

The Cook-Off

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The Cook-Off

by [arrowinthesky_\(restfulsky5\)](#), [restfulsky5](#)

Summary

At first, the gloriously feminine and fascinating object of Jim's affections seemed to embody the perfect source of blame for their rocky marriage. Who could possibly compete with a beautiful siren? A vibrant TV personality? That sexy toss of glorious red hair? That inviting smile? Every action evocative of a confidence McCoy simply didn't have?

It certainly wouldn't be him. He didn't know who he was anymore. When he looked in the mirror each morning—a stranger stared back.

Notes

I truly meant to post this story after I had finished it — but I have no self-control, obviously. Bear with me as I have yet another WIP on the board. ;) There will be one more chapter.

I'd meant for this fic to be a one-shot but it grew, having a mind of its own, as these fics tend to do. I hope you enjoy the next part to this Jim and his McCoy's story. I can't tell you how much I've looked forward to sharing this particular part. Writing Gaila is SO. MUCH. FUN. (Oh, why did they have to kill her off?)

Thank you, diamondblue4, for betaing this for me. If only I had your mad editing skills! <3

I dedicate this to everyone who loves cooking and baking. Including three of my closest Trekkie friends. YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE!

Chapter 1

Chapter by [arrowinthesky_\(restfulsky5\)](#)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

McCoy wasn't sure who was to blame, exactly. He just wanted to attach the blame to someone so he could finally breathe. Not live. He didn't deserve that. *Breathe*. He just wanted to breathe.

At first, the gloriously feminine and fascinating object of Jim's affections seemed to embody the perfect source of blame for their rocky marriage. Who could possibly compete with a beautiful siren? A vibrant TV personality? That sexy toss of glorious red hair? That inviting smile? Every action evocative of a confidence McCoy simply didn't have?

It certainly wouldn't be him. He didn't know who he was anymore. When he looked in the mirror each morning—a stranger stared back.

When he couldn't squelch the guilt, he shifted the blame to Kevin, the rising star who seems to effortlessly replace Jim in the cinematic world.

Followed by Ben, who didn't have to even ask what was troubling McCoy. Those wise eyes had witnessed so much pain in his own life that it had taken Ben mere seconds to see right through him.

Followed by Spock, when McCoy's flagging self-confidence intensified his struggle to believe that his relationship with Jim was unchanged and unthreatened. The stoic man had, after all, initially encouraged the friendship between Jim and Gaila, a stance that had taken McCoy by surprise. No, by a choke-hold.

Pike could not escape his wrath, either. Although, deep down, McCoy knew all the old man wanted with his whole heart was to see Jim get a taste of his old independence again. Something they all wanted for him.

And Jim. The younger man had taken the brunt of the blame and the force of McCoy's unfounded jealousy time and time again.

If this wasn't poetic justice...

Now that he'd discovered the deep, dark truth of his error—that no one was at fault—not even him—he was alone to take it in and reap the consequences.

McCoy squeezed back tears, a ragged breath escaping him as he thought of his husband, without him who *should* be there by his side. God, why had he left in the first place? He'd been so stupid to let things get this badly between them, forgetting that he hadn't married just Jim, but Jim and his illness.

There was no point in rehashing his poor choices when the future was so uncertain, but he couldn't help but wonder when, exactly, things had unraveled one more time.

He prayed he could make it up to Jim before time, capricious and uncaring, reared its ugly head again. If it hadn't already.

McCoy had the scans—the test results—in his hand.

And Jim—

McCoy dropped his head in his hands, papers crumpling within his shaking palms.

—Jim did not.

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Two months ago....

Gabby wasn't merely a friend to Jim. She was a lifeline. Not a moment went by, except for the short time it took Leonard to walk her outside, that he was without her.

He relied on her and her warm presence when he watched TV, which still wasn't very often even now, more than a year after Kevin's interview. That he'd been nervous the first time he sat down to watch a prime time show, drama or otherwise, in a day when personalities and actors and actresses vied more than ever for popularity with cheap shots, was an understatement.

He didn't want to go down that rabbit-hole again, an experience that he didn't exactly remember except for the feeling of sheer terror it gave him.

"They're talking about how to get rid of gray hair, Bones."

Bones jumped over the back of the couch and plopped down down beside him. "Yeah?" He reached over and grabbed a handful of popcorn from the bowl on Jim's lap without looking, stuffing the buttery goodness into his mouth as if he hadn't eaten all day.

Jim watched him, smiling. "You got some corn on your chin there—"

Bones wiped it off and grabbed another handful of his favorite snack. "Thanks."

“And some new gray hairs,” Jim added, frowning as he inspected the sides of his husband’s head.

Bones rolled his eyes. “I know that, Jim.”

“Just thought you’d want to know I could, um, see them.”

Bones stared at him. “They bother you, is that what you’re saying?”

Jim blinked quickly, his thoughts tumbling one after another in a panic that he didn’t quite understand. “No, but I thought, I mean, I remember you hated them. Plucked them out.”

“You mean you do.”

Jim didn’t, not really. His confusion grew. “I thought...you, well...that everyone does...”

When Bones’ face went blank, Jim backpedaled. “Never mind,” he mumbled.

They stared at each other quietly. It was the most uncomfortable moment they’d had in...Jim didn’t know when. Maybe forever.

“...don’t they?” Jim added in a belated whisper.

Leonard seemed to deflate. “In your line of work, I guess they do. Youthful looks matter. More than to most people.”

Jim looked straight ahead. “I don’t have a line of work.”

Not anymore.

That was still a sore subject, considering all he'd lost, and he changed the subject at the same time as he flipped the channels on the remote with his greasy fingers, until he came to the one he wanted. The show he planned to watch. The one that had captured his attention.

Lifeguard turned celebrity chef, Gaila, on Eat Your Heart Out.

Her innovative cooking style and surprising recipes were a way better distraction than trying to hide signs of aging, or thinking about aging, or wanting to kick himself for saying stupid things.

In fact, Gaila never said the wrong thing—and she looked like she hadn't aged a day past twenty. Her complexion was clear and wrinkle-free, glowing like no other skin he'd ever seen. As if she were from a different planet. And he'd heard that she never wore makeup, except for her usual lipstick.

He smiled to himself and thought of aliens, again.

He'd almost accepted a role which had his character stranded on Mars once. He should've taken it. Maybe he would've had an alien costar.

Now that would have been fun, almost as much fun as Gaila.

“What are you all googly-eyed about?” Leonard leaned forward, narrowing his eyes on the enthusiastic crowd cheering as the show opened live. “This is on again?”

“It's a series now, Bones.”

“Yeah? Since when?”

Jim shrugged. “I’ve been watching it for a little while, I think. A few weeks? When you take Gabby out in the evening. Kevin was the celebrity guest the second week. I remember that much.”

Gaila suddenly appeared, waving with both hands, her high heels as crimson as the hue on her lips, not quite as orange-red as her hair. But Jim was struck even more by the recipe that had flipped across the screen in her signature scrawl. It was legible and carefree—two things he really wasn’t. He still couldn’t keep things straight and his handwriting was atrocious. And, he was a burden.

Gaila fixed things, she made things, she moved with an ease he didn’t have. She could even crack open an egg with one hand, stir cookie batter and dance at the same time, and stand beside an oven without breaking into a sweat.

At least, when he watched the show, he could pretend he was someone else. Someone more like his old self. The man he’d been before...

He could be like her in his daydreams.

He remembered, maybe, people wanting to be like him and him not liking it, but this was different, wasn’t it? Gaila was teaching them how to make the food. Jim never tried to teach people how to act.

And this meal looked different. Jim thought he liked different. Different defined him, and where he was in life. What was it that Dad always told him? *You’re a funny fish, Jimmy, but our fish.*

He tried to memorize every detail about the plated food. A spicy appetizer for chocolatiers—and Jim loved chocolate—followed by a lasagna recipe with a secret ingredient that already had his mouth watering despite the fact she used kale instead of spinach, his favorite.

But, if Gaila liked using kale, maybe it would be something he liked, too.

Bones chuckled after a moment, when Gaila and her guest and the other host were three steps into making the appetizer, and Jim's stomach hurt from laughing at their conversation. "Cheatin' on me, eh?" Bones asked, teasingly.

"Can I eat spicy foods?" Jim asked absently.

"You never had a problem before with it."

"Good." He paused. "Then, I need to get that stuff. Everything on her list."

"I'm allergic to lasagna."

Jim whipped his head around to stare at him. "But it's pasta. You like pasta, right?"

Bones broke into a smile. "I'm kidding, you," he said, leaning over to brush his cheek with a kiss. "It isn't my favorite but I can deal."

Jim nodded. "I'll cook."

His husband's brows hiked to his hairline. "You'll what now?"

"I can cook." He threw him a lopsided grin. "With help, of course."

Bones slipped an arm across his shoulders, bringing him closer, until he heard Bones's comforting heartbeat in his ear. "You know I can't resist that smile," he murmured into his hair, quietly, as Ben came into the room with his dinner and sat on one of the recliners.

Ben made a low hum of satisfaction as he watched, which he always did when Gaila made masterpieces before their very eyes. Like he was tasting one of her dishes.

It made Jim happy that Ben liked the show as much as he did.

“Kanzi, I hope you are writing this one down in your head,” Ben said joyfully, making Jim laugh, as only he could. “Someday, you will make this. Maybe even better than the chef!”

And Jim, as he watched Gaila until his eyes were closing, could not help but notice the kindness she showed to everyone who walked onto her set.

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Seven weeks ago...

“She said she’d love to have me back on the show, if the producers agree,” Kevin said.

Jim’s mouth dropped open.

He quickly snapped it shut, relieved he hadn’t actually met Kevin yet, and was talking face-to-face with him, because he would’ve looked like an idiot. And he hated looking stupid in front of people.

But a repeat appearance? He was so pleased to hear it—Kevin was his friend, after all—that he stammered into his cell. “R-really?”

“Yep.”

“You going?”

“I don’t know. I’ve got a busy schedule. Not like you,” Kevin teased him. “I’m not the one who gets to take two naps everyday.”

Jim grunted. “Even with the nap, I can’t keep it all straight. I have to work on the book with Dad, and then my PT with Bones and that other guy, several times a day. And Ben’s kids always find me. Not that I mind. They make me feel useful.”

They’d arrived from Africa less than a month ago, Ben’s wife and children. Now Jim’s morning consisted of listening to audios on the deck—while watching the children alternate between playing frisbee with Gabby and baseball with the father. When they finished their game of chase, Jim always had lemonade in tall glasses with ice waiting for them, with a mint leaf on the side, and Bones had more than his fair share of stories to tell them about his childhood in the Deep South. Jim had to admit, they were entertaining. Bones had been one rebellious kid, which had surprised him, and even more so as a teenager.

“Don’t let it bother you, too much,” Kevin said. “Not running around. Frisbee’s overrated, anyway.”

“Bones has been talking to you about me again?” He’d always known Bones needed to know for himself that other people were watching out for him, too, and that was okay. He didn’t want Bones to be solely responsible for him.

“I can hear them,” Kevin said. “They’re playing ball, aren’t they?”

Jim almost smiled, glancing out into the yard as Ben’s youngest son rounded third, which was marked by a soft seed sack. “Yeah. Bones, too.”

“He cares about you, Jim.”

“I know.”

But there was one subject that bothered Jim. No matter how hard he tried to understand the good intentions behind it.

He was beginning to truly feel like a real shut-in these days. His parents and Bones walked circles around him. Especially Bones. Like he was a piece of fine china. Fragile and easily breakable.

And thanks to people who didn't understand what had happened to him, who gave him condescending stares and asked questions that went over his head, or directed them at Bones or his other caretakers and not at him, he was reduced to feeling subhuman on a daily basis.

The thought of which made him feel even worse.

Suffering? That was a joke, of course. What he was experiencing wasn't true suffering. Even at his worst.

Ben's family—they were the ones who'd suffered. And their friends. And the people who weren't friends but living in neighboring villages. Families without water. Food. A safe place to live. Fathers, mothers, young children forced into backbreaking work that whittled them down to bony flesh, separated from each other, sometimes with no memory of their loved ones but their final cries for help.

That realization haunted Jim at night.

He was lucky compared to many in the world.

He was alive. He had lived longer than he'd expected to live after his first diagnosis. He had more money in the bank than he could use in one lifetime. He was married to a wonderful

man, someone he didn't feel he deserved. Some people said Jim was even more good-looking than ever now. His mother had remarried and was happy, which meant the world to Jim, too. He had friends who cared, who didn't live halfway across the world.

And he had the perfect dog. Gabby was both his right arm and his pillow.

He really didn't have a single thing to complain about, did he?

So why did he feel this frustrated and unfulfilled with his life?

"Yeah," he said, his heart squeezing tightly. "I know."

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Six-and-a-half weeks ago

"I want to be like her," Jim said breathlessly.

