Moments along the path

by InsaneSociopath

Summary

This is not a love story.

This is just a life being lived.

Featuring!
- Jim Kirk the raging Pansexual
- Christopher Pike as a big 'ole homo
- Leonard "Bones" McCoy as a heterosexual (Wait. Really? Are you sure Bones?)
- And far too much mature emotional conversation for any of our lads to handle

Notes

This was supposed to be about 15k long. It is not 15k long.

While I have done my best to edit it for mistakes, typos, and grammar errors, it's far too big for me to have caught everything. Please bare in mind that I am a dyslexic mess of a human bean as you read this, and be gentle (even though it's not my first time lol)
PS. Read it even if you don’t normally like Pike/Kirk. See what you think after.
Now Jim won’t lie and say that he doesn’t have a bit of a bed hopping habit.

But it’s not exactly excessive or unreasonable either. He’s just a healthy young human adult male that enjoys some physical intimacy every now and again. He’s big *(really big)* on consent, even more obsessed with staying healthy, and has a firm list of limits that he insists on sticking to at all times.

Safe, sane and consensual is almost a life motto at this point, he says it so often.

And yet here he is again. With some Commodore (Yardley? Yarforth? Jim doesn’t know, he’s never even heard of the guy before?) ordering him to his office to lecture him on propriety and perceptions again. He hasn’t even slept with anyone for like, over four weeks now? Maybe five? Definitely not since the summer “break” began at least. He’s been a little busy trying to get the top marks in his stellar cartography course which is not a subject that comes naturally to him. Working his ass off keeping on top of it all has left him with very little time to doing anything else, let alone going out and getting his ass laid.

Not that this guy wants to hear that, no matter how politely and professionally he phrases it (he’s been at the academy long enough now to know its not a good idea to use the word ass when speaking to superiors).

“It’s not appropriate Cadet,” the Commodore is stating firmly, leaning over his desk and staring down at Jim like looming will actually intimidate him somehow. “It’s not just about your own image, which is important for officers in training, but about how that image reflects on Starfleet as a whole. Imagine how the general public would react if they were aware of your antics, about how that would look for the academy and the ‘Fleet?”

“Yes sir, I am aware of how that might be perceived.” He replies neutrally. “Which is why I don’t-”

“I don’t think you’re taking my warnings seriously Kirk.”

“No sir, I absolutely am. I am very much aware that I need to be-”

“Actions speak louder than words Cadet, and your actions and words haven’t been matching up recently.”

“Sir, I have a strict personal policy regarding the discretion-”

“I think a little discipline would set the idea more firmly in your head. Nothing too physically demanding, but just something to keep you occupied out of hours so that they you’re not so focused on making notches on your bed post.”

“That’s really not necessary sir, I promise,” Jim protests as mildly as he can. “As I said earlier, I already have a very demanding schedule that leaves me with little time to-”

“No, I think it will do you good.” The commodore interrupts yet again. “Perhaps working alongside a senior officer, one of the ones in active exploration service but that’s currently grounded waiting on a refit to finish. Or someone’s who awaiting reassignment perhaps.”
“Sir—”

“I can think of three or four good officers who might be amenable to the idea. I’m sure they’ll have some paperwork you can help out with, or some errands for you to run.”

“Honestly sir, I—”

“Kirk your constant protests are just making me more sure this is the right course of action, so I suggest you quieten down. Now I have a couple of calls to make and some messages to send. I will get back to you with whom you should report to, and when and where shortly. Consider yourself confined to your dorm for the night as well; that you should keep you out of further trouble.”

“Commodore,” Jim tries yet again, praying that he might finally be able to get a whole sentence out. “I already have academic commitments this evening that require me to—”

“You’re dismissed Cadet. Straight to your dorm now, or you’ll discover how much harsher I can be. I’m not afraid to start issuing demerits and rescinding privileges if I have to.”

“Yes sir,” Jim sighs, resigned to his fate.

“Good lad. Oh and Kirk? he calls as Jim opens the office door and forces himself to remain outwardly relaxed. “No inviting anyone to your room either. Don’t go thinking that you can while away the hours by tricking some poor girl into spending time with you.”

“Of course sir,” he grits out, keeping his back turned to the man. “Wouldn’t dream it sir.”

Once he’s out in the corridor and has surreptitiously glanced around for any possible observers, he stalks up to the nearest trash recycling unit and kicks it as hard as he dares.

His right toes ache as he limps his way all the way back to his dorm block.

Lieutenant Riser, Jim starts typing, I regret to inform you that despite my earlier assurances otherwise, I will not be able to attend your extracurricular lecture series on practical ethics applications in the field of first contact treaties tonight. I hope that despite this, you will still be willing to forward me the recommended reading material, and that it will still be possible to discuss the Plantar-proposition articles on some future date. At your discretion and convenience, of course.

He signs it with his name and automatic comm signature and groans as he taps the send button and collapses back onto his bunk.

Goddammit, he’d really been looking forward to that lecture. He’d heard rumours that Captain Pike was back from deep space and could well be attending as a guest lecturer. He’d give his left foot to sit through one of the guys infamous talks.

Twenty years of deep space command experience, captaincy of three different ships (soon to be four if those rumours were also true), over sixty federation membership treaties negotiated and signed, and the most envied senior bridge crew in history working under him (Those who accompanied Jonathan Archer on his historic voyage noted and obviously excepted).

Not to mention that Jim knows his older guys, and Pike is a looker

With the brains and intellect to match.
Jim hasn’t seen him, spoken to him, or so much as glanced at him from across campus since he strode rather too cockily onto the shuttle in Riverside shipyard. The small but feisty and fierce Lieutenant that had been yelling at Bones to sit down when he first got onboard had dragged him and Bones off again when they landed and taken them straight to the recruitment centre long before Pike had probably emerged from the cockpit.

Jim hadn’t even gotten so much as an automated reply when he’d sent a belated “thanks for seeing something in me and taking the chance to recruit me” thank you message almost six months after “Cupcake” and his buddies had done a number on him.

And given that Captain Christopher Pike is something of a campus legend (and kinda hot, let’s not deny), Jim really had really wanted to go to the series of mini lectures this evening.

So that he could, you know, stare. As well as probably learn some really interesting stuff.

But here he is, lying on his bed alone. In the dark.

He huffs in frustration and forces himself to get up and go sit at his desk. He might as well get even further ahead with his coursework if he’s gonna be stuck here all night.

When he wakes the next morning long before his alarm is due to go off, there’s a message waiting for him on his Padd.

Sent: 13/10/2257 23:47 PST STANDARD EARTH TIME
Delivered: 13/10/2257 23:47 PST STANDARD EARTH TIME.
Tap here for equivalent Federation stardates

_Cadet Kirk,

A well-regarded officer has offered to meet with you and discuss mentoring you. They have indicated that they would be willing to discuss terms with you at 7am precisely tomorrow morning in the senior officer’s dining hall. I have attached a temporary pass for the hall to this message; it is one time use only and will expire after 1pm tomorrow. Any attempt to replicate this pass, or to give other individuals use of it, will be met with serious consequences.

I expect you to make the most of this opportunity that has been provided to you,
Cmdre Yardone,
C6Ht Division,
Starfleet Command Diplomatics

And oh great, guess there’s no way out of this farce now. He’ll just have to drop a couple of evening clubs and societies to free up some time and get on with it.

Thank god he woke up early though! Seven in the morning!? He’s barely got time to shower and smarten up beforehand as it is!

He stops outside the main doors to the senior mess hall at precisely nine minutes to seven. The Ensign currently on duty at the adjacent security desk frowns at him suspiciously, and only lets him proceed to the pass scanner attached to the door once he’s explained his situation three times and shown her the message he received late last night twice.

And then once he’s finally been granted access and stepped inside the brightly lit and well-furnished room, he has to deal with upwards of thirty pairs of even more suspicious eyes all swivelling his way
at once, and a resultant silence that makes the situation even more awkward.

Jim still has no idea who he’s supposed to be meeting, or where they might have chosen to sit.

Feeling incredibly self-conscious in his bright red uniform and increasingly bright red face, he smiles tightly and steps away from the doors, choosing to stop next to an old model of the International space station – circa late 21st century according to the metal plaque beneath- and leaning as inconspicuously as he can on the wall beside it.

Several officers are still watching him curiously, but most, thankfully, have gone back to their breakfasts and quiet conversations. Still feeling like the main act at a cirque du freak performance thanks to those few though, he goes to glance at his wrist chrono again, and wonders what the hell he’s supposed to do now.

Only he’d forgotten to put it on this morning, so he ends up just staring at the paler strip of skin where it usually sits.

“It’s 07:01”

Jim just about jumps out of his skin.

“Sir! Sorry, Captain Pike sir, it’s an honour sir” he gabbles, feeling his face becoming impossibly even more heated. He tries to salute, but it’s a poor imitation at best, much to his further embarrassment. “I was- I was told to meet someone here but I- and I was just checking the time because- but I forgot to put on my-”

“Kirk. Stop talking,” the Captain orders him with obvious amusement.

“Yes sir,” he breathes shakily.

“Have you eaten yet son?”

“Um. No sir, but I’m supposed to be meeting-”

“-Me, at seven am sharp yes. Come on, food counter is this way.”

Jim stares and his feet remain planted to the floor.

“You sir? What? But-”

“You sir? What? But-”

“Kirk come on, I’m hungry.”

Jim has a lemon and poppy seed muffin and a cup of overly milky coffee.

And he’s sat opposite Captain Christopher Pike watching him peel a purple banana-thing and slice it into some bran flakes.

“This is not a favour to you Kirk,” the Captain is telling him sternly. “I am not doing this for your benefit, not out of any sense of favouritism, nor any desire to correct your apparently less than stellar behaviour. That is not my job. My obligation to you started and ended with your recruitment, do you understand?”

“Yup- ahhh I mean yes sir.”

“I am here because and only because having Commodore Yardone owe me a favour is something I
desire. Clear?"

“Yes sir,” Jim replies meekly again.

“I will however treat you as fairly as your actions show me you deserve. If you follow my rules, show me that you are committed to learning from this experience, and stop doing whatever the hell landed you in this boat in the first place, then I will see to it that you’re rewarded for your efforts. I’ve heard it said that my letters of recommendation can make or break careers, so I suggest you take this seriously.”

“I will sir, of course sir.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other so far. But I also have some ground rules. Number one and most importantly: You will at no point attempt to manipulate this mentoring relationship into something more than it is, and you will not use it in an attempt to gain favour with other officers nor lord it over other cadets. You break that rule, and you can kiss goodbye to ever setting foot on a starship as anything other than a janitor.”

“Professional relationship, got it.”

God, but keeping his mind out of the gutter is going to be hard if Pike keeps using that tone of voice is going to be hard.

“Two. You will go where I tell you to and do what I tell you to without complaint. My yeoman will continue to complete his usual jobs and keep my schedule organised, and I expect you to also keep him up to date with your own schedule. I won’t call you to my office while you’re supposed to be in class or away on exercises provided I know when those classes are supposed to be happening. At all other times, you come when called.”

Jim doesn’t answer verbally this time, just picks a lump off his muffin and nods vigorously.

“Three. Sundays will remain entirely your own, but as I often have to work Saturdays, so do you from now on. Repeat what I’ve said so far back to me so I know you’re listening.”

Jim hastily swallows and swigs some of his coffee.

“This is not a favour to me, but I will be treated fairly. I must not try to take advantage of you or your reputation or I’ll be cleaning heads for the rest of my life. If you say jump, I skip passed asking how high, and get to jumping. And my Saturdays are now your Saturdays.”

“Concisely put Cadet,” the Captain grins wryly at him. “There’ll be other things that crop up from time to time, and you should fully expect to be dragged along on the first-year training exercises I am delivering this year when your timetable allows, but those three will do for now.”

“Training exercises sir?”

“Some experience as a senior field TA will look good on your record, so I volunteered to organise some of the Plebe survival expeditions once the fall semester begins in four weeks. No classwork or lecturing though, I can’t stand being an academy professor.”

“Right,” Jim replies faintly. “Sharing a tent with you in the wilderness and harassing first years. I can do that.”

“That’s not all it’ll be,” Pike tells him with a strange, undecipherable look. “But yes, I’ll expect you to keep the cadets in line for me. Now quieten down and let me finish my breakfast in peace. My
“Bones you have to help me,” Jim begs his reluctant best friend. “He’s so wise and experienced and he wants to share a tent with me!”

“I’m sure that’s not what he actually wants, you child.” Bones grumps back.

They’re sat in the library, heads in their respective coursework books. Jim has spent the morning before classes being shown how to work the coffee machine in Pike’s office, and how to make coffee precisely to his expectations. One sweetener and no milk or creamer. Real sugar is thoroughly banned, as is honey.

“No he said that he signed up to run first year survival courses specifically so that he could take me along. That involves tent sharing! Instructors and TA’s always share tents! You know this!”

“Jim, he’s Captain Pike, not some ensign or junior lieutenant. He will just take an extra tent so that he can have his own. And he will make you carry it.”

Jim’s eyes glaze over for a second, and he hears Bones huff in disbelief.

“I’ll get to carry Captain Pike’s tent for him woah.”

“What is wrong with you, you creep,” Bones groans in disgust.

“Have you seen him though! His whole…,” he waves his hands in front of him vaguely, hoping Bones takes his clearly implied meaning. “He’s just so unnngggg! Good looking you know! And he has that whole authority air about him!”

“He’s twice your age! Old enough to be your father nearly!”

“And!? So are you and we’re still friends!”

“I am not, you little punk!” Bones growls, outraged. “Do you see any grey in these locks huh? Am I becoming wrinkly and creaky? Do you see me-!”

“Bones!” Jim interrupts his tirade urgently, already grabbing his bag. “Angry Librarian incoming, time to scarper!”

“Oh shit,” Bones near squeaks with wide eyes.

They depart hastily.

“Here is a copy of my personal information minus my security access codes,” Pike tells him, handing him a Padd. “In that drawer over there by the window, there is a stack of data chips all of which contain forms that need signing off. You can input all of my data into the forms, and then forward them to me to double check, sign, and security stamp.”

Jim nods and takes the Padd.

“I have a meeting with Admirals Komack and Tranter this evening regarding the reallocation of mining resources in the Omega-IV system. You will sign this form to state that you agree to keep everything you hear 100% confidential, and then you will come with me to act as a scribe.”
Jim hastily scratches his signature on to the confidentiality agreement.

“There’s a short conference on new Deltan deep space tactical manoeuvres that I have been invited to in Japan on this coming Saturday. Cadets are not usually allowed to attend, but I have arranged otherwise. You will complete any classwork that you will miss on Friday afternoon on the shuttle and at the hotel that evening, you will wear the uniform I provide to you for the duration, and you will not leave the conference centre or the hotel without my supervision, agreed?”

Jim pulls his personal Padd out of his bag in order to forward his uniform tailoring information to the Captain immediately.

“Slow day today son, just pull up a chair to the corner of my desk and get on with whatever Academy work you have.”

Jim blinks. This is not normal.

There are normally jobs he must do.

“Sure sir,” he says amiably anyway, trying to gauge the Captain’s mood. He seems fine, his usual amount of frowny and stern, but-

But Jim doesn’t actually know. Jim is a grown ass man who knows how to keep his inappropriate feelings inside his pants out of sight and has been following the “professional relationship only” rule to the letter. Jim has never given himself (or been given) an opportunity to see the Captain in a non-professional setting; not even at the hotel in Japan last month, where he’s told the Captain got absolutely blind drunk with a couple of friends after Jim scurried off to bed.

So he puts his satchel in its usual spot inside the cabinet by the door (inside the cabinet Kirk, out of sight. Don’t be cluttering up the place unnecessarily) and pulls his smaller Padd out of his inside pocket. Carefully moving the second desk chair to the corner of the desk out of the way (Lift it Cadet, don’t drag it like a Neanderthal!), he risks leaving his jacket collar undone, and quietly opens up the report he’s been writing.

He’s been scribbling away with his stylus for maybe fifteen or so minutes when Pike suddenly breaks the silence.

“What are you working on kid?” he asks, boredom evident in his voice even if he still looks busy with his own reports.

“Carthessian vs Altermandian ethic principles sir,” Jim tells him dutifully, biting back the urge to say that he thinks that both principles are utter bollocks.

“Oh that old nonsense,” Pike grumbles in apparent sympathy. “I don’t know why Barnett insists on keeping it in the syllabus.”

“I have to admit, I’m not a fan,” Jim tries cautiously. They’ve never had a conversation about anything other than Pike’s orders before, and he’s nervous as hell about saying the wrong thing.


“I’ve never met him and thus don’t know him well enough to judge personally,” he answers hurriedly, “but as a Cadet I can say that surely he’s an admirable flag officer.”
Pike snorts.

“Bootlicker,” he chuckles. “Smart answer though. That kind of talk keeps you out of trouble.”

“I… Do my best to follow the rules sir. Both the um, official ones and the unspoken ones.”

“Now you say that,” Pike says curiously, finally looking away from his terminal screen and placing his elbow down on the desk to rest his cheek on his fist. “But you ending up my personal yes-man for the year was a result of a close shave with a demerit or two wasn’t it?”

“Yes?” Jim draws out carefully, “But, if you permit me to speak freely on the matter sir?”

“If you must,” he’s told with a raised eyebrow.

“I don’t deny that there were occasions early in my attendance here that led to me earning some disciplinaries, but those were largely the result of me… misinterpreting? Some rules? Or straight up ignorance of the system on my part. And I learnt better pretty quickly, but it was enough to earn me a reputation that I feel doesn’t actually reflect the truth of my personality.”

“Oh?” Pike drawls, with obvious amounts of scepticism.

Jim sighs, suddenly reluctant to go on, and scrubs a hand backwards through his hair.

“If you’ll forgive the implied inappropriate content of the statement sir, an incident in my third week lead here to several officers gaining the incorrect impression that I have a rather cavalier attitude towards woman, and my efforts to prove otherwise since then have had little to no effect.

“And what did this incident entail then?”

“A friend of mine, another cadet. I was just helping her fix her uniform skirt after some ass- after some other Cadet tore it off in an effort to humiliate her, but then an Admiral had the misfortune to walk into the alleyway just as I was down on my knees in front of her trying to clip it to the bottom of her jacket for her. She’s an Orion so no one was interested in hearing her side of the story, and one look at my unsealed Juvie record had everyone ignoring me too.”

“Once perceived a womaniser, always perceived a womaniser,” Pike chuckles. “Doesn’t mean all their conclusions are incorrect though. I’ve heard the other stories about you son.”

“They’re rather damn excessively exaggerated sir,” Jim grunts defensively before he can think better of it. “I mean,” he adds on in a panic, “it’s like Chinese whispers sir. I ask a friend about her opinions on 22nd century warp advancements, and suddenly everyone is asking me why I thought it was okay to invite her to indulge in some public indecency!”

“Relax kid,” Pike teases, “I was a cadet too once remember. I know what the rumour mill is like. But I do wonder what you were expecting everyone to think of you given that I recruited you off a barroom floor bashed up six ways to Sunday. You’ve even publicly admitted that the fight started because you wouldn’t stop flirting with someone who wasn’t interested.”

“it’s- there were… extenuating circumstances that night sir. I mean, being far too drunk is no excuse for anything ever, but-”

He stops himself, not wanting to spill his personal problems to someone who has always insisted that a certain emotional distance is maintained between them at all times.

“But? Come on son, I’m curious now.”
Jim looks around and silently curses himself for letting the conversation end up here.

“It’s common knowledge that my mother and I do not have the closest relationship,” Jim relents eventually, loathing the truthful words coming out of his mouth. “And that night she had commed me to say that she knows where my brother has been all along, that he was only actually missing for six months and not the last twelve years. And that if I didn’t stop trying to find him, she would cut me off permanently too. I was. I was angry and upset because she- Well I went to the bar to drown my sorrows like a pitiful loser and had a couple too many beers. And then those cadets started pushing me around and calling me names and it all got out of hand.”

He stares at the desk while he recounts his tale, hands clenched unhappily in his lap.

When he eventually looks up, the Captain has closed his eyes and is pulling an obviously regretful face.

“Sorry sir,” he says dully.

“Kid look,” Pike says carefully. “It’s fine, I shouldn’t have asked. I said when this started that I would treat you as your actions showed you deserved, and I so far you’ve been nothing but polite, agreeable, attentive, and helpful. Me poking into your private life just because I’m frustrated and fed up of reading financial reports isn’t acceptable. So just… finish your work and I’ll buy you a pint of whatever you kids drink these days as an apology.”

“That’s not necessary sir,” Jim mumbles.

“It’s happening anyway. Now hurry up and get that pointless ethics report done so I can send you some reading on something worthwhile.

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Bones help! He sends.

What now? He gets back.

Captain hot pants is taking me out for a drink! Help!

What the hell did you say to make him do that? Are you blackmailing him!?

No! I accidently told him my brother hates me for reasons beyond my knowledge, and that my mother barely acknowledges my existence!

Oh so you emotionally blackmailed him into feeling sorry for you. What type of funeral would you like?

Bones we talked about this. Cremation with my ashes scattered over Pluto, beastie boys playing as I’m lowered into the flames.

Don’t fuck it up. No flirting, and one drink only.

Fuck, I’m going for a drink with Captain Pike!

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The bar is not one Jim has been in before. Its old fashioned, with wooden panelling and leather seats, no music blaring nonstop, and a bar that runs the length of the single room space, old brass pull taps at strategic intervals along it. Not a single trendy shiny metallic surface to be seen.

They’re the only two in ‘Fleet uniform when Pike guides them in; only a handful of other patrons are
scattered about at all. No one looks up as the door swings shut behind them, and the Andorian behind the bar doesn’t acknowledge their presence until Pike has already settled on a bar stool and glanced for several seconds at the daily drinks deals board hanging next to the main spirits cabinet.

“Usual Pike?” The Andorian eventually asks, flicking a once-white towel over their shoulder with practiced ease.

“Mmm, something a little more top shelf today I think,” the man rumbles back. “Got any good Macallan? The really aged oak barrel stuff?”

“Sure, but it will cost you.”

“I’m feeling flush, give me a couple of fingers.”

“And the lad?” they ask Pike, a nod in Jim’s direction.

Pike looks at him, squinting.

“Your best vodka over gord-rock-ice,” he says eventually, without letting Jim give his own input. “Give him a proper crystal tumbler, and one of those freeze-mats too. And a steel thin-straw.”

“Well you are feeling flush today,” the Andorian grins again, their antenna wobbling appreciatively. “I’ll be right back Captain.”

“Sir, I’d be more than happy with whatever beer they have on tap,” Jim protests carefully as the pale blue bartender moves down the bar and pulls a magni-key out of their apron pocket. “I’m really not worth that kind of credit.”

“Kid can it. I fucked up and I don’t do emotional apologies. Take the drink, appreciate it, and remind me that I know better than to judge books by the covers that other people have put on them next time I try to pry.”

“But-!”

“Can. It. Or I’ll buy you a glass of something else expensive too.”

“Yes sir, shutting up now.”

“He bought me two drinks!” Jim gushes, lying on Bones’ bed on his back. “Two really expensive drinks!”

“Don’t you have your own roommate to pester Jim? Can’t you regale him with your teenage crush talk instead of me?”

“Bones, I don’t mean he bought me a couple of pints, I mean he bought me two drinks worth more credit than our combined stipends can afford in a month.”

“Well lucky you, but I don’t know why you think I care.”

“Bones he was drinking oak-cask Macallan 2050.”

That gets Bones’ full attention.

“Oh damn Jimmy, you might finally have taken an interest in someone with actual taste,” he whistles appreciatively. “You know how much that stuff costs!”
“I saw the total when Pike paid Bones. I nearly fainted.”

“I had a small 100ml bottle of that stuff gifted to me at my wedding, and let me tell you, the flavour and the burn is worth every single damn excessive credit.”

“He made this *noise* when he sipped it the first time, this like really appreciative moan that went straight to my groin. God, than man is sinful and he doesn’t even know it. I’ll never tell him, but what I wouldn’t do to have that mouth wrapped around-”

“Okay, way too much TMI now kid! Less talking, more helping me with advanced shuttle manoeuvre planning.”

“Aye aye Bonesy, we’ll make a qualified helmsman out of you yet!”

Pike seems determined to pretend nothing out of the ordinary happened after that, so things go pretty much back to normal. Jim gets to the Captain’s office at 7:15 sharp, exchanges a bit of ‘Fleet gossip with Pike’s yeoman, Andy. He has a hot mug of black coffee (and whatever notes Andy has asked him to pass on) ready and waiting for when the man arrives at exactly 7:30. Then he either does whatever paperwork Pike passes to him, or works on his own projects and papers quietly until 8:40, wherein he nods a polite goodbye and scampers off to his first class of the day.

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, he respectively attends the Chess and Xenolinguistics societies and then messages to see if Pike wants him in his office afterwards (usually not). Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays he goes straight to the Captain’s office after his last class or seminar.

Saturday mornings he usually gets dragged to the gym and made to spot while Pike does deadlifts. Which is okay, because the senior officer’s gym and changing rooms are much nicer than the ones the cadets have access to.

Well, surreptitiously watching Pike get hot and sweaty in a tight workout top is a huge bonus too, but if anyone asks, its because the treadmills are much nicer, and the rowing machines haven’t got three decades of grime caked into the pulley system.

And then Saturday afternoons are anything from more paperwork to meetings to being allowed to leave via being told to sit quietly at the desk and do his own thing.

So Normal.

With the added bonus that not one Commander or Captain or Commodore has pulled him aside and accused him of being up to no good since this all started.

And so it’s all going well (his classes and grades included), until Pike is suddenly calling him and telling him to check his messages for a kit list quickly, and ordering him to meet him at the shuttle hanger before any of the first year cadets arrive.

He had to run back to his dorm and haul all his gear out in rather a rush, and then sprint most of his way to the hanger like a mad man, but he does make it just before the time Pike had given him.

“Gave you plenty of time to get here then,” Pike jokes as he comes skidding to a stop next to the man, dropping his command duffel to the floor with a breathless huff.

Jim makes a vague noise instead of dignifying that with an actual answer.
“Into the shuttle with you now; you’ll be co-piloting with me on this trip, but I’m not letting you do so until you’ve done all the pre-flight checks to my satisfaction.”

Jim, as has become his habit around the Captain, simply nods enthusiastically and jumps to do as he’s told.

“Stable altitude achieved, autopilot engaging,” Pike announces with practiced ease, flicking the appropriate controls.

“Acknowledged,” Jim replies, checking the navigation and engine panels to his right. “Flight pattern holding steady, no alerts given. Pressure stable, impulse levels all green.”

“Aaaand done,” Pike grins. “Now we just sit back and enjoy the ride. Well, until we start the landing sequence in twenty minutes anyway.”

“Do you want me to check on the cadets in the back sir?”

“Nah, leave them. I’ll check the security-holo footage later and then make vague references to it all week that’ll make them all think I know what they’re doing at every second of every day.”

“Well that’s one way to keep them in line,” Jim accedes in a wry tone.

“Fancy a swig of something warm then?”

“While we’re piloting!? Forgive me sir, but I’m not sure that’s wise,” he says in alarm.

“Oh god, your face,” Pike laughs at him. “I just brought a flask of decent coffee with me and a couple of mugs, not alcohol.”

“Oh,” Jim mutters in embarrassment, “I suppose that’s alright then sir.”

“Lighten up kiddo,” Pike grins, punching him gently on the shoulder. “I even brought you some milk to ruin it with.”

They spend the first night in the Indian field centre, Jim being granted the privilege of using the second instructor’s room while the rest of the cadets share six to a room in the same old bunkbeds Jim suspects have been here since before his parents were in the Academy.

