

## Convergence

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# Convergence

by [Joules Mer \(joulesmer\)](#)

## Summary

Three years into the five-year mission they find someone completely unexpected. Unfortunately, coming back from the dead is not always immediate sunshine and happy endings... especially if, so far as he's concerned, Christopher Pike is not the one who died.

## Notes

If you'd like a backstory for the Kirk/McCoy, Pike/Boyce and Tarsus references here, it will be consistent with [The Red Wheelbarrow](#). You don't have to read more of the series than that (but you could read The Red Wheelbarrow, Giants, Xenopolycythemia and then Convergence as a mini-series in its own right. The rest of the series assumes its own trajectory after that and will no longer fit with this).

## Morning, 2263.1

Sulphur. A yellow mist near the ground and a smell that made McCoy's nostrils twitch; the doctor scrubbed a hand through his hair and sighed, trust Jim to stay on the ship when they beamed down to the rotten egg planet. If you ignored the yellow mist the surface was almost pretty: craggy foothills rising into mountains scored by waterfalls, purplish flowers blanketing the valley. The Al'tair had described it as their sacred valley; a place of convergence, whatever that meant. It had been part of a monologue that was, in Leonard's opinion, a little hippy-dippy for his taste.

Small flowers crushed under his boots released a spicy scent into the air that was almost heady. Leonard reminded himself of what the aliens had said: a place of convergence of realities, where those needing healing could be found. Convergence of realities could mean just about anything, although he cast a fervent hope that it wasn't anything psychotropic. After years of carefully cultivating his reputation, Leonard didn't fancy beaming back to the ship wearing his underwear on his head and babbling about the dancing pink sehlat.

The second part of the Al'tair proclamation was how he found himself wandering through the valley with his medical kit: the federation representative ready to heal anyone who needed it. So far, he'd been depressingly alone.

Resisting the urge to comm the ship for a beam-up, Leonard continued along the narrow path that snaked through the valley, telling himself to enjoy the real earth under his feet. *1400*, he made a mental note for his log, *two hours on the surface and not a goddamn thing*.

His tricorder gave a trill: three descending notes indicating a life form. The doctor stopped, eyebrows knitting together as he consulted the reading. Whatever it was, it was in the cave he could see just fifty meters away. It could be an animal, but *those in need of healing* were covered by an oath he'd taken, and he had to go and check.

Wishing he had a phaser, Leonard carefully picked his way over loose rocks at the mouth of the cave, softly moving into the shadow and waiting for his eyes to adjust. There was something sitting on the cave floor, just visible where light spilled in from the entrance. After a moment, something resolved into *someone*. Familiar blue eyes, greying hair at the temples... he felt the breath catch in his chest as their eyes met.

Similarly startled, it took the older man a moment before he was able to breathe, "McCoy? Leonard McCoy?"

Heart thumping in his chest, Leonard's voice didn't sound like his own as he replied, "Admiral Pike?" A breeze from the cave mouth ruffled the hair on the back of his neck, making it prickle with the realization that there was a goddamn *ghost* in front of him.

"Oh my God." Pike scrambled awkwardly to his feet, crookedly leaning against the cave wall once he was upright. "How did you get here? Who sent you to look for me?"

“We weren’t looking for you.” Leonard was still a bit too stunned to manage anything better than blurting out in continued surprise: “You’re dead.”

A silence stretched between them before Pike barked out a short laugh and retorted, “Well as you can see: rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated.”

*They weren’t rumors.* The doctor could feel his heart pounding in his chest, because he’d seen the aftermath of Daystrom. He’d seen the goddamn death certificate and he’d seen the look on Jim’s face afterwards. Focusing instead on the admiral’s first question, Leonard offered, “The Enterprise is in orbit; we’re negotiating a Federation-entry treaty with the Al’tair.”

Shuffling forward into the brighter light of the cave mouth, one hand braced against the rock for support, Pike asked, “When were you assigned to the Enterprise?”

When was I not, he wondered. Figuring the admiral meant after Nibiru, Leonard replied, “Three years ago; for the five-year mission.” Recovering enough to open his kit and pull out a hand scanner, he waved the device over the admiral: slightly under nourished, and some markers of long-term stress, but otherwise healthy. Definitely human, if the readings were to be believed. He’d have to get Pike into a scanner to see what could have happened to the chest wound mentioned on the death certificate.

Pike’s forehead wrinkled, “I thought that mission was suspended?”

Shaking his head in confusion because nothing made any goddamn sense, Leonard offered what he did know, “It took a year to get Enterprise spaceworthy after Khan, but the brass were keen to get things back on track. Not to mention the public interest in humanitarian and peacekeeping priorities.”

Pike’s face shuttered at the reference to the augment, jaw clenching as he ground out, “I left Starfleet and joined Section 31 to track down the bastard who killed my son.”

His *son*. Leonard frowned in confusion; he’d never heard a son mentioned, never seen a living blood-relative in the man’s medical files. How could Jim not have known? Not have mentioned it if he did? Grasping for an explanation, he asked, “What’s the date?”

“Not sure how long I’ve been here.” Pike frowned, guessing, “2262.363?”

“2263.1” Close enough that it didn’t seem like a case of time-travel.

Quirking an eyebrow, the admiral offered a wearily sarcastic, “Happy new year.” It was the same voice, same dry wit, as always. Pike had aged as well, from what Leonard could remember: the white that had been confined to his sideburns had crept into the hair at his temples.

Four years. Swallowing the sour taste in his mouth, Leonard settled for action instead and flipped open his communicator, “McCoy to Enterprise: two to beam up. Scotty, can you please have the captain meet us in the transporter bay; and otherwise clear the room.” He didn’t quite know what to expect from the reunion that was about to occur, heart already thumping at the thought of what this could mean for Jim.

A long moment stretched as Leonard and Pike were lost to their own thoughts, sorting through the jumble of confusion between them. Eventually, they were saved from further talk by a familiar tingle and swirl of light.

Leonard breathed a sigh of relief when he found the room empty but for Scotty and Jim, the latter standing just inside the door with his head cocked to one side. Facing straight ahead, it was possible to see the exact moment Jim recognized the figure on the other transporter pad: the half-smirk melted off his face, whatever jibe he had prepared for Leonard forgotten as his features went lax in surprise.

“James!” The exclamation from Pike came out strangled, as if the man was out of practice saying the name.

The admiral’s normally coordinated movements turned jerky; he stumbled off the transporter pad and reached out with visibly trembling hands. “Oh my god, Jamie.” Pike wrapped his arms tightly around Jim, forcing the other man’s head onto his shoulder as he gave a choked murmur that sounded like, “Son.”

*Jamie.* Leonard felt an eyebrow make a break for his hairline. Since when had Pike called the younger man *Jamie*?

Jim either hadn’t noticed or hadn’t cared, as he seemed to be returning the embrace with equal fervor. Scotty caught the doctor’s eye and excused himself with a little nod, slipping out the door without the other men noticing the movement.

There was a hitch in Jim’s voice that Leonard had only heard very rarely as the captain murmured, “Sir, it’s so good to see you.” It was echoes of after the *Narada* and after Khan and after *fifteen thousand* killed under the hulk of the *Vengeance* in San Francisco and it turned Leonard’s stomach to hear it now, even under happy circumstances.

Pike reluctantly pulled back, hands coming up to frame Jim’s face and he gently said, “I think this counts as off duty enough that you’re allowed to call me dad.”

Leonard froze, the grav plating seeming to give a sickening turn even as he found himself growling in surprise, “What the Hell?”

## Afternoon 2263.1

“Dad?” The word came out of Jim’s mouth as a little puff of air, far too insignificant for its implications. The young captain’s face was frozen in incomprehension, lips slightly agape. He couldn’t have moved if he’d wanted to.

Pike looked searchingly at Jim, still framing the younger man’s face with his hands. After a moment, something shuttered in his gaze and his hands slid down to Jim’s shoulders. Softly, as if the words were bitter in his mouth, he said, “You’re not my son.”

“No.” Jim’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed convulsively. “I’m not.” And that was the truth, despite whatever the admiral might have called him from time to time. In a tone that was thin, not at all the voice of a captain, Jim added, “Not really.”

The doctor in Leonard roused itself enough to register that both men were shaking, and the transporter room was no place for whatever the hell was unfolding. Wanting to go to Jim, he could see who needed his professional support more. Slipping an arm around Pike, Leonard could feel the press of a rigid brace against his side. “Come on,” he wasn’t sure if he was speaking to Jim or Pike, “Let’s go to med bay and get checked out.” He had to give a tug to get them moving, as if they had become rooted to the deck plating.

The halls were suspiciously empty and Leonard breathed a sigh of relief at the realization that Scotty must have discreetly ordered them cleared. With Jim on Pike’s other side they made a hitching progress, the whirring of some form of mechanical assistance to the admiral’s mobility only discernible to Leonard.

Chapel was waiting just inside the med bay, wide-eyes the only betrayal of her usual professional mask. Together, they levered Pike onto a biobed, then Leonard pressed Jim into a bedside chair with a firm hand. He could see the captain’s pulse hammering in his neck and wished he could pull the younger man into his office.

Setting the bed to run both basic diagnostics as well as detailed scans, Leonard quickly took a blood sample and ran it through the genetics database. After a moment, the computer beeped. Consulting the results, Leonard didn’t know whether to be relieved or not as he reported, “Well, you’re Christopher Pike.”

“I could’ve told you that.” The admiral was frowning at them, a tension still apparent in his frame even flat on his back on a biobed. If this truly was Christopher Pike, Leonard figured he was probably wondering if he was being subjected to some kind of alien plot.

Calling up the detailed scan results Leonard zoomed in and frowned: nothing on the chest area; not even a trace of scar tissue or the markers of regenerator work. Whoever this man was, he hadn’t been shot at Daystrom. Leonard could see Jim out of the corner of his eye: the younger man was pale and tense; hands clenched into tight fists as he watched.

The med bay doors hissed and Spock appeared, halting with a jerk next to Jim’s chair as he caught sight of the figure on the bed. “Admiral.” A flicker of *something* in brown eyes that

Leonard couldn't quite read as the Vulcan said, "It is surprising to see you well."

"They've been trying to convince me of that too." There was a weariness in Pike's voice that Leonard had heard before, after the Narada, papered-over by the kind of gruffness they taught in command track courses at the academy. The hint of weakness would only be discernable to someone who knew the admiral; Leonard didn't know what to make of any of it.

Sensing the issue, Spock raised an eyebrow and asserted, "Vulcans do not lie."

Sitting up, despite the protesting beep of the biobed, Pike crossed his arms across his chest and in a more icy tone replied, "You seem to know my name and rank, but you'll forgive me if I don't provide anything more than my serial number until I get some answers."

Sensing that Jim was still trying to gather himself, Leonard set down his scanner and took control of the conversation, "I'm afraid those answers won't be coming from me. According to my scans this is Christopher Pike, but there's no trace of the attack at Daystrom. His age is right for the present date, but the nerve damage to his spinal column is more extensive than previous scans. We need to ask the Al'tair what the Hell is going on."

As if on cue, the comm beeped and Uhura's voice flooded the med bay: "Captain, the first minister has hailed us. He's asking if there was a convergence this morning, but I'm not quite sure what that means." It was a normal, everyday intrusion into a situation that was anything but.

"Oh, there was a convergence all right." McCoy's muttered protest drew a glance of rebuke from Spock, but nothing from the others in the room.

Sensing that the not-Pike on the biobed would protest him taking the call alone, and at the same time wanting at least Spock or Bones there as well, Jim swallowed and forced himself to stand. At least his voice seemed more steady as he ordered, "Patch it through down here." Bones would know better, of course, but he could at least look like he had it together for the Al'tair.

The screen snapped on to show the Al'tair first minister accompanied by the high priest, both with expressions of what looked like pleasure on their elongated faces. Making a complicated series of bows, the first minister said, "Felicitous salutations James Tiberius Kirk. We understand from our sensor arrays that your Doctor McCoy did indeed find one in need of healing in the valley?"

"We found someone, first minister, but it shouldn't have been possible." The knot returned to Jim's throat and he forced himself to speak around it, "So far as I'm concerned, the person we found is dead."

Instead of looking unsettled the aliens seemed to smile more broadly, the priest even bringing his claws up in a gesture of pleased surprise. "Most gracious blessings upon you, and the one that has been brought to you. It was an individual of personal significance?"

Not looking at the admiral, much less Bones, Jim replied softly, "Yes. It was." Everything about his tone of voice set Leonard's nerves jangling.

“And you to him?”

Pike made a faint sound in his throat that was half a growl, half something more akin to a suppressed sob. Continuing to ignore the older man, Jim raised a hand at the screen, palm up as if in supplication. “First minister, we don’t understand what happened. Was the individual we found alive somewhere else, despite what we thought? Or could he be a clone? Or...”

The high priest stepped forward then, voice thin with age as he said, “There are many threads to past and present, James Tiberius Kirk. Sometimes, the valley slips them together, where it has sensed a rend.”

From his place on the biobed, Pike finally spoke up in a tone that mingled scorn with genuine curiosity, “You’re saying I’m trapped in some kind of alternate reality?”

The aliens exchanged a glance, before the priest spoke again, “We do not profess to know *where* the others come from. They often share the common past of those they reinstate, the better to integrate into the fabric of our lives. You are not trapped; you simply are. There is no other place to return.” It was clear the universal translator was struggling, but the sentiment made a strange sort of sense to Leonard. Impossible though it sounded.

Sensing Jim was about to ask another question, the first minister spoke up, “One does not question the blessings of the valley.” He gave another bow, this one more formal, with an air of finality. “We shall transmit our cultural database as previously agreed, and resume negotiations in one cycle. Blessings upon you.”

