As cadets on a summer internship, Kirk and McCoy are supposed to keep their eyes open and their mouths shut. As far as Bones is concerned, that’s just plain wrong on Jim Kirk, but Jim seems determined to follow orders and fall in line for a change. After all, they’ve both seen enough trouble in two years at the Academy, and this is the Peace Mission of Axanar. However, when a mystery starts to weave itself around the mission, and the senior officers don’t seem interested in investigating, how far can Kirk and McCoy let it go?
Anyway, this has been a long time coming. It got sidetracked due to real life, writer's block, and all the usual bullshit. I hope it turns out the way I'd hoped.
Chapter 1

The seats were really goddamned uncomfortable. That hadn't changed.

Leonard McCoy was sitting next to Jim Kirk in the field house at Starfleet Academy. It was the only indoor area on campus large enough to hold the faculty, staff, cadets, new graduates, and all their families. The high, transparent aluminum ceilings let in what little daylight eked through the clouds, fog, and rain outside. The temporary stage was festively adorned with banners and crowned with the flags of every Federation homeworld. Neat rows of cadets sat perfectly still as Admiral Barnett delivered the commencement address.

Leonard snuck a sideways glance at Jim.

Two years ago, Jim would have simply gotten up and left, rather than let anyone tell him to sit quietly on polymer chairs that were never meant to be used by any human with functional nerve endings. He would have deemed the ceremony a sanctimonious pony show and walked out. That was before he’d taken up a dare, for reasons that he’d claimed he hadn’t quite understood at the time, and donned the uniform his father had once worn.

One year ago, Jim had sat through the ceremony, but he’d fidgeted the whole time. Squirmed. His untamed energy had his leg twitching, even as he’d struggled to restrain himself and act like the Medal of Honor recipient that he was, even if fewer than a dozen people knew about it. He’d occasionally hissed sideways at Leonard, and complained under his breath about the goddamned seats. He had frequently peeked at the chrono, probably wondering when the crusty old Admiral at the podium would shut up so he could get on with celebrating the simple fact that he’d survived the year.

That was before he’d come within a heartbeat of not surviving it. That was before Jim had realized he couldn’t do it all on his own, that fate was an illusion at best, and that he couldn’t save everyone. That was before he’d been thrown out of the center of his own universe and had finally stepped into a larger world.

No, the seats hadn’t changed, but Jim Kirk certainly had.

The young man’s face was set firmly, respectfully. He was listening to the Admiral’s speech; not daydreaming, but actively listening. Shoulders relaxed but not slouched. Hands resting on his knees, sitting at attention. The picture of a model Starfleet cadet.

Then, as if sensing that Leonard was looking at him, his head turned just the slightest bit and he made eye contact. A sly, subtle grin lit his face, and, as if in answer to an unspoken question, he winked.

Leonard rolled his eyes.

Okay, so maybe not everything had changed.

Soon, the speech ended, and Leonard did not get slightly choked up as he watched a solemn procession of Cadets First Class march up to the stage, one by one, to receive their branch insignia and official commissions as Starfleet Officers. The newly commissioned officers were mostly ensigns, but some cadets with advanced degrees were commissioned directly to the rank of lieutenant. With two doctorate degrees, Leonard knew he’d start with the higher rank. For that matter, he could technically graduate in three years, since he didn’t have to complete medical
school in addition to the basic requirements for medical officer candidates. It was a little secret he’d been keeping from Jim.

If Jim’s excessively ambitious plan to graduate in three years failed, Leonard could always do another research project. Stay planetside until Jim was ready to launch his own career. Sure, they could go their separate ways, but for reasons Leonard didn’t quite want to define, he didn’t want to. Jim was his best friend, something like the brother he’d never had, and they’d been through hell together, more than once. That meant something. He’d promised the kid he’d go with him, and wouldn’t leave without him, if at all possible. He intended to keep that promise.

Whether they graduated in three or four years, Jim would receive his commission as an ensign, and Leonard had to wonder how long that rank could contain him. Despite the year’s setbacks, Jim’s determination hadn’t waned, and he’d finished an unbelievable course load during the spring semester. He’d recovered from the shuttle crash, cleared from both medical and psychological injuries. Jim still had some emotional scars, but he was handling them well, and doing it under immense strain.