And then at breakfast, Pike lets him sit with him in the privacy of the upstairs kitchen while everyone else is overly raucous in the overcrowded downstairs dining room. With his weird purple bananas and odd way of draining the last of the milk out of bowl (pouring more bran flakes in slowly until he’s soaked it all up).

“Brought you something buy the way son,” Pike grunts once Jim’s finished depositing their empty bowls and mugs in the dishwasher racks. “Just to stop the other cadets from not taking you seriously while we’re out on these things.”

Jim looks at the Captain with some surprise. He hasn’t gotten so much as half a carrot from him other than those two overpriced drinks that night they never talk about.

“Yes I know, I’m a cold-hearted miser who never gives you anything,” Pike rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t say anything sir.”
“You didn’t need to, your expression said it all.”

“I- sir, I’m sor-”

“Don’t apologise. New rule. No apologising to me for anything. Unless you actually do fuck up big time, in which case I doubt a simple “I’m sorry” will cut it.”

Jim swallows and nods, not sure what to say.

Pike mutters what Jim thinks is “gotta get something something nodding(?) too” under his breath, but before he can ask, the Captain is a pulling a worn fabric bag out from under his chair and holding it out to him (and how had Jim not noticed it hiding under there!?).

Jim takes it slowly and starts to open it even more carefully.

“Really kid, you’d think you’d never been given a gift at all before the way your taking your time with that. It’s not even wrapping paper worthy honestly.”

“Only what Bones’ has been giving me at Christmas these last couple of years,” he admits with a self-depreciating smile. “And well, my uncle and Aunt once got a pushbike for my birthday when I went off planet for a year once, but that didn’t… anyway, I still kind of have a certain reverence for presents.”

“Right then,” Pike sighs looking once again, slightly concerned. “I guess you can open that as slowly you like then.”

Jim feels kind of bad for making the Captain feel guilty though, so he pulls the rest of the bag off quickly and shakes out the balled-up fabric inside.

It’s a jacket. A black instructor’s field jacket, but with no rank stripes on the sleeves and only half a pip on the shoulders.

“I’ve still got your uniform measurements from when I snuck you to Japan,” Pike shrugs when Jim doesn’t say anything. “This time your actually authorised by command to wear that though, so you can keep it instead of me having to surreptitiously shove it in the nearest recycling unit as we leave.”

“Wait. You snuck me to Japan!?”

“I make rules son,” the Captain grins,” but I don’t always follow them.”

The second night is rather less laidback.

Pike is in a bad mood.

A really bad mood.

One of the cadets, through their own pure stupidity, had managed to fall into the river the group were trekking along. They’d climbed a tree trying to show off to their two friends and the branch they’d stood on had snapped beneath their weight.

And on their way down, they had smacked into the Captain with almost comedic accuracy and catapulted him into the water too.

There’d been a lot a swearing and cursing (even Jim had learnt some new colourful phrases), and then a lot of yelling and threatening. Jim had managed to calm the Captain down from his fury by
ordering all the cadets to set off down the track without them and opening both their kit bags up, pulling all their microtowels out, a set of dry clothes and boots, and then getting his little jet-stove going and some fresh coffee brewing.

That had calmed him down, but not cheered him up.

When they’d caught up to the incredibly nervous group of cadets about an hour later, Pike hadn’t said a word and just silently ordered Jim to sort them out with a pointed look.

They’d all been incredibly well behaved for the rest of the day at least, setting up their evening campsite when they’d arrived at the day’s destination with an efficiency even Jim’s upperclassmen would have struggled to match. They’d even done Jim’s job and set his and the Captain’s tents up for him.

Pike had growled something (probably unsavoury) under his breath before the tent bags had even been unrolled and stalked off towards the cave system Jim knew was just up another fifteen minutes up the track. He hadn’t come back until worryingly late in the evening, just when Jim had almost given in to the impulse to abandon the sleeping cadets and go looking for him.

“Sorry son,” he’d said when he’d finally reappeared. “Had to clear my head before I murdered someone.”

“We’re not allowed to apologise to each other for anything other than quote unquote “major fucks up” anymore sir, remember?”

“That rules for you kid,” he huffs, a small smile twitching at one corner of his mouth. “I will apologise to you for being a grumpy miserable bastard as often as I please.”

“You’re not a miserable bastard sir,” Jim insists. “I’m quite fond of you actually.”

The smile widens a little.

“Notice you didn’t dispute the grumpy part though.”

“To be fair, I have had to talk to you on mornings when you’ve not had enough coffee yet sir.”

“Go to bed you cheeky imp. I’m leaving you in charge of this group of hellions again tomorrow, so you’ll need your rest.”

“See you in the morning sir. And sleep well yourself.”

Jim swears he hears Pike quietly breathe “You know, I’m quite fond of you too James” as he walks away from the fire to his sleeping bag.

But maybe he imagined it?

The next few days go rather more to plan, though now the group is now actually terrified of Pike rather than just mildly frightened by his reputation.

Jim finds the planned fake cave-in much more entertaining as an in-the-know instructor than he did as a clueless cadet, and the night they spend without tents in the heart of the Chilika wildlife reserve watching the stars is even more amazing than the last time.

Pike slowly relaxes again as the week progresses, even venturing over to the fire on the second to
last night and -not joining in, but at least smiling silently from behind Jim as he gets all the cadets singing raunchy and inappropriate campfire songs. He even lets Jim roast him a smore before skulking back to his tent for night.

“You did well this week Kirk,” Pike tells him gruffly as they watch the fifty-odd cadets pack their belongs into the shuttle back at the field centre.

“Didn’t do to bad yourself sir,” Jim risks with a wink.

“Oh get in the shuttle before I kick you in you little asshole.”

Jim has an awful lot of work to catch up on following that week. Six days unexpectantly spent romping around amongst the Indian wildlife had been great fun (and given him lots of great memories of non-office Pike for his late-night musings), but had also been terrible for his self-set goal of never missing a deadline and never handing in anything substandard.

Thankfully, Pike seems to have predicted that Jim would have a minor (major) panic about the whole being behind schedule thing and spoken to most of his professors and instructors for him. He walks into Pike’s office as usual on Monday morning to find the Captain already there waiting for him and in possession of a list of already agreed upon deadline extensions.

Jim almost breaks his promise to himself not be a creepy inappropriate loser in that instant by almost reaching out and kissing the man.

There’s a group of Masters cadets watching him from across the quad, knocking each other’s shoulders and pointing at him with smug, knowing grins.

Jim did not make it this far in the academy without learning to be immediately paranoid of such behaviour.

This happens three further times in various places around campus before one of them finally approaches him.

He’s a big brown haired Caucasian human dude, with a leer almost as ugly as his face.

“So you’re Pike’s little prodigy then?” he asks, flexing his arms like he’s gearing up for an imaginary shotput competition. He glances back at his little posse with a grin which for some reason sets them all off sniggering again.

“I’m currently working under Captain Pike, yes.” Jim corrects calmly. “Can I help you?”

“Under Captain Pike, heh,” the brute-wonnabe leers some more. “Guess you’re in the perfect place to be asking him favours then.”

The group of lackeys howl with laughter once more. Jim genuinely has no idea what’s so funny.

“Our relationship is a strictly professional academic one,” Jim replies pointedly. “If you wish to speak to him or request his advice with anything, you need to make an appointment with his Yeoman in the same manner that you do all senior Starfleet officers. Now unless there’s something else gentlemen, I have an appointment to keep.”
Jim turns around and walks away to the sound of their jeers and boos.

Jim arrives to Pike’s office after his last class covered in raw egg.

Neither Jim nor Pike is particularly impressed.

But as not a single flicker of security footage that shows the individual who dropped the dozen onto his head exists, and as he didn’t see anyone with his own eyes, Jim can do precisely sod all about it.

A different Cadet approaches him at lunch time three days later. One whom is Jim’s academic junior by two years and seemingly has a rather high opinion of himself.

“I understand that you have… come to an arrangement with a well known officer in the ‘Fleet,” he begins. Jim resists the urge to scrub at the grease he can feel pouring off the guy onto him. “And I was wondering if you would be amenable to letting me join you in that.”

Jim stares at the guy in confusion.

Thankfully Bones, Uhura and Gaila choose that moment to arrive at their usual lunch table with trays in hand, and the oily kid runs off before Jim has to try and formulate an actual answer.

“Who the fuck was that?” Bones asks coarsely.

“No idea,” Jim replies honestly.

“Hey Kirk,” the girl that’s slid in front of him greets with an over pronounced flutter of her eyelashes.

“Do you know who the fuck this one is either?” Bones demands from beside Jim.

This is now the eighth time this week Jim has been accosted by random cadets.

“Nope,” Jim rolls his eyes tiredly. “Look sweetie I’m sure you’re lovely and all but I am not in a position to ask any favours of Captain Pike on your behalf. I cannot arrange a meeting with him, I do not know where his private living quarters are, and no, I can not pass on your personal contact information to him.”

“No it’s your advice I was after actually,” the girl grins.

“Oh!” Jim smiles back, pleasantly surprised. “Well ask away then.”

“So I was just wondering if you could show me your blowjob technique? Because if its good enough for the ‘Fleet’s best Captain to want to keep you around, it’s got to be more than good enough to get this cute guy in my class to-”

“Oh my god,” Jim near screeches, tearing at his hair and turning his back on her immediately. “How is this getting worse!?!”

Bones doubles over laughing and remains no help at all.

Jim, still following the original three ground rules, does not mention any of this to Pike.
Which is fine, because Pike seems entirely oblivious to the growing number of rumours surging up about the two of them.

Until he’s suddenly… not oblivious anymore.

“What the hell do you mean have I been demanding sexual favours from him!? ” Pike spits like cold fire. Jim is standing at the back of the meeting room as still and as quietly as possible, hoping that the row of admirals questioning Pike will forget that he’s there.

“We mean exactly that Captain. Have you at any point over the last three months ordered Cadet Kirk to provide you with any sexual services?”

“No I fucking well have not!” Pike roars, rage personified. “I would sooner slit the throat of my own dear mother than take advantage of anyone, least of all one of the best damn cadets I’ve ever had the privilege to work with!”

“Mr Pike,” Admiral Komack sighs, “A little moderation to your tone perhaps?”

“Moderation!? Have you any idea how fucking ridiculous, how disgustingly baseless these accusations are!? And you want me to calm the fuck down!?”

“We simply want to hold a discussion to get to the truth of the matter. Now sit back down and demonstrate some self-control!” Nogura demands from the other end of the panel.

“You’re accusing me of raping a cadet and you-!”

“We are accusing you of no such thing!” Admiral Garland interrupts, her own voice outraged.

“You’re asking if I ordered a cadet to sleep with me, meaning that he would be unable to say no, meaning that anything that occurred between us would be entirely non-consensual! How would that not be rape!?”

The following silence is deafening, as the panel of Admirals exchange looks with one another, all looking disturbed.

“Captain Pike, perhaps it would be best if you waited outside with the security escort while we take a moment to speak to Mr Kirk himself.”

Pike looks like he’s about to explode at them all once again, his fists clenched and shaking. But he simply nods once, sharply, and turns and strides out into the hallway without another word.

Jim briefly considers ways to merge into the wall and become one with it.

“Cadet Kirk, if you would come take the vacated seat?”

God, what he wouldn’t give to be Shadowcat from the old X-men comics right now. Just melt right through the metal and concrete behind him into the next room. But he’s not Shadowcat, so he does as he’s asked instead.

“Now then James. Do you mind if we call you James?” Garland asks a little too politely.

“Erm, yeah I guess ma’am,” Jim agrees, irritated by the way they’re treating him like a delicate invalid but trying not to show it. He wishes he had the confidence to ask her to use Jim instead of James. Only one person can call him James and get away with it.
“Can you tell me about your relationship with Captain Pike James? Anything you say will be kept at the highest level of confidentiality and will be dealt with discreetly and in a way that will not impact you.”

“There’s nothing to deal with Admiral,” Jim tells her plainly. “Captain Pike has never been anything other than professionally courteous to me and has treated me with utmost respect at all times.”

“And he’s never… asked anything illicit of you?”

“Never Ma’am.”

“Or anything else slightly questionable?”

“I think his worst ever request was simply when he asked me to meet him in the shuttle hanger with my full expedition kit with only fifteen minutes warning right as I was leaving my last lecture of the day.” Jim jokes, trying to make them realise that he really was fine and absolutely nothing untoward had happened.

“And why did he ask that of you James?”

Jim gives them an incredulous look.

“Because he’d just found out that he would be leading a fifty-cadet field exercise and I’m registered as his field TA? He left telling me until last minute as I was in class until that point and he considers messaging in lectures extremely rude in case it causes a disturbance.”

“But has he any point even so much as hinted,” Komack presses, “that he’d be amenable to giving you an, academic leg up let’s say, in exchange for something questionable?”

“Not at any point sir,” Jim says with as much finality as he can manage, feeling more confident now that’s he’s actually being listened to for once. “And if I may add? I have a strict personal policy regarding consent, and I expect anyone I interact with to hold themselves to the same high standards. Not out of concern for myself, but out of concern for others. If someone won’t listen and take no for an answer from someone as forceful about the matter as myself, then it leaves the question of how they act around those less confident and insistent. If anyone at any level of Starfleet, be they a cadet, instructor, officer, admiral or a contract maintenance worker or otherwise had made any approach to me of the variety you are accusing Captain Pike of, then not only would I forcefully decline, I would report it immediately at the highest level I could manage out of fear that they might try and succeed with someone else.”

He pauses and looks every Admiral in the eye one by one, letting them see how serious he is.

“If Captain Pike had made any such demands or even suggested something of this nature,” he concludes in a hard voice, “You can be damn sure you would have heard about it from me long before now.”

Captain Pike is pacing up and down the corridor agitated while Jim sits slouched on the lone couch next to the meeting room door.

Their small contingent of security officers standing alert at various places along the hall are trying to look like they’re not watching Pike’s every move, but their constant regard is obvious anyway.

“Sir,” Jim says as levelly as he can manage. As soon as he’d delivered his final line and found himself being stared down by seven admirals in total silence, his surge of confidence had drained out.
of him like air from a burst balloon (metaphorical bang included), and he’d meekly slunk out of the room almost before they’d suggested he do so.

“Sir,” he tries again when Pike doesn’t even so much as twitch in acknowledgement. “It might be advisable for you to sit down for a while,” he suggests gently. The security officer closest to Jim’s left is clearly growing more annoyed by the Captain with every second that passes, and Jim would rather intervene now than after she snaps.

Pike scowls at him, but does finally deign to stand still, coming to a stop immediately in front of Jim’s sprawled legs.

“How are you so calm!” he suddenly yells, arms rising in disbelief and everything. “You’re just! Sat there! Like everything is fine!”

“Despite appearances I’m not actually that calm,” Jim snorts, “But I do know that the Admiralty is aware just how patently false these accusations are. Concentrating on that makes it easier to forget about how I basically just told them all to go fuck themselves in very polite language.”

Pike’s frown deepens and colours with shock.

“You did? Well that’s us both fucked then son,” he groans, finally collapsing onto the couch too. His sprawl is possibly even more lackadaisical than Jim’s which is quite a feat. The agitated security officer rolls her eyes and audibly sighs.

“Poor choice of wording perhaps sir,” Jim huffs in amusement. “Given the situation.”

“This situation is bullshit, is what it is kid.”

“Yup,” Jim agrees tiredly.

They sit together in silence.

“You know I would never-”

Pike cuts himself off before he finishes the sentence, but the meaning is clear regardless.

“I know sir,” Jim reassures.

That at least, seems to take some of the weight off the Captain’s chest. If the way he finally relaxes a little is any indication.

The silence resumes.

They call Pike back in before Jim.

Jim sits and continues to anxiously shred the skin around his finger nails with the aid of the pointy end of his collar badge.

“This board finds Captain Pike clear of any wrong doing,” is the first thing out of Admiral Komack’s mouth when Jim is eventually re-summoned.

Jim’s muscles go lax with relief.
Next to him, Pike actually closes his eyes and sighs, so profound is his own relief.

“Furthermore, given that Kirk’s records clearly show that this has been an exceedingly beneficial arrangement to him, we agree that this mentorship should be allowed to continue in the same manner as previously. We feel that Cadet Kirk is more than mature and capable enough to promptly seek the proper aid should anything untoward ever occur and therefore we will not be placing any restrictions or sanctions upon either of you at this time.”

Jim breathes his own sigh of relief.

“We do however press on you the importance of seeking the correct appraisals and notifying the appropriate authorities should this arrangement between you develop further into a personal connection,” Nogura suddenly adds, looking pointedly at both of them. “While it is true that this is the 23rd century and there are no regulations against relationships between officers of any rank, and indeed not between officers and cadets either, I am explicitly reminding both of you that there are rules regarding what is acceptable in those relationships. Any relationship, no matter how romantic, platonic, or sexual between individuals more than two ranks apart, or where one or more persons is a cadet must under no circumstance cause any disruption to any chain of command and must not be used to advance or sabotage any individual’s careers or academic achievements. Have I made myself exceedingly clear gentlemen?”

Jim almost squeaks out his “yes sir”, while beside him, Pike’s is faint with either embarrassment or shock.

Or with just plain disgust.

Jim can’t tell which.

“That.” Jim tells Bones in the most whiny and childish voice he can manage. “Was fucking diabolical.”

“It went okay then?” Bones asks him disinterestedly, focussing more on the diagram of a Betazoid chest cavity that he’s labelling on his Padd than Jim flopping about behind him. At least Jim thinks it’s a Betazoid chest cavity…

“Well they decided it was obviously bullshit thank god,” Jim answers in a more normal voice as he shimmies further up Bones’ bed on his stomach. “But then afterwards Admiral Nogura had to go and make it all awkward as fuck by gabbling on about ‘Fleet relationship policies. Pike looked like he wanted to sink into the floor in embarrassment.”

“The same waffle we had to sit through three times during induction week over two years ago?”

“More or less. He just didn’t keep repeating the line “love is love and people are people,” over and over and over again like he does at those compulsory Plebe lectures.”

“Love is love and people are people,” Bones dramatically imitates in his strongest southern accent, one palm spread on his chest. “You can love who you like and be loved by who you like. You can love many people, or just the one! You can love all species and all genders, and people of all genders from all species. You can love young and old and you can love across the ranks! But most of all you must tolerate love and love tolerance!”

“Admiral Bones McCoy,” Jim gasps playfully and equally dramatically, “That is unacceptable Aromantic erasure!”
“Oh you have to go to bonus lecture run by the LGBT+ society to get that version,” Bones snorts, Padd and work forgotten. “Did you know they complain every year about Nogura’s little soliloquy, but the stern old git insists that adding “or you can love not at all” would derail the intended message.”

“While I can see his point, it’s still blatant erasure,” Jim states wryly.

“Apparently Komack insists that pan and bi are the same thing as well by the way, like we’re still a pre-warp society.”

“Actually I think even people before World War III had that one down to pat. Where’d you hear that anyway? Though I believe it regardless.”

“LGBT Soc. Just because you don’t go any more doesn’t mean the amount of gossip has decreased.”

Jim sighs mournfully.

“I miss that society, they have the best weekend socials. And I don’t get to see Lieutenant Yonda any more either.”

“So start coming again.”

“I’d have to ask Pike for another evening free to do that. And I couldn’t go to the bimonthly Saturday bar meet and greets even if I did re-join. Too much work to do.”

“Ask him anyway. He might say yes to the Thursday sessions at least.”

“But then I’d be busy Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after classes. I don’t think he’d like that, and I don’t want to give up chess on Wednesdays to compensate. I don’t get to play at any other time.”

“Ask him you infant! The worst he can do is say no.”

Jim doesn’t mention it the first few days back after the whole accusation debacle though, especially as gross rumours are still flying about campus like wildfire despite the Admiralty’s public announcement of their inquiry findings.

Actually, Jim doesn’t mention much of anything at all because the Captain suddenly seems hyper conscious of Jim’s presence at all times and is strung like a live wire constantly.

It makes for quite the uncomfortable atmosphere.

Jim hadn’t noticed how much the man had relaxed around him in the four months they’d been working together until the long silences and clipped, concise orders had returned.

It’s like it’s the first week all over again, only even more tense.

Jim doesn’t get spoken to unless he’s being asked to do something, and everything he is asked is delivered like a professional order. Gone are the easy “Hey kid would you justs” and the “What do you think abouts” and gone are the comfortable evenings quietly doing their own sperate work in a shared space.

It’s awful and Jim hates it to the point of making himself nauseous.
Gone too, are the Saturday morning gym sessions, but Jim was expecting that at least, so he’s not so bothered.

(Even if the Cadet gym really is a shithole in comparison)

And then in the last week before the Christmas and winter break, it all comes to a head.

“Kirk,” Pike grunts as it’s finally nearing eight o’clock, Jim’s usual dismissal time. “Put the Padd down, I’ll finish it.”

“Sir?” Jim asks, still as anxious as he is all the time these days.

“I said put the Padd down and I’ll finish the charts off. It’s not fair to make you do them.”

“If you’re sure sir,” Jim agrees cautiously. This is the first time the Captain has spoken to him beyond brief explanations of his assigned tasks for almost two and a half weeks now.

“Why are you looking at me that?” Pike suddenly demands, scowling for all his worth.

“Like what sir?”

Jim’s heart is in his throat.

“Like I’m going to chew your head off if you so much as breathe in my presence!”

“Um,” Jim replies eloquently, wide eyed.

“Stop it!”

“Yes sir, sorry sir,” Jim gabbles quickly, hunching down in his chair and dropping his head to stare at his feet.

Pike has gone deadly silent, and Jim forces himself not to cringe away.

“Oh fucking shit,” Pike abruptly swears, sounding completely horrified. “James, I’m not going to hit you son.” And then adds very gently, “It’s alright, I promise.”

Jim looks up in a hurry, dismayed that Pike thinks that’s what he’s thinking.

“I know you’re not going to sir, I just-”

He just what?

He doesn’t actually know.

The captain is still watching him with no little concern evident, and the longer the silence stretches, the more awkward it’s growing. Jim opens and closes his mouth a few times as he tries to formulate a sentence, but nothing comes to mind and the tension grows worse and worse.

“I’ve been a total ass to you the last few weeks, haven’t I?” the man says eventually, scrubbing his hands roughly down his face.

“Um,” Jim says once again, unwilling to agree but not wanting to lie either.

“I have, don’t deny it for my sake. I’ve been a total fucking bastard to you.”
Jim shrugs for lack of a better option.

“My usual modus operandi at this point -as you know- is to take the injured party for an expensive drink and avoid all mention of emotion” Pike sighs discontentedly. “But I’m not sure that’s going to cut it in this case.”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to do anything,” Jim rushes to reassure him. “Just maybe. Um. Can we not- or rather can we just go back to how it was before. I mean before when- like how it was when-”

“When I was being less of a senseless asshole you mean,” Pike smiles self-depreciatingly “When I was actually treating you like a human being and not as an emotionless robot?”

“That’s not how I would have phrased it sir.”

“I’m aware. You’re entirely too nice for your own good sometimes kid. Far too much of a decent person to have to put up with me.”

“Sir I-”

“Okay this is clearly making you even more uncomfortable, so lets just move on and talk about something else. I’ll think of a way to make it up to you when you’re less nervous around me again. Tell me about your holiday plans.”

Caught off guard by the sudden change of topic, Jim spends a couple of seconds blinking in confusion before blurting out the unfortunate truth and not his usual cheery bullshit designed to stop people from feeling sorry for him.

“I don’t have any plans sir.”

“You don’t have any plans,” Pike repeats slowly, as if in disbelief.

“Yeea- no sir, I don’t.”

“What do you normally do then?”

Jim shrugs, resigned to having to be honest.

“Not a lot. Stay in my dorm mostly. Maybe go the library for a few hours a day if I can be bothered. I tried going out for a drink or two for New Year’s Eve last year, but it’s just kind of depressing if you’re on your own to be honest. So I probably won’t do that again this year.”

“But what about-? Your Doctor friend. The one I picked up in riverside the same night I scraped you off that bar table? McCourt or McCorn or something.”

“McCoy, Leonard McCoy,” Jim corrects. “I mostly call him Bones though. He goes back to Georgia to see his daughter at Christmas. He’s lucky if he even gets a call from her during the rest of the year, so I don’t want to intrude; I know what it’s like to spend all your time missing your father. At least Joanna sees her dad once a year, and I don’t want to force Bones to split his time and attention between the two of us. And well, I don’t really have any other friends I’m close enough to that I feel okay asking for an invite.”

“Oh stars, why can I never manage to have a single normal, none-depressing conversation with you James? Every time I open my mouth I put my foot in it.”

“Because my childhood was a depressing shitshow?” Jim deadpans, aiming for humour.
“That’s the least funny joke I’ve heard all year,” Pike sighs. “Fuck it all, the Admiralty already decided we’re mature sensible adults who don’t need no supervision, so let’s go into town and get absolutely shitfaced and pretend this evening never happened.”

This time it’s Jim’s turn to look incredulous.

_Bones can you ler me in. Jim sends im outsid ur blok. Cptain Poke says I;m bot allowed to stay in my dirm alone in case I chokr and die_

Bones does not reply.

As it’s nearing 3am and he’s absolutely plastered, Jim is not surprised by this.

_Dunt mattr, lov u xx_ he sends as well

“He’s not ‘ere,” Jim tells Pike with a serious face. This is serious information he needs to pass on.

Pike sighs entirely too soberly.

“I’ll call him,” the man says in a dry tone.

“Okaaay then,” Bones draws out when he finally stumbles down to the main doors of his dormitory block in his ‘Fleet issue pyjamas. “You weren’t kidding sir.”

“I made a huge mistake,” Jim hears Pike say.

“I’m the mistake,” Jim whispers. Doesn’t whisper. Tries to whisper.

“I don’t want him to choke in his sleep or something,” Pike also says. Jim thinks this is very nice of him to say. Jim doesn’t want to choke in his sleep either.

“Don’t tell him Bonesy, but Mister Pike is very nice and very nice looking,” he whispers to Bones in secret. “I like him very much but I don’t want him to be think that it has an inappropriate. He has a nice face and a nice butt, but he must not know that I know.”

“Like I said, I made a huge mistake,” Pike repeats grimly. “And I really hope he’s too drunk to remember any of this in the morning.”

“I’ll take him to bed sir,” Bones grimaces, “And have some hypos ready for him in the morning. Do you still want him to come to your office as usual tomorrow?”

“See how he is. Don’t force him out of bed if he’s obviously feeling too rough to function.”

“I thought the ‘Fleet rule was no sympathy for self-inflicted misery sir?”

“Trust me Cadet, his state is very much my fault and not his own. He can have a pass this time.”

“I need a pass to that ass,” Jim tells Bones quietly. Probably quietly. “He’s just so adorable, I love him. He must never know!”

“And that is my cue to leave,” Pike winces. Jim wonders why he is wincing. Is he hurt!”

“Sir wait! No Bonesy he has to wait! He’s hurt! You must doctor him!”
“He’s fine kid,” Bones sighs, “Come on let’s get you upstairs and out of your uniform.”

“Boooooooones”

Everything hurts.

“Now I am become hangover, destroyer of cadets,” Jim intones as he leans over the sink again, eyes puffy and his whole upper body dripping in sweat.

“I suppose we all knew that, in all ways dear brothers,” Bones finishes, completing the common Starfleet saying.

“Supposed to say siblings now,” Jim groans, forcing back another retch. “More inclusive, avoids the need to switch to sisters if- if-”

He loses the battle with stomach and propels himself towards the toilet hastily.

“As soon as you stop throwing up every ten seconds,” Bones huffs as he refills the glass by the sink yet again, “You can have another hangover hypo. But not until then.”