"Who? Gabs?" Leonard crouched down in the middle of the narrow pathway and rubbed Gabby behind the ears. "I have to agree. I'd love to get as much attention as she does. But it's the treats that are the most enticing." He smiled at Gabby. "Right, girl?"

Jim dragged one foot behind him as he walked, but he didn't stop. Like the determined man he was, he walked for a half hour at least once a day despite his usual struggle to keep up. Leonard kept watch on him from the corner of his eye. But not too carefully. Jim didn't like it when he was the nagging husband. Not on days like this, soon after a seizure had affected his mobility.

“No, not Gabs.” Jim said, moving ahead of Leonard. Gabby left Leonard’s side and immediately trotted beside Jim, where she knew she belonged.

Leonard set a slow pace to keep in time with Jim without making it obvious. “Your mom? I hate to break it to ya, but you already are like her. You both snore, or so I’m told.”

Jim laughed and shook his head. “Gaila.”

Leonard looked to high heaven, biting back a long-suffering sigh. That was the twelfth—maybe twentieth—time Jim had mentioned her name this day, alone. “Like her that much, huh?”

“She has this way about her. I don’t know...how to explain it...she makes me.. and others feel...she....” Jim frowned, his voice trailing away.

“She’s flamboyant.”

Jim scrunched his nose. “She cares.”

“I saw on the news that the producers are looking for out-of-the-box guests to have on her show,” Leonard said slowly, watching Jim for his reaction.

“Out of the box,” Jim repeated, mimicking Leonard’s inflection. “What does that mean?”

“Different.”

His eyes brightened. “Oh. That’s like me. Different.”

Leonard bit his bottom lip. “You’re my different, Jim,” he murmured.

“I mean, that’s me—oh.” Jim stopped in his tracks, suddenly wavering on his feet.

Leonard’s arm shot out to steady him. “Let’s call it a day, all right?”

“But...”

“You had a seizure recently, Jim,” he reminded him. “Less than twenty-four hours ago.”

“But...” Jim gripped his forearms, eyes widening with the hope that Leonard had unthinkingly put there himself. “That’s me.”

It took Leonard a moment to drop his gaze from Jim’s and give him the answer he didn’t want to hear. “No.”

So many things could go wrong, if he encourages Jim in this strange obsession, all of them out of their control.

Jim’s grip loosened on Leonard’s arms. “No? But...you said...”

Leonard thought quickly and lied, for the first time, to his husband. “I know what I said, but I thought you might have a suggestion. A colleague that was looking for something new...”

Jim stepped back from him, the warmth Leonard so loved leaving his eyes, too. “Different.”

Leonard refused to look down at his feet. He’d own this, even if he couldn’t tell Jim the truth. “Yes.”

“I don’t even have colleagues I still talk to,” Jim said, glaring angrily at him. “You know that.”

He shook his head. “You do,” he countered. “There’s Ny, and Spock...”

“My friends?”

“They were actors, first,” he pointed out.

“But they’re friends, and I—”

“Think about it. Isn’t Spock into cooking exotic dishes?”

Jim’s mouth fell open. “Isn’t...” He gave a short laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Spock is nothing but serious,” Leonard muttered.

“I can’t believe this,” Jim whispered, his eyes watering.

“Jim, I...didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

Jim sucked in a breath. “Yes, you did,” he whispered, and turned on his heel without another word.

But the younger man’s lame foot was his undoing. Coming down on a rock, Jim lurched, off balance, as his foot turned sideways on the uneven surface. A rock Leonard should’ve seen. Should’ve known was there.

Leonard's mind scrambled to make sense of the situation—to undo all of his failings—as Jim started to fall.

Gabby reached Jim before the switch in Leonard's damn brain flipped on and allowed him to move.

Despite landing on Gabby, the situation went from bad to worse. Jim reached out wildly for McCoy, in a desperate attempt to break his fall.

Leonard, adrenaline flooding his body as his fear for Jim suddenly spiked, was finally able to move, but it was too little, too late. He cried out as the back of Jim's head slammed against the concrete of the pathway.

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Six weeks ago...

“No, Bones. For the tenth time, I don't have a headache.”

Although he was tired of the constant motherhenning, Jim allowed Bones to grab his hand and hold it tightly as they drove home from the hospital. Even though...it was useless. Everything was useless. *He* was useless. He was going to stop watching TV, he was so useless. It only got him into trouble. He knew that now. It was too much of a risk, and it scared Bones.

“Hey,” Bones said softly.

Tears pricked the back of Jim's eyes, but to avoid the inevitable query about it, he looked in the opposite direction. He wouldn't let Bones nag him about those, too. He stared out the window, lost in his thoughts.

The trees blurred by, much like his life felt at this point. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the cool glass. He longed for his old life back, a return to the way it had been before the tumor had ravaged it all. He longed for it even if it meant he'd be alone.

Jim's stomach churned. He knew he shouldn't have thought something so horrible—he would not want to be without Bones—but sometimes. Sometimes...

Sometimes he just had bad thoughts. Especially after his doctor appointments.

"You do have a headache," Bones said, his concerned drawl thicker than ever.

"Yeah," Jim answered in monotone.

He should feel badly about lying, but he was relieved for the excuse, and the escape the window afforded him. He could look somewhere else other than at the man who confounded him lately, without making it obvious that he was avoiding his husband's gaze.

"I'll tell Ben that the kids can't come over tonight," Bones said with a sideways glance.

He released Jim's hand and reached over to caress his forehead. Jim closed his eyes, relishing the warmth and concern against his will.

"You need to rest," Bones murmured.

"No...no," Jim said, staring down at his hands. He let them lie limply on his lap. He probably shouldn't tell Bones he felt like he could sleep for a week. "Let them come. I'll just...go to bed early."

Bones dropped his hand, eyes fixing on the road ahead. “If you’re sure.”

Jim nodded once. “It’s good for them—and you—to have a family.”

“Okay,” Bones said. “If that’s what you want. I’ll help you up the stairs after an early supper, if you’d like the peace and quiet of your old room. We really should get that lift installed soon.”

Jim sighed. There Bones went again, about that lift. It wasn’t like he didn’t have the money to pay for the expensive contraption—he could afford five of them, if he wanted. He just detested the thought of using one, being limited. And once he went down that route, what was next? He’d put it off as long as possible.

No one understood how much he hated how his body demanded these concessions from him, his health forcing him to become a man who couldn’t manage well on his own.

For the rest of the ride home, Bones’s hand weighed heavily on Jim’s shoulder.

It held him there. But it wasn’t a rock. Or an anchor. Or a comfort. It wasn’t anything like it had been when they were first married, or even six months ago.

It felt like a burden. A reminder of his own growing bitterness.

But Jim didn’t bother moving a muscle to try and get out from underneath it.

He would only fail. Again.

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Five weeks ago...

“Go on, you two,” Winona said, shooin’ McCoy and Chris out the living room. “I’ll take care of Jim. He knows you planned on leaving, right? I don’t want him to wake up and be shocked you’re gone.”

“Yeah,” McCoy said, dutifully following his father-in-law. “He knows.”

Now, if he’d remember, that was a different story.

Chris watched him closely. “We don’t have to, you know. The back porch or your office would do fine.”

“No,” he clipped out, feeling short on words, already. While he didn’t exactly feel like a social butterfly, he needed to get away from Jim. Although part of him worried that every moment he spent away from Jim was just tearing their marriage apart, he was going to say something wrong to Jim, or do something he’d regret if he didn’t put space between them for a bit.

But leaving...it really did feel like a crime. They didn’t talk like they used to—Jim was always watching that damn show. And now Kevin was calling him everyday about it, which just encouraged Jim.

McCoy had already invested in a pair of ear plugs. He’d even use them once—okay, maybe twice—when Jim was watching Gaila’s prime time special.

He swore if he heard that woman’s peal of laughter one more damn ti—

“Leonard?”

McCoy snapped to attention.

“Are you okay?” Winona said.

He met Winona’s eyes guiltily, then turned his head to see Chris getting into his car.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Just thinking.”

She reached out and clutched his elbow before he could take another step, peering into his face. “Take care of yourself. I know how much of a strain caring for my son can be. I did it for over twenty years, under different circumstances, but the last few were the hardest of all. Jim’s needs are unique—but so are yours. Remember that.”

“I appreciate your concern,” he said, managing a small smile. “I’ll be fine. Really.”

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“So,” Chris began. “Do you want to tell me what’s bothering you—or do I have to pry it out of you with some of the best coffee in town?”

He’d never seen Leonard so out of sorts. The younger man had misordered not once, but twice, and still hadn’t touched his food. A plate no Southern-born and raised man would ignore.

Leonard poked at his biscuits, dragging yet another bite into the gravy and leaving it there. He didn't even glance at the cobbler to the side. "I think we need some time apart."

Chris frowned. "Well, I admit I've a little hard on you when it comes to Jim, especially this last year, but, really, we don't even see each—"

"Not you," Leonard said, scowling. "Jim."

Chris set his fork down, leaving the rest of his steak untouched. "What's this about?"

"We keep..." Leonard hesitated. "Arguing. We can't even have a conversation without one of us drawing up short."

"I've noticed something has been off," Chris said cautiously. "But don't you think the best thing to do would see a counselor?"

Leonard shot him a dirty look. "So you think this is my fault?"

"I didn't say just you, did I?" Chris replied. "Therapy wouldn't hurt Jim, either. In fact, I know he hasn't followed up with his since his last appointment. It takes two people, working together, to make a marriage."

"Tell that to Jim," Leonard muttered, throwing his napkin down. "You don't know...you don't see...he's like a child. He acts like one, constantly. I have to watch out for him every second of the day."

"That is what you signed up for, isn't it?" Chris asked.

"Of course it isn't," Leonard muttered.

Chris settled back in his chair, crossing his arms. “No?”

“I mean...yes...” Leonard winced. “But...also no. I hate to see him like this, but I also love him. But he...” He blew out a shaky sigh. “He’s getting worse.”

“You thought he’d get better once you were by his side legally,” Chris surmised.

Leonard shrugged. “I guess?”

“Life doesn’t work that way.”

“Believe me, I wasn’t under any illusions.” His voice grew quiet. “Just hopeful.”

“You have to take it a day at a time.”

“When I want a whole future with him?” Leonard barked out a short laugh. “When I’m planning for the next thing to go wrong with him?”

“You need to find a balance, Leonard.”

“You don’t think I know that? Do you realize that he wears a permanent tracker now, so I know without a shadow of a doubt where he is? And not just one, either. That watch I got him tells me where he is every minute of every day, and Gabby’s collar.”

Chris was stunned. He hadn’t known. “I’m sorry,” he said when he found his voice, aching in his heart for the both of them. “Thank you for taking care of our son.”

Leonard shrugged, glancing away at a bare spot on the wall. “He’d do the same for me,” he muttered.

But it sounded like he wasn’t quite sure.

“Of course he would,” Chris said gently. “Would it help to tell you that we’ve planned something that could possibly get Jim back on track?”

Leonard’s brow twitched. “Planned something? Like a party?”

Chris smiled. “Hell, no. Something...different. Something better.”

“What?”

“Kevin pulled some strings.”

Leonard stared at him unblinkingly. “He pulled some strings.” He worked his jaw. “Kevin. That’s great. Just great.”

Leaning forward, Chris narrowed his eyes. “I haven’t even said what it is, yet.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m quite shocked already,” Leonard deadpanned. “And what, exactly, did Kevin plan?”

Chris’s smile widened. He couldn’t wait to see the surprise on Jim’s face when he told him. “You know that cooking show Jimmy likes so much?”

“Yes,” Leonard said in a tight, controlled voice Chris didn’t quite understand. “How could I not? He watches it every damn—every day.”

Chris laughed. “That he does. I suppose you can’t ignore someone as outgoing and engaging as Gaila, now, can you? Well, Kevin asked if she’d meet Jim on his own turf. She agreed to stop over in a few days and surprise Jim, all on her own time. No producers, no television. Just old-fashioned cooking and baking. I think this is just what the two of you need. Something to lift Jim’s spirits.”

Leonard swallowed and pushed his plate away. It scraped against the table with a wretched, shuddering sound. “Yeah. Just what we need.”

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Four-and-a-half weeks ago

“Is she here yet?” Jim asked, running into Bones as he tried to reign in his excitement. “Is she here? Is she?”

Bones reached up with both hands and grasped Jim’s shoulders, steadying him. “Calm down. Ny said she just pulled in.” Bones let go, only to yank on the refrigerator door, opening it with more force than Jim would have liked and causing the door to slam into one of the counters.

He winced. “That fridge is new, Bones—”

“It’s steel. It can take it,” Bones muttered. He peered at the crowded shelves, scowling. “You really needed all of this for today?”

“Yep.”

“We have no room.”

Jim grinned. “It’s great, isn’t it?”

Bones sighed and let the refrigerator door close with a resounding thud. “You have an appointment tomorrow morning, bright and early, Jim.”

He nodded. “I know. She knows.”