For the first time in their history together, Leonard had watched the signs of exhaustion really start to pull on a man who usually radiated energy like a fusion reactor. He had been sure Jim would eventually crack under the pressure, but to his wonder and amazement, it was like watching coal form a diamond in front of him. A very rough diamond, with dark circles under his eyes and a propensity to catch head colds too easily, but still... he shined.

Leonard snuck another quick glance at Jim, and was somewhat stunned to see a sheen of moisture on the kid’s cheeks. Graduations were rites of passage, and it looked as though Jim had finally reached a point in his life where the weight of such events meant something to him. At one point, Jim wouldn’t have cared, and Leonard would guess that it was because somewhere along the way, Jim had become convinced that he’d never reach such a milestone, and that even if he did, no one would notice or care. Now, it was within his grasp, and people were watching him.

Leonard turned his attention away from Jim to watch the ceremony. He wouldn’t mention what he’d seen.

As the last of the graduates descended from the stage, the familiar form of Captain Pike stepped up to the podium. Admiral Barnett was the Commander of Starfleet Academy, but Captain Pike was Commandant of Cadets. Traditionally a Captain’s position, it was technically a command post. While the Admiral ran the academy itself, the Commandant led the cadets. The Commandant gave a final send-off at the end of the commissioning ceremony – usually a superfluous, rambling lecture about great adventures and embarking on the future and some such dribble. Light-hearted, with a pretense at profundity.

Somehow, with the way this year had gone, and the type of guy Pike seemed to be, Leonard had higher hopes.

A polite round of applause faded as Pike cleared his throat. He looked down at the graduates in the front rows.

“If you have crossed this stage today, then you’ve already learned everything this Academy can teach you, and there’s little left to say. Classes are over, but remember - training doesn’t end. Your education as a Starfleet officer is a continuum, and a commission is just one small signpost on a long journey. May your words be direct, your actions beyond reproach, your sense of duty profound, and your curiosity as infinite as the reaches of space that you will soon explore. If you follow that, then you will proudly represent the best of Starfleet as we continue our journey across the stars. In the old naval tradition, I wish you clear horizons and fair winds ahead.”
Then, Pike’s head lifted, and his gaze swept across the crowd, to the back of the vast audience.

“For those of you who are still waiting to cross this stage, there’s a lot left to say. That’s why you’re not going anywhere yet.”

A light chuckle rippled through the crowd.

Pike gave a subtle grin. “I also have some advice. If training is a continuum, then you’re already well along your journey with Starfleet. Graduation isn’t what makes a Starfleet officer. It’s the slow progress you make every day. A cadet’s uniform is still a Starfleet uniform; a privilege and a responsibility. It’s a mark of duty and honor. You earn it every day you wake up and fulfill your commitments. You also face risks every day.

“While we often think of the Academy as an isolated environment in which to train – a place with a safety net where you can test your abilities before you ever face any real risks – the reality of your uniform bears a heavier weight. This year we remember the loss of Cadet Second Class Abhaya Tambe.” He paused, and Leonard watched the slight shifting in the crowd around him, as the previously statuesque rows of cadets reacted to the memory, looking at each other, murmuring and whispering. A quick glance to the side allowed Leonard to see the tight clench of Jim’s jawline, the way his throat moved as he swallowed. Behind the podium, Pike bowed his head briefly before looking back at the crowd.

“Tambe’s rank was Cadet, but she was a leader in the eyes of Starfleet, and her peers. She led her flight squad into the black. The fact that it was a training flight was irrelevant; the danger and risk is still real. It’s real every day. Space doesn’t care about the rank on your collar. As members of Starfleet, whether cadets, crewmen, or officers, we embrace that risk. To honor her memory, and the memories of all Starfleet personnel who have been lost in the black, you need to remember that the burden of leadership and duty begins the moment you don a Starfleet uniform.

“Cadets, reach up to your collars and feel that insignia. Go ahead, do it.”