The channel snapped closed before Jim could respond, the captain’s posture deflating in front of the blank screen. “Well,” scrubbing a hand through his hair he turned back to the others, “That could have gone better.”

A grunt from Pike was the admiral’s only contribution; Leonard ignored him, staring intently at Jim instead.

After a shared moment of contemplation, Spock straightened and offered, “I may be able to verify the Admiral’s identity.”

Arms crossed, Leonard raised a skeptical eyebrow, “How?” His own scans had been clear, despite the discrepancies. What more they could do with instrumentation was beyond him.

Jim, however, realised what was being proposed before the Vulcan could reply. Incredulous, he asked, “A mind meld?” Spock inclined his head in a gesture of agreement. “But,” Jim frowned, “how would you know what you’re looking for?”

With an apologetic glance towards the admiral, Spock said, “In the final moments, in Daystrom...” he trailed off, obviously uncomfortable with the emotional dimension of the conversation.

Leonard watched in alarm as Jim seemed to sag at the implications.



“You melded with him as he *died*?” There was something almost-angry, almost-fragile in Jim’s tone. Jealousy? “You never mentioned that.”

“I wished to provide comfort.” Spock’s gaze flicked from Jim to Leonard and back again, “If I could.”

More softly, Jim said, “You should have told me.”

Spock inclined his head in a gesture that was almost acquiescence.

The moment stretched in a thread of tension and sorrow that was broken by Pike, voice gruff as he said, “If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not *willingly* let anyone rummage around in my brain. My command codes may be locked out if I’m MIA, but it’s still treason to share information.”

A furrow of confusion split Jim’s forehead and he looked from Spock to Pike. “So how do we corroborate the Al’tair’s story?”

“What about...” Leonard frowned, settling on a hunch as he said, “What about your command codes when you were a lieutenant on the Aldrin? That’s not classified, right? That ship was decommissioned a decade ago. If you can remember a code that matches what’s in the databanks, then that’s pretty compelling evidence that their crazy story is correct.” When no one seemed to object, he activated the nearest desk console and said, “Computer, enter Starfleet Command Code Historical Database and compare entry with Lieutenant Christopher Pike, USS Aldrin.” Leonard waved a hand at Pike to indicate he should speak.

Taking a moment to think back, Pike eventually offered, “Authorization Pike-Gamma-Five-Epsilon.”

*“Command code match. Lieutenant Christopher Pike, expired 2247.23”*

Unwilling to be convinced until proof had been provided to him in return, Pike asked, “Computer, display expired command code: Lieutenant Christopher Pike, activated 2247.24”

*“Lieutenant Christopher Pike command code, activated 2247.24: Pike-Alpha-Delta-Seven-Nine”*

The sudden sag to the admiral’s shoulders told the others what they needed to know.

Eyebrow raised, Spock turned as he asked, “Forgive me, Doctor, but why did you pick that particular point in time?”

Leonard sighed, the implications of the dates becoming apparent to him as he explained, “Medical records tell something of a story of a person’s life and traces are left in the body as well. The arm that our Pike broke when he was ten? I can see a trace of it in his bone scan. Everything seems to match until 2246 or so, then it diverges to some degree.” If he was right, the fallout from this was going to be goddamn spectacular.

“The Al’tair described the valley as a place for those needing healing, yet Admiral Pike appears to be in reasonably good health. To what were they referring, doctor?”

Before McCoy could try to explain that healing could apply to non-physical wounds, Pike's face hardened and he repeated, "I was tracking down the bastard who killed my son. I fell asleep in a hostel on Cerberus, then woke up in a cave. If this is their idea of healing, it's a sick joke."

And Spock, of course, stepped right into it all over again: "I'm sorry, Admiral, but to whom are you referring?"

"*Jamie* Kirk." Pike looked at a spot on the wall somewhere over Leonard's left shoulder, avoiding eye contact with anyone as he said, "Jim to most people."

A sudden slackness to the Vulcan's mouth was the only overt sign of his surprise, even as he asserted, "I do not understand."

Yes, they were doing this now. Thank you, Spock. Leonard's hand itched to grab onto Jim's shoulder; to offer some form of physical comfort as he set out the only conclusion he'd been able to draw: "You adopted him, didn't you? After..."

With a curt nod, still not making eye contact with anyone, Pike confirmed: "After Tarsus."

## Evening 2263.1

Everything had deteriorated quickly after that poisoned word *Tarsus* was uttered.

Jim had moved away from them, limbs oddly stiff as he both literally and figuratively backpedalled, “I’m going to report to Barnett; he’s expecting an update.” Leonard reached out, but the captain slipped out of his range, turning quickly and exiting the med bay without another word.

Spock’s gaze swivelled between the captain’s departing back, Pike, and Leonard before he decided to make a similar escape, offering, “I will return to the bridge to run more detailed scans of the valley.” Damn the Vulcan; sometimes willing to put himself in the line of fire when things got perilously close to emotional, other times able to duck and cover like a master.

Alone, Leonard regarded Pike with crossed arms. This was beyond fucked up, so far as he was concerned. He wondered dimly where Chapel was. She must have excused herself at some point and was probably lying low somewhere. Never let it be said the woman didn’t have good instincts.

Pike seemed to be regarding him in return with an expression Leonard couldn’t read. Damn the command track for teaching its captains the same schooled expression; Pike wore it as well as Jim. Better, even. At least with Jim, Leonard knew his little tells. Only a furrow of concentration lodged between the admiral’s eyebrows indicated the degree of scrutiny that was taking place. Eventually, Pike asked, “You implied my spine is more damaged than you expected?”

It wasn’t the question Leonard was expecting, but one he actually could answer; the mantle of doctor was easy to take on, no matter the circumstances. Taking a breath to gather himself, he called up a specific scan result on the large display. “Here,” poking a finger at the base of the admiral’s spinal column, “this looks like extensive damage caused by the Centaurian slug, which our Pike had as well, but in your case the primary neural grafting didn’t take. I saw you’re wearing a brace?”

“McCoy,” Pike tilted his head further to the side, “you fit me with that brace. It’s where we met: you took over my care after the Enterprise finally got to Earth. After Nero.”

Every topic seemed to harbor surprise pitfalls: little revelations of what life *could* have been like that left Leonard feeling increasingly adrift. “I wasn’t on the ship?”

Pike snorted in surprise, “Not with your record. You flunked every flight sim we tried to put you in; the brass grounded you before you even graduated. You were a neurology and neurosurgery lead with a research position while you finished your cadet training. Bit of a reputation as a hardass with a borderline drinking problem.”

Leonard had passed those sims, with a churning stomach and a steady stream of cursing, but he’d passed nonetheless. Thanks to Jim. The younger man had arranged to take Leonard on a

series of extra training flights, patiently taking him through all the safety parameters and checklists. Talking to him softly until Leonard's white-knuckled grip on the controls would finally relax. "I don't know Jim?" Unsure if he wanted to know the answer, Leonard couldn't quite quell his curiosity, "Where you're from?"

"You met at SFM. Once the brass was done grilling him over the Nero affair, he camped out in my hospital room until you kicked us both out. Don't think he saw you after that." Pike shrugged, "Never mentioned you again, so far as I can remember."

He'd gone through the academy *without* Jim? It was unthinkable, enough to make him feel oddly lightheaded as he said, "I met Jim on the shuttle from Riverside to San Francisco." The beat-up kid with the too bright eyes who offered Leonard the only words of comfort he'd heard in a long time. Just recounting it like this made his hand itch for the familiar weight of his flask. "We enlisted the same day."

"No shit?" Pike raised an eyebrow, "But you were still technically a cadet when you treated me."

"So was Jim. We were both in our third year. I was assigned to the Enterprise; he was..." Where to start? "A long story."

Pike was already shaking his head in his own form of disbelief as he asserted, "Jim enlisted at eighteen. It would've been seventeen, with his test scores, but it took a few years to get his health back after Tarsus and we didn't want to rush it. He did two tours on the Mayflower after graduation and distinguished himself enough to be assigned to the Enterprise as my tactical officer without any accusations of nepotism."

At the question implied by Pike's raised eyebrow, Leonard confirmed the disparity, "Jim enlisted at twenty-two. He'd been living in Riverside, not doing much."

There was a long pause as both men digested the differences. Eventually, Pike took a deep breath, and in a voice rough with emotion asked, "Can you release me to quarters? I'd like to get some sleep."

Much as he'd like one, there was no medical reason to keep him there. Leonard jerked his head towards his office, "I'll report to the bridge; see what they want to do."

Pike nodded, tiredly, and lay back down on the biobed to wait. When the admiral closed his eyes, Leonard considered himself summarily dismissed.

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It was four hours into beta shift when Leonard surfaced from his obsessive comparison of the admiral's scan results and happened to glance at the chronometer. Whoever had been on the Enterprise in his place had obviously tried to treat the immediate aftermath of the Centaurian slug, but without the skill or understanding of advanced techniques to ensure the grafting held. It was only in seeing the comparison that Leonard appreciated what he'd managed to do. Christ, no wonder they'd pinned a medal on him for it, despite the rap on the knuckles for

smuggling Jim aboard. Leonard stretched in his chair and felt something pop in his spine; a sure sign it was time to down tools for the day.

Pike had been released to guest quarters hours ago, and Leonard realized with a start that Jim would be off shift as well. Stomach growling with hunger, he nonetheless headed for the captain's quarters first. There was a muted buzz in the halls; most of the departments were either actively involved in the negotiations, or had received a wealth of data from the Al'tair to analyze. So far as he knew their passenger was a carefully guarded secret.

The door to the Jim's quarters hissed open at his thumbprint and Leonard was surprised to find the room dark. Stepping in far enough that the door slid shut behind him, he said, "Jim?"

"I can't, Bones." The voice came from the desk; the captain was silhouetted against the glow of the planet through the large windows, arms wrapped tightly around himself.

Stepping further into the room, Leonard replied, "Can't what, Jim?"

Jim shrugged, unsure what he'd even meant. He splayed his fingers on the cool durasteel of the desk, trying to gather rattling thoughts that wouldn't fall into line.

When no reply was forthcoming Leonard picked his way across the dim room, gently swivelling Jim's chair so he could crouch in front of it. The captain didn't resist at all, keeping his gaze lowered throughout the motion. Running his hands up and down Jim's biceps, Leonard made a hushing noise in his throat. "It's okay, Jim."

Emotion broke free then, Jim's shoulders shuddering under Leonard's hands as he gulped, "He thinks I'm his *son*."

"We'll figure it out." Leonard didn't even know what that would mean, but it was the only comfort he could offer.

"Why did it pick Pike, Bones?" Jim sniffed, wetly, head ducked to avoid the other man's eyes.

Why Pike? Leonard's forehead wrinkled, the common *need* of both men was apparent to him. Unless... He felt something tick in his jaw, teeth grinding together.

As if reading Leonard's mind, Jim continued in a choked voice, "Old Spock told me I knew my father. That he saw me take command of the Enterprise."

"Christ, Jim." Quickly standing, he pulled Jim against him, the younger man's face pressed against his belly as Leonard rubbed circles over trembling shoulders with one hand and tangled the fingers of the other in cropped blonde hair. "Shhhh," it was a noise more suited to comforting Joanna, but it was all he knew how to offer.

Jim said something, but his voice was too muffled by the fabric of Leonard's uniform for the words to be clear. Shit, his daddy'd had a term for someone who looked like Jim did now: fit to be breathing into a paper bag.

Rubbing Jim's shoulders more firmly, Leonard growled, "Don't you dare feel like you influenced this situation, Jim." Goddamn meddling aliens. "Don't you fucking *dare*." Eight years he'd known Jim, and Leonard could imagine what the younger man would be thinking. Should he somehow have *wanted* George Kirk more? How the fuck was his mother going to read the mission report? Leonard didn't want to think what on Earth Winona Kirk would see between the lines.

Putting that aside as something to worry about on another day, Leonard ducked down to press a kiss to the top of Jim's head, straightening again to hold him close and murmur, "It'll be all right Jim. We've just got to figure a few things out."

The whisper was audible this time: "I don't know what to do."

"Hell, Jim, I don't either." He let a touch of levity bleed into his tone, "but that's not exactly a unique situation." Jim snorted, despite himself, and Leonard let himself relax just a little. "We'll figure it out, just like we always do." Jim was still shaking, although the greater trembling had ceased. "Have you eaten?" Even as the words escaped his lips, Leonard realized it was a stupid question. This was a *Tarsus* day, of course he hadn't. "Come on," without waiting for a reply, he gently tugged Jim to his feet, wrapping an arm around the younger man, "let's get you something."

The mess hall would be a spectacularly bad idea, so instead he simply led Jim over to the sofa in the sitting area and pressed him down onto the soft cushions. Turning the lights on to a low setting, he moved to stand in front of the replicator and bit his cheek in contemplation. Tarsus days were thankfully few and far between, but it didn't make them any easier to deal with. Something fairly bland, he thought, and nothing with associations to previous incidents.

Leonard settled for baked potatoes, with a liberal application of sour cream that he'd normally protest but on a night like tonight he'd take every calorie he could get into Jim. The bits of bacon on the top would be enough to entice the younger man to dig in.

He carried the two plates over to the sofa, handing Jim a fork along with a peck on the cheek. They ate in silence, Leonard trying to appear focused on his own dinner rather than obviously checking how much Jim managed to eat.

It was late enough when they finished that bed provided an excuse to avoid further discussion. Aware Jim needed rest in order to function well when the negotiations resumed in the morning, Leonard tugged the unresisting man into the bedroom. They stripped quickly, efficiently taking turns under the sonics, cleaning their teeth and pulling on pyjamas in relative silence. Under the artificial lights of the small bathroom Jim's eyes looked impossibly blue, and incredibly guarded.