Bones wasn’t listening. He pulled his headset closer to his mouth and spoke into it. “She’s coming to the door, Ny?”

“Ask her what she’s wearing,” Jim whispers to him.

Bones frowned. “Ny, wait—“ He covers the microphone. “Her outfit? Really, Jim?”

“I don’t want to clash.” He had nightmares about it.

“It’s not like you’re going to be on a big screen.”

Jim felt a prick of sadness. “I know,” he said sullenly.

“Fine.” Bones sighed after a long pause. “Ny, Jim wants to know—“

Jim suddenly remembered. “Wait!”

Bones stopped mid-sentence, mouth tightening. “Hold on, Ny.” He gave Jim a dark look. “What now?”

“Is she in heels? Those red ones are as tall as the Eiffel Tower.” In Paris, where she wanted to vacation, or so she’d said on her last show. “She really could hurt herself on our front step if she’s not careful.”

“I’m sure she’s watching where she’s going,” Bones said through clenched teeth.

“Could you check. Please?” Jim had to beg. “I’d hate for something to happen to her, and then she would want to leave, and not come back, and it would reflect badly on Kevin—“

“Ny,” Bones growled. “Don’t let her go up the stairs. I’m coming out to escort her myself.”

Jim could hardly contain his excitement as he followed Bones out of the kitchen to the hallway. “Be nice, okay?”

“I’m always nice,” Bones retorted.

A wave of nausea overcame him. But maybe he was sick of the way Bones kept treating him.

A second wave caused him to stumble, and he tripped, slumping forward into Bones, who stopped and sighed.. “What,” he said tightly. When Jim said nothing, he started to walk again.

The room spun. “Oh, my God,” Jim whined, clutching Bones’s arm and pulling at it. “Wait. I—sick—”

He groaned, and wrapped his other arm around his stomach. How could he feel so ill? Everything had been going so well.

Bones came to a halt, twisting his head to stare at him. “What? What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I think I might throw up on you,” he said hoarsely.

“That’s just nerves, Jim.”

“Oh. Right.” Jim laughed shakily. “But I think—I’m gonna—”

Nausea welled in his throat until he was sure it was coming out of his ears.

He covered his mouth, gagging like he was some dumb starry-eyed teenager, not a damn adult who— “Oh, God,” he muffled out.

Bones’s eyes widened. “Christ—

“I—”

“Jim, wait—”

There was no waiting. Jim wanted to cry. He thought he was actually was crying. He leaned over, too sick to—to—

A second later, Bones stared down at his shoes in dismay. “Dammit, Jim!”

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Leonard had thought he was having a bad day—until Jim entered the kitchen wearing that new shirt he had bought him for their anniversary, that blue one that brought his eyes, also wearing a dazed look that could come from only one person these days, but that would be as difficult to get rid of as it would the stink on a skunked dog.

Just great.

It wasn’t just a bad day. This was an atrocious no-good day from hell.

“Oh, my God,” the red-haired woman squealed. She ran up to Jim with a bright smile and gave him a crushing hug. “You’re even cuter in person, Jimmy.”

“J-Jimmy?” Jim stammered.

She gasped, stepping back. “Is that okay? You’re just so sweet, Sugar, I can’t stand it.”

Jim blushed a deep crimson. “Uh, sure? My dad calls me that.”

“Oh, and no wonder.” She clapped her hands. “Oh, I can just tell we’re going to have so much fun.”

And, then, she had the audacity to lean over and kiss him on the goddamn cheek, staining it with the imprint of her sinfully perfect red lips.

Jim dazedly touched his cheek.

No, there was no going back.

Gaila, queen of the kitchen, was now queen of his husband's heart.

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Ben remained by Kanzi's side the entire evening, watching over him, helping him, making sure he didn't fall or forget to take his medication, because Jim's husband did not.

He was happy to be of help, but he was sad for the couple. This should be a joyful time, seeing Kanzi's dream come true. Instead, Mr. McCoy loomed on the outskirts of the kitchen, giving Miss Gaila looks that would fry a chicken. Occasionally he would sneak something from the refrigerator when he thought no one was looking, like one of Ben's sons would when he was feeling ornery. He then spilled the only gallon of milk they had, after taking a huge swallow straight from the plastic jug.

That wasn't all.

He'd even gotten a toothbrush he'd been using to clean the fine grooves of the kitchen tile stuck in Gaila's thick, curly hair, like a hyena tangled in a trap of brush. This distracted Kanzi after all of his hard work, which in turn distracted Gaila. They forgot to watch the timer. They pulled the anticipated lasagna from the oven too late, dismayed at the burnt edges.

An accident, Leonard had said, while they ate what was salvageable. Although Jim and Gaila had believed him, Ben suspected Gaila knew exactly what had happened for she invited herself over the following week.

The look on Leonard's face....

Yet no one—not even Leonard—could refuse Kanzi.

Ben sighed, determined to at least approach Leonard and remind him Kanzi would need his assistance—his gentle assistance—as he prepares for bed.

Sabotage was not becoming. Not to anyone.

Even if they were hurting where no one could see.

And especially if the other was hurting, his depression festering.

Yes, Kanzi was keeping a secret, too.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Reviews are always welcome!

Chapter 2

Chapter by [arrowinthesky_\(restfulsky5\)](#)

Chapter Notes

This story will not be two chapters, after all, but three or four.

Thank you, diamondblue4, for editing this for me.

Thank you for reading!

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Present Day

After an hour's worth of coffee and running through every possible conversation he could have with Jim, Leonard finally made the call.

And when Jim did not answer his phone, or reply to the three texts Leonard sent him within the next four hours, he called Chris.

The old man picked up before the first ring ended. His long-suffering sigh silenced Leonard before he had a chance to speak.

"Len," Chris gritted.

He could just imagine the fierce look on his father-in-law's face. "Chris, hear me out. Please."

"I'm not the one you wronged—"

“I need to speak with him,” Leonard blurted out. “It’s urgent.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to you. And even if he did, I wouldn’t permit it. Not after what you did.”

“Please, give me a chance—”

“No, you don’t get to have that. You walked *out*.”

Although a defensive retort was on the tip of his tongue, to remind his father-in-law that he himself had said Jim was also at fault for their distance, Leonard decided to ignore the barb. “I have Jim’s scans.”

Another pause, pregnant with tension. “Dammit, I had asked for those.”

Leonard’s surprised that Chris had forgotten he’d lost rights as a result of the marriage. “You don’t have the legal authority, anymore.”

“Where can I meet you?” Chris asked, his icy words freezing the air between them.

Leonard winced. Facing his father-in-law’s wrath was proving as difficult as he expected it to be, but he really should talk to Jim first. It was the least he could do for the man he still loved. Showing him the respect he deserved but hadn’t actually received from Leonard in months.

“I want to see Jim,” he said quietly. “Please.”

“No.”

“You can’t hide him from me forever.”

“Me, hide him from you?” Chris asked. “You’re the one who discarded him.”

It was a well-deserved reminder, but Leonard could not dwell on his grievous mistake or the

guilt threatening to overwhelm him. “I need to talk to him, Chris,” he said, not above pleading. “Please.”

“It’s been three weeks,” Chris said. “Hardly enough time for him to get over his spouse leaving him for a better life.”

A better life? If they only knew. “What I did was...hasty,” he admitted.

“Damn right it was,” Chris said. “And I should’ve known. It’s a pattern with you.”

Guilt wrapped itself tightly around his chest, squeezing the breath from him.

“This isn’t the first time you fled when things got tough,” Chris said.

He could not deny it. Yet, if had he not, he would have crumpled completely. “I - I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Your lawyer’s office, this afternoon.”

Lawyer? Oh, God. A continent-sized lump formed in his throat. “My lawyer?” Leonard rasped, another knot forming in the pit of his stomach. His lawyer was Jim’s, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t be after this. “Why?”

“These three weeks gave Jim a clarity he hasn’t had in years. He wants a divorce.”

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One month ago

“Rise and shine, beautiful,” Bones said, whistling a nameless tune as he opened the curtains.

The sun poured into the room, illuminating Jim’s face like a floodlight.

Jim groaned, turning over on his side to avoid ruining a perfectly good morning of sleeping in. He licked his lips, grimacing. “Did I drink last night?” he asked, praying he hadn’t actually had a drop. Alcohol interfered with his medication. “I feel like I have a hangover,” he whispered, running a hand over his face.

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic.”

He wasn’t trying to be. His head pounded, his mouth was as dry as cotton, not to mention he couldn’t think. “Mind closing those?”

“You have an appointment with Dr. Raal, Jim,” Bones said, his bright voice grating on Jim’s nerves. “Remember?”

Jim burrowed under the covers and threw a pillow over his head to block out the sound. “I don’t need to go. Haven’t felt better in weeks,” he lied, his voice muffled.

“Come on, Kid.” Bones tugged the covers down.

Jim shivered as cool air whispered across his bare skin, Bones’s hand trailing after it.

“Oh,” Bones said huskily, his fingers pausing at Jim’s bony hip. “I see how it is.”

Jim couldn’t help but feel slightly embarrassed. He hadn’t worn a stitch of clothing last night for some reason, and he’d lost another pound or two since last month. He was too skinny to be desirable. He wondered just how awful he actually looked.

No wonder Bones had noticed.

“I wish I’d gotten you up sooner,” Bones murmured.

Sighing, Jim turned over onto his back and squinted up at him. How the hell was his husband

already dressed, complete with that gold chain tucked under his shirt and an award-winning smirk. “How can you be so bright and cheery this morning? And where were you last night? You didn’t come to bed.”

Bones’s playful smirk evaporated. “Bright and cheery? Hardly.” He let go of the blanket. “I’m not the one who flirted all night,” he muttered, turning away.

“What?” Jim blinked, his gaze locked on Bones’s backside as he walked to the closet. “What does that mean?”

Bones grunted, sliding shirts out of the way and stopping at the navy blue and lime green checked shirt Jim’s aunt had given him for his birthday several years ago. It was the ugliest flannel he’d ever seen, but he hadn’t had the heart to throw it away at the time, for fear of hurting her feelings if she found out.

Even though she’d passed on more than a year ago and he’d hardly talked to her even when she’d been alive, both of them too busy with their own acting to make contact, he couldn’t part with it.

It reminded him of her sense of humor. Besides, Jim had developed a bad habit, hoarding things that he didn’t even like. He had little control over his health, or even his life, but these things he could control.

“So, is it flannel today?” Bones asked, now humming. “Or are you going to dress to impress?”

“Wait. Why did you say—”

“Say what?” Bones tugged the ugly shirt off the hanger and threw it onto the bed, followed by a pair of jeans. “Here. Maybe this? You said you wanted to wear it again to appease your conscience. You better hurry. We have to be there in an hour.”

He left the room, leaving Jim behind, bewildered and shocked as he stared at the flannel he disliked. Yet, Bones was right. It would ease his conscience. Hardly worn, the flannel scraped across his skin like a starched button-up shirt he’d wear to those stupid post-award parties. The parties he never wanted to attend yet never had the courage to decline.

At least the jeans were frayed and worn. He took a second look—they were his favorites.

Even more comfortable than his old sweats. He'd thought he'd lost them. He'd been looking for them for a week. Why were they in the closet? He usually put them in his drawer.

Strange.

But the empty room was even stranger without Bones, and he couldn't help but feel like he was being abandoned.

Swallowing back the bile rising in his throat, Jim stood. He barely held his own weight, his knees weakening as he tested them. He clutched at the bed with one hand to keep his balance, praying that he could stand on his own two feet without having to cry for help.

God, he was pathetic. It must be one of his bad days. And he had PT later this afternoon. Two grueling, one-hour sessions. He appreciated the intensity—he probably wouldn't be able to walk with Gabby if his therapists went easy on him—but they were exhausting.

Especially exhausting on days like today, but he had no choice.

The self-pitying thought of staying in bed like the depressed individual he didn't want to be but most likely was, tempted him but he shoved it and thoughts of the therapy aside and grabbed the pile of clothing. Bunching the clothing in his arms, he limped to his bathroom, each painful step slower than the last.

His foot hadn't healed since his fall. They'd adjusted his shoe, adding a custom insert to cushion his foot, but it still pained him when he walked. Something about the bone not healing like it should, which was one of the reasons he had to see the doctor again today.

A soft body brushed against his leg.

He frowned, looking down.

Two sad eyes stared up at him.

He sighed. "Oh, Gabs..."

Guilt stabbed his already wounded heart. He'd forgotten she was there. How had he forgotten?

He would never...never...forget. But he had—she'd been there on the bed with him, when Bones had come in.

She wouldn't have been anywhere else but by his side.

“Sorry, girl,” he whispered, patting her on the head. “I see you.”

She whined at him, before pushing the door open with her nose. Jim limped into his bathroom, exhaustion relentlessly riding at his back. Maybe he should reschedule his appointment. Meeting Gaila had been fun, but maybe Bones had been right. It'd been too much.