“Oh just kill me already,” Jim sobs dramatically between heaves. “Death will be kinder!”

Jim does not want to go see Pike.

Jim’s memories are very hazy, but he does know he did some things he shouldn’t have. Like grappling Pike into a hug and repeatedly muttering that he’s not a miserable heartless bastard no matter what he thinks of himself.

Stars, that better have been the worst thing he did. Or he might just die of embarrassment despite having survived the hangover from hell.

But he already had all of yesterday off to bemoan his own existence, so he really can’t bunk off again. His over-achieving work ethic will drive him to a panic attack if he does that.

“Jim hold up, don’t go in yet,” Andy-the-Yeoman warns him when he finally shuffles into the waiting room outside Pike’s office. Despite the fact that Jim is almost late.

“Meeting?” Jim asks. “Kind of early for one, but we both know the Capitano is a law unto himself where he can get away with it.”

“Sort of. I think it’s one of his friends rather than something work related, but there’s definitely another Captain in there with him.”

“I thought you said all his friends were off-planet on another ship?” Jim questions curiously. “And that’s why he has almost no social life to speak of at the minute? Well, other than- was it Toski and Gar’than? The two communications officers Pike met up with in Japan?”

“Yeah, they were senior officers on his last crew. Not bridge crew, but they did a couple of tours under Pike so they’re friendly. As far as I’m aware though, only Pike and I didn’t get immediately reassigned when they decommissioned the Yorktown six months ago. Oh, I think McKenna is puttering about somewhere too, but he only joined us about seven months before we came back to Earth so he never even made it to the outer rings of our Bossman’s social circles.”
“But some Captain who might maybe be a friend has come to see him this morning?”

“Well she definitely didn’t have an appointment when she showed up, and when I searched her name I found that she’s listed as active starship service on leave, so she’s not from Command.”

“Intriguing,” Jim wiggles his eyebrows. Nova, he likes how informal he and Andy can be with each other.

“I know right? And like I said, she didn’t have an appointment, so I comm called Pike to ask what he wanted me to tell her and all I got was “I will be there in two minutes”. He shows up in less then that and ushers her straight into his office without so much as a “good morning Andy, I like your new hair style Andy.”

Jim snorts.

“Sorry Bro, but Captain Pike wouldn’t compliment your hair even if he did notice it; that would be far too unprofessional a thing to do in his eyes. Does look pretty awesome though, the red really brings out the purple glow of your eyes.”

“Thanks dude, got my girlfriend to do it for me.”

“Hey do you reckon mystery Captain is our Captain’s ex?” Jim suggests jokingly.

“Nah, Bossman’s more gay than a rainbow pleated Borralian festival skirt Jimmy.”

“Wait, seriously?” Jim exclaims.

“You seriously didn’t know? He was vice president of the LGBT+ society when he was cadet. His name is still on the honours roll in the society plaque hall.”

“No I didn’t know,” Jim breathes quietly.

“Well you live and you learn,” Andy shrugs, oblivious to Jim’s sudden inner turmoil. “Want me to intercom Bossman and see if you should go in or not yet?”

“No, leave him to his meeting. Must be important if he skipped breakfast to come to it in a rush. I’ll just get some work done out here while I wait.”

“Sure thing bro. Pull a chair up and you can use the back of my desk to work on.”

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Pike’s mystery guest has not left by the time Jim has to leave to go to his final day of classes, so Jim leaves him a message with Andy and goes to find where his first lecture is being held.

Sorry, should have messaged an told you not to bother this morning. Cpt Pike.

*and

No worries sir, I used the time to finish my advanced strafing pattern analysis report. The one that’s due straight after the winter break.

:eyes_emoji: Send it to me and I’ll leave some comments and corrections on it.

Did that just happen? In real life? I’m not sure I believe it sir.

???
Did you sir, THE Captain Christopher Pike, just use an emoji?

No, you imagined it. Send me your paper and go to class punk. :wink_emoji: Cpt Pike out

Despite his fears following their tense not-argument and subsequent disastrous night out drinking, Pike is acting pretty much like normal when Jim slides into his office nervously after his last seminar. Jim had suspected all would be fine given the informality of their message exchange earlier in the day, but his doubts had lingered.

But everything is indeed pretty normal.

That is to say, pretty normal for Pike anyway.

Grumbling, complaining about incompetent Starfleet personnel under his breathe, sighing a lot at his terminal screen, and occasionally asking Jim to pass him something or other remains. But the charged atmosphere has gone, and the terse orders have softened back into absent minded requests. If anything actually, Pike has actually lightened up and become even more friendly than before.

For the first time weeks, Jim is able to relax and just get on with his work and bask in Pike’s (gorgeous. No shut up brain!) presence.

But then, at not quite ten to seven, the Captain breaks the comfortable not-quite silence with a suspiciously mischievous look that sends Jim straight back to anxious-land.

“Still got no plans for the holidays James?”

“No sir,” Jim frowns.

“Oh good, pack your things and come along then.”

“Sir?”

Jim is exceedingly glad he’d been attacked by an urge to be a neat-freak last night because Pike is in his dorm room poking at the paraphernalia cluttering up his only shelf. He’s still very self-conscious, but at least his bed is made and there’s no dirty laundry on the floor.

God forbid had the strip of condoms still been left abandoned on the windowsill.

“What’s this?” Pike asks, fiddling with a blue metallic cube that makes a strange ding-ding noise when you roll it in your hand.

“No idea sir, it’s Trent’s.”

“Who’s?

“Trent. My roommate. Practically lives with his two girlfriends off campus though so he’s almost never here.”

“Why is his stuff on your shelf?

“He said my meagre collection of belongings were pitiful and that my minimalism was making his half of the room look like a trash pit in comparison, so he put some of his things in my half to balance it out.”
“Well that’s impolite of him,” Pike grouses, throwing the cube onto Trent’s desk. “Did you even have a toothbrush when you moved in?”

“No, but the Cadet quarter master gave me all the basics.”

“I should have gone with you to the recruitment centre when I brought you to San Fran instead of leaving you to the mercy of Lieutenant Kordry. Both you and… Bones?”

Pike grimaces as he says Bones, as if even the mere concept of nicknames offends him.

“It’s only me that calls him Bones sir,” Jim lets him know. “Everyone else sticks to McCoy or Doc.”

“And he lets you call him that?”

“ Weirdly enough it was his suggestion.”

Pike raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah I don’t know either sir,” Jim fails to elaborate, “But it’s catchy and it suits him, so Bones it is.”

“Well then. But enough chit chat kid, get to packing already.”

“Um. Packing?”

“You say Um far too much. Less umming, more action. Summer duffel bag, swim shorts, wash bag. Hop to.”

The look of disgust on Pike’s face when Jim is finally forced to admit that the reason he can’t find his swimming trunks is because he doesn’t own any is comical.

“Australia?”

“Yes.”

“Aren’t there bity spiders and snakes in Australia sir?”

“I am literally taking you on vacation with me out of the goodness of my blackened and shrunken heart, and you’re complaining about where we’re going?”

“Wait what? Vacation!?”

“Oh my fucking god Kirk, how are you the top of your class!? Yes, obviously it’s a vacation!”

“I thought you were just sneaking me to some conference again for the weekend! So that you could make me learn more things!”

“Why the hell would I tell you to pack only civvies and your apparently none-existent swimming kit if we were off to a conference!?”

“Because I have long since learnt to stop questioning your strange and explanationless orders?”

“Oh just- Come on, we have to go through security like common plebs seeing as we’re travelling civvie style. And don’t forget to empty all your pockets because I’m not waiting for you if you get pulled aside by Federation police for a pat down.”
Jim does not get stopped as he walks through the scanner gates.

Pike does though.

Jim rather sensibly does not laugh his guts up as he watches the Captain complain his way through the ordeal.

(He only snickers a little bit)

(a lot)

(He snickers quite a lot)

The hotel Jim was expecting is not a hotel.

The hotel is actually a tiny beach side cottage thing with a weird synthetic thatch roof.

“It’s my sisters, do not break anything upon pain of death,” Pike warns him as he argues silently with the door access panel. A series of comm messages and lots of scowly faces pulled later, and the door finally slides open to admit them.

“Take that you stubborn wank-noodle,” Pike mutters at the panel victoriously as he grabs his duffel again and strides inside. “Now I need a goddamn chilled beer and a jet lag hypo.”

And with that, he strides off into one of the backrooms leaving Jim to peer curiously at the interior of the small space alone.

It soon becomes clear why the Pike family has selected this particular beach in the middle of nowhere to set up a home away from home. The surf is good and there are no barbeque or firework restriction laws.

Jim has no idea what he’s doing here.

There’s two bedrooms in the weirdly antique cottage; one master room with naught but a four-foot double bed and a small wardrobe squeezed into it, and an even smaller box with only a set of bunkbeds and a chest of drawers crammed in. The bathroom at least has enough room to manoeuvre and a shower with quite possibly the best water pressure Jim has ever experienced in it, but the kitchen barely deserves the name. There’s a coffee machine, a sink not wide enough for Jim to spread his flattened palm out in the bottom, two cupboards (one of which contains a stasis box full of bread and vegetable), and a fridge mostly full of fosters, bud classic, and bottles of classic American style lemonade.

Other than that, there’s one worn couch that seems to have swallowed half a desert of sand, and a table with one rickety leg propped up by a dried and cracked palm leaf that’s been folded up.

Outside though, there’s a security-tight shed full of wetsuits and surfboards of various sizes, a wooden deck area larger than Jim’s entire shared dorm room, and a brick-built barbeque that’s so big Jim can climb into it and comfortably lie flat on his back (Jim knows he can, he tried it almost immediately. Pike clearly did not know whether to be amused or angry when he saw what he was up to).

But as he said, Jim has no idea what he’s doing here.
Pike disappears into the shed and emerges in a very flattering (eyes up Jimmy, look at his face only!) wetsuit less than an hour after they’ve arrived, and after telling Jim to help himself to whatever food and drink he wants, jogs off down to the water with a long white surfboard.

Jim watches him from the deck for an hour or so, bud classic in hand, but disappears inside once the noon sun starts to give his skin a faint pink blush. He had slathered himself in sun cream before they even got off the shuttle, but clearly he needs either a higher factor spray or much more frequent applications.

Probably both to be honest. He is a blonde-haired space-born boy after all.

Deciding to spare himself from the sunburn for at least the first day though, he rummages in his duffel until he finds one of his Padds and brings it back to the main room. Then, lying sideways across the surprisingly comfy couch in just his blue gym shorts (Yes they’re the standard ‘Fleet issue ones, don’t judge), he closes all his work tabs with only a small whimper of guilt, and pulls up the first classic novel he can think of.

Half an hour later he’s fast asleep.

“James. James come on son, wake up,“

There’s a hand brushing gently across his forehead. That’s odd.

“That’s it James, wakey.”

“Mwurrr?” he mumbles intelligibly.

“Yes I agree,” Pike huffs in amusement. “But your burgers and corn are going cold, so perhaps we can discuss that later.”

“Burgers?” he rasps.

“Barbequed them for dinner. Come on, I’ll serve up on the outside table.”

And then he stands from his crouch and strides out into the vibrant orange of sunset with an unconscious shimmy that has at least part of Jim waking up fully as he watches.

God, the man isn’t even wearing a shirt. It’s indecent!

He can hear the sea as he lies in the top bunk alone.

He likes the distant gentle swoosh, and the warmth of the breeze that moves up from the water over the golden sand and breathes gently in through the gaps in the old fashioned wooden-slat blinds. He likes the quiet rustle of leaves as the same movement of air passes through the branches of the palm trees standing tall along the beach’s edge like sentries.

He wonders if lying still enough will allow him to hear Pike snoring in the next room.

He wonders if Pike snores at all.

“We’ll practice on the beach first and then we’ll move into the water in the afternoon slack when the waves will be at their calmest,” Pike nods to himself, looking contemplative. After another day of mostly leaving Jim to his own devices, he’s now apparently decided that Jim absolutely must learn to
“Okay sir,” Jim smiles. He won’t deny that he can be a right adrenaline junkie when the mood strikes him, and surfing must be thrilling or so many people wouldn’t do it.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t?”

“We’re on vacation, don’t sir me.”

“Oh. Okay si- sorry.”

“Rule four. Say it.”

Jim sighs.

“I’m not allowed to apologise except for a fuck up of great enough magnitude than a vocal apology would be insufficient anyway.”

“No apologies, and no sirs while on holiday. My name is Christopher. Use it.”

Jim stares, dumbfounded once again.

Rule zero -this is not a favour to you nor an opportunity for friendship- has apparently crashed, burned, and cast its ashes to the winds.

By the time the sky has started to become a blazing fiery hue again, Jim has exhausted himself but managed to keep himself standing upright on the board for a whole wobbly nine seconds.

Pike had spent the afternoon alternating between paddling around him cheerily shouting suggestions, instructions, and praise and zipping past him with enviable skill on his own board. They’d grinned at each exuberantly other every time Jim had managed to improve just one little nudge more.

“Come on let’s go rinse off and stop neglecting to keep ourselves hydrated,” the captain suggests from next to him as he stood ankle deep in the gentle breakwaves, watching the swash and backwash repeatedly bubble over the glistening fine sand.

“Hot food and a cold beer does sound rather good,” Jim agrees.

“I have an idea, but you have to promise me something,” Pike says in a curious manner, his head tilting towards his shoulder.

“Promise you what?”

“Promise that you will let me win!” the older man suddenly grins, darting out of the water like a phaser beam. “Last one to the surf hut has to do the washing up!”

“Hey no fair!” Jim yells back, scrambling to catch up to the terrifyingly nimble Captain.

Jim does not know if he’s about to make a very large mistake.

It’s Christmas morning and he’s holding the badly wrapped present he shoved in his duffel at the very last second in San Fran. It had been quite a challenge to get it in his bag without Pike noticing
given that he was looming over him in his dorm and ordering him about while he was packing.

He had managed it, but now the question is does he give it to him?

Obviously he originally had planned to give it to the Captain or he wouldn’t have bought it and wrapped it up in the first place. But the plan had been to just leave it on Andy’s desk with a tag attached so that he didn’t have to go through the awkward presenting it to him person thing. That. Yes.

Now he’s unexpectedly in Australia and he either hands it to the man directly or gives it not at all.

He briefly toys with the idea of leaving it in plain sight in the main room and then scurrying away down the beach before Pike can ask him what he’s doing. But that would only delay the inevitable emotional conversation (and possibly make it worse) given that Jim would eventually have to come back to eat, sleep, and not die of thirst at some point later in the day.

And Jim knows it will be an emotional conversation despite Pike being the world’s most feelings-allergic man he’s ever been friendly with, because that’s just how their communication seems to work. Jim will absent mindedly say something innocuous, Pike will frown, and suddenly Jim will be spewing things he’s barely even shared with Bones (and Bones is the first person he’s ever fully trusted in his whole life, so Bones gets all of Jim’s emotional baggage dumped all over him, poor guy).

Plus, there’s the strong possibility that it will make Pike feel exceedingly awkward. It’s unlikely after all, that Pike has gotten him a present too. Jim couldn’t care in the slightest and wouldn’t have done even if he hadn’t been unexpectantly brought along to down under, but Pike is all about stiff and formal reciprocation. Handing the man a present when he doesn’t have one to give in return would probably drive him to panic over his own perceived lack of manners or something.

So does he or doesn’t he?

Does he. Or-

“James do you remember where I put the kitchen scissors last-”

Apparently he does, because not shutting the bedroom door completely seemingly means that Pike will just shoulder it the rest of the way open and barge in whenever he feels like it.

“They’re on the outside counter next to the barbeque,” Jim stutters out, trying and failing to hastily hide the package behind his back.

“Barbeque. Right.” Pike says sounding dazed. He’s staring at Jim’s hands, at the way Jim is shuffling them behind his back, and at the corner of the lime green paper peeking out from behind his arm despite his best efforts.

“Yes. Right where you left them sir.”

“I’ll just go… check then.”

He turns on the spot and slides stiffly back out the bedroom door.

And then slides back in again less than two seconds later.

And resumes his staring.
In silence.

*Now what?* Jim thinks, panicked.

The answer it turns out, is just to silently hand him the present.

The action must be enough to kick start Pike’s brain back into motion, because it only takes him a second before he’s taking it off Jim with a fumbling grasp, turning it about in his hands with wide eyes.

“You got me a Christmas present,” he says quietly, like he’s not sure he’s still anchored in reality.

Jim shrugs self-consciously.

“You didn’t have to. I don’t exactly deserve it.”

“You would not deserve it sir?” Jim asks in genuine confusion.

Pike looks at him like it should be obvious.

“I started off using you as a pawn for my own gains, palmed off half my work onto you, dragged you all over the planet several times without once giving you fair warning, let half the ‘Fleet start thinking I was taking advantage of you without even noticing it, treated you like shit for two weeks instead of dealing with my subsequent self-loathing like a functioning adult, and then poured an unhealthy amount of liquor down your throat in an ill- advised and completely botched attempt to avoid asking you to be my friend because I’m a sad and pathetic lonely old bastard with no social life and no one else to talk to.”

And then he shrugs too. Like the words he just poured from his soul were naught but simple common musings.

“You’re a fucking idiot sir,” Jim laughs hysterically, reaching out on impulse and pulling him in for a hug.

Pike lets it happen with a surprised grunt, moving the eye-watering bright parcel to the side at the last instant so that it only just avoids being crushed between them. Jim snakes one arm up around his back and hooks the other around his waist, letting his chin rest just lightly on Pike’s shoulder so that the Captain can mirror the position on Jim’s own shoulder should he want to.

He doesn’t, but that’s okay. He awkwardly pats Jim on the back with his free hand instead, which given how unsure of himself Pike obviously is, is more than good enough in Jim’s eyes.

“You really do have stop calling me sir James,” Pike mumbles gruffly. “Especially if you’re going to insist on all this touchy feely nonsense from now on.”

Jim grins despite knowing that Christopher can’t see it.

Jim arrives back at the academy feeling much lighter than he ever has before.

He didn’t tell Pike this for fear of making him look even more like a grouchy sad puppy than usual, but going to Australia had been the first time Jim had ever been away on vacation.

Sure, he’d travelled by himself in the years since he’d come of age -both off and on planet- but he’d
never gone somewhere with the sole purpose of just relaxing and enjoying himself. And that’s what Pike had taken him to do.

Pike had taken him away just because he could and asked to be Jim’s friend just because he wanted to.

Jim is thrilled and so, so happy.

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And so Jim’s birthday passes with its usual complete lack of recognition (just the way he likes it), and classes and lectures and evenings with the Captain resume as standard

(He has casual conversations with Pike now, and they do greeting small talk good lord) (Pike is crap at small talk, but he’s trying so Jim indulges him, bless)

With the winter break now behind them and only two semesters left until Jim wants to graduate, the academic pressure has begun to mount up. Four years? I'll do it in three had originally just been the adlibbed cocky bullshit of still-slightly-drunk-and-definitely-concussed pre-Fleet Jim, but once he’d settled in at the academy, he’d realised that he rather liked the idea of the challenge and set it as his official on-record goal. He was -thanks in no small part, to all the proof reading, marking, and extra reading from Pike over the last six months- actually on track to manage it so long as he didn’t stumble at the last hurdle, so he’s really working hard towards it. In fact, the only major requirements he still needs to fulfil are one final week-long training cruise, two high intensity advanced survival expeditions, and the infamous Kobayashi Maru.

He has the first one booked for a mere two weeks before his target final sign-off date; Captain Brandoa had granted him permission to come aboard as a Junior tactical officer for the USS Dandenburry’s scheduled diplomatic run to Tellar Prime. It barely even qualifies as a milk run, but thanks to the commendation he got due to the almighty fuckup on the Farragut the previous summer, Jim only needs the time on his logs and the experience and his performance are almost irrelevant.

The survival courses he’ll do with the Upperclassman advanced expedition group. He’ll sign up for which ever two will round out his overall experiences the most as soon as the sign-up sheets are finally posted to the Campus intranet.

Which just leaves the dreaded Maru. Jim is avoiding thinking about it too hard.

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Fortunately, within three days of the return to routine, he’s granted a temporary reprieve from thinking about it.

Unfortunately the reprieve is granted by way of… more eggs.

“I will find the immature brats that keep doing this even if I have to go out and set up a trap,” Pike is growling as he leans over his terminal, security cam footage rotating in 3D on screen.

“Same time of the day as last time,” Jim sighs, scrubbing his hands down his still sticky face again. “Same pathway between the same two buildings on the same day of the week.”

“Someone knows your routine,” Pike scowls.

“And someone knows there’s no cameras that scan upwards between Queen’s and the Mayweather Block. So if they know that, it must be someone who has connections in security right?”
“Or a fourth year or more Security Cadet,” Pike proposes. “Part of the Upperclassman project for security cadets is doing a full security analysis of the San Fran campus and evaluating the current system’s flaws and advantages.”

“How many security upperclassmen are there right now?”

Pike’s face scrunches up the way it always does when he’s doing mental maths. Jim thinks it adorable.

“Between two to three hundred maybe?”

“And how many more are likely to know someone in security well enough that they’ve discussed camera placement?”

“Oh fuck knows,” Pike grunts. “A lot. Too many variables to narrow it down. Anyone who’s been shipboard more than six months and talked to a security officer, anyone’s who friendly enough with a fourth-year cadet to have heard them moaning about their projects, anyone who’s reported an incident on campus and been in the main security hall, anyone- well let’s just say there’s a lot.”

“Okay,” Jim breathes frustratedly. “So a different tact. How many people do I know that might want to egg me?”

“Depends on how many people you’ve pissed off James,” Pike snorts.

“ Officers? Not many, and the ones who weren’t keen on me have mellowed since I started shadowing you all day every day. Cadets I’ve been in class with? Any number of them could be annoyed that I always rank near the top, if not the top in tests and exams and practicals. But I guess there’s probably only ten? To fifteen? That occasionally get verbal about it, and no one’s tried anything physical since I was a Plebe.”

“Make a note of their names, we’ll see if we can track their whereabouts. Now go on. Other Cadets? Any from societies that stand out? Anyone from a night out, or from your dorm block?”

“Not really? I mean sure, I used to get a lot of flack about nepotism and favouritism, but I’ve been here long enough now that I’ve proved my own worth and its pretty much stopped. And it was always a general campus feeling rather than specific people anyway. I barely see anyone from dorms because I never go anywhere in my block but my own room, and I always take Bones and-or Gaila, or sometimes Gary with me when I go out drinking so I don’t get into shenanigans. So. Not likely someone from those two places.”

Jim pauses, scrunching up his face in displeasure.

“Erm. I guess it- maybe it could be someone I slept with? I mean, I haven’t since, like early June, but maybe?”

“You haven’t slept with anyone since summer?” Pike asks incredulously. “Weren’t you sentenced to spending all your time with me because of sleeping with everyone?”

“No,” Jim replies with clear irritation. “I ended up working with you because Commodore Yardone saw me talking to Cadet Leeree about the summer stellar cartography course we were both doing and jumped to conclusions. She laughed at her own joke and then felt awkward about it, Yardone saw her cringing, presumed that I was the cause, and then dragged me to his office and refused to let me explain.”

“Oh. Um-”
“No Ums, they’re forbidden,” Jim teases. He’s allowed to do that now. It’s weird.

“Shut up,” the Captain grumps back. “Or I’ll call Admin and tell them to delete the platonic cadet-officer relationship appraisal paperwork I sent in yesterday.”

“I can’t believe there’s actual paperwork for that,” Jim huffs. “If we were like dating or something,” (don’t pull a face, don’t pull a face, no looking hopeful) “then sure? But there are forms for just being friends!?”

“You remember what Nogura said when that rape accusation nonsense happened. Everything has to be above board or-”

Pike cuts off and blinks at him, as if he’s suddenly thought of something.

“What?” Jim asks slowly.

“The first time you got egged was in the week all those rumours started. Someone’s jealous that we know each other. Jealous that we’re… friends.”

Pike’s theory has credibility but doesn’t really help narrow down any suspects.

Jim tries yet another tact and goes looking for Gary Mitchell.

Gary and Jim are friends, but only just.

They used to be really close, almost as close as Jim and Bones are now. But then they went on the same long haul training cruise on the Farragut and it all fell apart between them. Simply put, Gary broke Jim’s number one rule and wouldn’t accept that he’d done something wrong.

Gary broke the Consent Rule.

They’d been on the Farragut for coming up six weeks and had another six left to go. Being Cadets meant that they were at the bottom of the metaphorical food chain, so they’d mostly stuck to their own company in their off-shift hours, playing chess and exchanging increasingly elaborate lies about their childhoods.

Of course minimal interaction with the other officers also limited their flirting target choices. Jim hadn’t really been bothered; he likes sex, like, quite a lot, but he doesn’t crave it. It’s not a necessity to him, or even something that causes him to become tense and sullen if he has to do without. Sex is great, but at the end of the day, it’s just sex.

Gary though.

Gary is one of those people who becomes increasingly snappy and irritable if he doesn’t get to hook up with someone at least every couple of weeks. And that’s something else Jim doesn’t mind. Some people are just wired that way and can help it no more than people can control other aspects of their sexuality.

Jim however did mind when it’d been six weeks and Gary had been about ready to murder anyone who so much as breathed wrong around him.

So Jim did what many a sex-positive and laid back friend has done; he offered a to lend a helping hand.
Literally.

And it had worked great. Gary had calmed right down and apologised for his attitude profusely, and Jim had gotten his own share of relaxation out of it as Gary had graciously offered reciprocation and Jim hadn’t said no.

It had worked great.

Until two weeks later when Gary had gotten all pent up again and just assumed that Jim would be willing to help him out once more. But being dragged into the bottom of a Jeffries tube and having a tongue shoved in his mouth and a hand rammed down his pants without so much as a “by your leave” had not gone down well with Jim.

The ensuing argument had been epic to the point that the Second Officer had been called down to intervene.

Jim had slunk down to engineering to cool off before he hit something or someone afterwards, and Gary had gone off somewhere else. Anywhere Jim wasn’t, he’d yelled as he stormed off.

And then the red alert sirens had begun blaring and suddenly people were dying left right and centre.

God knows what the creature had been. Jim had seen it first in the distance as he climbed from engineering up towards the bridge, a phaser gripped in one shaking hand and the argument with Gary forgotten completely. Some formless red smoke monster; an ethereal but murderous glowing cloud. Hovering in the endless stretch of the Jeffries tube above him.

Jim had been sure he was a dead man in that instant, frozen in fear, knowing that it would only take mere seconds for it to swoop down upon him and drain away his life like it had done to so many others already.

But it hadn’t.

It had simply flowed like poisonous gas into a ventilation shaft and left Jim terrified but alive below.

And it had swirled away a second time when Jim had impossibly made his way up to the carnage of the bridge. Clueless, frightened, and alone but for an equally petrified Ensign and the shock-stricken XO, Jim had stood by the turbo lift doors, sure once again that he was going to die, and fired one short phaser burst at the being out of pure panic. It had screamed as the beam passed through it despite its none humanoid existence and fled back to the surface of the planet whence it came.

For some reason, Jim had been awarded a medal and a commendation for the whole mess. Despite having acted too late to save the Captain.

But the trauma and subsequent relief of the incident had also led Jim to do something he would normally have never even considered; he forgave Gary for his transgression.

So they’re friends again, but there’s an element of distrust there now. He feels honour bound to do abide by his decision, but he’s still wary. They meet up at lunch times sometimes, and still go to chess soc together. But Jim won’t be alone with him anymore, and he won’t let Gary into his dorm and nor will he go to Gary’s.

So.

Gary and Jim are friends, but only just.
Pike’s theory has credibility but doesn’t really help narrow down any suspects.