Leonard tugged the other man closer with a hand on his hip, pressing their lips together without the intent to arouse. Taking a step back, he scrutinized Jim for a long moment then entangled their hands and led the way into the bedroom. Flipping back the covers, he gave Jim a gentle nudge.

The captain's shoulders seemed to droop, but he took the direction and crawled into the bed. Leonard slipped in after the other man, curling into Jim's side and slinging an arm across his

belly.

Five slow breaths where he didn't dare move, then Jim's hand came up and settled across Leonard's.

The doctor could have wept, danced a jig, swallowed an entire bottle of bourbon; from that little gesture, somehow, he could let himself believe it was going to be okay.

## Morning 2263.2

Leonard blinked awake from a restless sleep and slid out a foot to find the other side of the bed cold. “Jim?” No response. There wasn’t any noise from the bathroom, and no light from the rest of the quarters. He frowned; it was rare for Jim to be able to slip out without waking him, but the previous events could probably be found in the dictionary under “a trying day.” To say the least.

Stretching as he rolled onto his back, Leonard cleared his throat and said, “Computer: location of the captain.”

*“Captain Kirk is in conference room one.”*

Oh. The negotiations were set to start early; Al’tair cycles were less than a standard day, and so precessed through their shifts. Groaning, he cast an eye at the chronometer: 0710. His alarm was about to go off anyway, so Leonard kicked off the covers and wandered into the bathroom, scratching absently under the waistband of his pajamas. M’Benga was leading a scheduled inventory check that day; there was no need for Leonard to rush down to the med bay unless an actual medical emergency took place.

An alert from Jim flashed on a padd set next to the sink. Leonard scrubbed his fingers over his gritty eyes, then thumbed on the padd to open the message: given the bioscans and some further information forwarded by the Al’tair overnight, command had decided to accept that the individual in guest quarters was Christopher Pike. It was acceptable to talk about the past, but nothing too recent or obviously classified until after Barnett and a hastily convened group of admirals could grill him via subspace at 1130. Until then he was considered confined to quarters as well.

Leonard shaved and dressed, still feeling decidedly off balance as he puttered around Jim’s quarters. He remembered their Pike taking Jim out for breakfasts at a diner near Dolores Park; Leonard had joined them a few times, and the admiral had seemed to have a usual order. Pushing aside his misgivings, he opened a comm channel: “McCoy to guest room one.”

There was what could only be a surprised pause, before a slightly sleep roughened voice answered, “Pike.”

“Was wondering if you were up for some company for breakfast? I could pick up a Spanish omelette from the mess rather than subject you to the replicator.”

Another pause, then the admiral replied in a more awake-sounding voice. “Give me fifteen minutes and that would be great.”

Exactly fifteen minutes later Leonard pressed the chime on the guest room door, stepping inside when it opened. Pike was seated on one of two matching settees that faced each other across a low table. A pot of coffee and two cups were set out, Pike’s already filled. The older



man waved a hand at the table and said, "I didn't know how you take it, but I can see you know what I like."

With a rueful smile, Leonard admitted, "Yeah, not just a lucky guess. You used to go to this diner in the city where they treated you like a regular. And I'll take it with a splash of milk, please."

"Renata's?" At Leonard's nod he shook his head in a gesture meant to convey bemusement, "It's amazing what's still exactly the same." They exchanged a plate of breakfast for a cup of coffee and settled into the cushions as they applied themselves to eating.

After a few minutes to ease his initial hunger, Pike lowered his fork and regarded the other man for a moment before asking, "You two are together?" When Leonard appeared surprised by the non sequitur, Pike rolled his eyes, "He's enough like my boy I can tell when he's in love with someone."

Oh. Leonard shifted in his seat, unsure how much of this was his to tell. *Love*, that Pike had immediately pinned it so correctly was unsettling. Wishing Jim was there to help deal with this, but also relieved that he wasn't, Leonard said, "For a few years now."

"Huh." A little furrow of confusion lodged itself between Pike's eyebrows. Sensing Leonard's curiosity, he explained, "He had a lot of girlfriends before starting to settle down. Can't say he was ever serious with a man before."

Leonard felt something twist uncomfortably in his belly. "He settled down?" They'd never talked about that: Jim and Leonard, settled down. Not really. He was surprised at the sudden emotion Pike's story engendered, but kept his face carefully neutral.

"Carol Marcus." Pike couldn't quite keep the trace of a fond smile off his face. "Her father recruited me to Starfleet. We used to do barbecues and stuff when the kids were teenagers. They dated other people at the academy, but got in touch after their first tour. Carol was posted to the Enterprise after Jim took command."

That thing in Leonard's belly twisted again, transforming from unease to something closer to jealousy. Carol. He hadn't missed how Jim's eyes had followed her around the bridge; how the captain flirted with her before the shit hit the proverbial fan. Hell, Leonard had flirted with her as well in response; in retrospect as much to give Jim a taste of his own medicine as a desire to connect with the woman. Stunning though she was.

Softly, Leonard asked the question that had been chewing at his stomach since they first met on the planet. "You said your son, Jim, is dead."

Pike set his plate down on the table, half-eaten breakfast abandoned. "You know about Khan? And Marcus' agenda to provoke a fight with the Klingons-- that's the same?" At Leonard's nod, he continued, "The final fight ended up happening over Earth. Marcus was dead already; Khan had beamed Jamie and Carol back to the Enterprise in order to finish us all off together, but Spock and I had removed the cryotubes and armed the damned torpedoes. It was a gamble, but it worked. The Vengeance was crippled, but the Enterprise had taken too much damage..."

Leonard had the feeling that he knew this story. He knew *exactly* this story, but he sat silently and waited for the other man to continue. Pike took a breath that hitched in his throat, forcing words out despite a suddenly constricted airway as he recounted, "I was on the bridge: the warp core was offline, we'd lost power and were falling. I thought we were done, to be honest. Then the core just," he waved a hand to indicate a sudden surprise, "came back online. Sulu got us into a stable orbit and we had about ten seconds to celebrate before the comm came from engineering. I ran, as well as I can, but I barely got there in time. He'd gone into the core and realigned it manually. We couldn't open the door; the chamber was still flooded with radiation. Jamie died in front of me, and I couldn't even hold his hand." Overcome, Pike swiped a palm over his face and had to take several seconds to get his hitching breathing under control. When he raised his eyes again the previous emotion had flattened to an angry burn in blue eyes. "Khan got away. I've been chasing that sonuvabitch across the galaxy ever since."

Unsure how to reply, McCoy took a gulp of his coffee and watched the admiral's face over the rim of his mug.

Expression flat, Pike's right hand flexed into a fist, as if he was imagining what he would do if he caught the augment. Eventually, the admiral raised his gaze and asked his own question in return. "You said I'm dead?"

This was beyond bizarre. Trying to decide where to start, Leonard asked, "Did Khan attack Daystrom after the London bombing?" At the admiral's nod, he decided there was no point in trying to sugarcoat anything, no matter what Jim said about his bedside manner. "That's where you were killed. Jim and Spock were there too; from what I heard you practically died in Spock's arms. Jim got to you just after." Scrubbing a hand through his hair, because he hadn't been there for the younger man, Leonard tried to explain, "He took it bad. Demanded the Enterprise pursue Khan and bring him into custody. We didn't realize Admiral Marcus' agenda until too late. Jim stood up to him; insisted on following Federation law and taking Khan into custody instead of a summary execution. We'd never met Carol until she lied her way onto the Enterprise after you were killed, but she tried to help stop Marcus from killing us all. There was a complicated plan, but the upshot was that Marcus was killed and the Vengeance crippled when the torpedoes exploded."

"And Jim?"

"He went into the core and realigned it himself, just like you said." Voice suddenly tight with emotion, even several years later, Leonard added. "He died in there, too." Seeing the disbelief in Pike's eyes, he continued, the story becoming jumbled as emotion thickened in the retelling. "Khan's got some kind of superblood. I still can't explain how it works, but they brought Jim to the med bay in a bodybag. I..." Leonard swallowed. "He was dead. I had to sit down, just about fell down, and all of the sudden this damn tribble I'd injected with a platelet solution purred at me. It'd been killed in a decon sweep of ionizing radiation, and kept in stasis until I thought I'd use it to study cellular degradation and Khan's ability to heal rapidly. We put Jim into a cryotube and sent Spock down to take Khan alive; the bastard had rammed the Vengeance into San Francisco: took out fifteen thousand people on the waterfront. Green-blooded hobgoblin did it, too. Knocked the bastard out and brought him back."

Splaying the fingers of his free hand on the cushion of the seat, he continued more softly, “I almost lost Jim all over again with some of the reactions to the transfusion, but the serum worked.” Explaining it all over again, Leonard still had a hard time believing the story, even as he said, “He pulled through. It was enough that we finally admitted some things to ourselves. We’ve been together ever since.” It was a gross simplification of the events, but enough for this familiar stranger.

Pike’s head tilted to one side as he regarded Leonard. Thinking back to the conversation in the med bay the previous day, he said, “He told you about Tarsus.” It was a statement and a question rolled into one.

Leonard took a sip of his coffee, savoring the bitter liquid before he answered, “Actually, *you* told me about Tarsus. From beyond the grave, no less. The radiation made a mess of his GI tract and he wasn’t eating. You’d planted a message in the system that I triggered by searching the medical records for specific terms. Jim told me enough at that point so I could get him eating again. After we got together he told me everything.” Something flickered in Pike’s eyes at that last word: *everything*. In response, Leonard raised his chin, as if daring the other man to doubt him.

Silence descended between them, which was broken by the chirp of the comm and a hail from the med bay: “M’Benga to McCoy: we’ve got a few engineers who got sloppy changing a power coupling. Chapel and I can handle it, but if you’re free an extra pair of hands would help.”

“Go,” there was something fond in Pike’s sudden smile, “you doctors are all the same.”

*You doctors.* Leonard felt the bottom of his stomach fall to somewhere in the vicinity of his boots, because he’d been so wrapped up in Jim he hadn’t thought to think of *Phil*. Totally fucking inexcusable. Forcing himself to keep his expression schooled, he simply waved two fingers near his forehead in an informal salute as he said, “See you later.”

The door slid shut behind him and Leonard paused for a moment in the corridor, eyes sliding shut as he allowed himself a moment to very emphatically think, *Fuck*.

## Evening 2263.2

Three engineers with burnt fingers had turned into one pregnancy scare, the Denevian flu, a sparring injury that required a quick surgery to re-set a badly broken arm, and a cluster of sexually transmitted infections that had spread through a group of ensigns in stellar cartography.

Before Leonard knew it the chronometer had hit 1900 and Jim was still tied up in the negotiations: just another day in the ‘fleet. Damn, he was starving. A protein bar after surgery didn’t count as a real lunch. He checked his messages and found there was an update from HQ which Jim had forwarded to him during a brief recess. Barnett and his panel had spoken with Pike for almost five hours, eventually concluding that he should remain confined to quarters for another day, with visits restricted to medical and senior staff who had already interacted with him. A second briefing was scheduled for the following afternoon; after which time a decision would be made about how to integrate him back into the ‘fleet. If at all.

*If at all.* Leonard exhaled hard through his teeth. It was almost impossible to imagine Pike taking an involuntary retirement. And Pike, shit, that led to *Boyce*.

Setting his chair rocking side to side with the heel of his boot, Leonard contemplated that one. Philip Boyce, long-suffering husband of Christopher Pike, now a widower for four years. The man they had taken on board had never once asked after a husband... Yet, something about Pike’s smile that morning: *you doctors*. That was more than a passing familiarity, but he didn’t have a goddamn clue what to make of it.

Med bay handed over for the night, Leonard found his feet carrying through the ship not towards Jim’s or the mess, but guest quarters instead. It was half a morbid curiosity, half something he couldn’t pin down, but it had his hand hovering over the door chime nonetheless. Pressing firmly, there was a short pause before the door slid open and he stepped in to find Pike seated at the desk.

“McCoy.” The admiral glanced up and sat back in his chair. “Should’ve known you’d be back.”

“Yeah, well, I said I’d see you later, didn’t I? Jim’s still tied up in the negotiations.” Stepping further into the room a bottle and glass on the table caught his eye. “You’re drinking?”

“Given the debriefing I went through, I think I earned it.” Pike held up the bottle of single malt and waved it suggestively. “Ordered your nurse to liberate this from the observation lounge bar.”

Christ, it was the good stuff too. Leonard took the implied invitation, snagging a second glass from next to the replicator and crossing the room to settle on the settee closest to the desk. The planet hung in the window like the backdrop for a play; the entire room warmed by the reflected glow of the surface.

Pike leaned over to fill Leonard's glass, then topped up his own as well. Instead of a verbal toast he merely offered a wave of his glass before taking a sip.

Leonard followed suit, briefly embarrassed at the involuntary noise he made in the back of his throat when the liquor hit his tongue. Damn, it was good. He took another sip, closing his eyes in appreciation as he did so. Jim had always accused him of making indecent noises when confronted with good whisky, and perhaps the man was right. Not that he'd ever admit it.

Realized the desk computer was on, Leonard raised an eyebrow without being so obvious as leaning to glance at the screen. "What're you looking at?"

Pike stiffened, glass hitting the tabletop with a sharp rap. He regarded Leonard with a carefully shuttered expression for a long moment, then reached out and turned the display without a word. The video was a split-screen, three particular feeds called up simultaneously.

Leonard felt his breathe leave him like a punch to the solar plexus. He had to take a moment before he managed to ask: "How the hell did you..." It was the Daystrom conference centre; the date-stamp was unmistakable.

"Guess I made a convincing case. It helps that I've known Richard for years." Pike took a sip of his drink. "They showed it to me, actually. Wanted to grill me about what I remember; I just asked if I could keep access for twenty-four hours." He gave a smile absolutely devoid of mirth. "Told them I'd sleep on it and see if I remembered anything else."