Dealing with Bones's antics had been a little too much, too.

What had gotten into him?

Jim hadn't recognized Bones's bizarre behavior for what it was until after Gaila had left, when he was in bed and had time to think, instead of react.

Unable to sleep, he'd come to the slow realization that his husband had tried to sabotage one of the best nights he'd had in a long time.

To say that it hurt was an understatement.

And now...he was accusing Jim of flirting?

He didn't like Gaila in that way, and why would he? Sure, he was bisexual, but he had Bones. He had his own life, separate from stardom, and he liked it that way. Gaila was certainly a beautiful woman, and she reawakened something in him that had been dormant for so long, but it wasn't like that between them.

He'd have to set Bones straight. Sometime. It wouldn't be soon. Just thinking about it made him sick to his stomach.

How could Bones think he was flirting? Did *he* not like Jim anymore?

He took another step, but his world tilted, causing him to stumble. He gripped the doorframe. Not Bones's hand, or the older man's shoulder. Nothing of comfort. Just a damn door.

The large breath he started to take became a slight sob, the room suddenly suffocating.

What if—if Bones did those things—said those things—in order to drive him away, so that he could get away from Jim? What if his jealousy was just an excuse to leave him? Like before? Bones had stayed away from their bed last night. He could very well do it again tonight, with a perfectly articulated excuse.

He leaned his forehead against the wall, near tears. He wanted to fix this—fix them—but he didn't know how. He knew he wasn't a great catch now, the cancer eliminating all his chances of that. He had even fewer friends than before, and even fewer acquaintances. His chance at a long life had lowered significantly. He was a homebody at heart now. Uninteresting and boring, closing himself off from others because only then was he comfortable in his own skin. He'd thought inviting Gaila here would help him seem less...lame. Proving to Bones that Jim was still that exciting guy he'd fallen in love with.

Apparently, it had done the opposite of what he'd expected.

Gabby remained curled at his feet, waiting for him to continue with his morning routine. To actually move forward with his life. To *move*.

And when he did, when he saw that Leonard had already laid out his towel and washcloth, as well as a cup of coffee that had steamed up a small section of the mirror, he breathed a welcomed sigh of relief.

See, he thought to himself. Leonard did love him.

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Twenty-five days ago

Leonard moved his red checker, then narrowly eyed the boy across from him. “Kito, you better run.”

The boy broke into a wide grin. Of all Ben’s children, Kito was the most engaging, strongly resembling his father in both features and behavior. And because of this, he was the child Leonard knew best. In fact, Kito spoke English very well for only recently learning the language, and was the spokesperson on behalf his siblings. For that, Leonard was grateful. He’d discovered the children’s numerous medical needs over the course of several months’ time, thanks to Kito and the trust he’d secured with him.

“Mr. Bones, you better watch out for me.” The ten-year-old leaned forward, working his bottom lip between his teeth. Eyes narrowed, he slid his checker towards one of Leonard’s.

It was a sneaky, calculated move which trapped him in the corner, more or less. By three of Kito’s other checkers. Unless he wanted to risk losing yet another piece to the kid, he had to make a move from the other side of the board.

“I see how it is,” Leonard said. “No mercy, huh?”

“No mercy!”

Leonard arched a brow. “At least you’re honest.”

Kito just grinned.

“Lemonade, anyone?” Jim called from the porch behind them.

Kito looked up, beyond Leonard’s shoulder. “I will be back, Mr. Bones. I think I would love Jim’s refreshment.”

The boy was out of his seat faster than a hot knife through butter.

Leonard chuckled, craning his neck to find Jim. The younger man cupped his hands around his mouth and called out to the others in the field who were playing ball, including Spock.

Winona placed the tray on the table, smiling at Kito as he bounded up the steps. Leonard spied the plate of cookies beside the beverage, Winn's speciality. She spoiled those boys, as well as Ben's daughter.

And Jim, of course, who'd already snatched a cookie or two.

Leonard began the short walk to the porch, reaching the steps when Spock did. Gabby, who was beside Jim, wagged her tail upon seeing them.

"Did you even play?" Leonard asked, eyeing the man whose shirt was still crisp and clean, like it had just come from the line, no sweat to be seen.

"It was abnormally cool," Spock said, looking apologetic.

Leonard rolled his eyes and patted Gabby's head as he passed her. "Did you get hit in the head with a ball? I'm not sure this weather—as hot as hell and half of Georgia—qualifies as being cool."

Jim took a seat on the porch swing and grinned, kicking his feet to make the swing move. "It's his Arizona blood, Bones. Spock, you said you wanted to talk to me?"

"Indeed," Spock said.

Leonard grabbed a glass of lemonade for himself and took a sip, relishing the sweetness. "I'd love to stay and chat, Jim, but I have a scheduled phone conference with your dad concerning your doctor appointments."

Chris was away on a business trip. Although Leonard was expected to update him daily on Jim's health, legally he wasn't under any obligation. He did it to maintain the peace between them, even though it was clear Chris now had serious doubts he was good enough for his son.

"Okay," Jim said. He hesitated, looking up at him. "Do you need me to talk to him, too?"

And have to reckon with Jim's defensiveness about his physical health? Risk the two of them joining forces against him and the medical treatment he'd deemed best for Jim?

No. Things would go much smoother if he did this alone.

He squeezed Jim's shoulder, reassuring him—and maybe himself—that they were still partners. "I can handle it."

Jim's eyes flickered with relief. "Thanks, Bones."

He leaned down and kissed his cheek. "Come inside when you're done. Too much of this heat is never good for you."

Jim nodded. "I will."

As Leonard turned to leave, Spock folded his tall form into the seat adjacent to Jim and cleared his throat. "Nyota and I have discussed your compatibility with Miss Gaila."

Leonard halted in his tracks, choking on his next sip. What the hell was Spock *thinking*?

"Compata—?" Jim shifted in his seat.

"Compatibility," Spock repeated.

Jim swallowed. "What does that mean?"

What does that mean?

The myriad of emotions Leonard preferred to bury rather than face slugged him in the chest, one after another, until he felt bruised and damaged—like Jim.

Sorrow that Jim's vocabulary had shrunk even more. Guilt that he—Leonard—could understand without having to ask why. Anger that Spock had the nerve to talk about that woman with Jim. And fear that this subject would fill Jim's head with new ideas.

Hell, he couldn't just leave now, could he?

He slipped into the seat next to Jim, ignoring Spock's raised eyebrow, no doubt a nonverbal cue that he'd noticed his decision to stay—and wanted to know why.

He refused to explain. He shouldn't have to. Jim was his husband—and this topic was dangerous.

“Compatibility,” Spock said. “The means by which you are similar.”

Jim offered him a small smile. “Oh.” There was a pause, his grin slipping. “But...what do you *mean*?”

“You have similar behaviors and preferences.” When Jim didn't reply, Spock added, “It would be to your benefit to have another friend. One like her.”

Normally Leonard would be grateful that the man had shown tact, answering without making Jim feel like he was stupid, and for looking after Jim's best interests, but this was different. The truth was, he felt threatened. And not only by Gaila, but now Spock, and anyone else who “thought” Gaila was good for Jim.

“She *is* my friend.” Jim laughed nervously, his self-doubt catching Leonard off-guard. “Isn't she?”

“She is and by my calculations will continue to be,” Spock said.

“Oh. Well,” Jim breathed out. “That's good.”

“Have you spoken to her about things other than your cooking lessons?”

Jim scrunched his nose. “Not exactly, but we don't always talk about food during our lessons.”

Although it was painfully obvious Jim had misunderstood, Leonard swallowed an exasperated breath. He knew from experience that aggravating Jim's embarrassment and confusion only made things worse for them all.

“Jim, that means you do talk about other things,” he gently reminded him.

Jim blushed. “Sorry. I—I guess I didn't understand.”

“It is of no consequence,” Spock said, giving Leonard a quick, sideways glance. “What do you like sharing with her in the course of your conversations, Jim?”

Jim relaxed, back pressing into the swing as he stared up at the ceiling, a contemplative expression on his face. “Other than food? And recipes? We talk about...people. And our dogs —”

“She has a dog?” Leonard asked. He should have known—Gabby had loved her, too.

Jim smiled. “Yeah. This beagle that she says likes to disappear for days at a time.”

“Outside?”

“He’s an inside dog, but she goes into this wardrobe, and that’s when Gaila can’t find her.” Jim’s smile widened. “Like magic.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “Magic.”

Jim nodded. “To another world, she said.”

Leonard thought for a moment, but it wasn’t hard to come up with the answer, considering the fact that Jim had been watching more movies. “As in...Chronicles of Narnia?”

Jim’s ears turned pink. “Um...yes?”

He couldn’t help but admonish him. This wasn’t the first time he’d been so affected by Gaila and...her fantastical ideas. “Jim, piece of furniture doesn’t eat dogs,” he said carefully. “It can’t transport them, either.”

As if protesting in her own way, Gabby whined and nudged Jim’s leg with her wet nose. Jim looked down at his lap, where the dog had rested her head.

“I’m just telling you what she tells me,” he said, slowly petting Gabby.

“Fascinating,” Spock murmured. “She is a dreamer. Imaginative.” He paused, giving Leonard

another look before saying, “Like you, Jim.”

Jim kept his eyes averted, but his fingers stilled in Gabby’s hair. “No, not really. I’m just a dumb hick now, I guess. Iowa born and farm raised, and so shall I die.”

Leonard’s breath caught. It was painful to hear him degrade himself. “You’re not stupid, Jim. Far from it.”

“I must concur,” Spock said. “Quite the contrary.”

Jim gave a short laugh. “No? Then, maybe...” His gaze lifted, his eyes fixated on Ben’s kids as they ran back into the yard, where they started playing a game of tag. “Maybe I’m like them,” he said, inclining his head toward the laughter. “A kid, trying his best to ignore the shit that got him here.”

“You’re not a child,” Leonard said automatically, hoping the consolation would, at the very least, help him to relax.

Jim shook his head. “You don’t have to lie, Bones. There are times when I see it on your face.”

Leonard worked his jaw. “That’s not what I—”

“I can take the truth,” Jim interrupted, petting Gabby again. “I’m not like I once was. I don’t get things. Sometimes I do, but many times I don’t, and I purposely try not to think about it. I’m like...an overgrown child.”

“I am not—we are not—merely placating you. You are gifted, Jim,” Spock said, his voice softening. “Perhaps not in the way you once were, but in a different way—and it is no less important. You have an inclination towards imagination and heart that you did not have before.”

Jim’s cheeks pinked. “I don’t know about that, Spock.”

“I am sure Gaila appreciates when you do not speak ill of her when she shares her thoughts with you,” Spock pointed out.

“I guess,” Jim mumbled. “I just...we just...we understand each other. She lets me be me, and I can let her be silly, even though she’s as smart as anyone I know.”

“You cherish her.” Spock paused. “And in turn, she treasures the camaraderie she has with you.”

Jim shrugged. “I hope she does. She’s my friend, one of the few who understands me. I’d hate to lose that. But I think she might feel like she’s alone, too. She’s mentioned she’s around people all the time, but no one understands what she needs to feel...to feel *human*. I know how that feels, more than most. It’s not easy to be in the spotlight...maybe even harder than it is when you’re closed off from people, like I am now...” His voice trailed off. With a determined look on his face, he set his lemonade aside and stood. “If you’ll both excuse me, I feel like making a phone call. Thanks, Spock, for reminding me that I need to be a friend, too.”

Leonard couldn’t explain it, but as Jim walked away, favoring his good leg, he felt like he had lost his right arm.

Jim intended to share his dreams—the best parts of himself, if Leonard were to be honest—with a woman he barely knew, to comfort her.

And Leonard...he got Jim’s leftovers. The broken parts that were often so broken, Jim wasn’t recognizable, anymore.

His husband was slowly but surely becoming a man he didn’t know.

Leonard picked up his lemonade without a word to Spock and went straight to his office. Once there, he texted Chris to let him know he wasn’t available to talk, after all. Still standing, he opened his desk drawer, pulled out one of the flasks he’d stashed, and, ignoring the tremor in his hands, poured the rest into his glass.

He finished his mixed drink in five desperate gulps.

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Twenty-four days ago

Jim didn't want to go to bed. He didn't want to be told he had to go to bed. He didn't want to feel like he needed to go to bed. He wanted to stop counting his days.

He wanted to *live*.

He stood, spine stiff and hands locked at his sides, refusing to look at Bones.

"Jim," Bones called to him.

"It's only eight."

Bones came to stand in front of him. Jim stared down at his own bare feet—and Bones's black, shiny shoes. If there ever was a sign at how different they'd become, this was it.

"It is," Bones said. "And you fell asleep at the table an hour ago."

"So?"

"Jim." He felt Bones's hands on his shoulders. "Look at me, please."

Jim reluctantly raised his eyes.

Bones searched his face. "I know how wearisome PT has been for you lately, and with your concerns—"

"You mean yours," Jim said, his mouth twisting into a grimace.

