise to check on Scotty.

As ever, when Jim reaches the engine rooms, he pauses for a moment to let himself bask in the beauty of his wonderful ship. More relaxed, he sets off in search of Scotty.

It doesn’t take too long—as loyal as Scotty’s people are to him, Jim is a) the Captain and b) hoping to *help* Scotty, so the various red-shirts whom Jim encounters are eager to point him in the right direction. The first sign he’s on the right track is the sight of Keenser clambering down from one of the walkways above. Keenser is never far from Scotty if at all avoidable.

Keenser eyes him, gesturing further back into the engine.

Jim grins in thanks, following his directions, finding Scotty face-deep in his latest contraption. It’s not his distillery surprisingly, instead it’s a confusing piece of tech Jim recognises from Scotty’s attempts to explain it to him. It’s supposed to be a robot that’ll help Scotty out with his work. Scotty, however, remains stuck on making it capable of engineering functionality.

Why Scotty wants to make a robot that he’ll inevitably lose his temper with and throw out into space the first chance he gets, Jim isn’t sure, but he’s glad to see Scotty obeying Bones’ orders not to work. Sure, this is engineering, but it’s the stress-relieving kind.

It’s at that exact moment that Scotty drops his tool and swears.

Sort of. It’s the sort of stress-relieving kind.

‘Scotty? You good?’ Jim asks, leaning against the wall beside him, careful not to knock anything.

Scotty blinks, sliding out from under his robot—dubbed Bessie, for unknown reasons. ‘Jim? What’re you doing down here, laddie?’

‘Seeing what you’re up to,’ Jim says. ‘Still working on Bessie?’

‘Aye,’ Scotty says, sending Bessie a frustrated glare. ‘She’ll be up and running soon, if I have anything to say about it.’

‘I’m sure she will,’ Jim says with absolute confidence.

This prompts Scotty to laugh. ‘Course she will. I’m the one building her, aren’t I?’ He pushes himself up into standing. ‘But I’m guessing you didn’t come down here to hear all about old Bessie, as fascinating as she is.’ He gives Bessie’s head (it might also be her shoulder, unclear) a fond pat.

Jim laughs too, examining Scotty as he does. While Scotty isn’t as obviously worn as Sulu, he’s lacking colour. There’re dark rings under his eyes.

‘Want to come to a Lord of the Rings evening tonight? I already got Sulu, Chekov and Bones on board,’ he asks finally. Technically, he hasn’t asked Bones to come yet, but Bones’ll be there—he’s still incapable of saying no to Jim, besides he *likes* watching Lord of the Rings (the superior 2214 adaptation, of course, despite Sulu’s insistence that the 21st century one’s untouchable). ‘I’ll get Gaila in on it too, she loves it.’

Scotty eyes him. ‘I don’t know...’ he says. ‘I’ve a bunch of work to do on old Bessie here.’

‘Scotty, come on, you’ll have the whole day to work on her. Besides, Bessie’ll be there when we’re done.’

With a final glance at Bessie, Scotty nods. ‘Alright, lad. What time?’

Jim barely restrains his crow of victory in favour of giving Scotty all the details. Not willing to push his luck and fully aware that Scotty’s agreement is dependent on being left alone with Bessie henceforth, Jim backtracks out of the engine room. At least tonight he can ensure Scotty eats something, though he stops on his way out to suggest to Keenser that he coax Scotty into eating before then. Keenser gives him the most insulted expression Jim’s ever seen on him in response. Yeah, it’s an obvious ask, but it’s Jim’s job to care for his crew.

Satisfied, Jim retreats. For now, at least, all is well. Or it will be, soon enough. After a mission like that, it’s all he can ask for.

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