Pike reached out and punched the control to start the playback, and Leonard felt his mouth go dry: he didn't want to see this...

...But he'd wondered about it for years.

Leonard's skin prickled, a nervous tension he couldn't control. As he watched, Jim stood on the primary feed, turning as an eerie light bathed the room. The audio feeds were simultaneous, but Jim's voice rose over the garbled sound as he yelled, "Clear the room!"

It was worse than Leonard had ever imagined: the windows seemed to explode inwards in a roar of sound and mingled screams. Jim flew over the table, landed hard, then managed to get to his feet and race out of the line of fire, scooping up a phase rifle as he left the frame and reappeared in another.

In the main frame, the video zoomed in and Leonard realized this was a special arrangement put together by the investigation team. A blast hit the edge of the table and the Pike on the screen was knocked out of his meagre cover. Instead of going back, he started propelling himself towards safety across the room.

Even knowing what had happened, the shot took Leonard by surprise. He gripped his glass so tightly it was a wonder it didn't break. It was Spock who darted out from relative safety, dragging the admiral out of the line of fire.

In a smaller window he could see Jim in the hallway, oblivious to anything but his own efforts to take down the jump ship. The feeds shifted to two angles in the anteroom: one looking down on the admiral, the other a lower angle that captured the Vulcan's face. The mind-meld made something twist in Leonard's gut. Half that Jim hadn't known about it either, and perhaps half at what might have been conveyed. He wondered if Spock had been to visit Boyce.

The scene played out to its inexorable conclusion: a flicker of *something* in Spock's eyes as the meld was formed. Ragged breaths huffing through trembling lips: it didn't take Leonard's clinical eye to know Christopher Pike had died in tremendous pain. The ripple that crossed Spock's face moments later told him as much as the sudden smoothing of the admiral's features.

Leonard thought he could cry when Jim careened into the frame just a few seconds too late, if he were one for crying. He could only process details of what he was seeing: fingers pressed to the side of a neck, Jim's face crumpling, the back of a head of blonde hair, and a hand fisted in the front of Pike's uniform.

"I stayed under cover." Leonard jerked in surprise at the other man's voice. The living Pike waved at the screen with one hand, the other touching the rigid outline of the brace under his clothing. "I can't crawl like that with this on. I stayed cowering under my upturned chair like an idiot, but I never got hit. Jamie and Spock fished me out after Khan's jump ship crashed." The video ended and Pike hauled himself out of the desk chair, picking up the bottle and making for the other settee where he sat with a grunt.

Pouring himself another two fingers, Pike scrubbed a hand over his face and in a low voice, said, "It would've been Jamie's thirtieth birthday in a couple days. A year older than George Kirk ever got to be. I never thought he wouldn't see it, even with all the crazy stunts he pulled and aliens that seemed after our blood. I had a bottle of whisky I bought when he was fifteen, just for the occasion." He took a gulp of his drink, grimacing when some burned the top of his windpipe.

Leonard's tongue finally seemed to unglue itself from the roof of his mouth, "I cottoned on pretty fast that Jim's not one for his birthday."

Pike's expression was hard to read over the rim of his glass. "Not one for his birthday?"

"We usually have a drink on another day." Leonard shrugged, rolling the glass between his palms. "The Kelvin memorial coverage was pretty bad for his twenty-fifth. We went all the way to Hawaii to escape that one: spent four days drinking mai tais on a beach in a near stupor. Even in our first year at the academy he vanished for the actual day. I still don't know where he spent it, but I took him out for a belated drink once he got back, and after that I made sure he was never alone on the day." He took another sip, closing his eyes for a moment before he added, "Even if we weren't going to mention the occasion."

"You said I recruited him?" Pike topped up his own glass, not quite meeting the doctor's eyes as he said, "That we were close?"

Leonard snorted; half a glass of whisky on an empty stomach was already loosening his tongue. “Hell, you used to call him son.”

A muscle twitched in Pike’s jaw, but his expression remained carefully neutral. “And I knew him during the Tarsus mission?”

“Your team found him. You personally carried him out of that hellhole, and got him to eat again afterwards.”

“And then?”

There wasn’t anything more. Leonard reached across the table for the bottle, topping up his own glass as well. “After the relief ships got to Earth he was returned to the care of his guardian.

“The step-father?”

“Yeah.” Leonard knew the general facts, but not much more. Only a few stories that had come out over the years: usually when Jim was drunk. “I gather Winona was Earthside for a while, but she eventually shipped out again. You’d have to ask him more about that.”

Pike looked furious. Worse than furious, he looked *murderous*. “That asshole missed his flight to San Francisco to meet Jamie at medical. Some jackass excuse about forgetting to set his alarm right after a night shift. He was ten hours late and Jamie was getting more and more tense as we waited; eventually the kid spilled that he didn’t want to go home because the man was an angry drunk.” Pike’s left hand clenched into a fist, but he didn’t seem to notice. “I lost it. Made Phil call the social worker while I called any higher-ups I could think of who might be able to pull strings. Not what you’re supposed to do, I know, but I sure as hell wasn’t letting Jamie go back to Iowa if that was the best Winona Kirk could do.

More softly, anger seeming to evaporate as he recalled what happened next, “It was Jamie who asked them if he could stay with me. Caught me off guard, to be honest: I was gunning for captain and had no plans to settle Earthside.” Slowly unclenching his left hand, he ran his palm over the soft fabric of the settee. “It was about the easiest and hardest decision I ever made,” he raised his gaze back to Leonard, “and I never regretted it.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Jim had always said that no one knew; that Winona didn’t understand what it had been like for her son when she was in the black. A forgotten alarm: Leonard’s throat constricted.

Aware of the effect his words seemed to be having on the doctor, Pike continued nonetheless, “We celebrated the hell out of that boy his first birthday after Tarsus. Phil had stayed in town to get him healthy again and we decided he was well enough for a real day out. I pulled some strings and we got a transport to Mojave; set up a picnic in a grove outside the city. The kid managed to eat two slices of cake and toss a football with Phil. I just about cried.” In truth, he’d teared up when Jamie wasn’t looking. Unexpected emotion seemed to go hand in hand with fatherhood. “He’d loved his birthday ever since.”

Leonard's face greyed and a queasiness crawled its way up his throat. He had to close his eyes and take a slow breath before he could look at the other man again, unsure if he wanted to know more about this other thread that could have been their lives. One where Jim had been happy. One where Leonard wasn't anyone's Bones at all.

Feeling an unexpected concern for the stranger that wore the face of his son, Pike took another sip of his drink and stated, "You seem pretty interested in what ifs regarding my boy."

Point taken. Unsure how to explain, Leonard stretched an arm along the back of the settee, thinking for a moment before he said, "My wife left me after my daddy died. Took the whole damn planet and our daughter with her in the divorce. I guess you could say I spent a lot of time thinking about *what ifs*." Taking another sip of his drink, Leonard rolled the whisky over his tongue, surprising himself when after swallowing he admitted, "Sometimes I still can't quite believe we got together: Jim and me."

Leonard looked up to find Pike watching him intently. Meeting the older man's gaze, a prickle of sweat beaded on the back of his neck even as he clenched his jaw. It was the classic stand-off of a suitor and a father.

Whether he realized it or not, Pike played his role as well: straightening in his seat and assessing the doctor, narrowing his eyes for a moment before being seemingly satisfied by something he could see. Leonard couldn't fathom what it might have been: he'd all but admitted to being a deadbeat father.

Pike reached for the bottle and topped up both their glasses, raising his own in a toast that was only slightly choked as he said, "Here's to James T Kirk and his constant surprises."

Leonard chuckled with something only approximating humor, leaning forward to clink his glass against the other man's. "Cheers to that."

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The corridor was too bright and Leonard was dimly aware he was walking far too deliberately. Resisting the urge to pause for a moment, lean against the wall and hope his swirling head could calm down, he forced himself to carry on until he reached a familiar door.

Jim's quarters were dark; soft snores from the sleeping area had him kicking off his boots just inside the front door, trailing clothes across the floor until he could pull back the covers and slip into the empty side of the bed. The cool pillow was heaven against his overheated forehead.

The soft snores trailed off into a hitched breath, so long planetside in negotiations must have irritated the younger man's airway. Leonard's fingers twitched, forming the shape of a medical tricorder, but he was feeling too slack, too clumsy to move.

Something heavy shifted, then Jim's breath gusted against his cheek in the dark, minty fresh and hot: "You're drunk, Bones." Leonard let out a long slow groan, hitching his body towards



Jim's comforting warmth. "What did you have for dinner?"

Leonard frowned. What *had* he had for dinner? "Whisky?"

Jim muttered something that might have been "sure smells like it." The bed moved in a way that made Leonard's stomach roll alarmingly and he closed his eyes tightly. The cool bite of a hypo against his neck made him flinch, but Jim's hand on his bare shoulder had him slump into the mattress with a soft moan of acquiescence.

"Hey," Jim's hand gave a gentle squeeze and Leonard raised his head to find the lights had been turned on low and a glass of water was hovering in his line of vision. Using an elbow to prop himself up, he leaned forward to close his lips on the rim of the glass, drinking as it tilted.

A low chuckle came from somewhere above; Jim, presumably, enjoying the rare reversal of their usual roles. Leonard drank it all down, ignoring the dribble that spilled out onto his chin. The glass was removed and he sprawled back down, mashing his face into the pillow and ignoring another shift of the bed until the lights went off and an arm tightened around his waist.

A gust of breath tickled the hair at the back of his neck accompanied by a soft, "Sleep well, Bones."

## Morning 2263.3

The bed dipped and Leonard mashed his face more firmly into the pillow, muttering something that might have been, “Oh my fucking God.”

“Nope,” There was laughter in Jim’s voice, the bastard. “Just me, Bones.”

“What th’ hell was I drinking?” A soft kiss was pressed to the back of his neck, and Leonard shivered in pleasure despite the godawful misery that was his head and his stomach.

“More likely the fact that you weren’t eating. Here...”

There was a rustle, then the nip of a hypo against his neck and Leonard just about gave a sob of relief as the throbbing behind his eyeballs melted away.

“Better?”

Leonard waited a moment, then gingerly raised his hair from the pillow. Jim was already in uniform, regarding him with a slightly lopsided smile. “Better,” he confirmed in a still raspy voice, flopping onto his back as he asked, “what time is it?”

“0800.” Jim’s eyes were sparkling, and under the present circumstances that could only mean: “We signed the treaty last night. There’s a banquet tonight, but all I have to do today is meet with Komack after the analysts at HQ have given the text a final review and take care of some crew evals that were postponed.” He leaned down with a grin, “Plenty of time to take care of my poor,” a kiss to the side of Leonard’s mouth, “hungover,” another kiss, “Bones.”

“Infant.” The grumble was perfunctory, and Jim clearly knew it as the younger man only grinned.

Jim’s padd chimed to indicate an official comm and he reluctantly pulled back to retrieve it from the bedside table. He read quickly, then glanced up. “Given the negotiations have wrapped up, Barnett has requested to shift his briefing with Pike to this morning so he can join my call with Komack later. Think he needs a hypo too?”

His memories were hazy, but Leonard was pretty sure they’d matched each other glass for glass. “Probably. Send a note to Chapel and she can stop by.”

“You won’t go yourself?”

Leonard raised an eyebrow to convey that Jim had clearly gone crazy if the younger man thought he would leave the bed anytime soon.

Jim shrugged, “You’ve been spending a lot of time with him.”

“Why? You jealous?” It was an unintentional low blow; one he wouldn’t have given if he’d had a proper night’s sleep and was thinking straight. Quickly, he amended, “Sorry, Jim. Not

what I meant. Just a bit stressed by it all.” Leonard slid a hand across the blanket to ghost fingertips over the other man’s knuckles. “He’s barely mentioned Phil.”

“Oh.” The tension that had formed in Jim’s frame at Leonard’s poorly chosen words relaxed slightly at the explanation.

Swallowing around the lump in his throat at goddamn ridiculous aliens and their fucked up alternate dimensions, Leonard made himself say, “I don’t think they’re together.”

That took a moment to absorb. Leonard’s fingers gently touching the back of Jim’s hand grounded Jim enough that he tried to think of what to do next. “Admiral Barnett was at the academy with Chris. They knew each other; I’m pretty sure they were on a flight crew together.” Jim worried his lip between his front teeth for a moment. “I’ll drop him a note to see if Phil has been told, and ask if Pike mentioned him in the debriefings. He fiddled with his padd, continuing more softly, “Ask him who should handle it.”

It meant telling, Leonard was sure of that. Telling both of them.

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Christopher Pike stretched out his legs and picked at the sandwich balanced on the settee cushion beside him. It had been another grilling; thank Christ McCoy had sent his nurse by with a detox hypo before the comm.

The second round of questioning had been odd. While the first was clearly all about verifying his identity and determining whether he was a security risk, the morning had focused on odd details of his life. Pinching off a piece of bread with his thumb and forefinger, Pike chewed it thoughtfully as he recalled one such exchange.

*“Did you know Philip Boyce,” Admiral Barnett, who he had to keep reminding himself wasn’t his friend Richard, had leaned closer to the camera, “where you came from?”*

*“Of course.” Pike wasn’t sure about the sudden change in questioning, unless it was another attempt to evaluate when and how their timelines had diverged. “We met at the academy. Third year. I’d flunked the Maru and Phil just about fished me out of a fountain.” He’d shrugged. “He’s one of my oldest friends.”*

*Something had flickered Barnett’s expression; gone too fast to parse, but it gave him pause. Unless... “Is he...” dead? Because that would be a cruel twist of fucking fate he was not ready to deal with this week.*

*That flicker of something in Barnett’s eyes again, before the other man assured him: “He’s living in San Francisco. He was appointed Surgeon General last year.*

Phil: the Surgeon-fucking-General? He couldn’t remember what he’d said in response to that, but it must have been some expression of surprise. Sure, Phil was a brilliant doctor and every tour he’d ever done as a CMO had resulted in glowing reviews and commendations, but he’d

never thought his friend would gun for one of the most prestigious desk postings in the 'fleet. When Boyce had returned to a Starship posting after Chris and Jamie settled in San Francisco they'd stayed in frequent contact; the years of their friendship enough to weather the distance.