A frown marred Bones's features. "You have to admit, they are disconcerting. Your leg isn't healing, not to mention the headaches have come back—"

"Stop," Jim whispered

“—the fatigue, the memory issues—”

“Dammit, Bones,” Jim said, tearing himself free from Bones’s grasp.

“We need to talk about these things, Jim—”

“No—”

“Yeah, we do. If we don’t, how can we—

“We don’t.”

“I think we need to face the facts,” Bones said, in the tone Jim imagined he’d used for patients once.

That he was dying? Not soon, but they both knew he wasn’t going to make it past thirty.

Jim’s chest tightened. “No,” he said hoarsely.

“Jim—”

“Just shut up about it, Bones!” Jim cried, covering his ears.

Bones grew quiet.

“Please,” Jim said shakily. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You never do.”

“Because it sucks!”

Bones exhaled a long, slow breath. “Listen. How about I join you?”

Although he wasn't sure Bones meant it, Jim couldn't think of anything better. He didn't know why Bones had started sleeping in a separate room in the first place. Imagining the warmth at his back that he'd been missing for days now, he raised his eyes, hesitating.

It was a second too long.

A phone vibrated, the one in Bones's right pants pocket.

Bones sighed. "Just a sec, Jim." He took out his cell, answering it immediately. "Yes. Christine?"

Jim's stomach somersaulted. "Christine?"

Bones covered the speaker and looked at him apologetically. "I need to take this."

"Christine?" Jim repeated, part of him wilting on the inside.

"It's not like that, Jim." Bones stared straight into his eyes, but the fact that he was talking to his ex—not a fling, not Jocelyn, but someone who'd meant something to Bones, a woman he'd loved—only hardened Jim's resolve to ignore Bones's pleading expression. "I can't explain, not yet, but I will."

"Right." Jim hunched his shoulders and shuffled to his bed, reluctant to feel the hurt and distancing himself from Bones's ex the only way he knew how.

By distancing himself from Bones.

Tears stung the backs of Jim's eyes. He blamed it on the fact that he felt he could sleep for a year. "You know the way out."

But Bones had already forgotten him.

"Christine, I know it sounds like...like before. If you know someone—anyone—who could help, who I could trust..." Bones shut the door behind him, his voice fading into nothing.

Jim crawled into bed, willing himself to fall fast asleep. After a moment of intense restlessness, he blinked into the darkness.

Everything was blurry. Unclear, and distorted. He wiped at his eyes, but it made no difference. Something wasn't right.

He reached beside him, hoping to feel the solid warmth of Bones's body, but felt the cold emptiness of the sheets, instead.

Panic pressed down on him like a dead weight.

Oh, God. He took a labored breath, then another, curling into a ball when he couldn't fight the swell of emotion in his chest.

Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, down his cheeks. Gabby nudged him with her nose, but he was too scared to move.

He couldn't remember where Bones had gone.

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Twenty-three days ago

Leonard crept down the stairs in his stocking feet before Jim and the rest of the world awakened. Including one particular mother-bear, Winona Kirk. No, Winona *Pike*.

He held a black plastic bag at his side, thanking his lucky stars that Chris hadn't come along, too.

He entered the kitchen, eyes on the door to the garage.

“What is that?”

Leonard’s heart lodged in his throat. He stopped, breathing lightly through his nostrils first before turning.

He forced a smile and faced Winn. He pulled out an empty pop can from the bag, tapping it with a well manicured finger. “Things I don’t need. Or, rather, Jim.”

She sighed. “He has a habit of sneaking sweets into the house. He’s like a little boy.”

“He’s gotten better.”

She smiles. “At what? The sneaking or stopping?”

He chuckled. “Depends on the day.”

“I hope today’s a good day,” she said.

“It should be. He seems to sleep well.”

“I didn’t mean him,” she said quietly.

He stared at her, heart beating fast, his fingers tightening around the bag. “Oh? I’m fine.”

“Make sure of it.” She inclined her head towards the bag. “Secrets don’t keep well in this house, and if you’re throwing your flasks out, that’s a good start. Maybe you should think about quitting altogether before Jim finds out what you’ve been doing.”

“And what have I been doing?” he asked stiffly.

“You tell me.”

He knew, then, she had come to stay with them, not because of Jim. But *him*. “I’m taking care of the problem,” he lied.

She worked her jaw, her eyes angry in a way he’d never seen before. “See that you do,” she said through clenched teeth. “I do not want Jim to know. If he finds out that you’re drinking again, what do you think will happen? What will happen if Chris finds out?”

He stood, his thoughts reeling.

“You don’t know?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“Then you’re stupider than I ever thought.” She gave the bag—and him—one last, long look before walking out.

He couldn’t drop the bag in the garbage bin fast enough.

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Twenty-two days ago

Jim hugged the pillow to his chest, hoping he didn’t look as pathetic as he felt. “You didn’t have to come, you know.”

Gaila sat beside him, cross-legged on the couch and filing her nails. “I’d do anything for you, Jimmy.”

“I don’t feel like a lesson today.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“I don’t feel like talking, either.”

“Where is he?”

Jim picked at the lint on the knees of his pair of old sweats. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Out shopping?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. He left a note on the dresser. I haven’t read it yet.”

Her hands stilled. She looked up at him. “A note?”

He pulled the envelope from under his thigh and handed it to her.

Her lips thinned and she looked at it, flipping it over. “It’s sealed,” she murmured.
“Jimmy...”

“Yeah?” He almost couldn’t bear the pain he felt growing in his chest.

She narrowed her eyes, reading Bones’s neat script on the front, where it said simply *Jim*. “I think you should open it.”

He swallowed. “I don’t want to.”

He didn’t want to tell Ben or his mom that he didn’t feel so hot, either. Like a pick was driving into his head. That sometimes, everything was blurry. That sometimes, it was all he could do to just breathe.

Gaila curled her fingers around the envelope, looking at him with undisguised pity. “Jim...” She hesitated. “Do you want me to do it?”

He nodded.

“Okay,” she said.

She opened the letter with her nail file. She scanned it. “Oh, Jimmy,” she said softly.

His heart shattered.

He’d known. He’d known.

Jim groaned. “Bones.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ve got you.” She pulled him into her side, into her comforting embrace, and began to read.

“Dear Jim. I know I’ve failed you, in many ways, and I’m sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. You’re the last person I’d ever want to hurt. I love you with my whole heart. Never doubt that. But what I have to say to you now, with it being just part of the truth, is me failing you again. I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I don’t deserve any of your goodness, or your love. Yet if I don’t leave and face what I’ve become, I’ll never be able to crawl out of the hole I’ve made for myself. I need time, Jim—”

As the words destroyed the vestiges of his life, what little the cancer hadn’t already eaten away, Gaila held him, his head against her warm breast.

Her soft voice washed over him like a calming blanket, bestowing a thin balm of peace, soothing him despite the presence of the letter with its gutting words.

Beneath her gentle touch, however, despair settled deep into his marrow. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he never had to open them again.

Chapter 3

Chapter by [arrowinthesky_\(restfulsky5\)](#)

Chapter Notes

This story will have four chapters—I can't end it here.

A dear family member, my SIL, has been battling cancer for several years now. This week, we learned it's back, and in even more areas. We're all heartbroken. She's one of the strongest people I know, but this is the third time she's facing treatment—I know she's weary. And scared. Especially her sweet husband and children.

I've used this story as an outpouring of my heart—to anyone who has been affected by cancer. And to anyone who has suffered an addiction, or going through one, including loved ones. My prayers are with you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Present Day, days after Chapter 2's Present Day.

“Your slippers are on the right side of the bed, and so is your water, Kanzi.”

Ensuing silence weighed heavily in the room, almost as much as one particular doctor's absence.

Ben sighed and looked down at Jim, who had curled on his side on the bed, arms around Gabby. Ben, for one, was grateful for the dog, who did not sleep but stared at Jim in concern, still, after hours of canine vigilance. The covers had gathered at Jim's ankles, forgotten. Sadly, just like the dog.

He wanted to encourage Kanzi to talk with him, but Jim wasn't having any of it. The younger man's face was pressed into a pillow, hidden. His heart, Ben knew without a doubt, had long-

since been broken. What was left were vestiges of a happier time, a hopeful life, that Jim could not fathom to have again without his Bones.

Kanzi, once the bright center of joy of the Kirk family, was now a reflection of the damage that the collective secrets and avoidance of the family had caused.

“Kanzi,” he urged. “You must speak to me.”

But Jim made no sound. Made no effort to reply.

“Can you hear me?” Ben had expected some resistance from the young man, but now Kanzi was ignoring him completely. And not for the first time that day. “We need to talk.”

He’d been given instructions to judge for himself if Jim was in his right mind before the nurse returned from her break. Winona could not watch over Jim—she was ill with a cold. And Chris was not available, but for other reasons. Nyota and Spock were both away—an emergency with Nyota’s family, he’d heard, although they’d return tomorrow. Although the nurses were professional, handpicked by Chris, like himself, they were not as attuned to Jim’s moods as his family and friends were.

It was up to him to fill Leonard’s shoes as caretaker, not just carry out his role as bodyguard. But all Ben could think was: how could anyone who’d been abandoned be in their right mind?

The young man he’d come to love remained motionless, staring sightlessly over his pillow, Ben realized, at the wall.

Jim had experienced another seizure this afternoon, not long after his father told him there were six more tumors on his brain. The tumors were operable, but the surgery, scheduled for tomorrow, would be the most invasive he’d ever had. Radiation would follow.

There was a chance—always, a chance—that Kanzi would not survive either of the treatments.

Kanzi should not endure this stress alone, although Ben had no doubt that if anyone could, it would be Jim Kirk.

If Leonard were here, he'd know just what to do to pull Kanzi out of his depressed state. But he was not, he had left to take care of himself, all that Leonard could manage, and it was up to him—Ben—to do what he could in his place.

Ben had endured years in the tangled jungles, the tough but beautiful lands of Africa, the barren deserts of the Sahara, and a dangerous but necessary undercover mission that had nearly sucked his soul dry, a traumatic affair that had nearly torn his own marriage in two. But this—this had stripped his heart from his chest, leaving it absolutely hollow.

No one wanted Kanzi to suffer. His wife had warned him he cared too much, and if he wanted to do his job well, without the pain of losing a client to a dreadful illness, he should reconsider how close he'd come to Kanzi and his family and place some distance between them.

He could not heed her words, instead coming to the conclusion that with Kanzi, a most unique client, it was impossible to remain cold. Distanced. Detached. Kanzi was full of life, despite his sickness. He drew people to him with his smiling courage.

He'd come to the realization that to do things right, he must always wear his heart on his sleeve around Jim. For Jim did the same with everyone around him.

“Your baba will return soon” he reminded him, recalling Pike's recent text. “As he always does.”

Jim's silence brought out his own melancholy. He grieved for Kanzi and for those who loved him. And there were many who loved this man. More than Jim realized. If he could just remind the young man of this—that he was not alone—perhaps it would give him the peace he needed for—or to want to survive—the surgery.

“I am sure he will help you,” Ben added. “If you are up to it when he comes.”

Jim shivered, a fine layer of sweat pooling on his forehead, the face once beaming with affection for Leonard, and even his baba, now pale. Withdrawn. Sad.

“Kanzi.” Being took a damp cloth from the stand and leaned over Jim, gently dabbing at his forehead. “I want to help you.”

“I want Bones.”

The three softly spoken words were all Ben needed to hear. He paused what he was doing and sat on the edge of the bed, the mattress bending beneath his weight, a stark contrast to the thin man whose body had ebbed away in the past month. He gathered the blanket around Jim’s shoulders with a confidence that belied his fear that the younger man would find reason to escape the ministrations—and his life—and never be seen again.

A sorrowful storm brewed in Kanzi’s heart and mind, despite the willpower that had kept him fighting for his life. He would have to proceed with great caution. “Your father—”

“My father doesn’t understand,” Jim protested, his voice muffled by the blanket.

That was not the case—Chris had always understood, perhaps more than Jim—but he could not betray the Pikes’ confidence. Chris Pike was his employer, and Ben, too, saw the wisdom in withholding just enough information to ward off the worst of the stress. “He wants to protect you.”

“Well, here’s a news flash,” Jim whispered. “I’m sick of it.”

“It isn’t his intention to cause you more distress,” Ben said.

“He isn’t. It’s me. I shouldn’t have said I wanted a divorce.” Kanzi’s eyes filled with tears. “Why did I say that?”

“You were upset.”

“I was hurt,” Kanzi said thickly.

That was true. And sensitive to what Leonard wanted, Jim had taken himself out of the equation without counsel from those who loved them both. “It has been a difficult time for all of us.”

“And that’s why—that’s—I…” His expression fell. A moment passed, Kanzi’s eyes growing even more distant. “I wasn’t thinking,” he managed. “I was letting others think for me, Ben, and—and that was wrong.”

