

Home Before Dark

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Home Before Dark

by [VelvetMouse](#)

Summary

A behavioral psychology experiment going horribly wrong... or right, depending on your pov.

Notes

written for Team McChapel for ST_Respect ship wars, Prompt 5 - Fairy Tales. Beta, as always, by seren.

"I'm going to kill Jim Kirk."

"That's mutiny."

"I don't care. I can make it look like an accident."

"That's still mutiny."

"No one would convict me. It's completely justifiable."

"That doesn't change the fact that killing your captain is mutiny."

"If you don't shut up about that, I'm going to kill *you*."

"That's insubordination."

Christine clenched her hands into fists and counted to ten in both Standard and Old Earth French, in an effort not to strangle her companion. He was right, that would be insubordination. Killing one's CMO was generally considered bad form for a Head Nurse, anyway.

She opened her mouth to deliver a verbal retort rather than a physical one, but was cut off by McCoy's muttered, "Besides, you can't kill Jim if I've gotten to him first."

Despite herself, Christine smiled and felt some of the tension leave her. It was not *the* strangest situation she had found herself in since joining Starfleet (that honor went to the incident involving a single, non-reproducing tribble, a jar of peanut butter and three hours of Verdi opera), but it certainly ranked up there.

What had started out as a simple knowledge exchange had taken a downward turn (for Christine, at least) when the Laotirian leader had made what seemed like a simple request.

"Captain," he had said, "I was wondering if we might borrow two of your crew members for part of tomorrow."

"For what purpose?" Kirk had asked, understandably wary.

"Some of our *kh'lam'al'tiq* - ah, behavioral scientists, I think you would call them - have been studying decision making processes. They would be most interested in having data from human subjects to compare with their results from Laotirians."

Kirk had pondered the request for a moment, but when he had turned his gaze on his CMO and Head Nurse and his eyes had lit up, Christine knew she was in deep, deep trouble.

They had protested. They had begged. They had threatened. But the captain remained adamant. She and Dr. McCoy would be taking part of the next day to participate in the Laotirian study. And then Kirk cheated; he brought out Liz. As the ship psychiatrist, she told them that she had reviewed proposed plan of study and that nothing posed any risk; as a friend, she told them to suck it up and deal because Jim Kirk was going to get his way on this one, whether they liked it or not.

Which was how, twelve hours later, Christine found herself stranded on the edge of a forest with her boss, threatening to kill their captain.

Taking a deep breath, Christine glanced sideways at McCoy. "You think this is another of Jim's damned attempts to set us up?" Their captain, it seemed, was utterly convinced that his CMO and Head Nurse were perfectly suited for each other, and would periodically make outrageous attempts to drive them into a relationship. While Christine wasn't entirely convinced Kirk was *wrong*, she resented his interference.

McCoy scowled. "I wouldn't put it past him. Shall we get this over with?"

"Into the woods, and out of the woods, and home before dark," Christine sang softly. McCoy looked at her oddly. "Sorry," she apologized, "20th century Earth musical theatre song. It seemed appropriate just now. Let's go."

They started along the faint trail and walked in silence for several minutes. Their instructions had been simple - follow the path and get to the other side of the woods, overcoming any obstacles they encountered. They had not been allowed to take along anything but the clothing on their backs, although they were reassured that there was no actual danger.

"Maybe a course of Hypatian vaccines," Christine mused aloud.

"Pardon?"

"For Jim. Since you won't let me kill him for getting us into this, I think a full course of Hypatian vaccines would be a fitting thank you."

McCoy grinned at her, in the way that always made Christine's stomach flipflop a little, but as he opened his mouth to respond, there was a blinding flash of light and a roar of noise filled Christine's ears, so that she could not even hear herself scream.

When the light and noise receded, Christine found herself standing in a small clearing - definitely not where they had been before. And she was alone.

"Len? Len, where are you? McCoy?" she called out, but the only sounds were the rustling of trees and the occasional chirp of the bird-like creatures that inhabited the forest.

"Dammit," she swore under her breath, and felt for the communicator that wasn't there. As she did so, she noticed that her clothing had changed. Gone was the practical, regulation, Starfleet uniform, and in its place she wore a light summer dress. She seemed to be carrying a picnic basket, and around her shoulders was a soft cape.

A soft, bright, red cape.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me!" Christine exclaimed in disgust. "Off to grandmother's house, am I? Where's the wolf, then?"

As if the thought had summoned him, Christine heard a rustle in the trees and turned to see a large, humanoid wolf, standing on two legs, leaning against one of the trees in the clearing.

Christine studied him frankly for a moment. He was rather cartoonish looking, she decided, and not overwhelmingly scary. Until he began to speak, that was.

"Hello, little girl," the wolf said in stomach-clenchingly familiar voice. "You've grown up, Chrissy. You look good," he added with a leer.