Jamie had taken a shine to his Uncle Phil. Had he ever. Pike should still remember the feel of the boy's bony shoulder under his hand as they waved the shuttle goodbye a year after Tarsus; the shudder the slender frame couldn't quite hide. That first posting had been two years on the Aldrin. Hell, he'd even *encouraged* his best friend to take it. Phil was the kind of doctor that kept the captain sane and the crew alive. An instinct to leap without looking that you just had to admire.

The padd McCoy had given him beeped, knocking Pike out of his musings. Thumbing on the device, he found a message from the board of inquiry, copied to Captain James T. Kirk. Just seeing the name in print made his heart jump into his throat. Swallowing down the burst of emotion, he scrolled into the meat of the message.

He was reinstated. Sitting up more straightly, Pike carefully read from the start: he was granted the rank of vice admiral and access to 'fleet systems, but no actual command authority on the Enterprise. He was to be returned to Earth on a route determined *at the discretion of the captain*.

Mouth dry, he called up the Enterprise's public orders:

*Rendez-vous with the USS Hermes in two weeks to pass on scientific samples.*

*Reprovisioning stop at Yorktown Base in six weeks.*

*Exploration - TBD.*

Both the Hermes and Yorktown afforded routes back to Earth. He wondered where *Jim* Kirk would leave him.

Pike wasn't confined to quarters anymore, but he wasn't sure if he felt ready to wander the ship. Pushing the plate with the remains of his sandwich lunch aside, he stood and stretched. The dull ache in his hips and press of the brace was a constant reminder of the Narada. Phil had been there, after. Recalled from the Laurentian System with the rest of the fleet. A regrouping on Earth to get over the mute horror of Vulcan destroyed and an entire graduating class of the academy all but wiped out.

Phil had arrived three days after he'd been planted in a bed in San Francisco and assigned to the care of Doctor Leonard McCoy, noted aviophobe. He'd still been in a haze of painkillers when the reassuring force that was *Phil* barrelled into the room, clapping Jamie on the back but only having eyes for Chris.

The desk computer caught his eye: he could call Phil. The idea surprised him, until he realized *he could*. He was reinstated, had access to basic ship's systems, and no one had said he couldn't...

Aware that there were probably a million reasons why this was a spectacularly bad idea, he nonetheless found himself moving to sit down at the desk. Mouth dry, because he had no idea how to explain what had happened, he called up the correct comm channel and punched it before he could lose his nerve.

It chimed for a while before the connection went through and there was *Phil* sitting in an office with a spectacular view of the Bay. From the lack of surprise, Pike could immediately tell: “You heard about me.”

A muscle twitched in Boyce’s jaw and there was a hoarse quality to his voice as he replied, “Got off the comm with Richard half an hour ago. Didn’t quite believe it until now.”

For the first time, Pike felt like he could be home and found himself actually smiling as he gently teased, “Christ, Phil: Surgeon General? How’d you swing that?”

The other man’s posture shifted slightly, but he didn’t seem quite ready to relax as he replied, “I was focused on work for a while. Where do you think I should be?”

“You’re CMO on the Bradbury, running the sector-wide relief efforts to control the Deltan plague that spread after the VSA had to withdraw their medical relief ships to regroup at New Vulcan. High profile, sure, but not,” he waved a hand to indicate the large office.

The gesture was so *Chris* that Boyce felt something tug painfully in his chest, and he brought a hand up to run over his hair to hide the reaction.

A glint of silver as the other man’s left hand came into frame made Pike pause, eyes narrowing, “Phil: you’re *married*?”

“I was,” Boyce’s voice took on a slightly rougher quality, hand abruptly dropping out of frame. “He died.”

There was suddenly not enough air in the room. “I’m so sorry.” Wondering that the Hell he’d been thinking, just calling Phil like this, Pike heard himself ask, “When?”

“About four years ago.”

Four years. A long time, but the roughness in Phil’s voice sounded like a more recent hurt. Phil’s normally confident gaze dropped to the desk and in that moment an impossible idea occurred to him. “Wait...” He’d give anything for Phil to start laughing at him, but there was only a flicker of eyebrow that was one of the other man’s classic tells. Four years ago? Oh, Hell, no. Mouth dry, Pike somehow managed to ask, “We got married?” His voice nearly cracked on that surprising word.

Boyce nodded.

In an only marginally lower tone, Pike asked, “When?”

“2249.” One side of Boyce’s mouth twisted in a half-smile. “We met after your Maru, just as you described, but it took us a while to get our act together.”

They’d had a decade together. Married. Pike couldn’t have been more surprised. Crunching the numbers, he realized, “That was just three years after Tarsus. Jamie was sixteen, and finally sleeping through the night far more often than not. I was lecturing fourth-year tactics at the academy and in charge of the flight squadrons.” Pike’s brow furrowed as he thought back, “You were doing a second tour on the Aldrin. You stayed Earthside for a year after I

adopted Jamie: getting him healthy and helping us settle in, but command finally got you on a medical relief mission. I remember comming you when I was trying to teach him how to drive a flitter. We'd have a drink together over the comm while I tried to calm my nerves. The kid was a menace in San Francisco traffic."

Hand pressed flat to the surface of his desk, as if trying to keep himself from flying away, Boyce explained, "*We* did a tour on the Aldrin immediately after Tarsus; we had a bad run-in with a Vestian ship and you took command from Kanmach when he was incapacitated. All told I spent six years patching you up on three different ships after the academy: it was on the USS Yorktown when we finally got our heads out of our asses. You were captain and I was CMO."

The silence stretched between them and Boyce thought of the bare facts he'd been given by Admiral Barnett, colouring in detail between the stark lines. With an assessing gaze fixed right on Pike's blue eyes he said, "You were on a vendetta, weren't you? To get the bastard who killed your boy. Not exactly sanctioned by Starfleet."

Pike's jaw clenched at the memory of the last time he'd spoken with his friend. They'd argued then; he knew how it could play out as he replied. "It was sanctioned by Section 31."

The noise Boyce made in his throat was well remembered. "We both know they operate missions with varying degrees of transparency. This was the shadows, wasn't it? You tell Richard?" No, Pike hadn't told Barnett all the details. Enough to satisfy the brass, but not everything. "Hell, Chris."

Despite the rebuke, the tone of those final words was warm, and so *familiar* to Pike. He couldn't have held his tongue, even if he'd wanted to. "Jamie was going to get married, after his current tour. The kid had his whole damn life ahead of him and that bastard ended him." Pike was breathing harshly, heart pounding in his chest. "He ended my son."

"I'm sorry." After a moment of space for Pike's grief, he said. "I hate that bastard too." Boyce leaned forward, finally succumbing to the temptation to reach up and trace a finger over the other man on the screen. "He ended *you*."

They were both unable to speak then, blinking hard and trying to swallow emotion rising in their throats. Eventually, Boyce managed to gather himself enough to say, "You know we had bets placed as to when Kirk and McCoy would stop circling each other and commit."

Pike was already shaking his head, "It was Jamie and Carol for me. They knew each other since they were teenagers, but started dating when they eventually served together."

Carol *Marcus*? Phil remembered a bony slip of a thing at the admiral's annual holiday party when they were lieutenants. Years later she'd been called in front of Chris in his official capacity as Commandant of Cadets while the Enterprise was still under construction. Some minor infraction, but his husband had been more upset that she'd tried to lie her way out of it.

Pike remembered McCoy's words about Jim Kirk in the med bay: *He'd been living in Riverside, not doing much*. Not noticing the other man's reaction to Jamie's choice of partner, he asked, "McCoy told me I looked after him after Tarsus, but he went back to his family?"

Boyce nodded. “You always wondered, but it wasn’t your place to do anything after he was returned. They sealed the records of all the minors, and it was years before we were back on Earth.”

“But we met again: McCoy said I called him ‘son.’ What happened?”

Wishing he had a drink in hand, Boyce said, “You recruited him to Starfleet.” Shrugging in acceptance of the coincidence, he continued, “You’d been on a run to Riverside to check in on the Enterprise’s construction and pick up a load of cadets. I got a comm sometime after midnight.” He could still remember the confusion of the chime waking him up; worry for Chris dissolving into something else once he realised what he was being told. “You were furious, ‘Guess who I just scraped off the ground after a bar fight.’ We realized pretty quickly that Jim didn’t recognize you, and he’d hacked his personal and medical files to scrub everything related to Tarsus out of it. There was just a couple years in the files where he didn’t visit the doctor at all, then reappeared an inch shorter than projected.”

Boyce drew a long slow breath at the memories, then continued more softly, “You’d hoped things would go better for James once he got back to Earth, and were pretty pissed when it looked like Starfleet had just abandoned him. You tried to make up for it: appointed yourself his academic advisor and got him into accelerated command track. Checked in on him more than he knew; dragged him out for a meal when McCoy was out of town.”

“And he never knew?”

“Not until after you died.”

“Wouldn’t...” Wouldn’t it have *mattered*, he wanted to say.

Sensing the direction: “McCoy was pretty pissed off on Jim’s behalf.” Boyce splayed his fingers flat on the surface of the desk and tried to explain, “Jim Kirk showed up older than the rest of the cadets, with only the clothes on his back, off the charts test scores but no high school diploma, the ‘Kelvin baby’ nickname and all the accusations of nepotism that went with it. We talked about what to do for days, between us and with Archer, but if he’d looked like your favorite, or even worse Tarsus had come out...”

Jamie Kirk had showed up for the academy at eighteen, a freshly minted high-school valedictorian with outstanding recommendations from his summer placements. Sure, he’d been a captain’s son with a famous name, but no one was going to question his right to be there.

Seeing that his words were having an effect, Boyce continued, “It would have meant something, and you did intend to tell him once he’d proved himself. You were afraid he’d think you felt sorry for him or something; that he needed to get out from under his own insecurities. The truth was you admired the hell out of that kid.” Settling back into his chair from where he’d been leaning towards the screen, he added, “I think he knew it, too.”

“That kid took everything I had for those years after we got back.” Meeting Phil’s blue eyes, his tongue suddenly felt clumsy in his mouth as he repeated, “Everything I had.” The other man just tilted his head to one side; it was a look Pike had been on the receiving end of

countless times. Just like the other times, revelation followed: “We’d have gotten together...” He stumbled over what he was suddenly realizing: *we’d have fallen in love if not for Jamie.*

Boyce just shrugged, a little raise of his shoulders that was almost imperceptible if you didn’t know what to look for.

“Thanks, Phil.” He suddenly felt like the room was too small, and he needed to get up and walk, “It was...” what do you say to someone who looks at you and sees his dead husband? Lamely, he settled for, “It was real good to talk. I’ll comm again. Soon.”

“It’s good to see you well, Chris.”

The comm channel closed. To the empty screen, Boyce softly said, “I loved you before Tarsus.”



## Evening 2263.3

“They’ve requested Pike come too.”

Leonard paused in straightening the collar of his dress uniform, glancing over at the other man with a raised eyebrow.

Jim was standing on the other side of the bed, picking at the braid on his sleeve. Without making eye contact he continued, “Something about wanting to meet us as a pair, to see ‘the personal significance we reflected across the threads of life’. I didn’t have the heart to tell them I’ve barely talked to him since he came aboard.” Jim shook his head, voice suddenly slightly choked as he made eye contact with the doctor and said, “The universe hates me, Bones. Ambassador Spock, and now this: I can have a dad, or I can have you. How fucked up is that?” The remark was glib, the tone anything but.

If you could choose, Leonard wondered, what would you pick?

Something of the question must have shown on his face because Jim paused, whispering, “Holy shit.” He quickly crossed the room to stand in front of the other man. “Oh, Bones. You. I’d always choose you.” He held Leonard’s shoulders tightly in his hands, eyes moving searchingly over the other man’s face. “You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Jim.” Leonard’s drawl was low and slow, tone not entirely convincing even as he said, “Course I do.”

Jim opened his mouth to say more, but was cut off by a hail from the transporter room to inform them that the rest of the away team was ready.

It meant Pike was there.

Leonard shifted their posture, bringing his own hands up to the younger man’s shoulders, pressing reassuringly against the tension he found there. “It’ll be fine, Jim. Let’s go.”

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As diplomatic banquets went it wasn’t great, but it wasn’t that bad either. The food was bland, but by no means unpleasant. Spock and Uhura were hosting a small delegation of Altair scientists on the Enterprise, leaving Kirk, McCoy, Pike and two security crewmen as the away team.

Accepting a drink, and grateful that the Altair’s version of champagne was actually rather palatable for humans, Leonard moved towards the side of the room and surveyed the mingling. At least six different species, so far as he could tell. Apparently their hosts had invited representatives from neighboring systems with which they had diplomatic ties. It meant there were at least seven different ways in which he could accidentally insult someone that evening; Leonard sighed, he’d much prefer his med bay to the pitfalls of interplanetary niceties.

“The Al’tair have invited the Perxes?”

The sudden voice in his ear made Leonard jump, but he recovered quickly when he realized he recognized the speaker. Responding to Pike softly, without turning his head, he asked, “Who?”

Pike waved a hand to the far side of the room where a greyish skinned alien in ceremonial robes was hovering by the buffet. “That’s Paclur Perxa, their ambassador to the Federation. Where I came from they’ve been involved in a bitter trade dispute with the Caitan Mining Consortium. I wonder why they’re here.”

Leonard frowned. “Jim renegotiated the Federation’s dilithium agreements with the Caitans. Last year, it must’ve been.”