“Perhaps—perhaps not. Your life is at stake.”

“But that’s the thing,” Jim said quietly. “My cancer—it doesn’t matter. I’ll be dead one way or the other—Bones won’t be. There isn’t an excuse good enough. I love him. I will always love him. My husband is hurting—I need to be there for him.”

Ben was quiet. If only the others would come to this realization, too, but it was just like Kanzi to be the first.

“I miss him.” Jim’s voice cracked, causing Gabby to whine and paw at his shoulder. “I want Bones. I want Bones, Ben. I don’t care what happened between us, or how hard it will be, or what my parents will think. I just—I just want him.”

The heartfelt confession brought tears to Ben’s eyes. He grabbed a tissue from the nightstand and pressed it into Jim’s hand, taking one for himself, too. He’d known the confession would hurt Kanzi, but he’d never thought it would make his own heart squeeze tight with sorrow. But perhaps acknowledging this pain would help him start to heal. All of them. Even Pike.

“Kanzi, sometimes people who love—or love too much,” he amended. “They act to save themselves.”

Jim clutched the tissue, making no effort to wipe the tears from his face. “You mean, just like I did? I closed myself off. I chose to spend more time with Gaila—“

“Do not regret your friendship,” Ben countered softly. That friendship had been one of the best things that had happened to Jim, who’d blossomed beneath Gaila’s kindness. And Gaila, despite her boisterous personality and warm ways, had not once crossed the line.

Jim’s eyes flickered with surprise. “I’m not sure that’s possible...it ruined things. I’m pretty sure it fucked everything up, at least.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” He could not state that often enough, for other than Leonard, Gaila was Jim’s truest friend. But Leonard—was indisposed. “I cannot speak for everyone in your life, only for myself. But experience has taught me that life is often indifferent to our regrets.”

“You’ve...done the same thing?” Jim asked. “Acted to save yourself?”

Ben could not tell him his entire story, why he’d taken the fall for someone else early on in his career, thereby blackening his good name, but he could tell him this much. “I have kept secrets from my family. I thought that doing so would protect them. And they did keep my family safe, even from death.” He drew a long breath, steeling himself against his own honesty. Even his wife was ignorant of the truth. “But other times—for many years, Kanzi—they kept me from facing my mistakes, leading only to more hurt and suffering.”

Jim lowered his eyes, saying quietly, “That’s what Bones did, isn’t it?”

Ben fell silent.

Gabby nudged her way under Jim’s arm.

“He left—to spare me from more pain.” Jim exhaled a slow breath and started to pet his dog. “I knew it. I knew Bones wouldn’t just leave.” His worked his lip between his teeth. “And you know why, don’t you?”

Although the answer was on the tip of his tongue, Ben could not reveal more than he already had. “I cannot say, Kanzi.” He stood, his smile sad from bearing so many of his friends’ burdens. “Forgive me.”

“It has to be awful,” Jim said, a look of distress rising on his face. “Will you get my phone? And dial his number for me? I’d like to speak with him.”

“I can’t.” His chest tightened with guilt.

Jim frowned. “Why? This is my decision, my own life to live.”

He’d have to tell him. He’d prefer to tell Chris what he thought of his intrusive parenting, first. Guardian or not, this...was pushing things, as the Americans would say.

“Ben?” Jim’s voice sounded too small for a man who had experienced hell before he was thirty.

Ben’s pity stirred, loosening his tongue. “Your father...” *Is not always wise*. “He took your phone.”

“I’ll use yours.” His face twisted in thought. “If you can type the numbers in,” he muttered, waving at his face—his sightless eyes, a condition that was most likely permanent this time, unless the surgery was highly successful.

Ben spoke cautiously. “Leonard has not answered our calls.” The explanation left a bad taste in his mouth. “And—no one—except for Chris—knows where he is.”

Jim's eyes filled with unshed tears, which was more painful to look at than Ben had anticipated. The younger man's mouth moved, but not a sound was brought forth.

It was heartbreaking.

"I am sorry, Kanzi," he said after a moment, recognizing that he, too, had an important decision to make. One that would either bring this family together—or tear them further apart. "Leonard—"

"—is alone," Jim finished for him, adding, in a fighting voice, "But not for long. I'll find him—or you will—no matter what it takes."

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Twenty-one days ago

The night sweats would ruin him, if the grueling hours of working in the laundry, sorting and washing and drying, the endless cycles that had withered his hands, sucking them dry, didn't first.

He was used to hard work—it was how he'd managed to get this far in life—but the work was nearly intolerable, if he gave it too much thought.

He could not relinquish the anxiety that plagued him. It stuck to him like a second skin, burrowing deeper each day and leaching the certainty and confidence he had in life—and in

love.

He hitched himself up to a seated position, not bothering to look at the corner in the room, where at least one of them sat, watching him. Always watching him. Like he was going anywhere. He'd signed his life away. All of them here had. He couldn't take a piss without them knowing. Couldn't use a razor for fear that he'd—

Well, he wouldn't think of that now.

“I—I need a drink,” he pleaded hoarsely.

Just one. That was all.

He dragged an arm across his face, wondering if he'd ever get the chance to see Jim one last time. The effort he made to get the sweat off his face didn't help as much as he'd hoped. He sat, chest heaving, stomach empty, heart sick, debating a cold shower that would chill him to the bone. But to pull that off, he'd have to walk down the hall past ten other rooms. Maybe more. He couldn't remember.

He couldn't remember Jim's smile, either. Or the way he'd looked at Leonard.

His memory had never failed him before.

He wasn't sure he could handle the walk to the showers without using the wall or someone's shoulder as a crutch. He wasn't sure he wanted to feel countless pairs of knowing eyes boring into his back, either.

He'd only been here a short time, but he'd earned a reputation for being a grouch. An old man. An asshole.

(Jim would laugh. Tease him that he might have deserved the honest nicknames.)

They'd warned him he had to make a better effort in his relationships here, had written in their notes about his peculiar and off-putting ways. He never socialized, even when asked, or engaged in a conversation with some do-gooder sort who didn't care they were setting his teeth on edge. He had no desire to become one of them, he thought, even while staring at the band around his wrist.

He'd rather be in isolation, forced to live alone like a common criminal.

Leonard twisted the band, chest hot and tight. He didn't see the point in getting attached to anyone here. Not when he'd be leaving in a few short months, putting this behind him. And—who knew what would happen after that. Jim deserved far better than what he'd given him. And it was always possible he would screw things up again. How could he even live another day knowing that was possible?

But he'd been around and around this mental hamster wheel before. Not this rehab program—but close. He knew what was required, and what his body demanded of him. He just wasn't as prepared as he'd thought.

"Please," he entreated, and if he sounded desperate, it was a moot point.

Desperation was a constant part of him now. Alcoholism was destroying his self-regard, the life he'd built up for himself and had been so proud of. All of that was now gone, replaced by the shame he continued to feel for being so weak. They'd told him he wasn't consciously making the decision to continue drinking, that it was the disease speaking for him, but he couldn't accept it. He'd ruined so much, with Jim and others paying the price. How could it not be all his fault?

When the observer in the corner didn't answer, his restlessness erupted, threatening to push him off balance. And had he been less determined, he would have checked himself out, allowed the need for a drink to push him into a relapse. He rocked his body back and forth, arms wrapped around his chest, as if that alone would stop the pain of memory.

Still, he silently begged the guardian in the corner of the room to get up and give him what he wanted. The addiction stirring in his blood and raging in his mind.

“Please.”

The silence was stifling, the form as still and unreactive as a statue.

It felt wrong. Felt...off. Someone should have acknowledged his situation by now.

“Please,” he begged, in a whisper. “Please.”

He craved the taste of it on his lips, sure it was the cure for all the ills the deviled him.

“Please. Please.” He rocked violently now, his eyes darting around the room, snagging on the shadows as they fell, as if they were calling to him.

The walls were bare, dark, and, somehow, dangerous. His anxiety bored deeper, seeping into his blood until it coursed through, dragging him into an abyss.

Even his hands betrayed the steadiness he’d once had.

He wrapped his fingers around his side, the bones that ached like the hollows of his heart screaming with the agony of fresh loss. He wasn’t sure he could hold it together much longer.

If one could call this holding it together.

“Somebody...” His head pounded, preventing logical thought. He screwed his eyes shut, grinding his teeth, realizing with a sinking feeling that he was most likely on his own.
“Somebody...”

Someday.

He bit his lip until it bled, hoping for a scar, something to remind him not to come back to this place again.

The figure in the room rose, towering over him in its murky, black form.

“You,” he growled as it turned to leave.

The shadow stopped. Turned. Stepped closer. Smelled foul. Rotten.

It was terrifying.

He could see it clearly now. The horrible face had sunken, red-rimmed eyes. Its hair was stringy and wet with sweat, clinging like seaweed to its face. He was too shocked and revolted to do anything but stand still and stare.

The figure was not a human after all.

He felt as if he were staring at a monstrous parody of himself.

He blinked several times—

His heart thudded.

The image had disappeared. It was gone. Vanished into the thin air.

He tried to rub the sleep and self-hate from his eyes, What the hell had that been?

He gave the now-empty room a wide, furtive glance before reaching for the call button at his bed.

He wasn't alone, but he was. He'd seen something, but he hadn't.

Belated realization dawned. He'd seen himself as he truly was.

"Oh, God," he whispered, and promptly threw up, on his bed, on his floor.

He grabbed his chest, rocking back and forth, without wiping his mouth. He was hallucinating. Maybe he wasn't operating on all cylinders, but he knew that much. He knew fucking that much.

Booze had ruined him—how could he ever practice medicine again? More importantly, how could Jim ever put his faith in him again?

He looked at his shaking hands—all he had left—and tried to clench them into fists. When that didn't work, he pounded them against the mattress beneath him, driving them over and over into something of substance.

Even though the mattress was soft, he made an impact, the self-inflicted pain racing up his wrists and up his forearms, until he was forced to acknowledge that he could not pound his way out of his prison. He lifted his hands and turned them over, staring down at them in morbid shock. Had he sprained something?

The lack of pain awakened his curiosity, encouraging him to test his boundaries, to see what part of him he could hurt. He crawled off his pallet, hitting the floor jarringly with his knees, oblivious to the door opening. A needle jabbed him like a sword in the hip, four pairs of hands reaching for him as blackness descended.

A chorus of voices clashed above his head, at first fierce and unyielding. Then, his mind floating, cloud-like, the voices spun around him, falling softly like snow onto his body, pressing him down and down, until all he could do was close his eyes and breathe. In. Out. In. Out. Gently. Like he had nothing more to do in all the world except for this one activity.

Breathing.

Jim, he thought, darkness finding him with mocking laughter.

He ignored it, instead whispering a litany of hope, a small flame lighting the dark cavern of his soul.

I'm coming, darlin'.

He just had to figure out a way to take a bottle with him without getting caught. What could he use as an advantage?

If he could just get back home—and explain to them what he needed to do—Jim would understand.

He'd always understood.

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Twenty days ago

“We didn’t go about this the right way.”

Chris nodded, but he didn’t look at her. He didn’t agree—he never did. What else could he say?

Winona clenched her hands in her lap. “Talk to me, Chris.”

He gazed out the window to his office. It was pleasant enough weather—Jim could get out for a nice walk. A short one, of course, but it would do him good. “What do you want me to say? That what Leonard did was acceptable? Keeping it from us? From Jim?”

“He was hurting. And—”

“A drunk,” Chris said, bitterly. He turned his chair and stared at her, unwilling to mince words. Did she not realize how much Leonard’s disease impacted Jim’s current physical state? “He did all he could to hide it from us—almost managed it, too, if it hadn’t been for you accidentally seeing him dispose of his empty bottles. You can’t excuse the choices he made that got him to that point.”

“I’m not advising we do that.” She drew a shaky breath, but he’d already started to tune her out. “But, we can’t ignore the fact that it’s a disease. And that Jim’s condition contributed to Leonard’s relapse.”

Her eyes are earnest, her words and plea more so—but he held firm. “No.”

“He’s our other son,” she pleaded.

“Our other son,” he repeated.

“They’re married.”

“Separated,” he countered.

“You know Jim doesn’t want that. Leonard is our son-in-law, no matter how you look at it.” Her eyes entreated him. “I don’t want him to forget.”

The cancer might make that choice for him, but he didn’t mention the horrible possibility.

Winn sighed. “Chris, I have to ask—do you want him to forget the best thing that happened to him?”

He stared back, fighting the guilt stabbing him straight in the heart. What she said—was true.

“Alright,” she said quietly, meeting his gaze head on with her own stubborn look. “I see.”

“Did you take it upon yourself to remind Leonard of all of this before you forced him to leave?”

“That isn’t fair.”

He pushed his compassion aside and grabbed his glass from the desk more roughly than he intended, causing the liquid to spill out and onto his hand. “What isn’t fair is the way he’s behaved—towards Jim.” He swallowed back his drink. Shook away the thought that she was right. “Jim is my son and my top priority. I’ll treat everything that threatens his health the same way,” he warned. It was his personal litany, something he always said. It would never change.