Jim tries yet another tact and goes looking for Gary Mitchell.

This is because Gary is the type of person to know everything about everyone who’s anyone. And about all the everyones who aren’t someones too. Gary calls it his sixth sense and always starts to waffle on about Phys-scores and intuition whenever someone asks him how he manages it, but Jim is more inclined to believe its because Gary is more of a bed hopper than even Jim’s reputation can compare too.

“Hey Gary, you heard any talk about Pike and I recently?” he opens with at lunch break the next day, pushing his sweetcorn around his plate mindlessly.

“What kind of talk? Everyone talks about you all the time, so you’ll have to be more specific;” Gary replies around a mouthful of burger.

“Well not everyone,” Bones disputes with a meaningful grunt. “The lovely Uhura and I have far better things to do. As do most of the Med students, most of the Tech and Engineering cadets, and a large portion of the Communications department.”

“It’s true,” Uhura agrees, not looking up from her Padd.

“Nah, even they’re gossiping about Jim and Mr Stern and Grumpy.”

“He’s not stern and grumpy!” Jim defends, “He’s quite nice actually.”

“Someone’s got a crush,” Gary singsongs with a laugh

“I do not!”

He does too. A bad one. Huge. Even worse than before he knew the man. But Gary does not need to that. Gary is a gossip.

Gary just grins at him like he knows what Jim’s thinking anyway.

“Oh just answer my question you ass. Has anyone being talking about the Captain and I in a way that might lead you to think they would plan something against my person?”

“Something against my person.” Gary imitates with another sniggering chuckle. “God, you’re even starting to sound like him. Have you proposed to him yet?”

“Gary,” Jim warns lowly, not amused.

“Cool it, cool it! I’m just playing around! No I haven’t heard anything. No jealous ladies or lads if that’s what you mean, other than that group you already knew about.”

“What group!? I don’t know about any group, that’s why I’m asking!”

Gary looks at him gone out.

“What, you get harassed by a group of ex-command cadets lead by a guy that got kicked off the Tactics MSc course for being a dumb fuck and then later the next day you get egged and you think it’s a coincidence? Come on James lad, you know better than that.”

“Don’t call me James, no one’s allowed to do that,” Jim snaps as he grabs his bag and clambers to his feet. “I’ve got to go. Someone finish my lunch; don’t let it go to waste. See you later Bones?”
“Sure thing kid,” Bones replies, already pushing Jim’s lettuce onto his own plate and offering Jim’s steak to Uhura.

“Andy! I need to talk to-”

He rounds the corner and Andy’s desk is unattended.

Because it’s lunch time. And people tend to go for lunch at lunch time.

“Never mind,” Jim tells the empty waiting room.

Sir need to talk. Where u at?

Should he have used sir? Is it too vague a message? What if-

Where are you!? I’m coming now

-if Pike thinks it’s an emergency when it’s not?

James are you okay? Tell me where you are!

Oops.

Sorry! I’m fine! Didn’t mean to alarm you!
I’m outside your empty office.

Oh thank fuck. I’m gonna tan your hide for scaring me like that.

Jim momentarily gets lost in a fantasy involving leather handcuffs and a blunted tanning knife.

You’re being harassed by some persons unknown. I thought they’d done something worse than buy excess eggs.

I just think I know who might be buying the excess eggs, that’s all.

Officer’s mess. Comm me when you’re outside and I’ll escort you in.

So here he is again.

Where it all began.

It’s a different Ensign behind the Security desk, but she’s watching Jim just as suspiciously as he hovers by the mess hall door.

Here he sends.

The first thing that happens once Jim has explained his theory, is Pike adopting a distinctly evil grin.

The second is pulling a Padd out of his bag and calling an Admiral (identity unknown, but Pike is calling them Ma’am and asking for a meeting. So. Got to be an Admiral).

The third is sending Jim back to class.
Jim does not like the third thing.

Jim does not find out what Pike has done until almost a week later when he does as he’s told and walks between Queen’s building and the Mayweather Block at the same time as he did last Wednesday.

There’s an orange flash above his head and then a yelp of surprise.

Jim looks up (as does every other person using the path) and sees the distinct gridwork pattern of a flash-forcefield slowly fading back into stasis mode suspended high up between the two buildings. There’s a brighter patch almost directly above Jim’s head, no doubt the eggs’ impact point upon the energy barrier.

The eggs are no where to be seen, so Jim can only presume that the forcefield was set to repel impacting objects back in the same direction they originated from.

Jim really hopes his presumption is correct, because that would mean his annoying assailant just got force fed their own prank.

He grins and waits for whatever is bound to happen next.

He’s rewarded for his patience. It’s exactly who he was expecting.

Big brown haired Caucasian human dude with the ugly sneer. He has egg splattered on his shoulder and a panicked look on his face

Pike marches him out of the Mayweather block with a faintly smug look, two Campus security officers in their grey and red uniforms close behind him.

“This him son?”

“That’s him sir.”

“Can you can carry my bag for me Kirk? Only I need to take this excuse for a cadet to the detention centre. I can’t believe he thought he could get away with being an idiot in the same way for two weeks in a row.”

“Of course I can do that for you sir,” Jim replies deferentially, trying to stop his lips twitching in mirth.

“Are you sure? You’ll have to carry it all the way into the meeting I’ve arranged with a couple of the higher ranking Admirals if you do. You might have to witness some shouting, maybe a threat of suspension or expulsion or something. I don’t want to subject you to that if you’d rather not.”

Big brown haired Caucasian human dude with the ugly sneer adopts and even more panicked look

“That’s not a problem at all sir,” Jim grins, giving up on hiding his amusement.

It all seems anticlimactic afterwards.

Jim isn’t sure what he was expecting, but as simple a resolution as this was not it.

It’s just-
Too simple?

Is that all it really was? Just some jumped up angry punk upset that Jim got good grades and got to talk to a Captain? They’re not even in the same academic year. They’ve never had a single class together or been enrolled onto the same course. There’s no competition between them at all, not even indirectly.

Maybe it’s because Jim was expecting it all to escalate beyond some eggs before the culprit was caught. And the unnecessary build up of tension had left him feeling hollow once it had drained away.

Just-

How was it not something more complicated or- or dangerous?

In Jim’s experience things are never this straight forward.

So actually, maybe it’s that his brain logically knows its over. It’s done with. Finished with. But his instincts? They’re still waiting for the catch to spring up and stab him in the back.

Just like it always does when he lets his guard down.

“You’re fidgety today,” Pike says nonchalantly after they’ve been sitting quietly in his office together for about half an hour. It’s been another week since the caught the egg hooligan.

“Sor-”

He stops himself with a comical cringe.

“Close,” Pike laughs at him.

“I didn’t say it though!” Jim grins victoriously. “I stopped myself from apologising!”

“Yay.” The Captain deadpans. “You win a first-place sticker. Now why have you got ants in your pants?”

“I don’t actually know,” Jim replies honestly. “I just feel jittery today.”

“Still looking over your shoulder for more eggs?”

“Maybe. Also I guess the weather isn’t helping? Bones always says I’m more cranky when it’s raining.”

“Doesn’t it rain a lot in Iowa though? I thought you’d be used to it.”

“Not in January it doesn’t. It’s just cold as fuck. Below freezing pretty much all day every day. Doesn’t even have the decency to snow most years.”

Pike shudders dramatically.

“I grew up in a desert and I like my warmth,” he says in a very matter of fact way. “I didn’t see snow in person at all until I was eighteen and already a cadet.”

“Wild,” Jim snorts flicking his stylus around his fingers. “Guess you’re not the type to go on skiing holidays then?”
“Why bother when I have access to both a desert ranch and an Australian beach cottage whenever I want?”

“Because it’s like surfing on land?”

“James it’s cold and it hurts if you fall off. The ground is much harder than the sea.”

“So don’t fall over?” Jim laughs. “Or are you only inhumanely graceful on surf boards and your own two feet?”

And oh boy. Mistake. Big mistake.

Pike is blushing.

Like Jim just told him was pretty or something.

It’s gorgeous.

“I’m not inhumanly graceful,” the man mumbles, obviously self-conscious.

“Oh you are,” Jim continues, suddenly spurred on by a burst of impulsiveness. “Everything you do is weirdly elegant. Even when you sprawl in your chair its majestic.”

“Majestic!?” Pike splutters, growing redder by the second. “Christ, next you’ll be telling people I’m hot or something equally ridiculous. I’m forty-eight, not some perfectly sculpted twenty-something.”

“Well I’m hardly going to lie and deny that you’re easy on the eye am I?” Jim barrels on, still grinning and outwardly confident, but screaming internally for all his worth.

“God you were lying all along,” Pike intones with sudden levity. “You actually are a flirtatious menace like everyone says you are. I bet you chat up brick walls as soon as my back is turned.”

Thankful for the out, Jim just winks and smiles and picks up his Padd again.

Inside, his heart just broke a little.

Christopher thinks he was only joking.

The signups for this semester’s upperclassman survival courses finally appear on the intranet. Jim stares blankly at the options for a couple of long minutes while Bones peers over his shoulder making unhappy noises.

Jim doesn’t know why Bones is doing that; Bones doesn’t have to go on any of them.

“Lunar shuttle crash!? Featuring an actual uncontrolled crash!? Are they trying to kill us all!” he’s growling right now.

“It won’t actually be uncontrolled,” Jim refutes mildly. “Because Pike was working on the crash site preparations on Monday when he thought I wasn’t paying attention. He was coordinating shuttle beam out procedures, so if we fuck it up too badly, we won’t ever hit the surface.”

“Are you supposed to know that?”

“Nope. So don’t tell anyone.”
“Well you should sign up for that one then. At least you know there’s only a fifty-fifty chance you will actually die instead of it being a one hundred percent certainty. Captain Pike is unlikely to kill you deliberately unlike all the other survival course coordinators in this hell-school.”

“Bones literally no one has ever actually died in a survival training accident. Ever.”

“Now that’s a bald-faced lie if ever I heard one kid.”

Jim signs up to, to quote Bones word for word, “Death via moon splat”.

He doesn’t choose a second one because Pike said being his TA for the upcoming Plebe expedition to Corasan II would count for equal credit. Jim is fine with this because it means he will get to shoot paintballs at cadets while they’re sleeping and blow shit up with Andorian training bombs.

Jim likes playing with explosions, much to everyone else’s dismay.

“Are you sure you want to go for the three-day lunar course and not the week in the Botsey system?” Pike frowns when Jim tells him his decision. “I would have thought jungle campout with no supplies was more your style than living in an impacted shuttle with no privacy or personal space.”

“I’ve done lots of no-gear dirt side courses,” he shrugs back. “I thought a bit of variety would look better on my records.”

“Well if you’re sure…” Pike agrees dubiously. “But don’t come crying to me when you regret everything at the end of next week.”

The crash is frankly, horrific. The whole three days are horrific.

Eight out of the nine cadets that chose the same course as him are reasonable and mature cadets. Jim quickly notices that one of these eight has the most natural aptitude for keeping a level head and getting the others to listen to her. Naturally he tells the others that she should be appointed leader for the duration (he’s had plenty of his own practice at being in charge and knows what he actually needs, is practice at not being in charge), and they all agree and accept it quite happily and get on with the task of not dying.

Everyone except the ninth cadet, who as far as Jim’s concerned, needs to go die in a hole.

Cadet Brodin is the most arrogant, obnoxious, over confident and annoying asshole that Jim’s ever had the misfortune to have to work with.

For one, Jim is sure they come seconds away from activating the emergency beam out protocols as they approach the moon’s surface, because Brodin won’t let g’Hanty -a fucking advanced-qualified five-star helmsman- steer the shuttle into a gentle glide rather than a nose-first freefall because “he knows better” and won’t stop interfering.

And then they almost lose over half their oxygen reserves once they have skidded to a stop because senior engineer cadet M’Bakat-Han knows less than him about engineering and how gas-fluid lines work.

It just gets worse and worse as the hours progress.
And there’s no where to go to avoid him because they’re all stuck in a fifteen by thirty metre open plan space. There isn’t even a separate helm cabin in this particular shuttle design.

In fact, in the morning of the third day, Jim and Dannie have to physically force g’Han’ty off of Brodin when g’Han’ty (justifiably. Very justifiably) tries to strangle the other cadet. With all four of his hands at once.

Everyone is starving, cold, light headed, exhausted, and just generally fed up. Jim should have listened to Pike and gone to the Botsey system. The Botsey system planets are all temperate, filled with fruit and berries (admittedly a ridiculous percent of them are incredibly poisonous), tectonically stable (unlike the mood in the shuttle), and have an actual sensible amount of breathable air (again, unlike the shuttle).

Everything about Botsey system sounds wonderful in comparison.

Jim is never getting in a shuttle to the moon ever again.

Both Bones and Pike meet him in the hanger when he finally makes it back to Earth. He is bruised, battered, suffering from mild hypoxia still, and ready to sleep for a week while Bones mother hen’s him (or Pike. Pike can mother hen him, that would be great).

“Why is your arm broken?” Bones demands as soon as he stumbles over to where the pair are waiting for him. “Have you never heard of basic first aid? Have you even had a sling on this you infant!!”

“Brodin needs to die,” Jim mumbles weakly. “He needs to be stabbed and castrated and hung out to dry.”

“Amen to that,” Pla mumbles as she stumbles passed them towards her own group of friends.

“What did he do?” Pike asks with that adorable concerned frown of his.

“What didn’t he do?” Jim groans. “To answers Bones’ concerns first, he spilt half our water supply into the medi-kit before the first day was up. It made the medical tricorder explode and render half he first aid supplies unusable. And this was after he’d lost most of our oxygen, nearly killed us trying to take over piloting, mixed all the ration bars up with the similarly packaged solid fuel packets, and caused Blacker to have an epileptic fit by flashing his emergency lightbar in their eyes repeatedly even after he was asked to stop.”

Bones swears several times loudly and starts fumbling at the clasps of his metal medical case, no doubt after his own tricorder.

“I even began considering that he was a plant,” Jim muses, only slightly aware that he’s started listing to one side. “Surely a cadet that incompetent can’t have made it to Upperclassman year right? He must be an Ensign or a TA or something with instructions from Command to fuck up as much as he can and generally be an asshole right? But noooo, he actually is just that fucking useless. I hacked his file on the flight back down here to check.”

“James careful!” Pike exclaims, reaching out swiftly to catch him as he finally overbalances and falls sideways. He unwillingly whimpers as Pike’s arms close around him because dammit, he’s so sore right now. Everything aches, and he wants this pseudo hug, he does, but it hurts.

“Okay, I think you need a trip to medical or at the clinic,” Bones sighs as he continues waving his tricorder in Jim’s face. “And then you need hot food and lots of sleep.”
“Don’t wanna,” Jim doesn’t quite slur, shuffling in closer to Pike with his soothing body heat and solid presence. He restrains from pushing his face into the man’s chest only because Pike has already started looking distinctly uncomfortable, and because his face is one giant tender bruise and it would probably be painful.

“I’ll organise us a beam over so we don’t have to walk,” Pike sighs, ignoring Jim’s protest entirely.

Bones, older child-having divorcee with a medical degree that he is, is lucky enough to have been given a single occupancy dorm. This is great in that Jim never has to worry about barging in on Bones’ roommate instead of just Bones, because Bones doesn’t have a roommate. This is not great in that there is therefore only one bed in Bones’ dorm room.

Not that they haven’t shared it before anyway, when Jim has been drunk out of his mind or otherwise incapacitated. But generally Jim tries to avoid doing so because Bones is endearingly (and frustratingly) rigidly heterosexual (it’s okay, he got over it pretty quick because Bones isn’t his type anyway) and he doesn’t want to make Bones feel awkward. Consent, remember?

It should also be mentioned that Bones’ bed is not any bigger than any other cadet’s bed. It may be the only one in the room, but its still a single pushed into the corner against the wall. So it takes one person okay. Two is a squeeze. Three is pushing it too far, even if only one of the three is actually lying down.

Jim is the one lying down.

Bones is sitting near his knees, twisted sideways and prodding at his midriff with some uncomfortably cold metal thing.

And Pike is squeezed sideways next to his head, sat on the other half of the pillow with his arms around his knees looking down at Jim with yet another adorably concerned frown. He looks very strange sat in such a manner; it’s nothing like Jim would ever have predicted he would do.

“Seriously Bones, I’m fine,” Jim says again.

“You have minor liver damage from oxygen starvation,” Bones contradicts in a no-nonsense manner. “And the only reason you’re not still in Starfleet Medical under observation is because Captain Pike and I are soft hearted fools who know you prefer your own bed.”

“But I’m not in my own bed,” Jim grumps.

“You can go to your own room as soon as I’m sure those regeneration pills are doing their job properly. Until then, lie still.”

“Best do as he says son,” Pike rumbles, reaching down to pat Jim on the arm. “In my experience, ignoring your doctor only makes it worse for you in the long run. Phil Boyce spent half his life yelling that at me before I realised it wasn’t nonsense after all.”

“But why can’t we do this in my room? Trent won’t be there; he never is.”

“Because I have enough medical equipment stashed in here that I could set up an emergency surgery theatre if I had too. Meanwhile I’m not sure you even have steriwipes in your room still.”

“Actually he has a fully packed first aid box under his bed,” Pike shrugs apropos of nothing.
“How do you know that!?” Jim demands, shocked. Pike has only ever been in his room that one time.

That he knows of.

“I kicked it while I was looking under your bunk for your non-existent swim shorts remember? It’s a bloody great big durasteel monstrosity, it hurt.”

“Oh so that’s where that went!” Bones suddenly growls accusingly. “Have you any idea how long I’ve been looking for that case!?”

Pike looks down at Jim apologetically.

“Thanks sir,” Jim deadpans as Bones sets off on a tirade about thieves and criminals.

Despite how badly he personally felt the survival course went, Jim actually gets really good grades. They never did find any of the observation cameras (so they were probably outside of the shuttle), but the list of comments he receives as feedback show that the officers running the scenario had actually been watching their every move at all hours of the day.

And they’ve judged him solely on his own performance and not on how other cadets (cadet, singular) impacted the situation.

“Look they said I struck the perfect balance between keeping control of the situation and deferring to others when their abilities were more specialised and developed than my own,” Jim grins happily.

“Cadet Kirk is singularly suited to positions of command and it is hereby recommended that he be fast tracked to a senior position aboard a well-regarded exploration vessel as soon as the breadth of his real-world experiences has expanded enough to allow this,” Pike reads over his shoulder, pride obvious in his voice.

Jim tries to mentally wrap the warm fuzzy sensation that give him around his entire body.

“What’s it you said? You could be an officer in four years, you could have your own ship in eight? I might actually do it with a commendation like that!”

“James you were on track to achieve that anyway,” Pike smiles. “You’ve just pushed the timeline a little further up that’s all. Try three and six years at the rate you’re going.”

“I’ll be lucky to do three and seven,” Jim snorts. “Let’s be realistic. At absolute best, my first posting will be as a senior tactician and then I’ll have to work up from there. Ranks as well as position.”

“You’re underselling yourself son. But enough of the future; grab your belongings and we’ll go out for dinner as a celebration of what you’ve achieved now.”

“Dinner?” Jim enquires enthusiastically (oh god, not a date, not a date, not a-).

“Two courses and a round of drinks on me,” Pike winks back.

Jim’s stomach flutters, thrilled.

Bones! He’s taking me for dinner and drinks!!!
Bones!!!!
Hello? Important and earth shatteringly good news here!
Boooooooooones  
Look at your messages Boooones  
Bones with the grumbly groooooans  
BONES THIS IS AN EMERGENCY OPEN YOUR MESSAGES  

**WHAT DID YOU DO!?**  

*Finally!*  
*I’m going on a not-date!!!!!!*  

*I HAVE AN EXAM TOMORROW. DON’T MESSAGE ME AGAIN UNLESS YOU’RE ACTUALLY DYING*  

*Bones I’m dying of he’s-so-gorgeous-and-he’s-buying-me-dinner!*  

*I’m blocking you. Ass.*  

[system notification: message unable to deliver]  

“How dare you Leonard Horatio McCoy!” Jim shouts at his Padd out loud.  

An upscale xeno-fusion restaurant is not what Jim was expecting, but he won’t say no either.  

He pretends ignorance over the contents of the menu and lets Pike order for him, so he ends up with some delicious blue taco creation, served with standard Earth salad and crystal decanter of Ferengi black rum.  

It’s the best dinner he’s ever had, and not because of the food and drink.  

Stars, its just so *nice* to just sit and talk and swap stories and chuckle together in the corner.  

Another week passes and Jim is now spending nearly all of his none-class time in Pike’s office, his head in his studies. He used to do this kind of hyper focusing in the library, but the Captain’s office is both bigger and quieter, and comes with the added bonus of having Pike in it for him to watch fondly whenever he needs a five-minute break.  

He wonders sometimes if Bones misses his company, but the doctor had always preferred to study in his dorm room undisturbed anyway. All too often in the library, they’d end up chatting slightly too loudly or ribbing each other and inevitably be chased out by an upset librarian.  

Uhura and Gaila have always existed in their own little bubble; it’s never been unusual for Jim and Bones not to see them for weeks at a time. And Gary… well Gary is Gary and Bones was never fond of him anyway. Even less so since Jim told him what happened on the Farragut -it’s a miracle that Bones will be around the other man at all to be honest.  

So.  

Jim studies in Pike’s office a lot.  

He likes the quiet only disturbed by the Captain’s huffs and mumbles. He does that a lot actually; mumble under his breath as he types. Little things like, “what the *hell* did Grady do to these reports” and “work you bastarding thing” or “oh that’s *nice!*”  

Occasionally Jim will be kicked out so Pike can have meetings, but most of the time he’s allowed to
sit at “his” corner of the desk and carry on working so long as he doesn’t interrupt. He learns all sorts of interesting ‘Fleet things this way (and plenty of boring ones too) such as the rumour about the Kobayashi Maru being unbearable being true.

God, that makes Jim grinds his teeth.

The very straight-laced Vulcan that had come to discuss the matter with Captain Pike had seemed unimpressed by Pike’s decision to let Jim remain in the room. Well, as unimpressed as is possible for a Vulcan. Jim thought he saw the Commander’s eyebrow twitch a fraction of an inch. Maybe.

But he had been allowed to stay and so he had heard about the Commander’s plans to ensure that the test was even more unwinnable than ever before.

Jim is scheduled to take the test in just two more weeks.

“Don’t say I don’t ever do you any favours James,” Pike had told him after Commander Spock had departed, with a knowing glance at Jim’s mulish expression. “Just remember that the aim of the test is not to win, but to lose in as Captainly a fashion as possible. That’s more than most Cadets go in knowing.”

“What was it you told me when you were quoting my father sir,” Jim had near-snapped back. “I don’t believe in no win scenarios?”

“And the flat Earth society still doesn’t believe in basic science even after 300 years of space travel. Beliefs and reality don’t always match up James.”

Jim had scowled at his Padd in silence without getting a single bit more work done for the rest of the day.

Jim understood what Pike was trying do by having that meeting in front of him though.

While Jim still wasn’t happy about the test, he did appreciate that Pike had only been trying to help him. To warn him and give him time to prepare himself for unavoidable failure.

Jim is bound and determined that he will find away around it anyway, but he can accept Pike’s actions as the man intended them rather than how his emotions are telling him to interpret them.

Which is why on the following Saturday, he simply stands back and lets him in when he shows up outside Jim’s dorm room door.

He’d been studying furiously all evening, making lists of every single tactical manoeuvre he could think of and rating them from 1 to absolutely useless when there was series of precise knocks on his door.

Putting his stylus down, he’d turned and frowned at the other end of his dorm. Trent’s codes were still active even if was never here to use them. Bones would have just tapped in Jim’s own codes and strode in without asking if it was him. Uhura never came to his dorm, Gaila had only ever been here twice in her entire time at the academy, and Gary wasn’t allowed to come here on pain of death via angry Bones.

So Jim had no idea who’d been knocking.

He’d gotten up to see obviously, and so here he was now, standing to one side in disbelief as a sopping wet Captain Pike storms into his room growling and waving his hands about.
“Sir? Are you okay?” Jim asks warily.

“No!” Pike snaps back. “The utter bastard that lives in the apartment above mine has burst a cold-water pipe and flooded his entire living space! There’s water pouring through my ceiling! My bedroom is soaked through, my kitchen damaged possibly beyond repair, all the electronics in my front room are fried, every single piece of clothing I own is sodden and unwearable, and the goddamn quartermaster department here on campus are not answering my calls!”

“Oh,” Jim says faintly.

“And to fucking well top it off, it’s absolutely pissing it down so now the clothes I’ve been wearing all day are fucking piss wet through too!” he shouts, barging his way over to Jim’s small wardrobe and yanking the doors open.

“Okay let’s just find you something dry first and we can work the rest out from there” Jim breathes as calmly as he can, walking up to where Pike is pushing his coat-hangers about in irritation. “Why don’t you start by taking off your jacket and boots and I’ll find some clean towels and my wash kit.”

“Are you trying to soothe me!?” Pike demands, looking for the world like an angry wet cat, his dripping wet hair slathered in all directions and stuck up every which way.

“No I’m trying to get you out of your soaking wet clothes and warmed up,” Jim replies as neutrally as he can. “Come on, sit on my desk chair and I’ll help you with your boots.”

Pike makes another frustrated sighing noise, but does do as Jim suggests, collapsing into the seat with a faint squelch. By the stars, but he really is soaked to the skin.

“Sorry,” Pike suddenly grunts into his hand as Jim finally manages to tug off his second boot. “I shouldn’t be yelling at you.”

“You’re cold, upset and worried about property damage and all your belongings,” Jim reasons quietly. “I’d be more concerned if you weren’t angry.”

The older man sighs resignedly, still looking ashamed of himself but finally shuffling to take his deep navy overcoat off. He unbuttons and unzips his grey uniform jacket too as soon as he’s handed the saturated wool coat to Jim and looks down at his waterlogged under shirt unhappily.

“I still shouldn’t be taking it out on you James,” he mumbles, pulling the shirt away from where it’s plastered to his chest. “But I won’t say no to that hot shower you were implying I should take.”

“Come on Christopher,” Jim tells him with a smile, offering his hand, “I doubt the state of the cadet shower locker room has improved much since you were my age, but at least it’s pretty clean.”

While Pike is shut away in a cubicle basking under the warm water, Jim swipes up all of the man’s damp clothing and shuffles down to the refresher room in the basement. Assuming that he needs to use the same settings as he would on his own uniform, he shoves it all into one of the devices and sets it going. Hanging the Captain’s overcoat up in the airing room, he then hurries back up to his floor and opens his wardrobe and drawers up.

Unfortunately, while Pike and he are of similar height and have similar builds, Pike doesn’t dress anything like Jim does. Where Jim favours fitted v-neck tees and well-worn jeans paired with his old leather jacket, the other man seems to prefer pale chinos, casual shirts, and thin woollen jumpers. Jim’s hardly ever seen him out of uniform other than when they were in Australia, and he doesn’t think that Pike’s vacation wardrobe of brightly patterned board shorts and unbuttoned short sleeve
beach shirts ever sees the light of day outside of, well, vacations.

Huffing and deciding the man would probably rather be comfortable than stylish, he eventually grabs one of his baggier and older t-shirts from out of the bottom drawer and a pair of flannel sleep pants. He doesn’t have any brand new boxers left after he’d given the last pair to Bones (don’t ask, Jim promised not to tell), so he makes an executive decision and darts up to the communal kitchen on the floor above.

Pulling the side panel of one of the replicators off, he sticks a screwdriver in there and strips and moves some of the wires around until he can connect his Padd to the device. He quickly downloads some fabric replicating codes from the federation net, and then sets the machine off making clean underwear and a pair of warm woolly socks.