"You," she hissed. "You are not Roger. And even if you were, I don't want what you're offering."

"Don't you?" he growled, and sauntered towards her. Christine found herself rooted to the spot, transfixed by the wolf who spoke in Roger Korby's voice. He moved towards her, full of confidence and swagger, just as Roger had. "You know you want this, Chrissy. You always did. You want to bask in my glory, revere me for my brilliance." He trailed the tip of one claw down her cheek.

That was enough to rouse Christine from her stupor and she jerked away from his touch. "No! Never again. You used me, and when you were done with me, you tossed me aside. Never again."

"Pah!" the wolf spat. "Without me, you are nothing. You could have been great! Your name would have been remembered next to mine. But you insisted on remaining in Starfleet. And look where it got you, on a piddly little ship in the backwater end of the galaxy. You are nothing, Christine Chapel."

"No! I am stronger now than I ever could have been with you. You gave me nothing!"

"I gave you everything," the wolf said, coming up behind her, and putting his arms around her in a parody of a lover's embrace. "I gave you everything, but you rejected it, so I rejected you. I have no time for those who don't appreciate my gifts. See you at grandma's house, Chrissy."

And just as suddenly as he had appeared, the wolf disappeared, leaving Christine shaking alone in the clearing once again.

It took Christine several long minutes of slow, deep breaths before she felt she regained her equilibrium. Seeing no other way on besides a faint path leading away from the clearing, she set off, armed only with a basket full of rolls.

As expected, she came upon a small cottage.

"I suppose I should get this over with. Len, where the hell are you?" Christine said. She stared at the door with great indecision before bolstering her courage and heading in. Knowing that the bedroom was her ultimate destination, she detoured through the rest of the small house, stopping briefly in the kitchen to pick up a butcher's knife. It was not as good as a laser scalpel, but it would do.

Finally, she paused before the bedroom door and knocked softly. "Please let no one be there, please let no one be there," she muttered under her breath.

"Come in, Chrissy dear!" a sickly sweet voice called. No such luck.

Christine entered the room, carefully keeping her back to the wall. She grasped the basket in front of her and slid one hand down so it rested on the handle of the knife.

"My, my, what a wolfish grin you have there, grandma," she said with more bravado than actual courage. "Why don't you try wolfing down one of these rolls."

Growing up with three older brothers had caused Christine to develop an accurate throwing arm out of self defense, and she put it to good use, flinging a roll at the wolf. The wolf, however, merely snapped it out of the air with lightning-quick reflexes and swallowed it down.

"Thank you for the appetizer, my dear," he said. "Now let me move on to the main course."

Christine tried to move out of the way, but the wolf moved faster than she could believe, and soon he had her pinned against the far wall of the bedroom.

"You are mine, Christine," he growled. "I made you what you are and I will never let you go."

She struggled as best she could, but the wolf's extra weight impeded her progress. Suddenly, though, the wolf stiffened for a moment; without stopping to question why, Christine took the opportunity to plunge the knife in between his ribs and pray that his anatomy was similar enough to a human's that she hit something vital.

The wolf shuddered and slowly began sinking to the ground. As he did so, Christine noticed a small axe embedded in his back. Only then did the sound of someone else's quick breathing register in her mind. She looked towards the sound.

"Hey, Len," she said weakly. "Nice throw. Plaid is a good look on you."

McCoy quickly crossed the room and shoved the now-still wolf out of the way to catch Christine before her knees gave out.

Christine let the basket fall and accepted the support her friend offered. Suddenly, her legs didn't feel quite so stable.

"Knife between the ribs, eh?" McCoy asked, prodding the wolf with his foot. "Nicely placed, Nurse Chapel. But where did you get the knife?"

Christine grinned weakly. "The kitchen, of course. And that was a nice shot yourself, Dr. McCoy. Where'd the axe come from?"

"Came with the outfit. I just found it in my hand." He flashed a brief grin at her, but then sobered. "I thought they said there wasn't going to be any danger to us," he bit out angrily.

"I know. You willing to revise your position on me not killing Jim?"

"Not sure, let me think about it."

"Fair enough. Len," Christine hesitated, "How - how much of that did you hear?"

"All of it. I was in some sort of stasis field. I saw the whole thing in the clearing and somehow followed you to here. It wasn't until you went into the bedroom that I was allowed to move. I got here as quick as I could, Chris. I'm sorry."

"Your timing was just fine."

"That was Korby's voice, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Christine replied softly. "That was Roger, true to form." She snorted lightly. "I never thought about it, but big bad wolf really does fit him. And it felt good to be able to finally hurt that bastard."

"But how did they get *him*, his voice, in - in - that?" McCoy asked, gesturing at the corpse.

"I'm afraid to ask. Len, can we get out of here?"