But when he looked back at her, it was as if Winn had changed into someone he didn't recognize, standing with her hands loose at her sides, open and free, like she was letting go of the pain they'd both been feeling.

He envied her for it.

"Are you saying that for Jim—" she murmured as she left. "Or for yourself?"

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Sixteen days ago

"You're still Leonard McCoy, ex-bodyguard to the best-looking celebrity on the planet," Charles teased. "You should hear them talk about you."

But Leonard couldn't muster a smile in return and merely grunted. He was gross and sweaty, after a short run that nearly took his breath away. How had he gotten so out of shape?

He'd also forgotten to change his shirt before meeting with his counselor. "I don't feel like that man."

"We all see the good parts of the past as unattainable until we're finally sober."

Leonard looked away. "I've only been sober a few days."

Charles nodded. "And without those days, you would never have started the process." He leaned forward, resting both of his elbows on his knees, his expression neutral. "Leonard, tell me, do you want to continue treatment?"

Although he suspected this was a tactic to get him to talk, he kept his eyes averted, his knee bouncing up and down uncontrollably. “Yes.”

“Why?”

An image of a beautiful blonde-haired man took his breath away. “I need to make amends.”

“With your husband.”

He nodded, his shoulders tightening unbearably as he shifted his body forward, abandoning his attempt to lean back against his chair. But nothing worked—he was as tense as before. And jittery, at the same time. Pins and needles—all over.

“And your father?”

Leonard sucked in a breath, and began tapping his fingers on his knee. “He’s gone. I can’t fix that situation.”

“How did he die?” Charles asked quietly.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Leonard’s heart beat rapidly in his chest, in time with his fingers against his thigh. He wished this was another hallucination—this was the last thing he wanted to discuss.

“In the hospital?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Leonard?”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Charles breathed out slowly. “Alright. Let’s talk about Jim.”

Leonard snorted, bitterly. “You really like zeroing in on the big stuff, don’t you.”

“You said you didn’t want to be in here long, and you’ve made quite a bit of progress, already.”

He had, but it didn’t mean he wanted to discuss Jim.

He stood, feeling as if he was jumping out of his own skin. “I’m done.”

Charles smiled up at him. “For now.”

Leonard drummed his fingers along his leg. “For now,” he repeated.

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Twelve days ago

“It’s what’s best for you, Jim.”

Jim was sick of hearing this, but he was too exhausted to argue.

“Do you honestly think he’s going to be well after this? He could have a relapse when you’re —

“He has a disease,” Jim said, lifting his head slightly off his pillow to follow his dad, who had walked to the window. It was on the tip of his tongue to remind him that this disease was exacerbated by Leonard’s family history, but Chris’s rigid back reminded him that he’d hardly been lucid today, and the words evaporated in his dry mouth. “He’s sick,” he said instead, his voice hoarse. He felt lightheaded and heartsick, “But so am I.”

He sank back into his bed, wishing he could just get his body to work. He was too exhausted this week to fight, although he wanted to. But as soon as he tried to speak for himself—and for Leonard—his body rebelled against him.

“Oh, Jim,” Chris said, and turned. His dad sounded so sad, that Jim suddenly doubted his own premonition that Chris was trying to tear them apart.

Chris walked over to him and sat on the edge of the bed. “That’s why I think it’s in your best interest to let go,” he said gently. “If he can take care of himself—without worrying about you—“

“I’m too much for him to deal with, is that what you’re saying?” He wasn’t bitter about it—he was too far into his cancer diagnosis to be bitter. Resigned, was more like it.

Chris grabbed his hand, squeezing it. “I’m saying, letting him go would be best for you—but also for him. He could recover faster, Jim, focused on his own needs, without the burden of your situation, which your mother and I can handle.”

Jim couldn't believe he was considering it—it felt too much like washing his hands of a problem he could solve, with a lot of hard work—but it made perfect sense on the face of it.

He'd only bring Bones down with him into the abyss called terminal cancer.

Wouldn't it be better to give him his wings now, rather than force Leonard into a situation with no hope? It's possible he would eventually find someone else to love and have a normal life with.

As much as the thought hurt him, Jim decided to let go.

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Six days ago, hours after Chris's phone call

Leonard sat cross-legged on the floor by his bed, arms curled around empty space, imagining his best friend and lover, his husband, beside him.

If only he had a drink—something to quench the pain, if he couldn't have Jim—he could get through this. Couldn't he?

No—NO. He was through thinking that way. He had to be.

According to Chris—and the lawyers—Jim wanted a divorce.

He was never going to get through this without breaking his heart. And that thought called forth a wave of self-loathing. That he was trying to imagine a drink in his hand spoke only of his desperation. His concern for only himself.

Jim deserved a life without a damaged partner.

Didn't he?

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Three days ago

No one seemed to know exactly when the papers would be ready. Jim didn't want to think about it, but when Gaila came to check on him just days before his next surgery, it was impossible not to.

"I don't feel right about it," she said, as he sat, curled on one end of the couch, Gabby chewing on a bone at his feet.

It seems like all he did, these days. Sit. Think too much. Wonder if Bones was truly living yet—or merely surviving like he was.

Maybe it was all he wanted to do, too—drown himself in as much misery as he could.

Jim tried to focus. "That holiday special you were telling me about?"

She took his hand, brought it to her chest. "Feel this."

He rolled his eyes, tugging his hand away. “I don’t need to cop a feel, thanks.”

She giggled. “I mean my heart, silly.”

He hesitated, keeping his eyes locked on her eyes, not her chest. “Why?”

“Feel it, Jim.”

Sighing, he let her hold his hand close to her heart. “This?” she whispered. “Does not beat for you.”

His frown deepened. “I know that.”

“So do I.” She nodded, smiling. “We’re friends—we share many things, but not that kind of love.”

“Gaila,” he said, sighing. “What’s the point of this?”

“Now,” she murmured, guiding his hand to his own heart. She presses his fingers to his chest. “Feel,” she insisted quietly.

Jim didn’t know what he had expected from Gaila, but it wasn’t this. Something so simple, even childish, was breaking the barriers he had put into place, had let others put into place.

Tears leaked down his cheeks, unattended, ugly, and heartfelt. “I need him,” he whispered.

He’d cry all the tears in the world if he needed to, if it would just get Leonard back.

But he had to be stronger than this. Much stronger. “Will you help me?”

“Jimmy,” she said, eyes sparkling. “I thought you’d never ask.”

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Present Day

When Charles told him, the bottom fell out from beneath him, all over again.

Jim—more tumors—needing surgery—possibly not survive the surgery—

And he wasn't there to comfort him, to hold Jim's hand like Jim always wants him to.

The disappointment—the failure—that he had become—was too much.

“I need...” Leonard stopped abruptly, his world spinning around him, when all he could do was take one damn day at a time.

“Here,” Charles said, pulling the chair closer to him. “You okay?”

Leonard sank into his seat, his mind whirling with the possibility that Jim might die without seeing him first. “He can’t have the surgery.” It was too risky.

“I think it’s out of your hands. It’s scheduled for tomorrow,” his counselor reminded him.

“I never got to tell him—I’d gotten a call from someone who thought Jim deserved a second opinion.” He laughed harshly. “I just didn’t think Chris would listen to me after he realized I was drinking again.” He waved at himself. “I mean, who would?”

“I see a more nuanced picture of the situation than you do. Yes, this disease will always be with you. You remember what it did to your family, all the way back to when you were a young boy. But give the Kirks some credit. They’ve had time to understand your disease and what it means for you.”

Time. Something Jim doesn’t have.

He fought back the sting of tears and stood. “You’re right.”

He’d do this—or regret it for the rest of his life. He could save Jim—or at least give him another choice. And a reasonable one, at that.

Charles’s eyes softened. “I have another message to pass on to you.”

“Another message?”

“I got a call from one James T. Kirk before our session.”

His mouth dropped open. “What?”

“I’m sorry to withhold the information, but I wanted to see if you were up for the challenge.” Charles’s gaze was incisive as it passed over him. “And you are. You’re enrolled in Outpatient Treatment now, and you have been diligently attending for a week. You’ve made more than sufficient progress, and I have confidence you’ll be here every day, until you’re both physically and mentally stronger. I’d say you’re more than ready to fight for this man you love.”

The news knocked the wind out of him. “But he—Chris—still hates me.”

Charles smiled. “I think his fear is talking for him, Leonard. How could he hate you? You love his son and took care of him—only you lost your way for a time. Now you know how to cope with the risks of your disease.”

He was still so ashamed of his failures.

His counselor held out his phone to him. “Let’s make a deal. I know for a fact that a man called Ben will be on his guard for any altercation, although I doubt it will come to that, but he’s agreed to come get you and stay with you the entire time, and bring you back the second things go south.”

“I don’t want it to come to that,” Leonard said.

“You’re not willing to try?”

“The surgery...it’s tomorrow?”

Charles nodded. “Bright and early—not sure how your Jim will be able to sleep well at tonight, knowing you know that he wants to talk with you.”

Leonard could hardly breathe as he took the phone.

“I’ll leave you for now.” Charles went to the door. “I’ll be back in a minute, if you need anything.” He hesitated, a twinkle in his eye. “The number’s programmed in there—Ben’s new number, that is. Or maybe it’s Jim’s.”

Leonard nodded, mesmerized by the feel of the phone in his hand.

As soon as Charles left the room, Leonard gathered his courage. If he didn't do this now—take this risk—Chris be damned—his alcoholism, too—he would never be able to look himself in the mirror.

His hands shook as he dialed, and then he waited. And when he heard that sweet voice, his earthly Heaven, say *hello* with an endearing tremor, the sun broke through in his heart like it hadn't in weeks.

“Darlin’?” he rasped, hardly getting the word out before he heard a breathless laugh, his own name spoken like it was a rainbow after a dark, sorrowful storm. Hope sprang in his heart. “I know we have to talk—but I’m finally ready. I’m coming to see you.”

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“Don’t look at me like that.”

Gabby whined and, as if she was gathering her courage, stood up on her two hind legs, and pawed at Chris’s knee.

Chris sighed and leaned over to pet the persistent companion, rubbing behind her ears. “I know what Ben did—he went behind my back.”

He didn’t like it—but he was done feeling sorry for himself, having seen the error of his ways. He wouldn’t barge in there when Jim was talking to Leonard and demand the phone from him.

How could he? Jim’s heartbreak—and Chris had adamantly tried to keep the two men apart—wasn’t a healthy choice just before the surgery. It hasn’t been healthy weeks ago, either.

Chris had been mistaken. Grievously. He was facing a life without his son. There was always a chance for a miracle—but he had the ability to make a different miracle happen today. He'd take his wife's advice and let things go—and wouldn't get in the way.

"I messed up, Gabs," he murmured.

Gabby barked a yes, he was certain.

"You don't have to be so smug about it." He smiled and scratched her neck.

Sometimes, though, as he laughed at the tail she wagged appreciatively behind her, one did.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please, review? One more to go!

Chapter 4

Chapter by [arrowinthesky_\(restfulsky5\)](#)

Chapter Notes

Hellooo? Is anyone still here??? ☺ Apologies for my super long absence from this story. I'm finally in a writing headspace again and tackling the Trek stories that can be finished in a few chapters—and this was the first. Nearly four years later. LOL. I promised angst with a happy ending, so I hope this suffices.

Many thanks to Diamondblue4 who beta'd this for me!

Thank you to all who have stuck with me—I did update a few things in the last few months, btw, in case they've been missed.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Home,” Leonard’s voice cracked. “I never thought we’d make it back again in one piece.”

It was a miracle. One that Jim didn’t take lightly.

“It’s as large as it ever was,” Jim mused. “You sure you don’t want to move to a bungalow or cottage or something?”

“I missed the house because it was yours. But, darlin’, I missed our home—you and me—more than I can say.”

“You haven’t lost your romantic touch, I see,” Jim said, smiling.

“I think I lost it for a time, but we’re here now, Jim. We’re here,” Leonard whispered, like a benediction.

Jim wished he could see the contentment on his husband’s face, but he settled for leaning into his shoulder as they stood outside the house. His sight was mostly gone, very poor at best. He didn’t expect it to change, even with future treatment, but Leonard remains hopeful for the two of them

“Looks like Ben and his family are throwing a party?” Leonard asked, sounding thoroughly confused. “For me?”

“Just how many balloons are there?” Jim teased, imagining the sign they had made that congratulated Leonard on his sobriety.

“Too many,” Leonard grumbled.

“Never can have too many balloons. I used to gather them all up at my birthday party—and anyone else’s—and pretend they carried me away to the stars.”

Leonard hugged him tightly. “That sounds like something you’d do. Maybe this party is for you, you moron.”