The only other Cadet in the kitchen frowns at him like he’s worried he’s witnessing a bomb being made, but doesn’t say or do anything, so Jim just smiles and waves at him as he runs off back to his room again, leaving the replicator still running.

Thankfully, Pike has only just gotten out of the shower when Jim returns, standing bundled up in the fluffy none regulation towels Jim had splurged on early on in his second year.

“I brought you some dry clothes,” he announces his presence with. “If you give me a minute, I’ll jog back upstairs and grab the rest of them for you. Don’t want you getting cold feet again,” he jests.

“Thanks James,” Pike grunts. “You don’t have to do this for me you know?”

“Yeah I do,” he smiles back. “It’s what friends do for each other.”

Now warm and dry and bundled up the oversized Pride hoody that Jim handed him after they returned back to his dorm, Pike looks much calmer and relaxed. He’s still clearly not happy as he types out lots of messages and makes several calls about his apartment, but he’s not rigid with tension anymore.

“Fuck my life,” he groans after yet another call to the quartermaster department. “I swear there’s only clueless interns working there tonight or something. All I want is a dry bed to sleep in for the night, and access to the campus clothing replicator for ten minutes or so.”

“Are my blue plaid pyjama pants not to your taste Chris?” Jim grins from where he’s sitting cross-legged on the middle of his bed.

“Please don’t abbreviate my name,” he grimaces slightly back. “But no, there’s nothing wrong with your pants. I just don’t think it’s a good idea to out wandering about Campus in the rain in them.”

“You don’t have to go out,” Jim suggests tentatively, cautiously. “You don’t seem to be having much luck getting any sense out of the quartermasters and there’s a perfectly good empty bed right next to where you’re sitting.”

“Are you sure?” Pike asks with a vaguely startled look. “I was just going to try calling one more time and then give up and find a hotel if I don’t get anywhere again.”

“Yeah, why not?” Jim shrugs, heart pounding in his chest. “Trent hasn’t been back in so long now that those are still the same clean sheets that I put on his bed before Christmas. Nobody’s even so much as sat on them, let alone slept in them.”

“You’re a life saver James,” he sighs with obvious relief. “And I really am thankful for the clean
clothes. And for your tolerance of my shitty attitude when I got here.”

“Not a problem Christopher,” he smiles gently back.

_Bones you awake?_ He types carefully, the backlight turned down as low as he can get.

Yeah what’s up?

_I have a problem. A Pike problem._

_What did you do?_

_Or what did he do I suppose_

_He’s asleep in my dorm room and the problem is me._

_What?_

_Bones. It’s not just a dumb crush anymore._

The morning light filters in gently through the dimmed bedroom window. Jim doesn’t set it to complete black out normally, preferring to awaken to the warmth of dawn filling his room. It drips in golden waves over the two bedside tables beneath the window, rippling in waves over the beds and onto the desks beyond them.

It highlights the distinguished silver just beginning to creep into Christopher’s neat sideburns, glows softly on the tanned skin of his face, completely relaxed and care-free in sleep. It curves over his shoulder, shining down the length of his exposed arm where it lies atop the covers, and falls over the still-socked foot peeking out the other end of the bed.

Jim watches him breathe in utter silence, afraid that any sound from him at all will awaken Christopher and shatter the dream.

God, he’s so completely and utterly _fucked._

Head filled completely with the panic of last night’s personal revelation, he’s rather a clumsy mess once Christopher does grumble his way awake and crawls (literally, oh _gods_) out of bed. Jim tries to be a good host by escorting him to the communal kitchen for breakfast and coffee, but there’s just too many other cadets lazing around in the pyjamas in there for it to be anything other than awkward (this is why Jim never actually comes up here, preferring the mess hall with its real, none replicated food).

“We’re being stared at,” Christopher grunts for the fifth time since they shuffled in four minutes ago.

“I’m aware,” Jim grits out, looking over his shoulder to glare at the worst offenders yet again. He’s just trying to get the replicator to spit out something passably approximating coffee, but the longer he waits on the battered old device to actually _work_, the more frustrated he’s getting.

“I shouldn’t have put this hoodie of yours back on, even if it warm and soft” Christopher mumbles, turning around to do his own round of glaring. The hoodie in question is faded black and has Chronic Space Gay™ printed on the front in big rainbow letters. It’s very…unsubtle.

“It’s probably not helping,” Jim concedes, smacking the replicator on the side a couple of times again. It makes another gurgling sound and finally dings.
“Forget breakfast, lets just take our mugs and get out of here,” Christopher mutters, squinting menacingly at a young Plebe who still hasn’t taken the hint.

“Good idea,” Jim swallows making for the door immediately.

(He smacks his shoulder into the doorframe on his way out, but no one needs to know that) (No he absolutely was not staring distractedly at Christopher’s ass, thank you very much)

They lounge around in Jim’s room for another half an hour before Christopher declares he’s starving and once again goes rummaging in Jim’s wardrobe. This time he helps himself to a couple of pairs of jeans and holds them up against himself despite the fact that there’s no mirror in Jim’s dorm room.

And then, with absolutely no warning, he tugs off the plaid sleep pants and throws them onto Jim’s bed.

Jim is left sitting on his bed unable to stop staring with his eyes wide and his tongue wanting to loll out of his mouth.

Christopher seems to remain entirely oblivious to Jim’s predicament though, and tugs on the stonewash pair without looking up and spotting his no doubt comical facial expression. Jim forces his mouth to close as he’s doing the button up over the black boxers Jim replicated, which turns out to be just in time because one’s he tugged the zipper up too, he glances up and meets Jim’s eyes.

“There a bit tight, but I think they’ll do?” he asks Jim.

“Ah yeah, they look fine,” he forces his mouth to reply, brain still doing cartwheels.

“I’m keeping the hoody though,” he grins, still obviously oblivious to Jim’s turmoil. “Now get dressed too, I wanna go out James.”

Jim eats breakfast in a daze, once again granted access into the inner sanctum of the officer’s mess hall. Less people stare at him than usual, but then it is Sunday and almost no one is in uniform, Jim included.

People do glance at Jim’s stolen hoodie though. Or more likely, the site of Captain Christopher Pike in Jim’s stolen hoodie. Stolen hoodie and ruffled uncombed hair. Soft and relaxed and laughing at all of Jim’s fumbling jokes and funny stories as he passes Jim slices of purple banana.

He wishes they’d all stop staring. He wants to be the only one doing that.

God, he’s so. Totally. Fucked.

When Christopher had said he was keeping Jim’s hoodie, he apparently meant it.

Jim doesn’t mind one bit.

And so the next few days pass with Jim in a love swept haze, desperately trying to maintain at least a semblance of a distance between the two of them.

Jim’s not sure he’s managing to act normal and Bones insists he isn’t, but Christopher doesn’t seem to have noticed, so all’s well that end’s well.
“I know you mean well sir,” Jim growls, “but kindly Fuck. Off.”

“No can do James,” Christopher smiles pleasantly, pushing passed Jim and into his dorm room. He doesn’t even seem to care that Jim just swore at him.

“Yes you can do!” Jim yells, physically shaking he’s that mad. “Get the fuck out!”

“No I can’t,” Christopher repeats more gently, slowly putting an arm around him and pulling him towards his chest in a hug. “I’m not leaving you alone to wallow in your own misery. I’m not that cruel.”

Jim tries to resist, but Christopher’s grip around his shoulders is firm. As soon as his face his pushed into his shoulder by a gentle hand in the back of his hair, all the fight and anger just… drains out of him in one fell swoop.

“No one understands,” Jim sobs, everything hitting him at once. All the pent-up misery and frustration. “No one ever just fucking understands!”

Christopher’s hand slowly caresses the back of his head and he remains quiet, just letting Jim cry it all out.

“I can’t do it,” Jim bawls, “I can’t do it again. I watched everyone die around me once already. I couldn’t save them and I can’t do it again. All of them, mowed down around me and doomed to a shallow unmarked mass grave.”

Christopher suddenly stops swaying slightly against him and goes very still.

“I know what the meaning of the test is supposed to be,” Jim hiccups, pressing his face more firmly against Pike’s shoulder. “I know we’re supposed to face to death, to face our fear of death and remain strong anyway. But I already did it once, I already learnt the lesson and I refuse to do it again. I can’t! I won’t! I won’t let people down like that again!”

“James,” Christopher breathes very slowly, his own voice quivering. “When did this happen? You’re not talking about the Kelvin incident, are you?”

“No,” Jim cries as his shoulders shake with tears.

“I think we should sit down, come on love.”

Christopher pulls him gently over to his bed, keeping his hand firmly in his hair, thumb still moving slowly up and down. With only a small amount of shuffling, Jim ends up lying half a top of the other man, who is leaning back sat up against the headboard. Jim turns his head so his tear-stained cheek is resting on Christopher’s chest, an arm hooked lazily over his stomach and one of his legs sprawled between his.

“I- I think I already know what you’re going to say,” Christopher stutters, “but tell me anyway.”

Jim reaches down and grips Christopher’s wrist.

And starts talking.
“There were nine thousand of us to start with,” Jim begins with dully. “It was good actually. There were people my age that didn’t hate me just because I was smart, and my aunt and uncle weren’t like Frank. It was just supposed to be a research farming project. Somewhere to test out some new farming techniques and trial some new crop strains. I got to help in the labs sometimes even though I was only thirteen. I even got my first ever present; that push bike I mentioned? Tarsus IV was great to start with. I loved it.”

Christopher’s arms tighten around him some more.

“And then one of the crop strains. We don’t know how it happened, but it suddenly started going mouldy and it spread to everything else. Anything you’d classify as plant life to start with, and then anything at all with chloroplasts in it at all. The biologists, they tried to contain it, but one of the botanists got infected and transferred it out of the test facilities. Nobody even knew she had chloroplasts in her cells.

“They’d already started trying to develop an antifungal or a vaccine or something as soon as it first appeared, but it spread too quickly, evolved too fast and suddenly it got into the food stores. Grain and corn was decaying in the fields, trees were collapsing in on themselves as they rotted. All the grass withered and turned to mush, and slowly the entire colony turned to dust.”

“James…” Pike whispers with a quiver. “You don’t have to-”

But Jim’s on a roll now. He keeps talking in the same monotonous voice.

“They slaughtered the last of the livestock for meat first, and then raided everyone’s houses in town for anything canned or tinned or stored in a stasis box. Said they were going to ration it out, make sure everyone could last until Starfleet got there to evacuate us. But then then the days just kept on rolling by and we’d barely get enough to feed one, let alone the household of five we were. My aunt and uncle got sick first because they’d been giving Gracie and Mike and I most of their already pitiful share. And then the food stopped coming altogether.”

He pauses, releasing Christopher’s wrist so that he can wrap it around him too.

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“He’s dead James, he’s gone, he can never do it again,” Christopher rumbles under him, obviously crying quietly himself now as well.

“I got knocked to the floor in the panic,” Jim whispers. “I saw my cousin go down, his eyes glazed over and unseeing, and I just laid there and stared at his body until it was over. They thought I was dead. Just another corpse among the masses. And they just- they left us all there in the square and went to have a party.
“So I waited until night fall, until I could hear the crowds around the distant bonfire growing drunker, and crawled over everyone. Over my aunt and my niece and my neighbours. The kids from school and the family that had owned the corner shop just down the road. And I snuck into the streets and climbed my way over the rooftop until I made it into the dusted and torched fields beyond. And then I ran.”

“You were so brave,” Christopher cracks softly. “You got out, you survived, you made it here to this day with me.”

“Doesn’t feel like it some days,” Jim responds blankly. “Some days its like I’m there all over again, running through those fields all alone, the scent of death all around me. But I found others you know? I ran and ran until I accidentally stumbled into the Leighton family farmyard. Thomas was there with little Kevin, worrying because their parents had never come back from town. So I told them what had happened and we ran some more together. And we hid and broke into other abandoned houses and stole whatever morsels of food we could find, and eventually we found Stont too, this little stoic Vulcan kid who wouldn’t talk because all his familial bonds had been snapped. And then Stont found Milo and Lila, and Lila showed us where Shrak’eb lived. And we found a cave, high up in the mountains where no one would look and we horded as much food as we could manage to pillage.

“And then for another week it was awful, but it was at least manageable. Until Thomas and I got caught.”

Christopher goes very still again.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he mutters emotionlessly. “You don’t have to hurt yourself like that by dredging it all back up.”

“The guards,” Jim continues anyway. “Tommy found a phaser that we thought still worked, but it was damaged. We were gonna take it back to the cave and use it to heat some rocks for warmth, but it started making a hissing noise. Tommy got it out to look and it exploded in his face. We were too close to town and the guards heard him screaming. I couldn’t just leave him, I tried to carry him out, but I was starved and exhausted and too weak to carry myself, let alone another teenager. And that’s how we met Kodos. When he looked me in the eyes and then tied ropes around my wrists and hung me from a cross.”

“You’re one of the Tarsus nine,” Christopher blanches. “Oh Jesus fuck, you’re one of the nine kids he strung up outside the town hall and flogged. You’re the second survivor.”

Jim chuckles lifelessly.

“The tiger striped boy they call me. It’s the figure caption for all those fucking holopics. Thank god you can only see my back and not my face.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Christopher stutters, “Oh motherfucking god, I’ve shown that picture to people in ethics lectures when they used to force me to teach.”

“I got out though. Kevin snuck into town and cut me down. And we were already right there in front of the building, so we took a risk and broke into Kodos’ office. I was in agony and could barely think at all, let alone think coherently, but I managed to hack his computer terminal. Finally got a distress signal out.”

“Fuck, that was you,” Christopher gags. “You’re the one who wrote that crazy code that doesn’t make sense. The Tarsus Proxy.”
“And then Starfleet finally came,” Jim finishes with a final tear. “I took Kevin and we cut Tommy down too, but the other seven were already dead. We ran back towards the caves. He and I were delirious with fever due to infection when Starfleet’s life scans finally picked us up and they sent down a landing party to find us. I don’t remember much else until I woke up back on Earth in a private intensive care unit.”

“Please tell me you at least got decent care,” Christopher openly sobs, clinging to Jim for all his worth. “Please tell me they at least looked after you properly once they got you home.”

“Yeah they did,” Jim mumbles, turning his face back against Christopher’s chest. “I hated it at first, screamed at them all constantly, demanded to see my kids all the time. But they kept giving me proper medical treatment and kept bringing in different child phycologists until I finally clicked with one of them. And I got better. You know why I didn’t have a job until you showed up and dared me to do better? It’s because I was still technically on medical leave, even after eight years. I was fine, 100% cleared to work, had been discharged from the psych centre for three and a half years, but I was still working up the nerve to take that leap and get that first job.”

“That’s not on your file,” Christopher frowns, rubbing at his eyes.

“Nothing’s on my James T. Kirk file except that time I drove a car off a cliff when I was ten, and the couple of times I got arrested for brawling in the months right after I got out of psych. Sure, I put all my academic scores on my main ID file, but all my medical information is stored under JT Starson’s name. They legally – I mean Federation Child Protection – they legally made me a second file while Kodos was on trial to protect my identity as I was a traumatised minor. And they let me keep it active so that no one ever would find out.”

“And you’ve- you’ve never told anyone have you?” Christopher asks rhetorically. “You’ve kept it all locked up deep inside until that fucking test slammed it all up again.”

“I told Bones,” Jim tells him uncomfortably. Uncomfortable because he doesn’t like thinking about how upset Bones had been, how distraught it had made him on Jim’s behalf. “I’m surprised you haven’t noticed, but I have ration bars stored all over my room. When he found some of them, he put two and two together with my patchy “official” medical records and what he’s seen in his own scans of me, and he knew something awful had happened. So I got a bottle of vodka and told him.”

They’re full on cuddling now, Christopher having shuffled slightly further down the head board.

Jim would be deliriously happy if he wasn’t already so emotionally drained and just plain done with the day.

“What about-? I’m sorry, I should stop asking questions. You’ve had a beyond shit day and I should just shut and let you sleep.”

“Just- ask me whatever it is and then help me get ready for bed yeah?” Jim asks, beginning to go numb all over just like he always does when he crashes. Normally Bones would do this for him, but-

But Christopher’s here instead and that’s okay. That’s good.

“I just… wondered about the second-year ethics course. I mean, I know the content because I had to teach it for a year when I was a Lieutenant waiting on an XO posting. I can’t believe anyone would be so heartless and cruel as to make you sit through that.”

“I didn’t have to,” Jim sighs, his mind beginning to fog and the sleep of the emotionally destroyed beckoning him “Two days before that topic, I got accosted by Admiral Jonathan Archer of all
people. He told me that I wasn’t going to ethics that week and that I was on dog sitting duty for him instead. He pulled Bones out of class too so that I had someone with me. I think he’s the only Admiral that knows all the details and I haven’t seen or heard from him again since, but he must have told my course coordinators something, because no one ever asked where I’d been or why I hadn’t done the work.”

“I met him once too,” Christopher muses, slowly sitting up and bringing Jim with him. He starts fumbling with the catch of Jim’s blue exercise jumpsuit as he relays his story. “Weird experience; it was just after he got de-aged or whatever happened to him. I was on the USS Potemkin as a Junior Tactical officer, my first posting, and he just appeared on our transporter pad unconscious and fifty years younger than he should have been. Medical did every scan and test that they could dream up on him, but everything came back confirming that it really was Jonathan Archer and not a clone or a double or something.”

“Hmmm,” Jim says sleepily, grappling with the tee he’s been sleeping in this week. He doesn’t bother with the matching pants and indicates he’s fine in just his boxers instead. “Sounds cool. Bet Bones would like to look at tha’ data.”

“Yeah I bet,” Christopher replies fondly. “Into bed with you now, before you fall asleep sitting up.”

“M’kay. Stay though?”

Christopher pauses and looks at the other bed.

“Yeah okay,” he sighs. “Honestly I’d rather not leave you on your own anyway after that conversation. Just give me a minute to raid your drawers for more pyjamas again.”

“No,” Jim says firmly. “Stay. Here,” he repeats, his meaning clear in the way he flicks back his covers.

Christopher stays silent, watching him curiously.

“Please?” Jim tries. He’s too tired to fight for it, but god, he just wants to be held while he falls asleep after the day he’s had.

“James…”

“Not taking advantage of me, I promise,” he slurs, forcing his eyes back open. “Jus’ wanna sleep, Jus’ don’t wanna be alone again.”

“Okay, Okay love.”

When he first wakes, his head aches slightly but he’s warm and comfortable. The early morning sun is beginning to weakly trickle over them both again, and Christopher’s quiet breaths puff gently over his hair.

He’s curled right into the man, chest to chest except for where his own head has created a gap between them. There’s an arm over his back and a leg between his shins, and Jim’s own limbs are wrapped around the other like a (stereotypical but appropriately named) octopus.

He smiles fondly and closes his eyes again.

“Is ‘at your alarm?” Christopher rumbles sleepily above him. “Can I turn it off?”
“Yeah,” Jim moans, annoyed at being woken up again. “s’fuck work n classes, n stay here.”

“Mmm maybe,” Christopher rumbles again. Jim can feel his voice reverbing in his own chest, it’s so low and gravelly.

But Christopher has to roll over to pat at his Padd to turn the alarm off (because Jim disabled the voice controls for the computer so that he couldn’t be lazy and fall back to sleep), and the movement jostles Jim further awake.

“Don’t wanna get up,” he complains as he tries and fails to pull the covers back up to his chin.

“We better had though James,” Christopher sighs, rubbing at his eyes with a balled fist.

“You know, s’only you that’s allowed to call me James. Everyone else has to use Jim,” he yawns with a stretch. Christopher has to dodge his arm as he does so, ducking under it to avoid getting thwacked in the face.

“Well you didn’t seem to mind so I kept on doing it,” Christopher shrugs, swinging his legs out of bed. “I can start using Jim if you’d prefer, but you never asked me to, so I didn’t know if I should.”

“No it’s okay,” Jim tells him. “I don’t mind if it’s you.”

“If you’re sure,” he groans as he stretches himself, his neck and back cracking audibly. “God, I’m too old for sharing single beds, I’m stiff as fuck. Let’s never do this again.”

“What the bed sharing or the single bed sharing?” Jim chuckles nervously.

“I’ll think about it,” Christopher tells him with a curious cock of his head. “Now where the hell did my uniform pants end up?”

Despite the fairly pleasant morning in his dorm room, the whiplash of last night soon catches back up to him and leaves him feeling spent all over again. He drags himself through his seminar on Tretellion dip-strike tactics and almost falls asleep in his compulsory paperwork-handling class (yes that is a thing; god, officers have to file so many reports!).

And then at lunch, Bones gets one looks at him and drags him away from the other cadets, muttering about idiots and morons.

“I bet you didn’t even sleep did you, you infant,” he growls, rummaging around in his ever-present metal medical case. “Pike said he would go and talk to you, but clearly he didn’t say enough if you’re this much of a wreck. Couldn’t you have chosen someone with less skill at emotional repression to fall in love with?”

“He stayed all night actually,” Jim mumbles, letting Bones wave his scanny do dad thingy in his face despite how annoying it is. “The problem actually, is that I talked too much and turned his well-intentioned pep talk into an emotional shitshow before he ever really managed to start it.”

Bones stop scanning, and gazes at him knowingly.

“You told him about- didn’t you?”

“Yeah, T-IV. The whole damn story,”

“Shit Jimmy, how’d he take it?”
“Only slightly better than you did. He managed not to throw up, just, but because I didn’t plan it there was no alcohol to be had afterwards so we didn’t get to drink ourselves into a stupor to numb the pain.”

“That might be for the best to be honest kid,” Bones sigh sympathetically. “Look, I know I’m not supposed to ‘cause we’re friends and all, but I can write you a sick note if you don’t wanna go to the rest of your classes today.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s a good idea,” Jim concedes. “I don’t really want go back to my room on my own to stew in my own thoughts again, but I’m sure Christopher won’t mind be gate crashing his office if my lecturers and instructors already know I’m not going to show up.”

“Alright but come here and give me a hug first. And let me get you something to eat before you go gallivanting off to see “Christopher” in his office.”

“Yeah okay Bones,” Jim smiles thankfully at his best friend.

Why has a sick note just been added to your profile? It just pinged up on my Padd while I was eating.

Jim reads the message and tries to raise one eyebrow like Bones does. As ever, he only manages to raise both.

“Chr- Pike’s got my profile tagged for alerts,” Jim tells the table. “He just got a notification now about the thing you added Bones.”

“Oooo what did McCoy add,” Gary asks with an eyebrow waggle before Bones can reply.

“None of you’re damn business Mitchell,” Bones snaps at him, obviously feeling extra protective thanks to the events of the previous day.

“Wow okay, sorry I asked,” Gary rolls his eyes, going back to his mash potatoes.

“Ass,” Bones mutters, before turning back to Jim. “I’m not surprised he does actually kid, I do too.”

“Is everybody stalking Jim these days?” Gaila asks in her usual cheerily exuberant manner.

“Oh really not,” Uhura snorts. “But Captain Pike’s pretty damn fond of our Kirk, despite him being a human disaster.”

“I’d say he’s more than fond,” Gary snickers. “Seeing as he’s been seen in Jim’s dorm block in Jim’s clothes.”

“Jim gave him a place to sleep when his apartment was flooded, that’s all,” Bones growls. “Stop insinuating things.”

“He does look good in your hoodie though,” Gaila smiles dreamily. “I saw him wearing it when I was headed to the gym on Tuesday evening, and it makes him look all soft and huggable despite his permanent frowny face. It was definitely yours; it still has those beads strung onto the hood toggles.”

“Oh I err, lent it to him when he needed dry clothes,” Jim mumbles, wishing they’d all stop discussing this.

“Is he huggable?” Gaila asks, oblivious to Jim’s discomfort. “I bet he’s all muscley under that grey uniform of his, with perfectly formed pecs for you to mush your face into while he strokes up and
down your back.”

“Alright that’s enough,” Bones thankfully intercedes. “No more prying into Jim and Captain Pike’s privacy ‘ya gossiping bunch ‘o overgrown teenagers. Just let Jim reply to his message and finish his lunch in peace.”

Jim shoots Bones a look of thanks and picks his Padd up again, opening the messaging system back up.

“Geesh, it’s hardly private if they’re parading all over campus in each other clothes,” Gary mutters almost inaudibly.

Bones closes his eyes and stands up, obviously one hundred percent done with Gary’s shit today.

“Jim come on, I’m done tolerating this bullshit. Grab your plate before I deck him harder than a mole whacker at a fair ground.”

Jim doesn’t feel inclined to argue in the slightest and grabs his tray without another word.

They sit at another table at the over side of the mess hall briefly to finish eating, and then Bones throws an arm over his shoulder and walks him to Christopher’s office.

Christopher is thankfully already there when they arrive, meaning Jim doesn’t have to hang around on his own waiting for him to come back from his lunch. Andy opens the door for them both from his desk, and the two of them shuffle in together, Bones still hovering protectively over him.

“You didn’t reply to my message, I was beginning to get worried,” is the first thing that Christopher says as the door closes behind them.

“He was going to, but Mitchell was being a prime bastard so it was expedient to get away from him and just come here and tell you in person,” Bones answers for him.

“I shall take your word for it Doctor McCoy,” Christopher nods, rounding his desk and offering his hand for Bones to shake. “Nice to finally meet you in person Doctor, Riverside pickup none withstanding.”

“Likewise,” Bones gruffs as he clasps his hand with his own. “But you’ll have to forgive me sir; I have to leave for my afternoon shift at Medical soon, and I fully plan on using the short amount of time until then to thoroughly threaten you.”

“Bones,” Jim sighs embarrassed. “He doesn’t need a shovel talk.”

“No, by all means,” Christopher cracks with a grin. “Though I do promise to do my best to live up to your expectations.”

Bones eyes the Captain up and down sternly.

“I will hold you to that Captain, because while I know and understand that you two are only platonic for now, I also know that you’re both grown ass 23rd century men who are entitled to define your relationship however you damn well please. I won’t lie and say this age gap between you don’t make me wary, but again, its 2258 and it’s none of my damn business. You’re both of age, you’re emotionally compatible species and orientations, and you a have mutual levels of respect for each other.”
“Bones,” Jim moans, feeling his face begin to flame.

“But,” Bones ploughs on with a pointed this needs doing, accept it look at Jim, “If you even think about taking advantage of him sir, or in any way doing him a disservice, regardless of whether or not this ever goes beyond friendship, I will know. And I will find you. And you will live just long enough to regret ever even learning the name James T. Kirk. Do you understand?”

“Completely and without reserve,” Christopher replies dryly. “So long as you understand that my own best friends will now be wanting to deliver their own death threats to James when they return to Earth at the end of summer. Phil is really rather creatively scary when he wants to be, and Number One doesn’t even need to say anything to make you quake in your boots.”

“With all due respect to Doctor Boyce,” Bones drawls, “Unlike him, I was baptised into the world of medicine via trauma surgery and the world’s second busiest ER department. I know ways of damaging a man that your CMO hasn’t even dreamt of yet. If Jim even so much as mentions that you’ve upset him, you’ll soon be begging for a quicker less messy death.”

“Glad we understand each other McCoy,” Christopher nods. “I promise to look after him and never go beyond what we’re mutually comfortable with.”

Bones nods back one final time and hooks Jim in for a brief hug and back pat before turning and sauntering back out of the office. Jim watches him go with a mixture of horrified embarrassment and grateful awe.

“Well that just happened,” Christopher mutters with a deep, slightly disbelieving sigh.

“I’m so sorry,” Jim strangles out, “I had no idea he was going to do that.”