Feeling a bit awkward, and surprised by the unusual order, Leonard reached up and ran his fingers along the smooth, cool metal of the golden delta insignia on his collar. When he’d received it with his uniform during in-processing the day he’d arrived at the Academy, it hadn’t seemed like much of a big deal. It was just another thing he had to do if he wanted any chance of salvaging his career as a doctor. He had no personal attachment to the simple triangular badge. He just wanted to graduate and get on with doing something worthwhile with his life.

Now, he felt something else. Warm and thick, a sense of pride welled up in his chest, tightening his throat. His eyes felt hot, and he barely managed to blink back a couple of tears that threatened to spill over.

Well, damn.

So maybe it was more than just salvaging his career now.

He glanced over at Jim again, wondering what Jim was thinking about as he considered his own insignia, but this time, Jim was looking back at him, wearing an enigmatic sort of grin. Jim gave him a slight nod, then returned his attention to Pike.

“That insignia, Cadets, is a symbol of the legacy you carry with you. Those who have gone before you have created this legacy. The Federation was built on the sacrifices of dozens of planets and species, beginning in the days before any of our civilizations achieved trans-warp flight, and long before our various civilizations crossed paths amongst the stars. Exploration began before space
flight, on the firm ground and vast oceans of our planets. Brave souls who risked everything to push the limits of knowledge and exploration, because they believed in a greater purpose and a bigger world. They made the decision to leave behind the illusions of comfort and safety, and to explore new frontiers, crossing mountains and deserts, oceans and continents. They laid the foundation for the work we continue to do.

“You’re part of that tradition now. You’re already members of Starfleet, and there’s not a sentient being in this quadrant who would fail to recognize that. As you continue to work towards your commissions, remember that. Don’t be afraid to take on greater challenges, to embrace opportunities, and to boldly go where others fear to tread.

“But at the end of the day, that insignia is only a symbol. We wear it with pride, and live up to the ideals it represents, but our decisions and our actions are what define us as members of Starfleet. Our past has created our legacy, but our decisions and actions forge our future. And each of you, individually, regardless of the symbol on your collar, will forge your own future.”

“As we send off our new officers today, remember that you’ll be following them very soon. When you do, be sure that your own actions and decisions create a legacy that you would be proud to leave behind.”

Pike’s solemn expression slowly morphed into an amused grin. “And I would advise that you keep that in mind during the academic break.”

Another subdued chuckled worked through the audience. Leonard felt himself grinning, too.

Pike nodded to the assembled crowd. “Cadets! Attention!”

Leonard jumped to his feet in perfect synchronicity with the rest of the cadets in the audience, moving as one with hundreds of other people. The unity in the movement was oddly gratifying, and he stood straight and tall with his heels tightly pressed together, hands curled neatly at his sides.

“A round of applause for our new officers!” Pike instructed enthusiastically.

The cadets, along with the assembled families and friends of the newly commissioned officers, needed no further persuasion. The surge of applause, punctuated with hoots, hollers, whistles, and cheers, filled the field house with a deafening roar, reverberating off the high ceilings. Somewhere in the middle of the cheering, Leonard thought he heard Pike officially dismiss the assembled cadets, and the crowd began to ooze out through the aisles between the chairs.

Leonard turned towards Jim and nudged his arm with an elbow. “Hey,” he said over the crowd, almost feeling like he needed to shout to be heard. “Where are you going next? I was going to go rest up a bit before heading out, but did you have a plan for tonight?” They hadn’t discussed it, but Leonard had assumed that Jim would probably be up for a few drinks at one of their favorite watering holes. Cadets and new officers alike would be celebrating all over the city tonight, and Jim rarely missed celebrations like that.

Jim turned to him with an odd look on his face. It was a smile, but it seemed just a bit off. “Of course I’ve got a plan. Figured we’d head out on the town. I just need to go take care of something first.”

Leonard frowned. “Oh?”