Jim laughed. “No, no thank you. I don’t want to be the center of attention.” Which was why he refused to be on Gala’s show after all. It had hurt her feelings, but he couldn’t see how his blindness and Leonard’s homecoming would fare well if he was preoccupied with a big project like that.

Leonard grew quiet. “I would give anything for those days, Jim.”

Jim was used to hearing this from the man he loved, because Leonard, more than anyone, knew how much his work had meant to him.

He'd loved being an actor. There were things he didn't like, of course. The tabloids, for one, but overall, the work had fit him like a glove. Even the lifestyle, for the most part. He'd met Leonard because of it, hadn't he? His stardom had fizzled out quickly enough after he got sick. Ever since, he'd kept out of the news. Mostly. No one knew about his current health condition. Someday in the future he'd rectify that, but he wanted the next few months to be all about Leonard and their life together. He wanted lazy mornings, chaotic but delightful lunches with their friends and family, evenings when they could stroll the lawn arm-in-arm, breathing in the summer air. He wanted a life that infused Leonard with joy for the things he truly loved. He wanted what was best for both of them and would do anything to make that happen.

They'd called off the surgery, per Leonard's request. Jim had an appointment with another doctor next week, a former colleague of Leonard's, and he was confident it was the best decision they'd made in a while. He trusted his husband's professional opinion, despite all they'd been through.

"You think they'd mind if I snuck in a nap first?" Jim yawned.

"We'll let the party animals party until we both can make it," Leonard said softly in his ear. "Is that all right with you?"

"As long as they save me a piece of that cake."

"Hmm. It must be pretty big if I can see it from here."

"Gala made it." Jim admitted. "She wanted to do something nice for us."

Leonard was quiet.

“She’s not here,” Jim felt the need to say. “Too busy, actually.”

“Not too busy to make cake,” Leonard mumbled.

Jim winced. “Just wait until you taste it,” he offered, hoping to smooth over the moment. “It’s your favorite.”

“It is, huh?”

“Well, it will be.” Jim grinned.

“Nothing is better than the family recipe.”

“Just wait.”

Leonard sighed. “I thought we’d escape Gala for a bit.”

He would have felt the sting of that comment a week ago, but he understood, now, how hard the subject of his past relationship with Gala was for his husband. Jim hadn’t made the best choices when it came to Gala. It might seem as if he still wasn’t.

But this was a new beginning. “I know you, Leonard McCoy,” Jim teased. “One bite will be all it takes before you become a glutton over the peach buttercream icing.”

“That does sound intriguing. Maybe we could get a slice before I whisk you away to our bedroom.”

Jim’s breath hitched. He slipped his hand into Leonard’s warm one. “Tell me more.”

He felt the rumbling of Leonard's chest. "I'll feed it to you, little by little, bite by bite."

Jim licked his lips. "Yeah?"

"Maybe even let you lick the sweet buttercream off my fingers."

Jim blinked.

"Maybe I'll lick whatever gets on your chin," Leonard added.

Jim was suddenly...lightheaded. It had been so long. Too long. He still wasn't well and looked it, he assumed. Would he disappoint his husband? "Do you really want to...?"

"Darlin'," Leonard's breath was soft and warm on his ear. "There's nothing in the world I want more."

He threaded his fingers through Leonard's and smiled. "Something tells me I won't get to nap much."

"Something tells me you won't care," Leonard said, and Jim heard the smirk in his voice loud and clear.

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"Kanzi looks much better today," Ben said, drinking his lemonade, the evening light still casting shadows on the porch, showing off the remnants of party streamers, glitter, and balloons.

Chris would agree, but he still had that gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. Jim needed a life-giving miracle. He held his tongue, however, and nodded. “I believe we owe that to Leonard.” The man who single-handedly broke and repaired Jim’s heart in a matter of months. But Chris would give him this chance. He loved Jim too much to take that away from them.

Ben looked at him. “This hasn’t been easy for you.”

“Jim’s my son,” Chris said softly. “I don’t want to see him hurt.”

The statement was a cliché—but the truth. He’d put himself in harm’s way before he let anything else damage Jim.

“I think Leonard is in agreement.” Ben stared off into the yard, where his children were walking with the couple.

Technically, Chris knew this. His mind just had to catch up. But Ben was correct. Leonard had left to spare Jim pain, initially. He’d done the only thing he could have done. Yet, in doing so, it had created a rift between Jim and himself. One day maybe it would be as it used to be. For now, Chris would hold back, keep to the sidelines.

But he didn’t want to think about that now. He cleared his throat. “Will you be accompanying Jim and Leonard to the recording?”

Upon Kevin’s request, Jim had reluctantly agreed to attend the recording of Gala’s next episode, which would include one of the nation’s most popular movie stars, Kevin. Chris was attending, but Jim didn’t know that.

Not...yet.

Ben smiled, his eyes sparkling like he knew the secret, too. Which, of course, he did. “I will be there, per our agreement.”

Chris nodded. Ben was, and would continue to be until he found a suitable replacement, Jim’s bodyguard. “Thank you. I know it takes you away from your own family...”

“A contract is a contract.” Ben grew serious. “I never break a promise.”

“You think he is going to pull this off?” Chris asked.

Ben chuckled. “He will surprise Kanzi well.”

“Let’s hope so.” Chris sipped his lemonade, making a mental note to remind Winnie of tomorrow’s show. “Jim may be blind as a bat, but he can still see through people.”

“I think Leonard has done a good job at...pretending?” Ben said haltingly, as if testing the word, unsure if it fit the conversation. “I have been impressed.”

“Almost as good as Jim,” Chris noted, setting his glass down.

“Do you think Kanzi will ever return to acting?”

Chris had hope. Jim’s former first love—his career—had taken a back burner but there was a movement in Hollywood for inclusion. “I’ll never say never to anything Jim wants to do ever again.”

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“You’re here!” Kevin exclaimed, wrapping Jim up in a hug so tight he could hardly breathe.

“Ooph,” Jim mumbled into Kevin’s shoulder. “I forgot you were so tall.”

Kevin’s laughter rang out, loud and clear. “Wow, Jim. I forgot just how handsome you were in real life. Are you sure you’re taken?”

Jim found himself blushing and let go of him. “Don’t let Leonard hear you say that.”

“Leonard already heard,” Leonard said dryly from behind him. “Ease up on the compliments, kid,” he retorted back to Kevin, wrapping an arm around Jim.

“Sure,” Kevin said, and Jim could hear the smile in his voice. “Just want to make sure Jim’s ego was where it should be.”

Leonard actually laughed. “Well, we all know he doesn’t need any help with his ego. It’s as bloated as ever.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Don’t you two have something better to do than gang up on me?”

He wasn’t really complaining. He knew these things were said in jest, but they were cutting it close to taping.

“I always have time to say hello to you Jim,” Kevin said warmly. “We’ll talk more after the show?”

Jim nodded. “You bet. Knock ‘em dead!”

Kevin laughed as he walked away.

“Well, darlin’, we better find our way to the front.” Leonard led Jim to their seats in the first row of the studio.

Jim sat, suddenly feeling vulnerable in the sea of people, wishing he’d brought his cane, just in case.

“I forgot something in the limo,” Leonard murmured. “Wait here?”

"Well, shoot. Here was I, planning to go up on stage and crash the show."

"Smart ass."

Jim grinned. “Could you grab my cane, too?”

“Sure. Be right back.”

Leonard kissed Jim’s temple and was gone in a flash.

Jim sighed, hoping his mother and Chris were enjoying their time alone. They deserved it, after all Jim and Leonard put them through, in his opinion. It was about time they had a day to themselves, without worrying. His illness was a marathon, not a sprint, and sometimes they—all of them—forgot that.

A moment went by, and another. Jim wondered if the show would be starting late. It was time, wasn't it? Leonard and Jim had rushed here later than they'd wanted to because of him, of course. And traffic had been bad. He'd been surprised they made it with minutes to spare. He shifted in his seat, freezing when a hand squeezed his arm.

"This spot taken, Son?"

"Chris?" Jim asked, bewildered. "What are you doing here?"

"We came to see our baker in action. That cake was better than anything I've ever made. Maybe she'll divulge her secret."

"Mom?" Okay. Now he was really confused.

She kissed his right cheek, Chris taking the seat on the other side of Jim.

"You never said you were coming." Jim frowned. "If I'd known, we could have come together."

"Well, it was Leonard's idea, actually. He wanted to surprise you."

"Really." He couldn't believe Leonard had kept this a secret. And he had never even suspected. "Huh."

"We know how much supporting your friends means to you " Winona said. "We couldn't say no."

"Where is he, by the way?" Chris asked.

"He should be here—he went back to the limo."

“Well, it looks like things are starting, sweetie,” Winona said. “I’ll watch out for him, don’t worry.”

Jim tensed. If Leonard wasn’t back yet, would they let him in the studio? “You sure you don’t see him?”

Chris wrapped his arm around Jim’s shoulders and squeezed. “I’m sure your mother will spot him, soon.”

He doesn’t know why he was worrying. The feeling came out of nowhere. “He has to get in here before—”

Before they closed the doors. Before Jim had an anxiety attack again....

“*Good afternoon, everyone,*” Kevin’s voice interrupted.

Jim froze. Nononono. Now it was too late.

“Kevin’s on stage,” Chris whispered. “Gaila is right behind him. She’s actually staring straight at you, Jim.”

Jim grinned and gave a shy wave, his attention drifting from Kevin and on what was taking Leonard so long. Was it Gaila? Jim’s smile dropped as he took a sharp breath. Had he gone off just to miss this entirely? On purpose? He knew Leonard didn’t like her, but to desert Jim like this...

“Hey, you okay, Jim?” Chris asked.

“I just—I just hope he gets back.” He wasn’t going to make more of the situation than it was. It had been ten minutes—more than that. They’d had prime parking, thanks to Gaila. There was no way they’d let Len in, even for the prerecorded.

“He will,” Chris promised.

“Do you think he wanted to leave because of Gaila?” Jim blurted out.

“What?” Chris whispered. “Jim—no, no. That’s not what happened. I’m sure he’ll return.”

“—so, before we start filming, I wanted to inform you all of a little change in schedule.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I’m not cooking with Gaila, after all.”

A collective disappointing murmur swept over the audience.

“But I’m not the only celebrity here today...”

“Did he leave?” Jim asked, panicked.

Chris patted his arm. “No, Jim. Listen, why don’t you pay attention—

“...my buddy, Jim Kirk-McCoy is here somewhere and so is his former bodyguard, now husband, Leonard McCoy.”

The crowd stirred.

Jim blinked. Shit. That was the last thing he had wanted. To be noticed. The center of attention. Eyes on him. Didn't Kevin understand that?

"I hope you don't mind me saying, Jim," Kevin said, "but you two make a gorgeous couple. I'm just not sure who the audience is going to look at more during the show. Gaila—or her newest cohost—the multi-talented Leonard McCoy! Former doctor and bodyguard to heartthrob actor Mr. Kirk, he won first place in a high school fundraiser baking contest. Who knew?"

Jim's mouth dropped. "What?" Leonard was cohosting? But he wasn't here. Here with Jim. But he had been just minutes ago. "What did Kevin just say?"

"Hush," Winona whispered. "I want to hear this."

"But—"

His mother pressed a finger to his lips. "Just wait. I promise things will get clearer in a moment, Jim."

"Thanks for trading places with me, Kevin." Leonard's drawl stuck a chord in Jim's heart. His breath hitched. "There's one thing I know for sure—this will knock the socks off my husband. Two of his favorite people, vying for the camera. That would be me and the lovely chef everyone came to see, Gaila. Sorry, Kev."

The audience sniggered.

He felt dizzy. What was happening? "Len's on the—the show?" he whispered. What the hell?

Kevin laughed. *"I think we should give a hand to Gaila for working that out. Maybe you'll get that husband of yours up on stage later, to taste test what you've all made?"*

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry. I can sweet talk him into trying any dessert.”

Winona laughed. “Leonard just winked at you,” she murmured.

Jim didn’t know what to do as the audience clapped, the sound roaring in his ears, but he was certain he was blushing. Leonard was right about dessert—it was his guilty pleasure. But was Leonard actually talking to these people, in front of an audience? This audience? Was he actually going to tape the show with Gaila?

“Ladies and Gentleman, may I present your hosts for the evening...”

Jim laughed out loud, not even ashamed when his eyes grew wet.

Maybe no one in the audience realized it, but Leonard was jettisoning the past—and reaching for their future with bold, hopeful hands.

Delighted, love swelling in his chest, Jim grinned. He might be blind, but even he could see their future was bright.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the conclusion to this series. I debated an epilogue, but decided less is more, as they say. It’s more open ended and I just feel it’s the right way to go. Imagine what you will for the beloved characters! Suffice to say, I believe that Leonard is the hero of this story. <3<3<3

Thank you so very much for your time and comments. I have appreciated them more than you know! XXOO

Just a little side note: I’m partway through another chapter for And If I Stand Next To You, and working on one for Surrender. So, expect more updates in the future. :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!