“Oh don’t worry about it, I had it coming,” Christopher snorts. “I’m surprised he waited this long instead of cornering me after the first time I stayed in your dorm room. I know you tell him everything after all.”

“I-” Jim stutters.

“Please do continue to tell him everything if that’s what you want to,” Christopher reassures. “I’m glad you’ve got someone you can be that open with, someone you know will always have your back no matter what.”

“Yeah he’s great,” Jim mumbles. “I don’t know what I did to deserve him.”

“James you didn’t have to do anything. Anyone who doesn’t think you deserve the whole universe handing to you is insane,” he replies, starting to look uncomfortably flushed himself. “But you look like a wreck, so let’s just… sit down and relax for a while. I should’ve let you stay in bed this morning after all. Actually, I’ll walk you back to your dorm if you would rather go back to sleep.”

“No it’s okay,” Jim says, looking sideways out of the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the rest of campus and the ocean beyond. “I don’t want to get too behind with work and I- I still haven’t opened up my assessment sheets from the Maru yesterday.”

“Alright,” Christopher breathes gently as he softly rests a hand on Jim’s shoulder and squeezes a little. “Go and sit down before you fall down and I’ll rearrange my afternoon meeting for here instead of in the Admin building.”

Jim smiles gratefully and saunters over to his usual chair.
Once he’s worked up the nerve to open his assessment sheets and been pleasantly surprised by the review he finds inside, Jim works peacefully away in silence for another good hour before his eyes start to slide shut again. He yawns and considers the pros and cons of just putting his head down on the desk. On the one hand, stars, he really is tired. On the other, it’s a miracle he didn’t wake up in the middle of last night, panting and scared of his mind. If he fell asleep now, it’s likely it’ll happen now instead.

The decision is taken from him though, by Andy chiming the intercom to let Christopher know that his afternoon appointment has arrived.

It’s the Vulcan again.

He sweeps in stiffly, his back ramrod straight and his hands clasped neatly behind his back. His black instructor’s uniform is pressed the neatest Jim has ever seen off of a hanger, and the man’s boots are shined within an inch of their life.

He glances at Jim without turning his head as he steps up to the front of Christopher’s desk. His facial expression doesn’t change in the slightest, but Jim still feels like he’s been judged and found wanting.

“Glad you could make it Commander, I apologise for the sudden in change in venue.”

“No apologies are necessary Captain. The amendment has not affected my schedule in the slightest. In fact, it can be said to have further optimised it by reducing the necessary travel time to and from my own working accommodations.”

“Well that’s alright then. You don’t mind if James stays here again do you?” the Captain waves in Jim’s direction. “Only I’d rather not kick him out when he’s technically on sick leave for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I find that acceptable. I witnessed the Cadet’s abrupt departure from the Kobayashi Maru simulation centre yesterday afternoon, and while I cannot profess to personally understand the need for such strong emotional displays, I am aware that they have a lingering effect on humans. If you desire that he remains here under your observation, I hold no issue with acceding to that desire.”

“Oh trust me Spock, he has damn good reasons for disagreeing with the design of the Maru. But we’ll get to that later. In the meantime, I trust you’ve heard the rumours and understand why I want to speak to you?”

Jim, dozy though he’s feeling, perks up a little at that. He assumes Christopher is referring to the Admiralty’s announcement over the weekend that they’ve finally made a decision regarding the new flagship, the USS Enterprise. Jim has no idea what that has to do with this Vulcan Commander though.

“I can confirm that I have, to use the human expression, heard things through the grapevine.”

“And you also know that I’m going to need a new XO? There’s no way I’m asking Number One to give up her own command just to come back and work with me, no matter how much I’d love to have her again.”

“If you are indeed the individual that Command has selected for the position, yes. No name has yet been declared by our seniors though, so it would be illogical to speculate the results of their decision.”

Christopher grins and shakes his head, glancing down at the floor.
“Spock I know we’ve hadn’t had many opportunities to work together yet, but I know you know of my reputation. Command damn well knows the only reason I took a year long ground posting was so that my name would be at the top of the Enterprise consideration list. That ship’s going to be mine even if I have to go to Operations and tell them so myself and everyone knows it.”

“You speak with an assurity beyond mere speculation.”

“I do indeed. So, do you want to join me or not?”

Spock blinks. Even Jim notices it.

“You are offering me the position of your First officer,” he states very blandly.

“I am Commander.”

“Then, should your predictions come to pass regarding the command of the USS Enterprise, I will accept your offer to come aboard Captain.”

Christopher stands briefly to offer a handshake over the desk, but Jim clears his throat warningly, and the older man quickly turns it into the traditional Vulcan ta’al salute. Spock returns the gesture without, once again, changing his facial expression at all.

“Well now that’s over with,” Christopher continues once he’s reseated himself, “I need your permission to file a resit form for the Kobayashi Maru Commander.”

“Woah hold on,” Jim interrupts, speaking up for the first time. “Once was humiliating enough thank you.”

“That wasn’t humiliation James,” Christopher turns to him. “I’ve been thinking about it all morning and you were right to be furious and feel betrayed. The more I dwell on it, the more I’m starting to see the truth in the old argument that it’s teaching Cadets to accept failure before they’ve even begun. We don’t need to teach you all to face fear, we need to teach you to embrace it and keep looking for a way to survive anyway.”

“I am not sure I am the correct person to bring these concerns too,” Spock interjects, pulling Jim’s attention back to him. “I merely code the test to encapsulate the parameters specified to me; I do not have input regarding those specifications. Also I fail to see what will be achieved by allowing Cadet Kirk to retake the examination given that no alterations will be made to the simulation between now and then. At best, he will simply fail again, and at worst will cause his assessors to think poorly of him.”

“Oh you let me and James worry about that part,” Christopher drawls knowingly, “You just add your signature and print to the forms I send you.”

When Spock has gone, Jim is still feeling disquieted.

He fiddles with his collar pin badge for a while, staring out the window into the late afternoon sun peeking out from behind grey clouds, and wonders what the hell Christopher is thinking.

Eventually he just asks.

“So are you going to let me in on whatever your grand plan is?”

Christopher glances at him guiltily.
“Actually I’m still trying to think of the best way to break it to you gently, because you’re going to absolutely hate it.”

“I would have preferred you mentioning to me that there was a plan at all before you roped Commander Spock in,” Jim tells him irritably. “I already had to deal with one asshole springing shit on me today without you doing it too. One Gary in my life is more than enough already thanks.”

Christopher ducks his head with a chastised look.

“I’m sorry James.”

Jim sighs and scrubs his hand back through his hair.

“Well it’s done now, so let’s just move on.” Nova, it feels weird scolding an officer several ranks his senior.

Christopher leans back in his chair and scrubs his own hands down his face.

“You really are going to hate my idea,” he grumbles. “And I’m dreading having to let you storm out of here and refuse to talk to me for a week.”

“Fuck,” Jim cringes, “that bad?”

“The actual worst. And I’m a total fucking wanker for even considering it, but it’s the only solution I can come up with that doesn’t skirt too close to cheating. The last thing you need is getting called to a tribunal and suspended, not if I’m going to get you and McCoy accepted onto my new ship after graduation.”

“You want me on the Enterprise with you,” Jim gasps, his heart thumping in his chest.

“Well obviously,” Christopher frowns. “I mean come on, I cuddled you all night like an oversized teddy bear, so I’m going to have to file more of that stupid invasive relationship paperwork. Queer-Platonic should cover it, but a side effect of that is that you’ll be added to my priority assignment list by admin. You know Command always try to keep stable healthy couples and groups together for long term missions. Having people you care about with you when you’re out in the black is good for your mental health.”

“But getting suspended would overrule that,” Jim finishes with a groan. “Alright, I’m ready. Tell me your crazy and insensitive idea.”

Jim does storm out.

He doesn’t shout or hit anything.

He doesn’t growl or push anything over.

He doesn’t say a word.

He just stares disbelieving, gets up, and walks the fuck out of the room without looking back.

He sits in his room in silence, watching rain drops trickle down the glass of his window.

The pyjama pants that Christopher was wearing last night are still folded neatly on the other bed, and the navy overcoat that he forgot is still hanging on the same hook by the door.
He turns towards his desk and looks at the surface of it, at the small stack of Padds beneath the soft yellow light of the lamp. After several long seconds, he shakes himself and leans sideways to pull the top one towards him.

Where do you live? He types, with shaking fingers. I’m coming over.

Pike’s apartment is in one of the new build low rise buildings at the top of the cliff overlooking China beach. Off to the north-east, the golden gate bridge is lit up against the cloudless night sky, casting its pale golden glow into the sea air around it.

Jim drags his feet as he approaches the tidy brick-set driveway, his heart clenching unhappily in his chest.

He does not want to have this conversation.

But all too soon he’s standing outside the front door, his hand hovering over the intercom panel. Cpt C. Pike is printed neatly next to the number 5 button, the only name preceded by a rank, and the only one followed by the solid black version of the Starfleet delta.

He presses it gingerly.

The front door buzzes and clicks after a few seconds, sliding open to reveal a light and airy stairwell. At this time of night, it’s lit solely by artificial light and nothing can be seen out of the wide sweeping glass at the far end, but it still doesn’t feel like a cold and sterile space.

As Jim starts to climb the stairs up to the second floor, he wonders which of Pike’s neighbours was responsible for flooding the place. There’s certainly nothing to indicate water damage now, despite it only having been two weeks since the disaster occurred.

And really? He thinks, pausing on the first floor to peer out into the darkness, is that all it’s been since they suddenly changed from awkward friends to close companions? To Jim, it feels like it’s been an age since his heart finally demanded he sit up and take note of how it was feeling. An impossible stretch of time extending on backwards forever.

He huffs a self-deprecating laugh and turns back to ascend the final set of stairs.

Pike’s apartment is as fresh and modern as the outside of the building would suggest. A mixture of clean lines and trendy curves, the walls gleam freshly painted white, and the pale reclaimed wood of the floorboards have been polished smooth and don’t have a mark on them.

It’s an open plan design, with only doors placed along the front wall, no doubt leading to a bathroom and bedroom. The North facing wall at the back is formed entirely of sweeping glass, dimmed and blackened by the computer for privacy at this late hour.

Pike is leaning anxiously on a kitchen countertop at the far end of the room, his arms crossed, his eyes wary, and two unopened bottles of cold beer waiting by his left elbow. Jim finishes glancing around at the minimalistic furnishings from the doorway before he finally hangs up Pike’s borrowed overcoat, kicks off his boots and pads in his socks over to him.

He stops in front of the other man, a careful foot of space between them and doesn’t say a word.

Pike looks like he’s debating whether offering a hug would be appropriate, or if he should just remain standing still and let Jim decide how to proceed. He still looks incredibly guilty, biting at his
bottom lip subconsciously every few seconds, and the first finger of his left hand is twitching restlessly against his arm.

Jim decides the tension is too much and drops his head against the other man’s chest.

“I’m not doing it,” he rumbles as Christopher sighs in relief and puts an arm around his back. “It’s a horrific, awful, invasive idea and I hate it.”

“I told you wouldn’t like it.”

“Why’d you even start thinking about it? Why does it matter? No one has ever successfully rescued the Kobayashi Maru in that simulation. Not me, not you, not even goddamn Spock with his superiority complex.”

“Hey now,” Christopher chuffs in amusement, “be nice about Spock, he’s going to be your commanding officer in a few months.”

“No, you’re going to be my commanding officer. Which is going to be weird as fuck. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad the rules are the way they are, but who the hell decided it was okay for people to date people directly under their control!? It’s insane! There’s so many things that could go wrong. Like what happens if you have to order me into a potentially fatal situation? Or what if I have to let you go off on some suicide run? God honestly, no one in the ‘Fleet should be allowed to date ever.”

“Is that what we’re doing now?” Christopher asks weakly, now fiddling with Jim’s hair mindlessly. “Are we dating?”

“I have no idea,” Jim breathes. “But so long as we talk about what we want all the time, let’s just let it go where it wills. I mean, I like how it is now. With the- the hugging and bed sharing and stuff. I don’t need more right now, but we can wait and see what happens. Oh, I have huge hang-ups about consent though, just to warn you. I’ve scared more than one person away with how insistent I am over the matter.”

“Yes well, I’ve been reliably informed that I’m a grouchy emotionally repressed bastard with a short temper and a tendency to assume the worst in every situation,” Christopher snorts. “So I think you’re doing better than me if that’s your only concern. People who don’t take consent seriously are douchebags anyway.”

“Everyone’s going to talk. Especially because of the- you know, because you’re older than me. I mean, I know it’s a post-world war III world we live in, and people are a lot less judgemental in this day and age, and that continuously lengthening human lifespans make even twenty-year gaps seem smaller. But people will still talk.”

Christopher shuffles slightly, and Jim moves with him. He ends up leaning sideways on the worktop next to him, Christopher’s arm still around his waist, their chests still touching.

“Let them talk,” the older man rumbles. “We can go through the paperwork tonight and get it all squared with Command so its above board. If it’s all official no one can say or do anything as we’ll be monitored from then on to ensure that well, rank and age differences don’t cause a problem or endanger ourselves or others.”

“Are we um. Are we staying with your suggestion? The- the queer platonic route?”

“It gives us all the same rights as romantically involved individuals,” Christopher shrugs, “And it’s easy to convert to something else at a later date if we decide we want to- I don’t want to say “take it further” because that implies that Platonic relationships are somehow lesser when they’re clearly not,
but you know what I mean. So if that’s what you’re happy with, we’ll do that. Or obviously I’ll listen to your opinion if you’d rather define this differently.”

“No, I like that idea. It feels like the right path right now. I mean, I don’t want to get all mushy and talk about my feelings but-”

“-More than we already have you mean,” Christopher interrupts with a chuckle.

“Yes well, as I was saying,” he continues, jabbing Christopher in the side with his finger, “I don’t want to splurge my feelings everywhere yet. I haven’t thought about them enough to know what I want to do with them, and I don’t want to rush this, this thing developing between us until I’m sure.”

“God, if only Number One could see me now,” Christopher huffs. “Having a mature adult conversation with another adult about feelings and not running away screaming. She’d be torn between squealing with pride and tying me down and interrogating me to find out who I am and what I’ve done with the real Christopher Pike.”

“Yeah I have to talk to Bones too. He probably already knew this was going to happen, hence the threats against your person earlier, but I should probably tell him it’s official now.”

“You want to do that or paperwork first?”

“I was hoping for food first actually,” Jim grins sheepishly. “I spent all afternoon and evening staring at the rain outside deciding whether I hated you or not and forgot to eat.”

“Yes okay,” Christopher rolls his eyes, “lets see if I’ve got enough real food in stock to cook something, or whether we’ll have to resort to the replicator or ordering in.”

No longer hungry, satisfied that Bones’ one thousand and one questions have been answered to the Doctor’s satisfaction, and leaning happily on Christopher’s side as he signs his portion of the relationship forms and submits them, Jim feels a strange sense of peace.

This time last night he was sobbing his heart out and dredging his shitty childhood back to the surface, and yet here he is, only twenty-four hours later, relaxed and calm. Normally it takes him at least three days to get over an emotional meltdown like that. But. He feels fine.

Better than fine.

He feels safe.

He likes it.

And when Christopher starts yawning and muttering about sleep, he doesn’t even blink when he’s offered sleep clothes and a shoulder for a pillow for the night.

Jim goes back to classes the next day with Bones looking at him knowingly constantly.

They don’t have many classes together these days, having already done most of the ‘Fleet wide classes together in their Plebe and early second year. But they still have first aid and field triage together every other Friday morning, even if Bones is a TA and not a student.

“You’re doing it again,” he tells his best friend, leaning on his palm.

“What?” Bones says absent mindedly as he squats down and tugs on Jim’s bandaging to make it
neater.

“Staring at me.”

“Well excuse me for being pleased knowing that my best buddy is all happy,”

“I didn’t say it was bad,” Jim refutes, watching carefully how Bones is tapping through the menus on the basic tricorder.

“Well quit complain’ then!”

“I’m not! I’m just saying that the other cadets are starting to notice you smiling at me all the time. You don’t normal smile, they’re disturbed.”

“Don’t worry, if Gary’s around at lunch, I’m sure my mood will sour rapidly.”

Jim silently hopes Gary won’t be.

Gary is a no show, thank the stars, but now Uhura is looking at him knowingly too. And Gaila has taken to fluttering her eyelashes at him again, which she hasn’t done since before he unintentionally became celibate at the start of last summer.

Jim keeps his head down and concentrates on getting all the sauce out his chocolate pudding tub, letting them all talk about their graduation plans over his head.

It’s eight o’clock.

Jim has just finished the first draft of his final year dissertation and now he’s wondering if he should say something or wait to see what happens.

*My place or yours?* He tries out in his head and grimaces. Sounds like a cringey pickup line.

But what does happen? Do he and Christopher go their separate ways for the night? Do they go out for food? Do they go back to Christopher’s apartment across town, or just amble over to Jim’s nearby dorm block? What about their gym routines in the morning? It’s a Saturday tomorrow, but they’ve been going to their separate rank sports centres since before Australia. Are they going to go back to both going to the same place again? How is breakfast going to work given that Christopher nearly always goes to the officer’s mess? Sure, he can go in there on occasion with a pass, but he can’t go in there *all* the time or it’ll be classed as taking advantage as according to the ‘Fleet “relationship regulations”.

“Hey, do you want to go play Mario Kart in the Campus games room for an hour or so?” Christopher randomly asks, cutting through Jim’s anxious musings.

“Yeah why not,” Jim agrees easily.

“Oh my god, stop cheating,” Jim yells as Christopher once again knocks him off the edge of rainbow road.

“You were in my way James,” Christopher says tonelessly, eyes narrowed competitively.

They don’t really discuss it, but Jim ends up flaked on Christopher’s couch with his head in the
man’s lap at the end of the day. It’s probably for the best that they came here rather than Jim’s dorm as a) there’s no Cadets to stare at them here, b) Christopher has an actual bathroom they can use without having to walk along several corridors, and finally c) he has a double bed and not a narrow Cadet single.

And then there’s no real discussion in the morning either.

It all just flows naturally like it’s the 100th time they’ve done this and not the first.

Christopher makes pancakes (with the ever-present purple bananas which are apparently called Yagli fruit and are grown in the Dandii system) (Jim surreptitiously looks up Dandii on the net and discovers that the natives all have purple skin too), and then he rummages through his closet until he finds a pair of beige slacks and a soft grey jumper that fit Jim. Once Jim’s dressed and trying not to grin too hard over wearing his… partner’s? clothes, Christopher grabs his gym bag and they stroll through the crisp morning air to Jim’s dorm block to get Jim’s bag too.

(Christopher keeps muttering Jim’s gym gym-wear under his breathe with a frown the entire walk. Jim nearly stumbles over his own feet twice its so adorable)

Jim spots for Christopher while he goes through his usual deadlift routine, and then Christopher returns the favour. Jim migrates over to his favourite treadmill in the corner (it’s just as good as he remembers) when Christopher starts pulling on boxing gloves and eyeing up the punch bags. They both spend the last fifteen minutes trying to out distance each other on the rowing machines (Jim wins, much to Christopher’s disgust).

It’s good.

It’s fun.

Jim loves it.

But then it’s Sunday and Jim wakes up in his own bed on his own, feeling like a loose end.

They never did have a routine for Sundays. It’s always been the one day of the week they do their own thing on. Except, obviously, when they’ve been away somewhere.

So he putters around his dorm for a while, gathering up some laundry and taking it downstairs. Taking a long shower, sticking his uniforms through the steam press machine, emptying the bin under his desk into a recycler unit.

And then when he’s been lying on his bed staring at the ceiling for too many minutes, he gets up in a huff and goes to find Bones.

Bones usually works Sunday’s at the campus clinic. They’re his least favourite days apparently, because he hates the damn clinic and having to deal with “whiny snot nosed brats that don’t know the difference between the common cold and Rigellan desert fever”. He much prefers to spend his hours over at Starfleet Medical, handling actual emergencies and helping to coordinate medical research.

Today is just like usual.

Today when Jim walks into the clinic, Bones is hovering in the reception area looking like he’d
rather gouge his eyes out with a blood-splattered scalpel than instruct another uneducated Cadet in the mystic art of making chicken broth.

“Hey Doc,” he greets with as much cheer as he can muster.

“What are you doing here? What did you do now? Did you hurt yourself? You don’t just have a hangover you expect me to fix do you?”

“Bones I’m fine,” he sighs, “I just wanted some company and I knew you wouldn’t mind a distraction.”

“Do I have to go find the hypos I labelled with “For Pike” kid?”

“No no no, everything with him is great,” Jim reassures quickly. “I just felt like seeing my best friend for the day yeah? I don’t want you to start feeling neglected.”

“Yeah okay kid,” Bones huffs, the corner of his lips twitching mirthfully. “Let’s go to the break room. The coffee tastes like shit, but at least its hot and caffeinated.”

Jim nods agreeably and indicates for Bones to lead the way.

Bones stabs some numbers into the hot drink replicator next to the battered looking microwave once the door has slid shut behind them, and in short order has two mugs of brown suspiciously-sludge like liquid in hand. Jim takes his with a muttered thank you, and then leans against the worktop opposite Bones.

“You have something specific in mind you wanted to talk about kid?” Bones asks after he’s taken a long swallow.

“Not really, I was just starting to tear at the walls of my dorm and I’m not in the right frame of mind for more revision. Besides, I finished the first draft of my dissertation on Friday so I deserve a break right?”

“Sure do Jim,” Bones grins, obviously pleased for him.

“So now all I’ve got left to do is that Plebe expedition as a TA, the first aid final scenario, whatever essay Karr’ney gives us all for Advanced Diplomatics, and the exams after spring break. Oh, and Christopher wants to me to resit the Maru, but I told him no.”

“You told him no? I thought you’d have jumped at the chance to stick your middle finger up at the damn test. I was positive you’d find some insane way to beat it even if you had to hack into the code base and then demand another chance at it so you could show off your skills.”

Jim sighs and pinches his brow.

“Yeah, you’re right, I’ve thought about. But every way I can come up with skirts too close to cheating. I could get lucky and be commended for original thinking, and maybe I’d risk it if Christopher and I hadn’t- well you know, started dating? Become Queer plats? I really need to ask an aro or an ace what terms all the cool kids are using these days, ‘cause hell if I know.”

“I think they’re still using zucchinis. I’ll ask Lieutenant Yonda next week at LGBT+ soc for ‘ya.”

“Thanks,” Jim smiles. “But yeah- actually that reminds me; we should fill out the Queer Platonic forms too because that way we’ll get priority assignment. Command will do their best to assign us to the same ship if we submit the proper paperwork. That is, if you want to do that? I know you identify
as heterosexual, but let’s be honest, you’re somehow even more invested in Queer culture than I am and I’m well-known as a quote unquote raging pansexual.”

“Well hell kid,” Bones breathes, looking a little shocked but quite pleased. “I wasn’t expecting you to ask me that, but sure? Why not. Because yeah, I get it. I’m pretty Queer for a straight guy. I just. Maybe I’m not all as straight as I think I am you know? Actually- Christopher won’t mind will he? He’s important to you too and I don’t want to intrude on what you two have going on.”

“Nah, he’s fine with it. It was his suggestion actually. And no one will question its authenticity and say we’re only doing it to get the same posting, because we’ve been pretty much attached at the hip pretty since we got off the shuttle from Riverside. Even if that technically is what we’re doing. Well it emotionally makes sense too, but yeah. I want you with me when we ship out to wherever.”

“Okay go for it,” Bones smiles softly, a complete change from his usual semi-permanent scowl. “Send me what I need to fill out and we’ll do it.”

“Yeah I’ll do it tonight.”

“Alright enough emotional mush, let me have my sexuality crisis in my own time. What were you saying about the Maru before we got side tracked?”

“Oh that yeah,” Jim frowns. “I don’t want to get accused of cheating or academic misconduct or something right before graduation, because getting suspended would mean I’ll be grounded regardless of where Christopher gets posted. Or where you end up for that matter. So, much as I’d like to hack the blasted thing to prove my point, it’s safer to just walk away.”

“And you’re sure that the only way to beat is by hacking it? There’s isn’t something else you can try?”

Jim sighs again.

“There is a way, but I’m not doing it,” he says dully.

“Jim?” Bones asks in concern, clearly sensing the sudden change in mood.

“It would work, I’m sure it would. But it’ll probably out me as a Tarsus survivor and do I really want to deal with that?”

“I don’t know Jim do you?”

Jim scowls at the floor, not sure what to make of Bones not immediately agreeing with him and saying it’s a terrible idea.

“It depends on how much beating that test means to you kid, that’s what you have to decide. You know no-one is going to judge you for surviving that hell scape, but it’s your privacy and therefore your choice. I’ll support you no matter what you decide, you know that. So maybe think about.”

“If I do it, it’ll prove once and for all that the test bullshit won’t it?” Jim mumbles. “No one else will ever have to go through what I did ever again. Not one more cadet will have to have failure shoved in their face and be told their best efforts aren’t good enough and will never be good enough.”

“It’s up to you Jim. No one is going to judge you for leaving your awful past in past either, least of all me. So it’s up to you.”
Jim bounces up and down on his toes outside Christopher’s flat nervously, waiting for the man to buzz him in.

“We're receiving a distress signal from the USS Kobayashi Maru. The ship has lost power and is stranded. Starfleet Command has ordered us to rescue them Captain,” Uhura announces from the simulator’s communication panel.

“Understood. Bo- Helmsman McCoy, move us into the neutral zone steadily, low impulse only. Navigator, keep an eye out for any incoming ships; someone left the Maru in this state, it’s probably a trap.”

“Aye Captain,” the cadet at the nav panel chants, hands moving over her screen, pulling up views from all of the external cameras.

“Two Klingon’s have entered the neutral zone ahead of us,” Bones suddenly announces, just the same as the last time he helped Jim with this test. “Do you want me to proceed.”

“Shields up, red alert. Hold us in position McCoy. Uhura? Do you have that proxy code I gave you this morning ready to go?”

“Aye, I do Captain,” she replies, looking nervous. Jim and Christopher had explained the plan to her, but that involved giving her the bare bones version of Jim’s experiences, and she’d been giving him sorrowful looks ever since.

“Alright” Jim says shakily, gripping the arms of the captain’s chair tightly. “let’s do this. Latch on to the sim servers and start broadcasting.”

When three dozen other Federation ships suddenly warp into view, the simulator throws a hissy fit. It’s designed to carry out whatever orders the crew running it give it in a real-world manner, but to also block progress as every step of the way. Something in the ship might explode for instance, leaving them without functioning engines and unable to manoeuvre, or any hails to command for backup will be stopped against the brick wall of Klingon signal disruptors. It lets the crew do what they want, it just foils them at every turn. It’s been programmed to take in consideration every course of action conceivable. Every possible permutation.

Every imaginable scenario.

Except one.

No one has any idea how the Tarsus Proxy Code even works, so no one has ever been able design something to counteract it.

No one except the person who wrote it; Jim.

As he’d told both Christopher and Bones, he’d been delirious and out of his mind with pain when he designed it. The main problem he’d been facing was how to get around the planet wide signal blocker, and the obvious solution -go find and disable the generator and server bank- had been way too time consuming, and far, far too risky.

But Jim had also been a teenager.

And if there’s one thing teenagers are good at, it’s getting round Federation netblocks to download
the music and films they want regardless of the age restriction laws.

Most teenagers know how to use a VPN and proxy combo to pretend they’re someone else using someone else’s computer terminal in order to get access to pirate bay and its interstellar counterparts. Jim had just wanted to watch horror movies okay? Which he knows is horribly ironic now, but he had. So he’d learned not just how to use proxies and VPN’s, but how to code and make them too.