“Well, shit.” The admiral was scanning the room rapidly, a small furrow between his eyebrows the only outward sign of concern. “See if you can get Jim out onto the balcony where we can have a quiet word. I’ll comm the ship and tell them to keep a lock on us.” He moved away before Leonard could do so much as nod.

Sidling across the room, Leonard was aware of the Perxes’ eyes on him as he insinuated himself next to Jim. Flashing a smile at the Altair ambassador, he turned on the southern charm as he said, “Excuse my interruption, but may I borrow the captain for a moment? I’ll return him shortly.” The ambassador laughed and gave the equivalent of a nod, and Leonard’s hand on Jim’s elbow was anything but a suggestion.

Letting himself be drawn away, Jim waited until they were out of reach of prying ears to ask, “What’s up, Bones?”

“Not sure.” Leonard led the way onto the balcony, “Something about some of the other guests...” He waved a hand to indicate the other man waiting for them; only feeling the brief falter in Jim’s step by virtue of being shoulder to shoulder with his partner.

“Admiral?” Jim recovered quickly, moving to stand next to the older man.

Whether he noticed the hesitation or not, Pike didn’t give a sign. Instead, he snapped his communicator shut with a grimace. “I’m having trouble getting a clear signal to the ship; I think a dampening field is in place. I don’t know if they could tell I was trying to raise them or not. Uhura could probably figure it out, but she’ll be stuck with the diplomatic tour.”

“What do you think is going on?”

“We’ve got an unexpected guest: there’s a Perxes delegation here, led by their ambassador to the Federation. Kind of thing we’d normally hear about in advance.”

Jim frowned, “That’s it?” When Pike looked ready to protest, he quickly raised a hand, “I don’t mean I don’t believe you; I mean: that’s all we’ve got to go on?”

“If your world is like mine: the Perxes won’t be fans of the Federation having a dilithium trade agreement with the Caitan Mining Consortium.”

Jim crossed his arms; he'd negotiated that trade deal. "Why?"

Leonard snorted at the defensive note in the young captain's voice, "Worry less about your beautiful trade deal and more about what we need to do now if we can't get comms reestablished."

Uncrossing his arms, Jim glanced back towards the open doors where a hum of conversation and the clink of dishes didn't sound like anything was amiss. "Do you seriously think they'd try something today? And do what end?"

Pike looked uneasy, aware he didn't have much to offer but not wanting to underestimate the potential threat. "I don't trust the ambassador. He's a slippery, vengeful piece of work."

"Okay." Jim straightened, casting a glance first to the nearby foothills, then back towards the banquet hall. "Bones, fill in the security guards. Chris, see if you can suss out anything more about that ambassador and his aides. I'll talk to the Al'tair and see if I can find out how the Perxes came to be here, and whether they're having any problems with their comms." Plan in place, such as it was, they all returned inside.

Leonard found the lieutenant and ensign from security standing at attention near the balcony doors. Moving slowly to stand beside Varangot (thirty-three, prone to plantar fasciitis), he quickly relayed the fact that there could be trouble and who to keep an eye on. They glanced across and caught Pike's eye, the admiral giving some sort of hand signal presumably taught in the security track. In any case, it seemed to mean something to the other two, as they quickly moved to take up new positions closer to the Perxes.

His job done, for now, Leonard moved to a position that gave him a clear view of the whole room, scanning it and noting how Paclur Perxa seemed to be spending an awful lot of time speaking into his *working* comm for someone at an ambassadorial function. Pike seemed to have picked up on it as well; the older man had moved to stand in the alien's blind spot, and was watching him closely.

Looking to the other side of the room, Leonard spotted two younger Perxes, trailed by Enterprise security, having a hushed conversation. As one, all three aliens started moving towards the balcony; turning, Leonard was unsurprised to find Jim had returned outdoors and seemed to be engrossed in conversation with the Al'tair first minister. After a moment, Jim glanced back into the room, unerringly meeting Leonard's eye and giving an almost imperceptible nod.

Passing the signal on to Pike, and in turn the rest of the team, he moved to flank the Perxes as the aliens crossed the threshold of the room.

It was Paclur himself who made the first move: with a ululation and the flash of a ceremonial dagger he flung himself towards Jim...

...Only to drop, heavily, as Pike stepped forwards and clubbed him between the shoulder blades with two tightly clasped fists.

The other Perxes moved to follow and were immediately tackled by the Enterprise security team who had been following closely behind. All told, it was the most abortive assassination attempt Leonard had ever seen. The banquet hall behind them had descended into stunned silence; the events over so quickly no one had time for alarm.

Leonard looked up to find Jim laughing, white teeth flashing as the setting sun behind him put a golden glow in his hair. The young captain's eyes were dancing at the close call and Leonard felt his own heart swell at the infectious, devil may care attitude that was so inherently *Jim*.

Two loud cracks in quick succession and Jim flinched, expression changing to surprise and then pain at the holes torn in the front of his uniform.

Another crack and Jim could only process a blur of 'fleet grey and then a tremendous weight slammed into him as Admiral Pike football tackled him over the railing of the balcony. The stomach dropping sensation of falling lasted less than a second before they hit the ground, hard, side by side, and holy fuck that hurt. Jim gasped, momentarily too stunned by the pain and the impact to move. There was a heavy thump as something large landed next to him and he flinched.

"Dammit, Jim!" It was Leonard, scrambling on hands and knees over to his captain, sparing only a quick glance at Pike to ensure he was relatively unscathed. Knowing hands eased Jim onto his back, running over the front of his torso and testing the locations of the two holes in his uniform. "Can--"

Whatever the doctor wanted to say was cut off by the roar of an explosion from the building above, scattering debris even as aliens cried out in pain. Jim's view of the sky was obscured as Leonard held himself over the other man, grunting as larger pieces of rubble tumbled off the balcony above and onto them. In a moment of stunned silence following the blast, shots started up again, the *crack, crack, crack* of projectile weapons unmistakeable.

"Get up!" A hand under Jim's armpit roughly hauled him to his feet, ignoring his pained cry. He barely managed to recognize that it was Pike on one side, Leonard on the other before they began to move in a shuffling half-run towards the nearby foothills.

## Night 2263.3

“I’m fine, Bones.” In truth, he didn’t feel very fine, but flat on his back in an alien cave Jim would say just about anything to dispel that pinched look from Leonard’s face.

“In a pig’s eye you are. I think you have two bullets in you Jim, and I don’t have so much as a basic medkit to treat you with.”

If Jim had hoped to find an ally in Christopher Pike, he was sorely mistaken. Illuminated in the low glow of bioluminescent lichen, the older man looked down with an expression of anger mingled with concern as he gently ordered, “Let him look you over, son.”

Jim huffed out a breath, then closed his eyes in acquiescence, groaning as the doctor probed the bloody mess of his shoulder.

“I need a better look, Jim. I’m sorry.” There was real regret in Leonard’s voice, but Jim only had a moment to wonder what it could mean before godawful agony erupted as the doctor started to maneuver his jacket off. From far away, he heard Leonard’s voice again, “Give me a hand here. I’ll need the shirt too.” After that it was too much, and all Jim could do was try not to vomit as he let himself be manhandled. It was probably only a minute later that he came back properly to himself: shoulder and gut still radiating pain, but now shirtless on the floor of the cave. Leonard was hovering over him, scowl firmly in place.

Licking his lips and tasting blood, Jim asked, “What’s the damage?”

Touching his shoulder more gently, Leonard shared a quick glance at Pike before he explained, “I think it probably lodged in your scapula, but it could have traveled. The one to your gut stayed in there too. You’ve lost a lot of blood, but so far as I can tell nothing is bleeding uncontrollably. Yet.” And that was the heart of it: without real equipment he couldn’t really tell. “We’ve got to get you back to the ship.”

Pike shook his head, grey hair disheveled. “Dampening field still seems to be in place, and Enterprise may not consider us overdue for check-in for another hour.”

A loud tearing sound and Jim mourned the loss of yet another of his shirts, watching as Leonard ripped it into strips and approached him with intent.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to get pressure on that wound.” An emotion briefly danced across Leonard’s face, but he quickly pushed it down in favor of a professional mask. Only a twitch in his jaw belied his outward composure as he set to work.

“Fuck, Bones!” Jim reared up and gasped as Leonard seemed to first jam a scrap of cloth into the bullet hole before winding a makeshift bandage around his shoulder and over the padding. Jim tried to jerk again, but Pike, white-faced, was carefully holding him down so he couldn’t put pressure on his abdominal muscles.

The wrapping was over quickly and Jim sighed in relief as the pain dialled back to a seven; he was dimly aware that he was shivering, but braced himself as Leonard's hands slid down his torso to carefully feel his abdomen. The touch was gentle, palpating without shifting anything inside, but Jim still found he had to clench his jaw and breathe hard through his teeth.

Finishing the physical exam, Leonard clasped Jim's wrist with one hand to take a pulse and ran his other hand over the captain's forehead, lips pursing as he reported, "You're a little shocky." Looking back over his shoulder at Pike he added, "Help me get his legs elevated."

As they maneuvered him again Jim could do little more than groan and try to focus on the little hushing noises Leonard was making between his teeth. He wondered dimly if the doctor even realized he was making them. They worked his dress jacket back underneath him, pulling it loosely as close to closed as it would go without his arms in the sleeves. A rock or a log or something firm and flat was dragged over to raise his legs, and finally Leonard moved to sit close to his good shoulder, a warm hand settling over his heart.

Pike vanished for a minute, then returned to crouch at Jim's other side as he reported, "No sign of anyone following us, and the sun is about to go down. There's still some smoke coming off the banquet hall, whatever is happening there may not be over." Simmering anger at the situation was just kept in check, but plain in the tone of his voice.

In the low light Jim's eyes were glassy with pain as he asked, "Varangot and Xin?"

Pike and Leonard exchanged a quick glance, before the admiral shook his head. "No sign of them. I don't think they were caught in the force of the blast, but they didn't follow us closely off the balcony." It was an optimistic assessment at best, and the fact that Jim accepted it without question was revealing of just how badly he was hurt.

Responding to Leonard's raised eyebrow, Pike continued, "Assuming they don't know we're here, we should stay put and wait for Spock. The sky is clouding over: it'll be too dark to try and sneak back to the banquet hall for a look, and there's no good reason to break cover anyway."

It worked. Jim nodded, breath wheezing slightly as he accepted the assessment, essentially turning the decision over to them.

Leonard looked between the two men, knowing what he was going to have to suggest, "The temperature is going to drop quickly: it'll be twelve, maybe fifteen degrees if we're lucky." It had already started, in fact: a noticeable chill in the air that hadn't been present before. Perhaps not that cold, but dangerous for Jim nonetheless. "If we can't do anything, then we'd better get ready to hunker down for the night." From the lack of reaction, it was clear Jim wasn't quite following the implications.

Pike, however, stiffened.

"How's the brace?"

A huff of breath through the admiral's nose was the frank response: *sore*. With a shake of his head, he replied, "It'll be fine. Took a blow when I landed, but I'm okay."

Leonard didn't quite believe it, but wasn't about to argue the point. "Alright." He considered his patient, trying to work out the best way to approach it. "See if you can settle against his side without jostling him if you need to shift position." Wrapping himself around and over Jim's other side and good shoulder, trying not to put his weight on the other man but wanting to get as close as possible, Leonard tried to share his warmth with his partner. It was getting dark in the cave as well; the light given off by the lichen covered ceiling dropping with the temperature.

Jim's voice broke the awkward silence, hitching slightly in pain in a manner that put a knot of worry in Leonard's gut as the captain asked, "How did you know?"

The question was oblique, but Leonard heard a rustle as Chris shifted slightly, before admitting, "I made a deal with Section 31. Got me access to a hell of a lot more information courtesy of the Orion slavers."

"Starfleet doesn't..."

"Yeah, well Section 31 *does* trade with them."

Interjecting into the conversation, Leonard moved it from ethics to practicalities: "So when you said that the Caitans and Perxes were in trade dispute..."

Pike's voice was a low, frustrated growl: "It's a shooting war on at least three planets, but the Caitans have tried to keep it hushed up. By Federation law the Caitans are probably in the right, but I suspect they don't want Starfleet to send in a mediator as things wouldn't be guaranteed to go their way; the Perxes have a very particular concept of ownership and honor. Seem to think anything once colonized for the glory of their empire is theirs forever. They had control of the XR-376 asteroid belt for all of a few years over a century ago before abandoning it as worthless, but can't bear for someone else to have found dilithium in it now. Never mind that it was probably always in Caitan space."

Jim's voice had a note of weariness in it that went beyond their current situation as he said, "The Perxes weren't even mentioned in the negotiation briefings last year."

Pike snorted, "That's the 'fleet for you: never ascribe to malice that which is adequately explained by incompetence. Although in this case the thought of such a rich dilithium source secure from the Romulan border might have played a role as well."

The thought that the brass had sent Jim into a negotiation deliberately under-prepared made Leonard's jaw clench and he forced back the emotion that went with it. There was nothing to be gained from getting riled up in some godforsaken cave.

"I'll take first watch." Sensing McCoy about to protest, he continued, "You should get some sleep while you can. I'll wake you if he seems to get any worse."

While you can really meant *while Jim is relatively* stable, and Leonard found he couldn't argue with that. Grudgingly, he was also forced to admit that the morning's hangover and lack of sleep was getting the better of him. "Fine." Settling further, he tucked his face into the side of Jim's neck, careful to keep clear of the airway. The younger man smelled faintly like aftershave overlaid with sweat and blood. He hated the fact that it was an almost familiar combination.

The cave was silent except for three sets of breathing, a slight rasp setting Jim's apart from the other two. Eventually, despite himself, Leonard fell asleep.