“It shouldn’t take long. I’ll give you a call when I’m done. I was thinking O’Leary’s Pub for
tonight. I know a bunch of guys who are heading over there around 1900 hours. I can meet you there.” The grin broadened into one of Jim’s classic shit-eating billboards, but his speech was just a bit stilted and halting. “First round’s on me.”

Leonard wanted to drill Jim for an explanation, but he’d learned one thing about Jim if nothing else: he’d tell you when he was damned well good and ready and not a moment sooner. You just had to let the kid do whatever he was going to do, because he was gonna do it anyway. “Okay, Jim. Just promise me that whatever you do, you’re not going to spend the first night of your semester break in Pike’s office getting a lecture for some crazy stunt.”

Jim clapped a hand dramatically over his heart. “Ouch! You wound me, Bones!”

“I know you, Jim.”

“And I know you just as well, Mr. Devil Came From Georgia. Who was the man who triggered a biohaz lockdown of the field house to stop the Parisi Squares tournament? All because he didn’t want to spend his Friday evening mending dislocated shoulders and cracked skulls?”

Leonard couldn’t quite stop the smirk of amusement. When he felt motivated, he could be quite talented with pranks. “The difference is that when I pull a prank, nobody can prove a thing.”

“Right,” Jim said, stretching the word out in a sarcastic drawl.

Leonard raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Come on, Jim. What have you got planned?”

Just like that, Jim’s grin faltered and his shoulders slumped. “I’m not pulling any graduation day pranks. I just got my final transcripts for the semester transmitted to my PADD before I ran over here for the ceremony.”

Leonard felt a twist of worry. Jim’s three-year graduation plan was riding on a knife’s edge. “You’ve been working your ass off all semester. Did something go wrong?”

“I don’t know. My transcripts were tagged ‘incomplete.’ That’s why I need to deal with this as soon as possible, before summer semester starts next Monday. My eligibility for some of the summer courses depends on what I took this spring.”

“Well that’s not good. Why were they incomplete? Did you miss an exam? Not pass something?”

But Jim just shook his head. “Last I knew, I was passing everything with top marks. I won’t know what’s wrong until I talk to...” His eyes flicked up and past Leonard’s shoulder. “Here... I’ve gotta go take care of this, but I’ll comm you after I’m done.”

“Okay, but –”

Leonard didn’t know what sort of protest he was trying to give, or why, but it didn’t matter, because Jim Kirk had already dodged past a thick knot of cadets and had disappeared into the crowd. Shaking his head to himself, Leonard slowly pushed through the shuffling throng of people, trying to make his way to the exit so he could escape the claustrophobic crunch of celebrating cadets. When he finally got to the door, he turned and looked back, craning his neck in an attempt to spot Jim.

After only a moment, he saw the familiar tuft of dirty blond hair next to a cluster of officers near the front of the stage. Jim waited, holding a formal position of attention until Captain Pike separated from the other officers and approached him. They spoke briefly, and then Pike inclined his head and began walking towards the door, with Kirk tight on his heels.
Curious, but not surprised, Leonard raised an eyebrow to himself, then escaped from the field house.

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The wind bit sharply through Leonard’s jacket as he made his way from the dormitories to the south gate of the main campus. The rain had stopped, but it was excessively cold for May. The quad was almost completely abandoned. It was only four hours after the graduation ceremony had ended, but most cadets had already left with their families, caught transports back home, or had disappeared into the city to start the semester break with a proper celebration.

As for Leonard... he just grumbled and tugged his jacket tighter around himself.

While he’d been waiting for Jim to comm him, he’d received an infuriating bit of news. He’d been promised a week with Joanna for the summer. He’d thought it would be whenever he was able to get to Georgia to pick up his little girl. He had two weeks off, starting tomorrow, and had planned to catch a shuttle to Atlanta in the morning. Instead, when he’d patched a communiqué through to Jocelyn’s ID code, it was routed to the Mars Colony, where his ex-wife and daughter were visiting Joce’s sister for three weeks. They’d be back in sixteen days. And by then, Leonard would be a dozen sectors away, doing shipboard research for his aviophobia project.

The infuriating part of it was that it was his own fault. He’d never actually told Jocelyn when he was coming. He’d just assumed she’d be there, and he could take his daughter for the week whenever it was convenient for him.