Then he’d simply… applied the same logic to the Tarsus signal blocker. Treated it like one big Federation netblock.

It shouldn’t have worked. It really shouldn’t. A netblock and a wide range signal disrupter field are not the same thing, and the same laws of physics and computing should not apply to them both. But Jim had been desperate and he hadn’t had any other ideas so he’d done it anyway.

And it had worked.

He’d just told the generator server that he wasn’t a signal from on the planet inside the field, but just a signal from a ship out in space. It was perfectly fine for the field to let his signal out because it was never inside the field to start with. He had lied to the computer.

And once the signal was out, he’d latched it onto the nearest federation vessel, treated it like a massive VPN so that the Tarsus severs didn’t lock him back out, and then blasted the biggest and loudest SOS he could manage.

And he does the same thing here.

The simulator program can’t block his distress signal and call for emergency back-up, because Jim tells the program that it’s not coming from him, but from itself. And that means it can’t stop ships responding to the SOS, because it thinks it broadcast the SOS itself.

But then 30 something ships show up ready to face down only two Klingon warbirds, and no matter how sophisticated it is, the sim program can’t come up with a way to stop them from succeeding and still stick to its directive of “follow the laws of physics”. The sim gets trapped by its own programming, stuck in a logic-based infinity loop.

Does it follow the directive to block all successful rescue attempts? Or does it follow the directive to do so only in viable, real world ways?

It can’t do both.

But it tries to anyway, overloads, and crashes.

Jim sits back in the Captain’s chair slowly as the screens and lights flicker and die, and lets out a shaky breath.

He can hear the uproar on the observation deck. They all can.

He’s surprised no one has come down to yell at them and demand to know what happened yet. Judging by the way Bones keeps twisting his fingers around where his wedding ring used to sit and keeps staring at the bottom of the access stairs, he’s surprised too.

Jim knows Christopher and Spock are up there though, and he’s hoping that Christopher at least will be able to contain the yelling to the upper floor. Spock wasn’t told what was going to happen, but it must have been obvious from their previous conversation that something would. He probably
mentally prepared himself for an unexpected event, and was hopefully therefore helping his Captain.

“Soooo is anyone going to explain what just happened?” the cadet still sat that tactics panel asks awkwardly into the stretching silence.

“Yes,” Bones drawls. “You just witnessed a cadet led revolution.”

It’s another ten minutes before anyone seems to remember they’re all sat downstairs waiting to be dismissed. Admiral Nogura stomps in through the backdoor with a Commodore Jim doesn’t recognise trailing behind him. The stoic Japanese man glances up at the commotion upstairs, and shakes his head (and rolls his eyes? Did he just roll his eyes?) before continuing on passed and stepping down into the sim room instead.

“I’ve got four or five different variations of the same message all coming from the noisy buggers upstairs,” he says dryly. “But I’m not going up there until Captain Pike has calmed them all down some more. In the meantime, I will deal with you lot. Kirk I have no doubt you were the ringleader of this little coop, so how about we start with you telling me which of the other cadets in here were in on it, and which I should let go free.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jim spots Bones and Uhura nodding at each.

“Just Doctor McCoy and I,” Uhura speaks up before Jim can protest.

“Is that the truth and the whole truth?” the Admiral asks with a stern look at every person in the room in turn.

“It is sir,” Bones says gruffly. “No one other than Cadet Uhura and myself knew what was gonna go down.”

“Alright then. McCoy, Kirk and Uhura remain in your seats. The rest of you are free to go.”

There’s a short pause while everyone exchanges unsure glances and then they all stand at once, eager to get out of the room and out of the blame range.

“So tell me Kirk,” Nogura starts with flintily, “What was your aim? What was the goal of your little trick here?”

“His aim was to prove once and for all that the Kobayashi Maru exam is a pointless waste of time as it’s teaching the wrong thing,” Christopher answers for him in a steely tone as he steps off of the bottom of the stairwell. “Captains and Commanders are supposed to keep their crews safe, to come up with the escape route where none should exist, to never stop looking for the out.”

“The Kobayashi Maru is supposed to teach cadets that sometimes there is no escape from death, and they’ve just got get on with it anyway,” Nogura refutes, voice brooking no argument.

“But it doesn’t,” Jim insists from between gritted teeth. “Every single cadet that steps into this room knows three things. One. They can’t win. Two. It’s only a simulation. And three. The result of this test has absolutely no impact on their chosen career path unless they’re on command track. And even then it’s only minimal because you expect people to grow and develop as they progress through the ranks. Within two years, the assessment you receive here is irrelevant. Everyone knows all this and so almost no one even tries. It doesn’t matter. No real lives are on the line and no one passes so no one cares.”

“You say that Kirk, but it would seem to me that you care very much indeed.”
“Because unlike most cadets, I’ve done this for real. I’ve stared my own death in the face in a hopeless situation, accepted it as fact, and gotten on with what needed to be done anyway. And because of that, I can see the very real danger this test presents. It’s not teaching cadets to face fear and remain calm. It’s teaching them to give up and accept it as inevitable; that they shouldn’t even bother looking for a way to avoid it. If I had done that? Thousands more people would probably have died, and too many had been slaughtered in front of me already.”

Nogura frowns at him, some concern finally creeping through his unrelentingly stern façade.

“You claim previous experience, but I see no evidence of it,” the unknown Commodore suddenly cuts in with a sneer. “I’ve seen your records Cadet Kirk, and at no point in there is there anything resembling a large-scale massacre such as the one you’re suggesting you witnessed. In fact, there hasn’t even been a genocide of that scale since -”

“-Tarsus IV,” Nogura interrupts, blanching. “Chikushō, it’s not on your records because you were a minor. The Federation would have sealed everything to protect you. The unknown code you just used; it’s the completed version of the Tarsus Proxy isn’t it?”

The Admiral staggers back slightly and collapses into the nearest chair, looking distraught.

“Unfortunately you’re correct sir,” Christopher says lowly when Jim just thins his lips and doesn’t reply.

“Okay. Okay.” Nogura sighs sorrowfully after a couple of steadying breathes. “Okay, here’s- here’s what I’m going to do.” A deep breath in. “Cadet Kirk, I am hereby using my powers as a senior flag officer to formally declare that you have immunity against any accusations of misconduct related to this simulation which may arise, on the basis that you have fundamental knowledge that most individuals lack that has provided you with insight that Starfleet is apparently sorely lacking.”

Jim sighs shakily in relief, sinking in his chair.

“Pike,” Nogura continues less formally, still looking pale and shaken, “take your partner home. Or to wherever it is the two of you have been staying. Let’s… try and keep both of you away from the consequences of this stunt you’ve pulled as much as possible. I’ll do my best to contain knowledge of your erm, method of crashing the simulation contained to those in the building Kirk, but I am going to have to talk to some of the other flag officers. I can’t promise it’ll work, but I’ll try and ensure you have continued privacy regarding your time spent on- regarding your past. McCoy and Uhura, I trust that I don’t have to ask you to sign none disclosure forms given that Kirk seemingly told you voluntarily… So yes, you’re free to go too.”

“Aye sir,” Christopher sighs wearily, as he slowly steps the rest of the way down into the room, heading towards Jim to help him to his feet. “I know we’ve not left you with an ideal situation to deal with, but I think you understand why we had to do it.”

“I think I do Captain, I think I do.”

No one says another word as they leave the Admiral behind in the middle of the sim room with his head still bowed.
the old nature documentary playing on the screen position in front of the long sweeping glass wall. It seemed to be focused on native Vulcan species, with a variety of giant insect-like creatures being shown scurrying over sand, and a pack of cat-bear hybrids with enormous tusk-like teeth caught huddling in the night for warmth.

Eventually Christopher gave up trying to stay abreast of whatever was happening back on campus, and joined them in the mindless watching, shifting Jim around despite his moans until he managed to slot in behind him and wrap him in his arms.

Not long after that, Jim must have fallen asleep.

He certainly has no memory of Bones leaving, or of moving into bed.

“"We’re going to overshadow the news that we’re suspending Kobayashi Maru simulation testing until after a full review and restructuring can be done by formally announcing the Captaincy of the new Flagship tomorrow afternoon."

It’s not the same meeting room he and Chris were escorted to last time they had to stand before a panel of Admirals, but the layout and orientation is so similar it might as well be. Thankfully this time, they’re not being scrutinised and investigated, but thanked for their services. Or well, at least Christopher is being thanked anyway; Jim still isn’t 100% sure we he’s also here.

“So the public’s attention will be diverted away from whatever might have escaped your net early this week?” Christopher asks, standing stiffly next to Jim.

“Nothing escaped our net Captain,” Komack insists forcefully. “Despite the absolute lack of warning we were given by you.”

“We did what with had with the resources and options that were available,” Christopher bites back.

“Gentlemen this is beside the point,” Garland interrupts, a no nonsense look on her face. “We called you here today because we have made a decision regarding Captaincy of the USS Enterprise and are ready to announce it. As I am sure you had gathered long before you’re summons here today, Command has chosen to reward your long years of distinguished service with the honour Captain Pike.”

Christopher finally smiles beside him, and Jim doesn’t try to hide his grin. Despite his outward confidence that it was a sure thing, Jim knows that Christopher had actually been nervous and had begun to doubt himself as the announcement date kept getting more and more delayed.

“We understand that you’ve already approached another member of Starfleet regarding the position of XO?” Garland continues, once again taking charge.

“I have Ma’am,” Christopher nods. “He was- I would normally stay thrilled at the offer ma’am, but that’s hardly a considerate descriptor when discussing a Vulcan, so I shall simply say that Spock spoke in a manner that indicated satisfaction when I approached him. He has since confirmed that he will be taking the position provided that Command approves of the appointment.”

“Our approval is given. We assume you have plans in mind for other senior staff? For most we will await to receive your formal staffing request documentation before agreeing or disagreeing, but we would like to discuss the matter of your Tactical officer and CMO now. It is for that reason we have asked for Mr Kirk to also be present at this meeting.”

Jim swallows and hopes they’re not about to tell him they’re grounding him for his actions with the
Maru. Or that he will have to choose between staying with Bones and going with Christopher. He’s not sure he could make that choice.

“I have some people in mind, yes,” Christopher replies cautiously. “Obviously I would like Doctor Boyce to continue under me as CMO when he returns from his current posting this summer, but I understand that will depend on whether Caitlin Barry wishes to return to my command or continue on under Captain One -Captain Benedez of Thulz I mean.”

“And if Doctor Boyce does choose to remain CMO of the Intrepid?”

Christopher drags his top teeth over his top lip briefly, a movement Jim recognises as a mild nervous twitch.

“Doctor McCoy has more than enough experience as both a senior Doctor and as the lead of a team of pharmacists, nurses, and counsellors to be able to step easily into a CMO position once he has gained a few months working knowledge of living shipboard.”

“You are proposing to take a fresh academy graduate as a CMO?”

“Not immediately,” Christopher hurries to clarify. “I’ve already spoken to him about my thoughts and he, without out actually saying as much, threaten to skin me alive if I did that to him. So I would like to propose to this board instead that I offer the position to Doctor Puri as he has extensive experience and has already to formally declared his retirement for the end of the year. Provided the maiden launch remains scheduled for early June, that should give McCoy a full six months to gain the experience he needs in order to step in when Puri departs.”

Garland exchanges a look with Admiral Mattheus, the current Surgeon General, that Jim can’t interpret.

“I will discuss this further with my colleagues before offering a solid confirmation, but you have my provisional go ahead,” Mattheus intones eventually.

“With regards to the appointment of Tactical Officer, we have some thoughts of our own we would like to offer,” Admiral Komack then picks up. “We understand that you have filed and had approved the appropriate paperwork for declaring a relationship. As you are no doubt aware, this gives your partner the right to priority assignment; in this instance Mr Kirk therefore has the right to receive a skill-set suitable posting onboard the USS Enterprise ahead of other candidates of similar standing.”

“We are aware,” Christopher says slowly, glancing at Jim hopefully.

“Given Command’s intent to fast track Mr Kirk towards a Captaincy of his own based on his Academy performance and previous life experiences, this board feels it would be acceptable to offer him the position of Tactical Officer.”

Jim blinks.

And then blinks again.

“You’re offering me Tactical Officer of the new flagship?” Jim asks slowly, his brain sluggish with disbelief.

“We have some conditions that you need to fulfil before the June maiden voyage, but yes that is correct Mr Kirk.”

Jim blinks yet again and then turns to stare at Christopher wide-eyed. Christopher shrugs as if to say
“don’t look at me, I didn’t know either”.

“The Tactical Officer. On the Enterprise?” he asks again.

“Okay we’re just going to take that as a yes,” Nogura drawls, definitely rolling his eyes this time. “We’re asking for your discretion until the official announcement tomorrow, so please keep these postings to yourselves. Kirk you may inform McCoy as we understand you’re in an approved relationship with him as well, but he must also keep quiet and neither of you are to tell anyone else.”

“Understood Sirs, Ma’am,” Christopher nods formally, still grinning bashfully.

Christopher turns into a mess of nervous excitement as soon as they’re out of the admin building, jittering and grinning as they walk back across campus. Jim’s never seen him anything like as cheerful as he is now. Calmly pleased, pleasantly relaxed, and quietly proud, yes, but not excited to the point he’s practically bouncing.

It’s not something Jim ever expect to see; Christopher is usually a very reserved and self-controlled man, someone who comes across as stern and aloof at first. Someone is actually the soothing balm to Jim’s more exuberant and vivacious approach to life, but usually gets overlooked and written off as grumpy and sullen.

But right now he’s skipping down the steps towards the bay front end of campus with so much animation and energy that several passing Cadets and officers have stopped to stare in a disbelieving manner. Jim loves it.

Jim loves him.

Jim-

Jim loves him.

He won’t deny it anymore, not to himself. He won’t keep telling himself that he needs more time to think about it, to work out what his thoughts and feelings are.

They’re plain as day.

Jim is in love with Christopher Pike.

Oh Christ, he really is totally gone on him.

The auditorium is packed when Jim enters with Bones; so much so that most of the Cadets in attendance have been made to vacate their seats and go and hover in the aisles and by the doors instead. It creates the effect of a sea of black and grey bordered on all sides by vibrant red.

The two of them stand shoulder to shoulder down the left edge, their view of the stage almost blocked by the sheer number of heads and limbs between them and the raised panel of Admirals.

“This session has been called to resolve a matter which I know has been on most of your minds this past year,” Barnett suddenly begins, causing a hush to fall over the large hall instantly. “The Captaincy of the USS Enterprise, our new flagship.”

Barnett pauses, his eyes sweeping over the crowd. In the silence, a lower murmur begins to rise.

“I know that many of you in this hall are hoping for an assignment aboard the newest ship in our
fleet. Several senior officers have been handpicked by the Captain and will receive Comms with details following this announcement. Other crew members will then be selected by these senior officers and will receive specialist training so that they are ready to take their new posts in June at the shakedown ceremony.”

Another pause, and another round of whispering. Bones elbows Jim knowingly on the side with a smirk as lots of individuals begin glancing around themselves, wondering if they or their colleagues might be one of the chosen senior officers.

“And finally, the selected Captain and his chosen XO would like it to be known that posts will be offered solely on the basis of merit and ability. Seniority will not be a factor taken into consideration in the decision-making process.”

This time the swell of noise is full blown chattering, as the Cadets all realise that this means they too have a shot of gaining a place on the Enterprise. Barnett patiently waits for it to die down to a buzz once again before clearing his throat and making his final announcement.

“And now, I would like to call Captain Christopher Pike to the front please.”

Jim woops loudly, uncaring when Komack zeroes in on him from the stage and shoots him a mildly disapproving look. His joy catches on though, and soon the hall is loud with the sound of clapping and cheering and shouts of Pike Pike Pike!

It’s very much against Starfleet etiquette, but no one seems to give a shit so they carry on even when Nogura starts looking pained.

“Captain Christopher Pike,” Barnett eventually continues, his voice sombre with formality, “on behalf of Command and the Admiralty, I hereby invoke Starfleet order sixty one point zero four-A, and appoint you as Captain of the USS Enterprise. Please report to Admiral-”

Barnett pauses as an aide darts onto the stage with a determined look on his face. The Ensign almost skids to a stop next to the Admiral and speaks quickly into his ear.

Barnett frowns as he listens, and Jim swaps a concerned look with Bones.

“We've received a distress call from Vulcan.” Barnett announces stoically. “With our primary fleet engaged in the Laurentian system, I hereby order all cadets and grounded officers to report to Hangar One immediately. Dismissed.”

Watching the sea of uniforms flowing towards the door, Jim makes the executive decision to head to the front where Barnett is having a hushed conversation with Christopher and two other grounded Captains that were present for the ceremony. Bones follows behind him closely, and off to the left, Jim can see Spock also converging on the stage.

Jim has no idea if his appointment as Tactical officer will remain given that he hasn’t graduate nor fulfilled any of Command’s conditions, but it would probably be a good idea to act as if it will until he hears otherwise.

“Kirk, Spock, glad you could join us,” Nogura greets quickly when they approach together. “I presume you’re Cadet McCoy?”

“Doctor McCoy, yes sir,” Bones grumbles but nods.

“As I was just saying,” Barnett takes over again as yet another Captain climbs onto the stage with a
concerned look. “We have very little information on what’s happening out at Vulcan. Captains, you have five minutes to agree on a split of cadets between you and then head to your assigned ships. Spock, Kirk, due to the nature of this situation your assignments are now active and you should proceed to your stations. Captain Hardek promote someone you trust to first officer of the Farragut at your discretion. As of now this is officially a Command level emergency situation and all associated orders apply. McCoy you shouldn’t even be here so just go with Pike and do as you’re told. Dismissed.”

Jim hashes out a hasty salute when all the Captains around him and Spock does so automatically, and then turns to rush after Christopher who’s already begun to stride off towards Hanger One.

“Spock, pull every upperclassman cadet who’s taken the new constellation class procedure course and assign them to the Enterprise,” Christopher clips out, clearly in full Command mode. “If there’s more of one division than we need, send some of them Captain Brody’s way for the Farragut. Except for Cadet Mitchell and any other Cadets who were on the Farragut two years ago. Send me a list of who’ve you picked for us when you’re done”

Spock nods silently and peels off to the left, his head bowed over his Padd and already tapping away rapidly.

“McCoy, this is Doctor Puri’s frequency; the Medbay is no doubt severely under stocked currently due to only having arrived in space dock three days ago. You have fifteen minutes to coordinate together to rectify that as much as possible.”

“Sir yes sir,” Bones breathes, taking the comm held out to him and also darting off in a jog after Spock. Christopher suddenly pauses his fast paced strides, to turn and face Jim. Jim narrowly avoids colliding with him and quickly jerks his body into an attentive parade rest stance.

“Kirk, grab anyone competent from communications you like and get up to the Enterprise bridge as soon as possible. I want an open line established between the other home fleet ships and Command, and as many details as you can get on what we’re heading into.”

“Permission for priority access to the transporter bay sir?” Jim requests, mind already jumping through the steps he’ll need to carry out.

“Granted. I’m sending written confirmation to the engineers now.”

“Any further orders sir?” Jim asks as he pulls his own Comm out and pings Uhura’s frequency.

“We’re warping into an emergency with a boatload of Cadets who don’t have even half as much real-world experience as you do James,” Christopher grunts. “Please try to keep me from getting too unfairly frustrated with them. Now scram, I’ll see you on the bridge shortly for that report.”

Jim grins as reassuringly as he can manage and pulls his comm up to reply to Uhura’s questioning greeting.

Despite being in possession of a priority access order, there’s still a short queue for the transporter.

Jim fidgets restlessly as they wait their turn behind a stack of ration crates.

“Kirk, you need to stand still,” Uhura sighs for the fourth time.

“Sorry, I just feel like something is off about this whole situation and I can’t put my finger on what.”
“Vulcan sending out a high priority distress call is what’s wrong Kirk. Relax, we’re on our way to help.”

“I know,” Jim sighs himself. “It’s just I- never mind, tell me how your session in the long-range sensor lab went last night? Gaila mentioned it this morning before the aborted ceremony and maybe it’ll get my mind out the anxious rut it’s stuck in.”

“Interesting actually,” Uhura frowns. “I was tracking solar systems and I picked up an emergency transmission from a Klingon prison planet.”

“A _Klingon _prison planet?” Jim asks in disbelief as they’re finally waved forward for their turn on the pad.

“Yeah, an entire Klingon Armada was destroyed. Forty-seven ships in total.”

“Heck that’s bad,” Jim grimaces as he confirms their destination with the engineer on duty. “I hope the responsible party doesn’t come over to our neck of the galactic woods.”

“You sound just like McCoy talking like that,” Uhura snorts. “All doom and gloom and predictions of death.”

“I do indeed. Energise!”

They beam up in a wave of blue-sparking energy.

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They pause briefly in the nearest refresher room to swap out their cadet reds for black and red, and black and gold respectively.

“I’ll um… go to the bathrooms down the hall to-”

“Oh give over Kirk, we’re grown adults and you’ve solidly proven your reputation is bullshit this last year. You’re dating Captain Pike for gods’ sake, so just turn your back and get on with getting changed.”

Surprised, Jim merely nods and does as he’s told.

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As soon as they make it to the bridge, Jim commandeers the Communications panel for Uhura and then darts over to his own station to check that all of the Enterprise’s shields and the tactical armoury is being powered up properly alongside the rest of the ship.

“Commander on the bridge!” the curly haired youth sat at the navigation panel suddenly chirps up, making Jim’s head swivel towards the turbo lift.

“Spock,” Jim calls, waving the Vulcan towards him.

“Report Cadet.”

“Ship power up is at 80% and increasing, Nav and helm are confirming destination as we speak and coordinating with the fleet on flight and arrival pattern. Medical are stretched to their limits as the medbay was completely un-stocked ten minutes ago but are coping as best they can. Engineering is reporting no problems, communications are running smoothly, and tactical and security will have their final checks completed in T minus five minutes,” Jim rattles off as he adjusts the start up flare of the shielding to better protect the ship’s underside during initialisation.
“Has command provided further information regarding the situation that we will be warping into?”

Jim swivels again and calls across the bridge.

“Uhura! any update yet?”

“Yes sir, further details just coming through now. I’ll send the data to the Captain’s chair for your review.”

“After you Commander,” Jim waves, standing up from his own seat. Spock once again doesn’t answer verbally, and simply strides towards the centre chair, dropping down into it with an air of confidence.

“At twenty hundred hours Federation standard time, Telemetry detected an anomaly in space,” Spock reads out after pulling up a holographic display panel. “Shortly afterwards, Starfleet received a distress call from Vulcan High command stating that the planet is experiencing widespread seismic activity. We are to assess the condition of Vulcan and assist in evacuations if necessary.”

“An anomaly?” Jim questions, disliking the vague wording. “What kind of anomaly?”

“They state that it appeared to be a lightning storm in space Cadet,” Spock clarifies emotionlessly.

Jim feels his whole body go rigid with tension. Spock must notice, because his right eyebrow rises a fraction of an inch.

“Uhura!” Jim calls again, dashing away from the chair and over to where she’s sat. “That attack! From the Klingon transmission! Was the attacking ship Romulan!”

“Kirk? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just tell me if the ship that destroyed those forty-seven ships was Romulan!”

Uhura frowns, obviously worried about his frenetic energy.

“Yes it was.”

Jim feels the blood draining from his face.

“Cadet, report,” Spock snaps when he continues to stand there with his heart pounding in ears for slightly too long.

“Keptin on the bridge!” Young navigator calls out before Jim can pull his wits back together.

“Spock what’s going on?” Christopher demands as soon as he steps into view, clearly sensing the tension.

“Sir!” Jim near yells, “We need to call a fleet wide halt until we’ve had an emergency tactical discussion. Vulcan isn’t experiencing a natural disaster, it’s under attack!”

And oh, Jim is oh so glad they know each so well, because Christopher takes one look at him and must know how serious Jim is being. Without asking a single other question, he starts shouting orders to call a stall on launch to all the ships in space dock and start an internship conference call.

“You’ve got one minute to explain to me how you worked that out Kirk before every Captain up here and half the Admiralty are baying for our blood and demanding the same answers.”
Jim takes a deep breath.

“This is madness!” Captain Ha’tarnth of the USS Rodenberry exclaims. “We can’t warp into a situation like that! The Romulans mowed down forty-seven Klingon battle cruisers, what chance do seven Starfleet exploratory vessels stand!?”

“Very little, but we have to try,” Christopher remains firm. “I propose we warp outside of Vulcan space and approach on impulse only one at a time with extreme caution. That will at least give us time to attempt hailing the attacking ship, and if things go badly, the rest of you can retreat to defend other Federation planets until the rest of the ‘Fleet returns from the Laurentian System.”

“Agreed,” Nogura bites out, his eyes narrowed with strain. “Officers, we will not order one of you to approach first, so I’m calling for a volunteer. Please remember that you will be putting your entire crew at risk as well your ship and your own lives.”

Jim and Christopher exchange a resigned look while Spock remains his usual expressionless blank. The Vulcan Commander nods though, so Christopher squares his shoulders and turns back to face the waiting officers displayed on the forward viewscreen.

“The Enterprise volunteers sir,” he says with a steady voice. “We have cutting edge shield technology and therefore have the highest chance of holding against an attack. I doubt we’ll make it beyond maybe two or three volleys of that ship’s firepower if the reports from the Kelvin remain relevant, but with any other ship that reduces to two at most.”

“If you are sure Captain,” Garland nods. “While we all dearly hope otherwise, should this end as we are predicting, know that we will hold until our last in your name.”

“The thought is appreciated,” Christopher smirks humourlessly. “Once last request?”

“Gladly Captain.”

“Make that two actually,” he huffs wryly. “First, reset all the Federation defence codes once we leave orbit in case this Romulan orders a repeat of Captain Roubu. I’d feel better knowing that this madman can’t extract that information from any us no matter what tricks he has up his sleeve. And second. I amended my will not two days ago. I don’t know if the changes have made it through the system yet but-”

He trails off with an awkward glance at Jim.

“We’ll look into it Christopher,” Garland says softly. Too softly. “Godspeed Captain, or whatever well wish you would prefer. You are now all cleared to leave space dock, go boldly Captains.”

The channels through to Command wink out one by one, leaving seven Captains exchanging unhappy and nervous looks.

“You’re crazy Pike,” Ha’tarnth says eventually. “But we’ll be right behind you. You so much as blip a hail in our direction and we’ll try to tether you out. Even if you’ve already… exploded.”

“Appreciated,” Christopher frowns. “But if we explode then you need to get the hell away. Let’s not lose any more people than we have to. See you on the other end of warp folks. Uhura, end transmission.”

Jim shudders from where he’s stood next to the Captain’s chair. Christopher looks up at him and smiles weakly.
“Not with a whimper but a bang, we’ll take the stage and leave their jaws all on the floor,” Jim recites with a huff as the older man grasps his hand loosely. “Come on sir, let’s go die in the name of everything we love.”

They warp less than half a lightyear out from Vulcan and pray that it’s enough to keep them from immediate sensor detection.

Christopher addresses the crew one final time, and then they fire up the impulse engines and start broadcasting a white flag signal on all hailing channels.

“Shields up, red alert,” Christopher orders as they inch into hailing range of the planet.

The computer follows the vocal command before Jim can even turn back to face his station, but he watches the surge of the shield generators apprehensively anyway.

“Captain they’re locking torpedoes,” Spock says from his own station by the turbolift.

“Emergency evasive, Kirk align our shields accordingly.”

“Aye sir,” Jim calls, one voice among many as he pulls auxiliary power from port nacelles and channels it into the forward shields.

The ship rocks with impact a few seconds later and the Captain calls out for a damage report.