Gently, he guided her out to the kitchen and made her sit down for a few minutes while he fussed about.

Christine knew she was starting to feel herself again when it stopped being endearing and started being irritating.

"Enough, Leonard!" she snapped after the third time he asked her if she wanted a cup of tea. "I'm fine. And I think we should just get out of here."

"He's wrong you know," McCoy said suddenly, as they continued their way along the forest trail. "The wolf - Korby - who ever he was. He's wrong about you."

Christine shrugged, keeping her eyes firmly on the trail in front of her. "Maybe," she said noncommittally.

"Hey, look at me," McCoy ordered. He stopped and placed a hand on Christine's shoulder, causing her to stop as well. Then he gently tilted her chin up so that she was forced to look him in the eye. His hand was warm against her face and Christine had to refrain from leaning into it.

"You are a remarkable person, Christine Chapel, and a damned fine nurse. And someday you'll finish your research and be a damned fine doctor. Korby didn't do any of that - you did."

"But I ran away," Christine whispered. "He told me to take a hike and I took the longest one I could find. I dropped everything - my research, my funding - and ran for the stars. I couldn't face finishing it without his support."

"No, you couldn't deal with something that provided you with a daily reminder of that bastard. Which is a perfectly natural reaction. That's not running away, that's self-preservation."

He held her gaze for a long moment and Christine could read the truth of his words in them. As if drawn by a magnet, they slowly started leaning towards each other. But before their lips could touch, there was another blinding flash of light, and the roar of sound drowned out Christine's anguished scream of frustration.

When Christine's vision returned, she was alone once again. Looking around, she saw she was in a small, circular room. There was no door and only a single, open window, along with a bed and a vanity. She thought about slamming her fist against the wall in frustration, but decided against that. The last thing she needed was to break her hand on the stone. Glancing in the mirror, she saw that her clothing had once again changed, and she was now in a - well, "princess dress" was about the only way she could describe it.

Pinching the bridge of her nose to stave off the impending headache, Christine made her way to the open window. As expected, the view showed her to be at the top of a tall tower. It would have been quite a lovely spot - had there been a way to get out.

Christine looked around the room again and then out the window.

"Screw this," she announced to the air. "I refuse to sit around and wait for a rescue. There's got to be a way I can get myself out of this."

She examined the window again and found two sturdy hooks, meant to hold open the non-existent shutters. Next she turned to the vanity and a few minutes later emerged triumphant with a pair of scissors. Finally, she systematically stripped the bed of its sheets, and set to work.

Christine sang to herself as she worked, as she often did, and eventually completed her task. When she returned to the window, she had to smile at what she saw. McCoy stood at the base of the tower, looking very grumpy. His face, however, lit up when he saw her.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, eh?" he called up to her.

Christine laughed. "Not on your life! They seem to have forgotten to give me a mile of hair. Can you imagine how heavy that would be? I'd never be able to move! Besides, what good would that do? Then you'd be stuck up here with me."

McCoy's muttered reply was too quiet for Christine to hear. "What was that?" she asked, but he waved her off.

"So what are we supposed to do now?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Well, while *you* were enjoying the sun, *I've* been working on a way to get out of here."

"The stonework is too smooth to climb," he said.

"Found that out the hard way, did you?" she asked with a laugh. "What on earth possessed you to try to climb the tower?"

Christine could barely hear his reply, but thought she heard something along the lines of "I couldn't leave you up there," and her stomach did a funny fluttery thing.

"Well, never mind that," she continued. "Give me a minute, and I'll be right down."

Carefully, she affixed the knotted rope she had created out of the bedsheets to the hooks and dropped it out the window. It didn't quite reach the ground, but Christine judged that it was a safe distance to drop.

"Here I come," she called. "Just be ready to catch me if I fall!"

"I'll always catch you." It was said so quietly that it barely drifted up on the wind, but it made the flutters in her stomach return.

"How did you know how to do that?" McCoy asked when she had safely reached the bottom.

"I had three older brothers, and I went to an all girl's Catholic school," she replied with a wicked grin. "There are very few places that I can't figure out how to escape from."

And with that she sauntered off down the forest path while her friend's brain attempted to reboot itself.

"So what do you think is next?" Christine asked sometime later.

"Well, they've given us Red Riding Hood and Rapunzel. So they might go with Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. Cinderella might be doable, although - what?" he asked as Christine grinned at him broadly.

"I had no idea you were so well versed in fairy tales."

McCoy's face darkened. "Before Jocelyn took her, Joanna was in a princess phase. I must have read fairy tales to her before bed every night for two months."

Christine put her hand on his arm in comfort and they walked in silence for a ways. "What I want to know," she said eventually, "is why they're using old Earth fairy tales. We were told we'd have to overcome obstacle - what good does this do? And how did they even get a hold of them?"