It wasn’t a particularly new behavior on his part.

He’d blamed Jocelyn for the divorce. He’d mentally summarized the implosion of his marriage as a product of the debacle over his father’s death and Jocelyn’s refusal to support him. It was all because of her greed and self-centered behavior. That’s what he’d told himself.

Now, after a couple of years, some experience, and a new perspective on what it meant to be there for someone, he realized that he’d been an egocentric prick. Joce hadn’t been innocent – not by a long shot – but then, neither had he. He’d wrapped himself in his work before he’d assisted in his father’s suicide, and drowned himself in bourbon afterwards. He wasn’t an easy man in the best of times, and that? That had been hell. Jocelyn hadn’t been there for him, but dammit, how could anyone have been there for him when he was in that state? Why would they want to? He certainly hadn’t been there for his baby girl through that whole mess. And now, it would be months before he’d see his Joanna again, all because he’d been too caught up in his own shit. All because the world revolved around Leonard Hothead McCoy.

The wind kicked up again, and he wrapped his arms tighter around his jacket. He was going to spend his summer alone in the depths of space, without his daughter or his best friend, and he had nobody to blame but himself.

But for now, he had two weeks until he was going to ship out. Jim would be around, taking courses over the summer semester so he could begin the following academic year as a Cadet First Class. And then, once Leonard was aboard the USS Athena, he’d be so wrapped up in his research that it wouldn’t matter. Jim hadn’t been too thrilled with the idea of Leonard going on a real deep space mission without him, but cadets couldn’t get shipboard internships unless they had already been promoted to Cadet First Class. Leonard told Jim he had gotten a waiver for the posting because he already had his medical license, but in truth, he already had the promotion. The internship had seemed like an excellent opportunity at the time, but now, it didn’t seem like such a great idea.
It had been far too long since he’d seen Joanna in person. She was growing up so fast - four years old now - and he sometimes hated himself for not being there. For his first year at the Academy, he had been so busy that his own daughter became an afterthought, with time and distance eroding his parental bonds. So, he’d convinced Jocelyn to let him send daily messages to his daughter via vid-comm, and eventually, they’d begun talking a couple of times a week. Even though she’d done well for a toddler in talking over vid-comm, he could only hope she’d still be able to accept him in person. She was bright, but shy, and he wouldn’t know how she’d react until he got there.

He’d make it up to her. He had to.

He’d try to grab a few days of leave when he got back to see Joanna before the fall semester began. Maybe try to make some sort of sincere apology to Jocelyn for being so presumptuous. He didn’t really care what she thought, and he had absolutely no designs on trying to renew the relationship, but it certainly couldn’t hurt to be on civil terms with the mother of his daughter.

For now, however, the only thing he could do would be to try to forget about it for a few hours.

The Academy gate opened, and the cab he’d called was already waiting there for him. He blew out a tight breath in relief that something, no matter how small, was going right. He climbed into the back seat and gave the address to the driver. A moment later, the lights of the city were racing by – blurry streaks on the other side of the cold window. For a moment, he imagined they were the light of passing stars, drawn out into flashing lines by the effect of the warp engines, speeding him through the galaxy, away from his daughter. Away from Jim. Away from anything and everything that mattered to him.

It was only a few minutes before the cab slowed and pulled up in front of a rustic-looking pub. Leonard muttered a thanks to the driver, swiped his credit chip against the reader, and hurried into the building.

The inside of the pub was a shock to the system after the cold and quiet of the ride over. A thick crowd and raucous laughter filled every inch of the room. It was a cacophony of clinking beer mugs, smiling waiters, shouting cadets, and even a few Academy instructors who were pretending not to notice some of the cadets’ antics. The lights had a warm yellow hue, and the air smelled like hot French fries and fresh beer.

Leonard had been looking forward to this all week, but now, the only thing keeping him from going back to his dorm and hiding behind his own private stash of bourbon was his promise to meet Jim here. He scanned the crowd. At a small, round table towards the back, he spotted the looming blue figure of Cadet Thaleb, the Andorian on Jim’s flight squad. As he moved towards the table, he finally saw Jim’s smaller form, previously hidden by his enormous squad mate. Jim caught his eye a second later.