“Deflector shields are holding!” Jim answers as Spock begins reeling off a more precise analysis.

“Engineer Olson report!” Christopher shouts into his ship comm. “Kirk keep those shields stable, Uhura are they responding to our hails?”

“Negative sir!” she shouts back, frantically typing away still.

“Hail the other ships, tell them to stay back!” Christopher yells as another volley of torpedoes slam into the Enterprise’s saucer.

“Captain, the Romulan ship has lowered some kind of high energy pulse device into the Vulcan atmosphere. It’s signal appears to be blocking our communications and transporter abilities,” Spock interjects, his façade calm despite the otherwise frantic energy of the bridge.

“Kirk, prepare to return fire everything we’ve got, Sulu status report?”

“Shields at thirty-two percent. Their weapons are powerful, sir. We can't take another hit like that!”

Jim’s hand hovers over the launch button, and he turns to catch Christopher’s eyes. He smiles with everything he’s got despite the sheer terror coursing through his veins. They’re about to die, but at least they’re with each other. Christopher smirks back knowingly and mouths something at him, something Jim can understand without actually being able to read lips.

He sucks in a final deep breath and nods, waiting for the final order to fire everything so they at least go down fighting and-

“Captain we’re being hailed!” Uhura shouts cleanly over the noise.

In an instant, silence rings across the bridge and every head swivels to stare at the Captain. Jim keeps his own face open and reassuring.
“Forward viewscreen,” Christopher eventually orders, obviously forcing himself to relax a little in the chair.

Uhura nods and transfers the call across with an obvious nervous swallow.

“Hello”

Jim eyes the Romulan on screen nervously. He’s had the misfortune to come across unstable types before, and this guy is triggering everyone of his experienced warning bells.

“I’m Captain Christopher Pike, to whom am I speaking?”

“Hi Christopher, I’m Nero,” the Romulan drawls, his smile slick and oily.

“You’ve declared war against the Federation with your actions. Withdraw. I’ll agree to arrange a conference with Romulan leadership at a neutral location.”

“I do not speak for the Empire. We stand apart, as does your Vulcan crewmember, isn’t that right Spock?”

This time, it’s Spock that most of the bridge crew turn to stare at while the man in question steps up behind Christopher.

“Pardon me, I do not believe that you and I are acquainted?”

“No we’re not,” Nero replies cryptically. “Not yet Spock. But there’s something I would like you to see. Captain Pike, your transporter has been disabled. As you can see from the damage caused by two volleys alone, you have no choice. Come aboard the Narada for negotiations. That is all.”

The connection cuts out with one final burst of noise and the silence throughout the crew remains deafening.

“Right then,” Christopher breathes a tad sarcastically. “That went swimmingly.”

As they had all already resigned themselves to messy deaths, Jim and Spock do not argue too hard when Christopher announces his intent to do as Nero had ordered.

“We gain nothing through diplomacy,” Spock states. “But I agree that we have little choice in the matter.”

“He’s going to kill you,” Jim sighs sorrowfully, “But maybe you’ll buy us some time to do something about Vulcan.”

He’s keeping a tight lid on his emotions, but he’s pretty sure Christopher knows his heart is breaking anyway.

And he’s pretty sure Christopher’s own heart is screaming too, if the look he keeps surreptitiously giving Jim is anything to go by.

“You’re correct gentlemen. Our first priority has to be disabling that drill-thing and stabilising Vulcan so I need officers with advance hand-to-hand combat training.”

“I have training sir,” Sulu pipes up from where he was obviously listening in.
“Good, come with me Helmsman. Chekov, you have the Conn.”

And without further ado, Christopher turns and strides towards the turbolift.

They’re joined as they march through engineering by Lieutenant Olson, the current acting-chief of engineering. Jim eyes the man warily, as he seems to be just a tad too care free and excited given their near brush with total annihilation not ten minutes ago.

“Without transporters, we can’t beam off the ship, we can’t assist Vulcan, we can’t do our job,” Pike clips out as they march towards the Enterprise’s shuttle hanger. “Mr Kirk, Mr Sulu, and Engineer Olson, you will space-jump from the shuttle. You will land on that device, you’ll get inside it, and then you’ll beam back to the ship.”

The three of them grunt their assent as they continue trying to keep up. Only Spock seems to be calm despite the fast pace their Captain has set.

“Mr Spock I’m leaving you in command of the Enterprise. Once we have transport capabilities and communication back up, contact Starfleet, report what the hell’s happened here so far. If all else fails, send the rest of the home fleet to rendezvous with the rest of the fleet in the Laurentian system.”

They arrive at the shuttle hanger, and Christopher neatly turns on the spot and leans back against the doors.

“Kirk,” he says, staring at him intently. “I’m promoting you to first officer.”

“Sir?” Jim blinks, given that there are at least two other officers aboard the ship that have actually graduated.

“You heard me James. You’re in charge of coming to fetch me so my mom doesn’t murder me for never introducing the two of you. Follow Spock’s lead and try not to be too rebellious or insubordinate.”

“When have I ever been?” Jim tries to joke, but he sounds too frightened for it sound anything but sad.

“Remember to leap without looking,” Christopher smiles sadly. “Spock, careful with the ship, she’s brand new.”

And with that, he slaps his hand over the door sensor and allows it to slide open behind him.

He scrambles into the blue HALO suit with apprehension roiling in his gut. Sulu is helping Olson with the chute straps on his, and off to the side Christopher is staring into the shuttle’s cockpit like he’s seeing a whole other world.

And Jim supposes he is really.

Staring into the future that he knows won’t contain him.

Jim bites down on his bottom lip to hold back the terror and tears once again and makes a decision.

“Sir, before you go in there and seal yourself off from the world,” he stutters shuffling up in front of his partner.

“I’ll keep the door into the back open until I’m ready to drop you above Vulcan,” Christopher
mumbles, his eyes still distant. Jim reaches out and grabs both his hands, trying to pull his attention into the here and now. He’s not sure who’s are trembling worse; his or Christopher’s.

It works though, as Christopher’s eyes snap to meet his. Jim can see his own emotions reflected there for a second, the fear that his other half is keeping control of with an iron fist for the sake of the crew.

“I’m not letting you go on that ship without knowing,” Jim shudders. “I need you to know.”

Christopher slides his hands up Jim’s arms and then around his back, and Jim can feel how unsteady the other man’s breathing has become.

“I already know love,” Christopher shudders himself, dropping his forehead onto Jim’s shoulder, “I’ve known for days. Weeks. I’ve known for fucking months and I was too afraid to speak up and say that I felt it too. You babbled it at me while drunk out of your mind, and I knew. I knew I should tell you then. I even took you on holiday so that I could say it properly, but I still chickened out because I’m an emotional disaster and I was worried it had only been drunken babbling.”

“Christopher,” Jim breathes, his grip finally not strong enough to prevent the tears welling at the corner of his eyes. “I- I-”

“I love you too James,” Christopher says gruffly, looking up at Jim’s face once again. “And don’t you ever forget that.”

“I won’t,” Jim promises with a shaky breath. “I never will.”

And then, in the dim light filtering through the shuttle’s viewscreen from the hanger, Jim surges forward and presses his lips against his Captain’s.

They fall and they fall and they fall.

Olson does not listen and pays for it with his life.

“Holy shit!” Sulu exclaims as Jim screams the Engineer’s name again.

And then there are angry Romulans to deal with, and the realisation that Olsen was carrying their explosive charges.

They improvise with stolen Romulan weaponry and thankfully get almost immediate confirmation that their small explosion was effective when Spock suddenly commandeers the Comm line.

“Gentlemen, I suggest you hold onto something. You have inbound headed into the atmosphere.”

“What?” Jim exclaims glancing up.

And then he sees it. The small spinning item whizzing down towards them, headed straight for the hole drilled into the planet below.

And more importantly, he sees the slightly smouldering Federation vessel streaking towards them at an angle, the familiar site of its pulsing blue tractor beam pulsing rapidly towards the device.

“Holy shit!” Sulu swears again, diving towards the edge of one the drill’s vent covers, desperate to cling on despite the extreme air turbulence being wafted their way.

“Is that the Rodenberry!?” Jim shouts as he too clings on for dear life.
“Sorry about the atmospheric kickback boys,” Captain Ha’tarnth yells, breaking into their comm channel. “Soon as we’re clear, we’ll warp this explosive out of here. Get yourselves beamed up and we’ll rendezvous with you later. If this oversized hell-beast of a ship doesn’t cripple us further that is.”

Jim doesn’t bother answering and instead concentrates on trying to breathe in the hot, howling gale, regretting taking his helmet off.

Both of them are swept off the edge of the drill platform despite their best efforts, and they tumble through the air again, this time without chutes. They’re beamed up in the nick of time though, and they land on the transporter pad hard enough to crack one of the beaming lights slightly, Jim on the bottom with Sulu on top of him.

Jim’s wrist is screaming at him as Sulu rolls off of him with groan, and his mind is torn between worry for Christopher and dealing with the unpleasant drain of adrenaline his body is experiencing. Eventually he groans himself and starts to stagger to his feet, only to have his arm grasped as he’s halfway up so that he’s hauled the rest of the way.

“Good work,” Spock sates neutrally. “Your fast work disabling the drilling device and re-enabling communications allowed the USS Rodenberry to remove the singularity device from the vicinity before it could enter into Vulcan’s core.”

“I guess Ha’tarnth meant it literally when he said he’d be right behind us,” Sulu winces, rolling his shoulders.

“He stripped his crew down to skeleton levels by transferring them to the other ships and began to approach us as soon as he noticed the barrage upon the Enterprise had lessened. Without his decision to do so, Vulcan would likely have a black hole forming at its centre as we speak.”

“A black hole!?” Jim says disbelievingly. “Is the Romulan insane!?”

“I would say that insane is likely quite an understatement Kirk,” Spock agrees with a raised eyebrow.

“Quite,” Jim breathes faintly, aware that he’s once again imitating Christopher’s pattern of speech.

“Nevertheless, he did not succeed, and did not remain long enough in Vulcan space to ascertain such after firing the singularity device. Now if you excuse me gentlemen, I have need to proceed temporarily to the planet’s surface. While the other ships of the home Fleet are now rapidly approaching with the equipment needed to stabilise the tectonic activity, there has still been widespread damage across the planet and I must ascertain that the Vulcan High Council have remained safe.”

“Spock, it’s not safe to beam down there yet,” Jim croaks, his chest feeling tighter by the second. “What if that- that Nero comes back, or we don’t manage to stabilise the planet on time!?”

Spock ignores him completely and simply calls out Energise.

Jim watches him disappear wrapped in energy as his chest tightens even more.

Someone -a security Cadet that he doesn’t recognise nor know the name of, guides him away from the transporter room and towards the centre of the ship. Through the fog beginning to haze his thoughts, he eventually realises that he’s being steered in the general direction of medbay.
They cross quickly through engineering at the core of the ship, Sulu still on their heels, and then out the other side. As they walk, Jim feels himself becoming more and more light headed and wonders what the hell is happening to him.

And then Bones is there, snaking his arms under his shoulders and almost carrying him to a biobed.

“Jimmy, I need you to breathe kid,” he can hear his best friend saying distantly. “I think you’re having an anxiety attack, I need you follow my breathing.”

“Bones,” he groans, clutching at the Doctor’s medical-blue shirt.

“That’s it, keep going. In and out. Steady as she goes.”

It takes a few more minutes, but eventually his chest begins to loosen and his vision starts to clear. Bones lets him cling to him as he shudders through the tail end of the attack and stays close even after he’s managed to push himself upright and let go.

“I need to go get some support bandages for your wrist Jim, can you sit here for a minute?”

Jim nods, glancing around at the battered Medbay as he steps away. There are scorch marks all across the walls, and several of the main light are out, replaced by emergency spotlights. At the far end of the room, the extended wing is sealed off entirely, the blast doors down and the faint shimmering haze of a forcefield security barrier can just be seen in front of it.

“What happened?” he groans when Bones eventually returns, a swath of white material in his hands.

“You had a panic attack is what happened,” Bones mumbles as he sets about scanning Jim’s wrist. “Probably because the man you’re head over heels in love with just ran off on a suicide mission after dropping you into orbit over an imploding planet.”

“No not me,” Jim mumbles back (though he doesn’t deny the probable truth of Bones’ words). “What happened to Medbay? Looks like a bomb went off in here.”

“Close enough kid,” Bones sighs with a glance at the nearest black sear, “One of those torpedoes the big ugly tattoo bastard shot at us had its blast reflected around the shielding. Half the Medbay went up in flames and Doctor Puri with it.”

“Shit, that’s my fault,” Jim near-whimpers. “I pulled power from the nacelle area to reinforce the forward shields. The transfer will have caused the shielding to go into linear stripes around the saucer edges instead of a steady plane.”

“It ain’t no one’s fault but Nero’s,” Bones growls. “If he hadn’t been tryin’ to blow us to the four winds then you wouldn’t have had to adjust the shielding to stop the whole damn ship making like a teenager smoking in a retro gas station. I’ve spent enough time learning helm duties to know that you did the only thing you could. Now lie the fuck down and let me wrap this cracked bone of yours.”

Jim does as he’s told.

“Cadet Kirk.”

Jim opens his eyes and finds Spock looming over him.

“Hey,” he croaks in lieu of a more formal greeting.

“You were injured in the assault on the drill,” Spock states rather than asks. Jim treats it like a
question regardless.

“No, not really. Just my wrist.”

“And yet the monitor at the end of this biobed suggests you are in some considerable distress.”

“That’s mostly emotional Spock,” Jim sighs, uncomfortable with the need for an honest answer.

Spock tips his head ever so slightly, and Jim has to banish a hundred memories of Christopher performing a similar sideways tilt back to the back of his mind.

“I see,” Spock eventually responds, clearly not actually understanding. “I presume this is due to your close personal relationship with our Captain.”

“Spock honey, perhaps leave that discussion for another time,” A woman dressed in a loose flowing tunic-style dress says, stepping up behind the Commander and placing her hands on his shoulders.

“I am sure you are correct mother,” Spock nods. “But I unfortunately must continue to ascertain the Cadet’s mental and emotional wellbeing anyway. I cannot safely hand over command of the ship to him if he too is emotionally compromised.”

“What!” Jim screeches loudly, sitting bolt upright in a hurry.

“This is a nightmare,” Jim groans to Bones as the two of them jog quickly up to the bridge.

“Oh you’re telling me that?” Bones mock-gasps. “Did you magically forget every word that’s come out of my mouth about space over the last three years?”

“But what the hell is Spock thinking!? We saved his planet, both his parents are on board, and yes, the Rodenberry accidentally created a miniature black hole that swallowed a primitive moon, but the ship itself managed to limp away! What the hell does he mean the emotional backlash from Vulcan’s inhabitants is affecting him. How does that even work!!”

“If the Vulcan says he’s emotionally compromised, then he’s emotionally compromised kid.”

“He just doesn’t want to have to deal with giant confab I’m now going to have to have with the Captains of the other ships,” Jim grumbles. “We haven’t got time. Nero will be heading for Earth next no doubt, and Christopher made me promise I’d dash in like prince charming and save his ass.”

“So let’s go convince everybody that we need to get a shift on.”

Jim sighs loudly for dramatic effect, and then marches onto the bridge to announce to the crew that their leadership has changed hands yet again.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, everyone has agreed to let the Enterprise proceed first to Delta Vega to drain the radiation leaks in the base of engineering, and then onto Earth to mount a defence and stage a rescue, while the rest of the home fleet continue to scramble around Vulcan trying to reduce the tectonic activity still tearing at its surface.

Spock reappears just as Jim is beginning to grow frustrated with the other Captains’ inability to see beyond his Cadet status, and unexpectedly throws his lot in with him with absolutely no complaint, and that soon has them seeing things Jim’s way. It’s annoying that they wouldn’t listen to him without that backup, but he’ll take what he can get given the emergency nature of the situation.
“Captain, there are three humanoid life readings on the surface of the moon, not one as anticipated,” Spock announces, apropos of nothing. “And one of them is Vulcan.”

Jim blinks, as alarmed as much as Spock is pretending not to be.

“So do we beam down to them or beam them up to us?” Jim eventually asks.

“Oh god, get it off, get it off!” Jim yells as the thing gets its tongue wrapped around his ankle. He would fire at it himself, but his phaser has long since gone missing.

But before Spock can locate his own from within the myriad of jackets he’s layered in, someone else comes charging forward waving a flaming torch.

The creature screams and Jim is left with only a mild burning sensation up to his calf and not an entire missing limb.

“You are James T. Kirk,” the individual they were seeking suddenly exclaims.

“And you and I share the same katra aura,” Spock states, actually looking a little wide eyed.

Well, the younger Spock states, as it later becomes clear.

They beam back up to the ship with the Elder Spock and a chatty Scottish Engineer in tow. Jim’s leg still feels like it’s been coated in acid, but his head is too full of memories of another life to pay much mind to it.

Spock- younger Spock had protested when Older Spock (god, it’s already confusing having two of them and it’s not even been an hour yet) had proposed a mind meld, but Jim had recognised the need to hurry and get things over and done with. They could have sat around and had a long discussion, but they didn’t have the time, so he’d agreed.

(Older Spock has been staring at him in concern and repeatedly asking him how long he’s known Christopher Pike since then though, so maybe he should have listened to younger Spock anyway)

But with a new warping equation in hand, and the engineering decks no longer swimming in radiation, he put all that debacle aside for another time and gets to dealing with the now.

As soon as he and Spock beam inside the Narada, he knows that either Scotty’s aim is well off, or Scotty’s estimation of the ship’s internal design was even more of a shot in the dark than he was admitting to.

This is not a cargo bay.

This is a wide-open engineering room full of Romulans with disruptor weaponry.

They manage okay, falling into a flanking and covering routine as if they’d practiced together a thousand times before this. Before long they’ve reached the juncture where they have to either split up, or somehow manage to get to both Captain Pike and the ship containing the singularity device on after another. As the latter is pushing their already strained time limit beyond its borders, Spock runs off down one bridge and Jim down another.

At least the Narada was delayed by its initial inability to get past the Earth outer defence system, allowing the Enterprise to make up for the time they spent draining the lower decks.
Not even two minutes after leaving Spock, Jim runs into Nero.

Spock’s time travel is confirmed for the third time when the insane Romulan starts raging on about how great a Captain Jim was (will be?) and how he’s going to take great joy in seeing that he never has the chance to become so again (but technically-? Never mind).

Jim is rather more concerned about the hands around his neck than any possible destinies or future-pasts to be honest.

Not even four minutes after leaving Spock, Jim is thrown aside by Nero and promptly near strangled to death by his second in command instead.

And when he does manage to escape that choke hold, he nearly falls fatally to his death off the side of a bridge anyway.

God, he just needs to find his Christopher and get the hell out of here.

“James, what are you doing here,” Christopher croaks when Jim eventually goes splashing towards him.

“You said come save your ass, so here I am,” Jim laughs nervously as he tugs at the restraining buckles. Hell, but Christopher looks like he’s an inch for death’s door and Jim is sickened by it.

“Thank fuck you listened,” Christopher gasps back, clearly still completely terrified. “Are you sure you’re not another hallucination?”

“I’m here,” Jim says gently as he finally undoes the chest strap.

He’s immediately shoved backwards by the force of his other half slamming into a sitting position and grabbing his phaser. Two groans from behind him followed by two shallow splashes have his heart pounding in his throat even harder.

“Fuck that hurt,” Christopher groans not a second later, his whole body going limp against Jim. Clearly he doesn’t give a damn about maintaining appearances given that there’s no one else around to see their Captain struggling against the pain.

Jim just strokes a thumb through his hair above his ear a few times before carefully hauling the man to his feet and flicking his Comm open to request a beam out.

When it’s all over and done, Jim sags into the Captain’s chair in sheer exhaustion.

His throat burns with every breathe, his ribs and chest also aching. The searing sensation around his leg is slowly becoming less and less ignorable and might possibly be creeping up towards his knee. His wrist has long since lost it’s supportive bandaging, and it never did get any osteo-regeneration given that Medbay was short on equipment even before half of it was blown out into open space.

His head his pounding behind his eyes sockets, the bright wide lights of the bridge stabbing into his skull insistently. Somewhere distant, it also registers that he hasn’t eaten or drunken anything for coming up twenty-four hours now.

But they’re stuck adrift in space, with only half the usual power to the impulse engines, and no warp
core at all.

There are things he needs to think about as Acting Captain. Such as how they’re going to ensure there’s enough working replicators to keep feeding everyone adequately, whether or not the damage to the air recycler has been repaired yet, how well their fresh water turbine system is running after its outer shell was doused in radiation.

How they’re going to get more supplies to Medbay while they wait for another ship to come tow them back to Earth and space dock.

How they’re going to organise the crew rota so that everyone gets enough rest and downtime despite the sheer number of repair jobs that need doing and the smaller than normal crew capacity.

How he’s going to get through the next Comm meeting with Command.

What reaction the general public are going to have upon learning that the only thing that stood between them and an angry time travelling Romulan was a ship full of undergraduates Captained by a Cadet and an emotionally compromised Vulcan.

How-

Jim groans and tries once again to force back the blackness encroaching on his vision.

He wakes unexpectantly.

He does not remember going to sleep.

There’s an oxygen wire hooked under his nose, and his limbs feel leaden. The lights of where ever he is have been dimmed, and he has that light headed feeling typical of being dosed with muscle relaxants and painkillers. And somewhere close by is a familiar grumbling sound.

When he eventually manages to make his head turn despite the stiffness in his neck, he’s greeted with the sight of Christopher propped up slightly in a biobed, a screen position over him casting a low light over his too-pale face.

Jim must make a noise at that point, because Christopher twitches and then turns slowly to look at him.

“You’re almost in as bad a shape as me James,” he rasps with a fond smile. “That’s pretty impressive given my spinal cord has been chewed on.”

“Stop trying to talk Pike or I’ll clamp your mouth shut!” Jim hears echo from beyond what he assumes is a privacy partition. Christopher pulls a face and looks like he’s contemplating throwing up his middle finger despite Bones not being able to see it.

“Wha’ happen’?” Jim tries to ask. But it comes out in such a pained slur, he can barely understand it himself.

“You’re an idiot is what,” Bones growls, appearing suddenly, his shirt stained with drying blood up one sleeve. “You should have come to Medbay with Christopher and I as soon as you got back onboard, not gone rushing off with Spock to the bridge.”

“Was needed.” Jim protests painfully.

“You almost died,” Bones snaps with a pointed finger. “You slid out of that damned chair and had a
seizure. If little Chekov hadn’t reacted as fast as he had, I wouldn’t have gotten to you quick enough to resuscitate you! And then when I do, I find your blood absolutely swimming with toxins! Your neck pulverised to the point of two cracked spinal bones! And so many of your ribs broken it’s amazing you only managed to puncture the one lung when you started convulsing! And that’s without mentioning the extensive third degree burns you were ignoring on your leg!”

Jim grimaces rather than verbally replying.

“It’s a toss up now between you and actual Captain Dunderhead here over which one of you is getting the biggest idiot on the Enterprise award.” Bones concludes with a snarl. “Both of you are staying here until we finally get back to Earth whether you like it or not.”

“It’s not like I can get just get up and walk out,” Christopher grumps, rolling his eyes.

“Stop! Talking!” Bones growls dangerously. “Or I seriously will reconsider my decision not to gag you’re your mental health be damned.”

And with that, the clearly exceptionally stressed Doctor storms back out again.

“God he’s even worse than Boyce when he’s tired,” Christopher whispers with a faux-grimace. Jim just huffs in otherwise silent agreement and lets his eyes slide shut again.

True to his word, Bones keeps both of them tucked away in Medbay for the entire two weeks they spend chugging along on impulse only. Jim starts tearing at his hair in boredom after the first five days and continues to do so even after Bones starts letting Spock in to see him regularly to discuss the status of the ship.

(Spock continues to treat him as Captain, despite his prolonged stay in Medbay. Jim tries to hand the Acting Captaincy back over, but Spock won’t hear of it, and so Jim is left to carry on making decisions from his bed and signing off paperwork.)

Despite his words to Jim when he first woke up though, Christopher obviously is in a very bad condition. Jim learns fairly early on during his confinement that the other man has almost no sensation in his lower limbs other than a constant painful tingling, and that his nervous system has been damaged badly enough that his hands currently shake constantly.

He also spends most of his time asleep, a state brought on both by his body’s natural response to the trauma inflicted upon it, and by the sheer amount of drugs Bones is having to administer to him thanks to the literal slug that was apparently living inside his spine.

(Jim has seen it, and by fucking god…) 

And well, that sleep is not always restful either.

After the first night, Jim had begged Bones until he conceded and pushed their beds closer together. Watching Christopher struggle through nightmares out of reach had been as agonising as knowing that he was having nightmares in the first place.

At least this way, he can stretch across the small gap between them and stroke Christopher’s hair and talk to him quietly until he gasps awake, and then he can cradle his head gently and whisper reassurances until he calms down afterwards.

Occasionally, they’ll switch roles in that arrangement, and Jim will be the one sobbing himself awake while Christopher does his best to hold him. But mostly Jim’s problems lie in his too heavy limbs and
constant pounding headache, and not in the horrors that await him in his dreams.

They’re transferred straight to Starfleet Medical once the USS Endeavour has finally towed them the last few lightyears back to space dock.

Jim lets it happen without complaint, as he’s painfully aware that his condition has barely improved despite the fact that it’s been two weeks and the fact that Bones has been stabbing him with various hypos on a daily basis.

“I’ll finally be able to synthesis some proper antivenins,” the Doctor crows happily as their beds are pushed towards the transporter room. “No more of this simple stasis bull I’ve been forced to resort to. Goddamn slug, spewing nerve dissolving shit everywhere, lighting up all your pain receptors like the fucking fourth of July. And as for you Jim, I’ll finally be able to drain all that access lactic acid without causing your cells to all go into shock due to fucking withdrawal. What the fuck kind of animal has a tongue full of addictive venom!?” he spits.

“The type that evolved on Delta Vega,” Jim and Christopher chant together out of habit, having heard this same rant more than a dozen times now.

“I am going to unfix your vocal chords, I swear upon my poor mother’s immortal soul,” Bones growls at Christopher.

“It wouldn’t stop me talking and you know it,” Christopher replies entirely too cheerfully with a cheeky grin aimed at Jim. “I’m too much of a big ‘ole homo for you to ever truly get me to shut up.”

“Jim what the fuck sort of nonsense have you been filling his head with now!”

“True love is a hell of a drug Bonesy,” is all Jim laughs back. “Did you know he still won’t let me say sorry despite the fact that I lost the warp core of his brand-new ship? And! He spent all of yesterday bitching to command for me because they said that relationship paperwork updates are the least of their concern right now!”

“Oh my god, you two should never have met.”

A week later and Jim can finally drag himself out of bed.

A week later and the first place Jim drags himself to into the bed in the room adjacent to his.

Christopher sighs happily as Jim wraps his arms around him and presses their lips together again. They’re both too physically wrecked still to do more than that but they both know it will evolve into more eventually. Plus, Bones will gripe and complain at them when it does happen, and Jim can’t wait.

It’ll be a long road until they’re both properly back on their feet. But it’s a road they’ll walk together.

And in the meantime, Jim is happy to fall asleep wrapped in love.

Chapter End Notes

And so Jim was made a Captain, and Christopher was promoted to Admiral. And then
they got sick and tired of not being in the same place for more than a few weeks at a

time, and Bones whipped out some rings, married them, and helped them bully the rest
of the Admiralty into giving Christopher a post on board the Enterprise as a senior first
contact negotiator specialist.

And then, eventually, they lived happily ever after.

PS. keep an eye for falling eggs. You never know who might drop some!
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