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Jim jerked awake with a whimper of pain, a muscle in his shoulder cramping and sending pure agony all the way across his chest. Before he could fully process where he was, a hand buried itself in his hair and began a firm but gentle stroking.

"Shhhh." The voice was low. Authoritative. Distracted by the pain it took a moment for Jim to realize it wasn't Bones. The hand moved in his hair again. "It's alright, son. Just relax."

Scarcely wanting to breathe in case the movement made it worse, Jim tried to focus on anything but the pain.

A long minute of keeping up the gentle stroking, and Pike could feel that the younger man seemed to be breathing more easily. "Is it easing?" Jim gave a grunt that he knew was an affirmative. "Do you want..."

"No." Much as he might like the reassurance of the other man, Jim was firm. "Let Bones sleep."

"How are you feeling?"

A lie would normally come easy; it would for any other crewman, save perhaps Bones. The hand in his hair slid around and up to take the temperature on his forehead and the truth spilled out, "Hurts; feeling pretty thirsty too."

Painfully aware there was nothing he could do to ease either of those, Pike offered the best he could: "Try to go back to sleep."

"Hmmm." Jim's reply was indistinct, but after several minutes his breathing eased into something indicative of a deeper sleep.

Once he was sure the younger man wouldn't stir, Pike sat up and carefully eased his arms out of the jacket of his dress uniform. Spreading the garment over Jim and Leonard, he lay down again to tug one edge over himself as well. This close, the scent of Jamie's preferred aftershave brought emotions roiling to the surface.

He wasn't going to be getting any sleep that night.





## Morning 2263.4

It was warmer than when he'd last muzzily risen from a deeper sleep. Leonard blinked his eyes open to find the cave was light again, Pike watching him unapologetically from the other side of Jim; the older man hadn't woken him to take a shift as promised.

An admonishment died in his throat as he realized Jim was stirring as well, blue eyes blinking open as the younger man gave a hitching breath at the sensations that awoke with his body.

"Morning." Mindful of the admiral, but deciding he didn't care, Leonard leaned down and gently kissed Jim's lips, saying the words in his head that he'd always bit back on the actual day: *Happy birthday, Jim.*

Confusion clouded Jim's eyes for a moment, before clearing when he realized the significance of the morning as well. Voice pitched for Leonard's ears alone, he softly replied, "Thanks, Bones."

Sitting up, Leonard cast his glance over the other two men. Pike looked well enough: eyes puffy with exhaustion and a slightly pained furrow in his brow from a night on the cold floor of the cave.

Catching the frustration in Leonard's eye, Pike shrugged, "We need you ready to look after Jim today."

Turning his attention back to Jim, Leonard eased open the jacket and was relieved to see the bandage appeared to be doing its job on his shoulder. Glancing lower was another story. Leonard tried to keep his face carefully neutral as he palpated Jim's noticeably distended abdomen. The sharp hiss of breath in response told him enough, as did the heat of the skin under his hands. "Are you thirsty?"

"Parched."

Leonard rocked back on his heels, chewing the inside of his cheek for a moment before succumbing to two pairs of questioning eyes. "The bullet may have perforated your descending colon; that leaves you open to infection." He ran a hand over Jim's forehead, smoothing the furrow of pain.

"McCoy." Pike jerked his chin towards the mouth of the cave and brighter daylight. "Walk with me."

At a small nod from Jim, Leonard followed the admiral to his feet and towards the front of the cave. Pike carefully peered around a columnar rock formation before motioning Leonard to follow. Careful to stay within the shadows, they looked down on their path of flight the previous evening. The banquet hall had been reduced to a burnt out husk, a tang of smoke still sharp in the air. The valley itself was eerily silent: the venue had been selected for its

stunning location deep within a biopreserve. Now, Leonard would trade the palpable remoteness for just about anything.

Pike flicked open his communicator, carefully set to receive-only. The staticky hiss of a jamming signal was immediately apparent so he quickly snapped it closed. Stepping back further out of view, he motioned McCoy close and whispered, "He's not just open to infection, is he?"

Leonard's shoulders dropped as he admitted, "Already set in. Peritonitis will turn to sepsis if we don't get him back to the ship. I don't have a hope of stopping septic shock down here." Scrubbing a hand through his hair in frustration, he continued, "We should try to keep him comfortable and distracted. The pain is going to get worse; he's not going to be mobile if anyone comes sniffing around."

Lips in a thin, tight line, Pike cast one last glance towards the valley before clapping a hand on Leonard's shoulder and drawing them back from the mouth. With a limp in his walk more pronounced than the previous day, he led the way back to Jim, settling on the floor of the cave with his back against the wall.

After a moment contemplating the useless comm held in his hands, Pike said, "Leonard told me you joined up at twenty-two." It was the first time he'd called the doctor by his given name, but he ignored McCoy's raised eyebrow and continued to address his words to Jim. "By my math that means you didn't just finish in three years instead of four, but had command of the Enterprise then as well."

"I told you I'd finish in three." A ghost of a smile twisted the corner of Jim's mouth. "The morning I joined up."

"So were you a hellraiser at the academy, driving the instructors to distraction by pulling top marks in your courses despite flirting with half the student body?"

"Only half?" A more real smile took hold then. "Other-me wasn't on his game if he only flirted with half."

Leonard snorted, and he was surprised to hear a similar noise from Pike as well. Shifting to be more comfortable on the hard floor, the admiral's voice took on a more melancholy note as he admitted, "I don't think it was easy for you: George Kirk's son, and Tarsus was a weird kind of open secret for anyone who knew my service record or could do the math of when I appeared in San Francisco with a sick and undernourished adopted son in tow. You graduated high school as valedictorian, entry to Starfleet pretty much assured. I was a commander, busy running the flight squadrons and pilot training program."

A glance down at Jim confirmed that the younger man was paying close attention, so Pike continued, "Still a little scrawny, then, if I'm honest. I think you were picked on a bit in your combat training class." A small smile forming at what was obviously a fond memory, he added, "Your Uncle Phil taught you to box when he was home on furlough. That put a stop to it pretty quick."

Philip Boyce, Jim figured, it had to be.

Knowing he was about to tip his hand about a major difference in their realities, but aware it would interest Jim enough to keep his mind off the pain, Pike offered, “We’d just finished a tour on the Yorktown: you were my tactical officer and Spock was my science officer when the distress call from Vulcan came in. It hadn’t been formally announced yet, but I think the Enterprise was going to go to Vertes. I’d been on the shortlist, but she had more command experience than me after I stayed Earthside until your third year at the academy. She was in the Laurentian System when we got the distress call, and the Yorktown was in the middle of refits, so they gave us the Enterprise.”

Captain Pike *not* being the natural choice for the Enterprise. Jim had to roll that around in his mind for a minute, and it was still hard to believe. He’d seen the respect Chris commanded at headquarters, and the man’s own instinct to leap without looking.

As if sensing Jim’s thoughts, Pike asserted, “It was worth it.” His sombre tone breaking as he said, “But lord did you give me grey hair when I was trying to teach you to drive.” Leonard snorted, loudly, unable to contain himself at the image as Pike continued, “You insisted you already knew everything you needed to know, even when you got us airborne on Filbert despite being in a groundcar. I had to have a double scotch over the comm with Phil before I could even think about letting you near any type of vehicle again.”

“Bones...” Jim seemed to need a moment to gather his breath before suggesting, “Tell him about the Deltans at the Bluebird”

Leonard huffed in surprise at the request, rolling his eyes in well remembered exasperation. At Pike’s raised eyebrow, he acquiesced, “Fine. It was our second year. Jim was treasurer of the Xenolinguistics Club in some harebrained attempt to learn Uhura’s first name. There was this visiting delegation of Deltans, potential recruits but around our age, and Jimbo here decide that, in the spirit of friendship, the club should offer to host a social mixer at the Bluebird. There was this cadet, Finnegan...”

“Total asshole.”

“Total asshole,” Leonard agreed, “He showed up with a few of his sparring buddies and you could see our table immediately caught his eye.”

“We were being so *appropriate*.” Jim sounded almost wounded at just how unimpeachable his conduct had been up to that point.

Leonard nodded, “I was just along for someplace to have a drink. The rest of the club were trying to converse in Deltan, as best as they could, and it was mostly the basics as a result: pleasantries, talking about the city, things to do, and what the academy is like. So Finnegan gets it into his small brain to come over and try to convince the Deltans they’d have a much better evening with him and his friends. Asked if they’d taken the oath of celibacy yet. Uhura told them to get lost and he put a hand on her shoulder, so Jim jumped up and got involved as well. Suddenly there was this gawdawful piercing whistle and everyone froze.”

Pike nodded in appreciation. He’d worked hard on that whistle.

“No one had any idea you were in the corner alcove until you stood up and you said,” Jim joined in and they continued in unison, “Gentlemen, I appreciate in your under-sexed state a certain measure of jealousy of Cadet Kirk is inevitable, but if you can’t keep it in your pants when an interplanetary incident could result then you don’t have a place in the ‘fleet.’”

Jim’s eyes slid shut for a moment in an expression of fond bliss as Pike barked out a laugh.

None of them could say when “the other Pike” and “Jamie” had turned into simply “you,” but it seemed natural to continue as the admiral picked up on the theme. “You must have been in your first year when you decided you should try to test out of the basic survival courses. Somehow you got your academic advisor to approve you joining the winter break retake cohort for second year students who had been unable to complete the summer course. It was the classic model: individual drop offs and you have to navigate to a shared pick-up point within 48 hours in order to pass. You marched out of there stark naked except for a pair of underwear on your head that you’d soaked in a creek to try and keep you cool. You passed, but refused to tell anyone what happened to your uniform. The lieutenant in charge threatened to give you a demerit if you didn’t tell, but it didn’t work. They had to pass you, but you wouldn’t even tell me. I think it was a good story, because the tips of your ears would still flush whenever I brought it up, even years later.”

The stories continued until Jim’s contributions decreased in frequency, his eyes slowly slipping closed. Eventually, McCoy paused mid-story and looked across to meet Pike’s eyes as he said, “He’s asleep.”

Nodding, Pike shifted so he could scrutinize the younger man more carefully, “How’s he doing?”

Leonard eased open Jim’s jacket to reveal the younger man’s abdomen had continued to swell. Reaching down, he carefully unbuttoned Jim’s trousers to take pressure off the area, before gently sweeping his hands over the taut skin, avoiding where yellowish fluid was weeping out from under the makeshift bandage. “Not good.”

“Hand me your comms.” Setting his own aside to keep one in working order, Pike set to work prying the back off Leonard’s. “I might be able to rig together the power cells and boost the signal enough to get through the dampening field, but we’d run the risk of the Perxes picking it up.”

“Moving Jim could kill him. If the Perxes come and try to drag us out of here...”

Pausing for only a moment, Pike fixed Leonard with a non-nonsense gaze. “How long until it’s a crisis either way?”

How long until septic shock could kill Jim if they weren’t rescued? Leonard didn’t want to even try to say. Chewing on the inside of his cheek, he contemplated the feverish heat radiating from the other man along with the telltale swelling. “Four hours. Maybe six ‘till he’s critical.” Sweeping a hand gently over Jim’s forehead, he added, “Could be less. I’ll need to monitor him closely.”

Pike returned to the comms, wincing when one sparked as he tried to link them together. Eventually, he was forced to put them down, having done all he could before they were ready to risk testing it. Looking over he found Leonard focused on Jim, a worried frown creasing the doctor's brow.

As if sensing the scrutiny, Leonard asked, "You done?"

"As much as I can until we're ready to try using it."

Attention still on Jim, Leonard asked, "Have you talked to Phil?"

The non sequitur took the admiral by surprise, but perhaps it shouldn't have, given their earlier storytelling. "Yeah. He had quite a story to tell as well." Still uneasy with how the conversation had wrapped up, and not sure he wanted to get into this with the doctor, his first instinct was to dissemble. Glancing over, however, at the emotion laid bare on the younger man's face as he looked down on Jim, he found himself powerless to lie. "You're friends with him?"

Leonard wasn't quite sure how to describe their relationship, but friends was close enough. "We didn't know you were married until after you died. He stepped in and helped with Jim's recovery after the warp core. I don't know how he managed that, given his own grief, but it made a world of difference to Jim. He helped me as well; I wasn't in good shape then either."

Fondly, but uncomfortably, Pike softly replied, "That's Phil for you."

"You never... where you're from?"

"It was tough when we got back from Tarsus. Phil spent a year Earthside after I adopted Jamie: getting him healthy and helping us settle in. He had an apartment in medical staff housing, but was at our place more often than not. After the year they finally pushed a medical relief mission on him: I actually encouraged him to take it. I'd been so absorbed with Jamie, it didn't seem fair to keep Phil's career on hold as well, now that the kid was doing so much better." Since his conversation with Phil, he'd been turning their interactions over the years around in his head. Giving voice to his uncertainty, he said, "Phil told me we got together after we'd served on the same ships for a while." Voice dropping as he looked at his boots instead of the other men, "I wonder what made us grow close like that. I'd never felt like we were on that path."

Jim made a noise that was half a breath, half a whimper and Leonard quickly rubbed a hand over his good shoulder, easing him back to sleep. Once he was satisfied that Jim's breathing had evened out, he said, "Phil once told me that the two of you had a bet about us: how long it would take us to get our heads out of our asses. He said it was a pattern that you were familiar with, which implied that it wasn't so much that something made you grow close, as you happened to finally realize what had been there all along." Realizing he might be massively overstepping, Leonard added, "In this world, at least."

Pike seemed to be seriously contemplating Leonard's words. The spell was broken when Jim shifted, eyes opening to half mast as he gave a small noise of pain before asking, "Bones?"

Leonard's reaction was immediate: "Right here, Jim."

"I'm thirsty, Bones." He shifted and gasped at the radiating pain that accompanied the small movement.