"Well, I'm sure the *Enterprise's* computer has a full library of fairy tales. But I have no idea why they're using them. I'm a medical doctor, not a shrink. Ask Liz when we get back."

"I plan to. You know," Christine said slowly as an idea began to form, "they said they wanted to observe our decision making processes, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, isn't the choice not to play by their script a decision?"

"I think I see where you're going with this."

"I mean, if they're using all these traditional fairy tales, we already know how the story turns out. So I say we cheat, skip to the end with as little fuss and trouble as we can manage."

"We'll see what we can manage. It depends on what they throw at us next."

"Next" turned out to be Cinderella. Or at least so Christine assumed when she found herself dressed in rags and standing in front of a beautiful tree.

"Shiver and quiver, little tree, Silver and gold throw down on me," she sang with a smile. *"I'm off to get my wish..."* And she watched, transfixed, as silver and gold threads twined around her, transforming her tattered dress into an elegant ball gown.

As she stepped into the horse-drawn coach that suddenly appeared beside her, Christine found herself growing giddy with excitement. The thought of Leonard dressed as the prince was enough to send her stomach all a-flutter; and the idea of dancing with him all night? Well, she wasn't prepared to admit just how many times she had fantasized about exactly that. Perhaps this wouldn't be so bad after all.

The coach broke through the last of the forest and came to a clearing in which stood a fairy tale castle. *Right, no kidding, genius,* Christine scolded herself, even as she allowed herself to be helped down from the coach and escorted up the stairs to the receiving line.

Her excitement grew as she approached the throne and saw her prince. Her grumpy, scowling, prince, but she knew then that she would have no other in his place. She curtsied to him and watched his whole expression soften when he saw who was before him.

"Would my lady do me the honor of sharing this dance with me?" he asked, drawl going full force, which made Christine weak in the knees. Without waiting for a reply, he took her by the hand and led her out onto the dance floor. The other couples parted for them, until they stood in the center of the hall.

"Chris," he breathed, unable to say more. She merely nodded back, understanding all that was said in the silence. And then they danced. Oh, how they danced.

Christine knew there were rumors flying around the *Enterprise* that if anyone could get their grumpy CMO to unbend long enough to get him out on the dance floor, his lucky partner would find him second only to their exuberant captain in that particular endeavor. But as far as she knew, no one had managed that feat. Until now; and she knew that even Jim could not compare, at least for her.

"I am never letting anyone else dance with you. Ever," she whispered fiercely, when he drew her close during a slow, stately, pavane.

"Good. Because I don't want to dance with anyone else," he replied, and Christine melted a little more.

They danced until midnight. When the first stroke of the big bell tower rang out, they stopped in the middle of the floor once again.

"Midnight," Christine breathed.

"You're not running away are you?" McCoy asked, and placed a hand on the back of her neck to draw her in.

"Never. This is my happily ever after," she whispered a moment before their lips touched.

As first kisses went, it was not world-shattering. Instead it was soft and gentle, a promise of things to come. It seemed to go on forever and each toll of the bell reverberated through Christine's body.

When the last echoes of the final peal faded away, they drew back from each other and held each other's gaze until the light became too blinding.

When her vision cleared, Christine found that for once she was not alone. Instead, she was in a room with several other people, including the researchers, Kirk and McCoy.

"Thank you very much for your time," one of the Laotirian researchers said. "The data you have provided for us will be of great value."

Christine nodded politely to him, and then turned to her captain who was smirking so hard that she thought his face might split in half.

"Chris-" he started to say, but was cut off by a hard slap to his face. "Hey!" he said with a pout, but subsided under Christine's glare.

"Len," she said, not taking her eyes off of Jim, "if you haven't changed your mind, I should probably get out of here."

"You owe me, Jim," McCoy said under his breath as he led the fuming nurse from the room. "You owe me big."

"Me?" Christine heard Kirk exclaim plaintively as they left the room in search of the transporters. "What did I do?"

"So," Christine asked when they were safely hidden in McCoy's office on the *Enterprise*, "what now?"

"We go forward," he said with a shrug and Christine rolled her eyes.

"That's not exactly the answer I was looking for, Len. What I mean is-"

But she was cut off when McCoy abruptly pulled her in for a kiss. This one was more demanding than the first, his tongue seeking and receiving entry to her mouth. Then just as suddenly he pulled back.

"I know what you mean, darlin'," he said with wicked little grin. "And I think I just answered you."

Finally, for the first time since the whole mess started, Christine allowed herself to relax.

"Ever after?" she asked quietly, resting her forehead against his.

"Ever after," he agreed.

There was a moment of silence.

"You know, I still am going to kill Jim, though."

McCoy's groan of frustration turned into one of pleasure as Christine began to kiss him again.

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