“Bones!” he shouted over the crowd, enthusiastically waving him over to their small round table, then lifting a small glass of amber liquor. “We’ve got a round of Knob Creek with your name on it!”

Leonard made it through the dense crowd and gratefully accepted the glass, knocking back a large swallow before sitting down across from Jim. “Thanks, Jim. Hi, Thaleb.”

“Hello, Doctor McCoy.”

Despite his foul mood, Leonard had to smile. He’d been trying to get Thaleb to use his first name since they’d met after Jim’s shuttle accident, and Thaleb’s insistence on formal titles was actually endearing. Leonard didn’t often know how to deal with the vastly different cultures of various
Federation species, and he wasn’t always comfortable with figuring out how to interact, but he liked Thaleb. “I’m off-duty. It’s Leonard.”

“A member of Starfleet is always on duty,” Thaleb said sincerely. “Would you not come to the aid of any being in need of your help at any time?”

*Ah, Andorian warriors,* Leonard thought with a mental sigh. “Sure. But if I’m on-duty, then I can’t finish this bourbon,” he said, raising his glass then tipping back a sip. “And that would be a crime against fine liquor.”

“Here’s to that,” Jim said with a grin before chugging another swallow of beer from his glass. “And here’s to summer semester adventures!” He leaned forward on the table. “I’ve got some news!”

“Oh?” Leonard asked warily. When Jim made an announcement like that, it usually ended with Jim in the infirmary.

“I talked to Captain Pike.”

Suddenly serious, Leonard put down his glass of bourbon and leaned on the table. “What was going on with your transcripts?”

Jim shook his head. “Relax, Bones. They’re fine. Better than fine. I passed everything with flying colors. But... remember when I passed the Assistant Instructor testing?” He grinned broadly. “I got course credit for that! I never realized it was worth actual course credits. I’m closer to promotion than I thought.”

Leonard smiled proudly, then quickly hid the expression with a sip of bourbon. “That’s great, kid. But why the big deal with the incomplete transcripts message?”

“Well, I also took all those weekend tactics seminars. I had figured that the seminars were just individual units. I hadn’t realized that in the credit system, they show up as a full course if you’ve taken all of them. And I did.” Jim leaned forward on the table. “But if I want to have them count as a course, I’d need to take the Tactics and Survival seminar as a capstone. So... you remember that survival training course I wanted to take?”

Leonard furrowed his eyebrows. “You mean the one that you couldn’t take because it overlapped with the start of summer semester on Monday?”

“That’s the one,” Jim said, grinning broadly. “That’s the capstone for the tactics seminar series. And I’m going.”

Leonard knew full well that what Jim wanted was a hearty congratulations, thinly veiled with an eyeroll and a warning not to come back in a dozen pieces. This time, however, Leonard’s protest felt more practical. “Wait a minute... if you’re going on the survival course, how are you going to take the summer semester courses? You’ll miss a week of classes, and I know the Academy doesn’t like that. Wasn’t that how you were going to get your promotion to Cadet First Class before the start of the next academic year?”

“Don’t worry about my promotion, Bones.” Jim’s confident grin took on a mischievous edge. That look never failed to make Leonard nervous. “I’ve got it worked out.”

Leonard gave him a scrutinizing look. “You’re not telling me something.”

“What? Don’t you trust me? It’s just a change of course plans for the summer. That’s why I talked
to Pike. He approved the change, and I’m not going to miss any essential courses.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t given the Captain a mental breakdown. How many hoops is he jumping through for you this time?”

“Ouch, Bones! That stings!” Jim feigned dismay, and then took another sip of beer. “Pike didn’t have to jump through hoops. It was all on the level. I earned my way into the survival class, and my summer courses will actually work out just fine.”

“Whatever you say,” Leonard said lightly. He took a small sip of bourbon, savoring the spiciness before swallowing. Then he gave Jim a bemused grin. “Just make sure you come back in one piece. I’ve heard that class is brutal.”