"Easy." Leonard pressed a hand to Jim's good shoulder. "Easy, try not to move."

"Thirsty."

"I know. There's no water; I'm sorry." There was no point even trying to find water for Jim, as Leonard doubted he'd actually be able to keep it down if they had any to offer.

"It's cold."

Pike raised an eyebrow, because with daylight the ambient temperature was far from cool. Leonard quickly shrugged off his own jacket, tucking it over Jim along with Pike's. Leaning down, he pressed a quick kiss to Jim's forehead and stroked a hand through sweaty hair. "You just rest. We'll have you back in my med bay soon enough."

"Bones?"

"Yeah, Jim?"

Sinking down quickly, he couldn't quite remember what he wanted to say.

The last thing Jim heard was another familiar voice: "It's going to be okay, son."

## Late Evening 2263.4

“How’s our boy?” Leaning against the door to the CMO’s office, a deep weariness was apparent in Pike’s frame even as he held himself doggedly upright.

“Resting.” Leonard rolled his chair back from the desk and stretched, tiredly. “The surgery went well and I’ve got the infection under control. He’ll be out until the morning and then have a pretty miserable day or two, but should be back on his feet by the end of the week. Full duties a week after that.”

Pike smiled his relief; it had been a damned close call by the time they broke through the dampening field in the mid-afternoon. The sheen of sweat on Jim’s face and his increasingly thready pulse eventually drove them to try out Pike’s boosted communicator. With a lock on their location, Spock and a rather excitable engineer quickly developed a plan to target the Perxes’ field generator and then beam them up to the ship. Too damn close. Lingered worry was like an itch under his skin, and even after the stress and sleepless night Pike couldn’t quite bring himself to relax. “Can I see him?”

Leonard rose with a knowing nod, admitting, “I was about ready to check in on him too.” Pulling back the privacy screen revealed a heavily drugged Jim Kirk out cold and breathing, thankfully, on his own. Echoing Pike’s own thoughts, he softly said, “It was a close call. There was more damage to his shoulder than was readily apparent, and his abdomen was an utter mess of infection. The damn thing travelled at an angle and perforated his small intestine, severed a ureter and tore open his bowel.”

Ignoring the gruesome details, Pike stepped towards the head of the bed and allowed himself a moment to revel in that fact that *this* Jim Kirk was alive, despite the increasingly dire situation they had been in just five hours before. The kid was still too pale, with dark circles under his eyes and a shoulder strapped together under a still-humming regen unit. A measure of swelling was still apparent even with a blanket pulled up over his belly.

Resisting the urge to touch the lax hand settled on the blanket, he turned to the doctor and said in an undertone, “I just finished debriefing with Spock and Barnett. Heads are going to roll in the diplomatic corps tonight.” It was almost too little, too late, but brought a measure of grim satisfaction nonetheless.

Nodding his approval, Leonard moved to the head of the bed, trying to resist the temptation to pick up a hand scanner. Jim was going to be fine, he reminded himself, as were the others: “M’Benga released Varangot to his quarters a few hours ago with mostly superficial injuries, but we’ve got Xin under observation for a fractured skull and smoke inhalation. He’s going to need more regen on his lungs tomorrow, but it could have been a lot worse.”

A lot worse indeed. Pike glanced up from Jim’s wan face and realized Leonard was sporting a similar complexion. A furrow of concern was still carved between the doctor’s eyebrows, and he had the look of a man having to work to keep it together. Feeling a sudden kinship with



this man who cared for Jim Kirk, he said, “Good job, son.” Seeing Leonard jerk in surprise, he added, “Seriously. He’s lucky to have you.”

“I couldn’t do a goddamned thing for him down there.”

Shaking his head at the predictable nature of overachieving doctors, Pike countered, “Bullshit. You treated the wounds as best as you could, kept him calm and distracted, then pulled off a small marathon of surgery up here despite what you’d been through as well.” Leonard’s shoulders seemed to slump in some combination of acquiescence and exhaustion. Snagging a chair with his good leg, Pike tugged it closer to the head of the bed and pressed the younger man down into the seat.

Leonard sat without resistance; the urge to pick up a tricorder forgotten in the face of being able to gently take Jim’s hand. Taking a shaky breath, he gave a squeeze, wishing fervently Jim was awake to return the gesture. He’d scrubbed up for surgery and done a quick turn under the sonics, but the scent of dust and smoke seemed to linger in his nostrils. A real shower, preferably in Jim’s quarters, was what he needed, along with a real night’s sleep. That, however, meant leaving, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to do that yet.

“Leonard.” Pike waited until the younger man looked up, the tension plain for him to read. “He’s going to be fine. You need to go get some rest and come back in the morning.”

Gaze slithering back down to Jim, Leonard licked his lips but didn’t reply.

“I’d make it an order, but I’m aware I don’t have the authority to do that.” There was something at once wry and wistful in Pike’s tone.

A deep breath that was almost a sigh, but he wasn’t going to protest the truth in the admiral’s words. With a nod, Leonard stood and gently pulled the blanket further up Jim’s torso. Looking back to the older man, he tried to inject appreciation into his words, “You should get some rest too, sir.”

“I will.” Pike gave a tired smile before turning to the door, calling back over his shoulder, “Just going to comm Phil first.”

## Night 2263.4

The channel connected and the reaction was predictable as Philip Boyce gave a quick double take. “Damn, Chris, you look awful.”

Despite himself, the corner of Pike’s mouth quirked up in a small smile. Trust Phil to always tell the truth. Not bothering to turn up the lights in his quarters probably made him look worse.

Settling further into his chair, obviously still at his desk despite the late hour, Boyce gently asked, “What happened?”

Any intent to tell the whole story evaporated in the face of the doctor’s careful concern, and he blurted out, “They shot him with *projectiles*, Phil. He almost died on his thirtieth birthday!” The significance of that wasn’t lost on the other man: precisely one year older than George Kirk ever got to be. Realizing his hands had closed into tight fists, he took a breath and forced himself to relax and start closer to the beginning, “It was a goddamned mess right from the start. The kid did a good job in the negotiations with the Al’tair, but command sent him into a bad situation with no intel when the Perxes showed up to the reception. He negotiated a trade deal last year that they would have held a grudge against, and command hadn’t even informed him of that *during* the negotiation. They’d have killed him if I hadn’t been there with intel from Section 31... just about killed him regardless.”

“He’s going to be okay?” Boyce shifted in his seat and seemed to be fiddling with a padd off camera: probably looking for Kirk’s medical records. His expression of worry softened about the same time as Pike replied.

“McCoy says he’s going to be fine, but it was a damned close call.”

Whistling softly through his teeth, obviously having accessed the records, Boyce agreed, “I’ll say.” The slight furrow in his brow that always accompanied reading appeared, and a moment later he looked back up to the camera and asked, “Under fire and then overnight in a cave? How are you doing?”

Pike shrugged, “I’ve had worse.” Sensing this Boyce wasn’t any more likely to take bullshit than his old friend, he added, “Kirk’ll be fine. I know that; it just...” He waved a hand in the air, tiredly. “It’s been a long day.”

Even that was a weak attempt at downplaying the situation, and clearly not how he’d intended to end the sentence. Picking his words carefully, Boyce pushed aside how hard it was to look at the familiar face of Chris, his *husband*, and use the similarities to make an educated guess about what needed to be said, “You lost your Jamie, and I can’t begin to understand what that would have been like... but you’re allowed to care about Jim.”

The sudden tightening of his throat caught Pike off guard. It took a moment to swallow around the constriction, and another to be able to realize what he needed to ask, “And what about you?”

“I care about you Chris, and I’m sure Jim and Leonard do as well.”

“Phil.”

Boyce let out a shaky breath, gaze dropping to the surface of his desk as platitudes about how the other man wasn’t alone in this reality fell away. They were going beyond that now, in ways he wasn’t sure he was ready for. The silence stretched, Pike knowing the only way to get the truth was to simply wait. Eventually, Boyce raised his eyes and looked, really looked, at the other man. Tousled grey hair, with curls of white at the sides. More white than his Chris had, and deeper furrows at the sides of his eyes. Different, but so achingly familiar. “You said, we’re good friends in your reality?”

“Best friends.” Thinking back to the man he was now realizing he’d taken for granted for years, “Ever since you fished me out of that fountain in third year.” Even as he said it, the understatement struck him. “We were going to be something; in the ‘fleet, I mean. When we were lieutenants on the Aldrin there was a below-decks poker group: they used to call us the C&C for future captain and CMO.”

Boyce smiled, wanly, “I remember that: Hastings, Jian-xin and Sonora.”

God it was strange: everything so similar up to a point. Pike caught himself wondering when it had really started for the other men, if they got married in 2249. “Then Jamie needed me and...” He trailed off, unsure quite what he was explaining.

The uncertainty written across Pike’s face was something Boyce knew few, if any, other people got to see. It was a reminder of late nights in the captain’s quarters and in their living room on Earth. It had been a long day. A long couple of days since Barnett had first commed him. Perhaps he wouldn’t have said anything if he hadn’t been so tired, but as it was his mouth betrayed him, “Did you really never know?”

Unsure he wanted to hear the answer, Pike nonetheless softly asked, “Know what?”

He was too old to feel like this, but Boyce forced himself to ignore the twisting in his stomach and get it out. “I admired you by the end of our fourth year. It may have taken six years patching you up on three different ships for us to agree there was something mutual there, but I cared for you before Tarsus.” The truth was more than caring, but he wasn’t going to use the real word for it. Not yet.

And damned if that wasn’t a kick in the teeth. Pike suddenly wished he had *his* Phil here. His Phil who had got him through that first year with Jamie: abruptly the sole-carer of a traumatized, undernourished teenager despite being too young to be the boy’s biological father.

Some emotion must have been showing on Pike’s features, as the man who wore Phil’s face cocked his head to one side slightly and continued, “I’ve seen your single-mindedness in action; maybe even got to love it, eventually, as it’s just a part of you. But I only had to compete with a ship for your attention. A son who needed you... I guess can see why there wasn’t room for *us*.”

Images were flashing through Pike's mind: late nights on Earth with Jamie asleep on the sofa, leaning into his side as he talked softly with Phil; early mornings drinking coffee at the too-small kitchen table in his 'fleet housing when the doctor had spent the night while the boy was still frail; the look on Phil's face when orders to deploy had come in after the year together on Earth.

There had been room; if he'd been able to notice.

He felt sick.

"Hey," Boyce's soft word made Pike look up. "You did the best you could."

The conviction in the doctor's tone almost made him feel better and worse.

Answering the unasked question, Boyce said, "Because I know *you*, Chris. I might not have been the one there with you and Jamie, but I was married to you for a decade." And damned if that statement somehow managed to make sense. Another silence, then Boyce added, "I'm glad you're here." It was selfish, he knew, because somewhere another version of himself had lost his best friend and what sounded like his de facto nephew as well.

There was a tired gravel in his voice, but as Pike considered the men he'd left in the med bay and this Phil across from him it was surprisingly easy to reply, "I'm glad I'm here too."

Settling more comfortably into his desk chair, Boyce turned the topic to more stable ground: "So what's the plan?"

"For me? The original plan was Earth: either via a rendez-vous with the Hermes in two weeks or I could catch a ride from Yorktown Base when they stop for reprovisioning in six weeks."

"Original implies that might not be the plan any more?"

"I was debriefing with Barnett earlier and he said they may need an interim Vice-Admiral at Yorktown before someone is appointed more permanently. I think they still want to grill me in person, but it's just four months and probably considered a low-action posting where they can see how I do.

"Low action, but prestigious enough. Signals they trust you."

"Yeah." He was willing to admit that he'd been relieved when Barnett had made the suggestion. "Told them I'd sleep on it, but I think I'll send in an acceptance in the morning."

Boyce smiled, fondly. "Trust you to land that one, Chris. It's got a reputation around HQ as the newest and shiniest." Pike's snorting laugh turned into a yawn and the doctor's eyes softened further. "Sounds like you need to get started on that sleep."

Pike tried to wave a hand dismissively, but the gesture was ruined when he yawned again, this time so forcefully his jaw cracked.

"Get some rest, Chris. Doctor's orders."

Shaking his head, but good naturedly, he waved two fingers near his forehead in a casual salute and replied, "Fine, Phil. I guess we can say that being Surgeon General counts as outranking me."

Boyce chuckled, real humor plain in his tone. "Sweet dreams, Starshine."

It was an old joke between them: back to their fourth year survival training and a miserable night in the arctic. Snorting even as he had to bite back another yawn, he replied, "You too."

The channel closed and the room was left in near darkness. Slipping off his academy ring, Pike twisted off the stone and dumped a small data chip onto the surface of the desk. He regarded it for a moment, then reached for the padd McCoy had given him and pressed it inside. The screen filled with a photo of a painfully thin blonde boy leaning against the side of a much younger Philip Boyce. Swiping to the right and it was Jamie at his high school graduation, the tassel of his cap swinging into Chris' face as they hugged. Another swipe revealed Jamie and Carol, laughing, as she held the fourth finger of her left hand up to the camera. The visceral reaction surprised him: that same pang of loss for his son... but now a strange unease as he looked at Carol.

Turning the padd off and setting it face down, he typed a quick text message into the desk comm, not wanting to disturb McCoy if the doctor was already sleeping: *What's your professional opinion on when Jim will be well enough for a birthday drink?*

The response came back in less than a minute: *Six days*

*Observation lounge? I can put a discreet command lockout on it.*

Again, barely a moment before the reply came through: *I'll bring the good stuff*

Smiling, a very real smile that warmed his insides as well, Pike rocked back in his chair and thought, "Happy birthday, Jim."

The blinking ready light of the comm system caught his eye and he leaned forward to tap another message into the system, holding his breath as he hit send: *Meet me at Yorktown Base?*

Phil's reply was immediate: *I'll be there.*

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