“I’ll be fine, Bones,” Jim replied, raising his mug of beer towards his teammate. “Thaleb is taking the training, too.”

Leonard looked sideways at Thaleb, who nodded solemnly in answer. Leonard nodded back, then raised an eyebrow at Jim. “Are you bringing your whole flight squad?”

Jim shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “Okoru is doing an individual academic course from home in Japan for the summer. Freeman got an internship at Starfleet Headquarters. And d’Eon is working on the Engineering Department’s transporter project.” He reached over and clapped Thaleb on the shoulder. “Which leaves us, right, buddy?”

Thaleb gave Jim an absolutely somber stare. “Someone has to ensure that you don’t end up in a bloody heap at the bottom of a cliff.”

Jim’s mouth fell open and he gaped wordlessly at Thaleb’s unflinching expression for several seconds before Thaleb let out a surprisingly hearty laugh. “I’ve been learning by observing Doctor McCoy.”

Jim looked back and forth between Thaleb and Leonard a few times, appearing utterly gobsmacked. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“Ya got lucky, Jim,” Leonard said with a laugh. “Thaleb, you’re a good man.”

At that, Thaleb stopped laughing and gave Leonard a curious look. “Doctor McCoy, I am not a man.”

Although that fact was blatantly obvious, Leonard found himself actually taken aback by the sincerity of Thaleb’s statement. Not only was the guy not human, but Andorians had four genders, none of which was exactly equivalent to the human gender *male*. “I... I know that. It’s an Earth phrase. It doesn’t actually... well, I guess it doesn’t even require a person to physically be a male, or even human.”

Thaleb tilted his head in query. “Then what does it mean, if being an actual man isn’t required to be a ‘good man’?”

Leonard swallowed tightly. This was awkward. He held up his glass of bourbon, which was almost empty now, and stared into the amber liquid as he spoke. “I guess... it means a person who’s strong enough to do the right thing. Stands by his convictions. Stands by his friends. Someone who doesn’t run away when other people need him.” He glanced up over the rim of the glass to look at Thaleb, then at Jim. “Someone who makes sure everyone comes back alive.”

Before unwelcome memories from the distant and not-so-distant past could come back to haunt
him, Leonard tossed back the rest of his bourbon and closed his eyes, hiding behind the burn.

“A noble set of attributes,” Thaleb said with a hint of satisfaction. “Despite the misnomer, I’ll take it as a compliment. Thank you, Doctor McCoy.”

Leonard raised one eyebrow without actually looking up at Thaleb. “Don’t mention it.” He sat quietly for a few seconds, pointedly not thinking about the father he’d failed to save, his failed commitment to his daughter, and the man sitting across the table who’d brought him back alive. A movement out of the corner of his eye distracted him.

“Great! Food’s starting to arrive.” Jim waved at one of the waiters, who set down a basket of pub rolls and butter.

“Any more drinks?” the waiter said with a knowing smile.

Leonard held out the empty bourbon glass. “Knob Creek. Neat. Make it a double this time.” Then his stomach growled at him and he remembered that he hadn’t eaten since before the graduation ceremony. His conversation with Jocelyn had made short work of his appetite. “And... burger and fries, I guess.”

“No steamed broccoli?” Jim asked, with a serious note under the teasing question.

“No now, Jim.”

He sat back quietly and started making short work of one of the rolls as Jim ordered another round of the local microbrew and Thaleb took Jim’s suggestion of sampling the pub’s fresh-brewed root beer. A moment later, the waiter had hurried off to get their drinks, and Thaleb had dismissed himself to go use the restroom.

Without preamble, Jim grabbed his chair and swung it around to Leonard’s side of the table so they were practically shoulder to shoulder. He turned his head and leveled Leonard with one of his best ‘don’t bullshit with me’ looks, tempered with just a touch of authentic concern. It was really damned effective. “What the hell is going on, Bones?”

“Nothing, Jim,” he said stiffly. “I’m glad you got your courses figured out. I’m sure you’re gonna have a great time playing soldier out in the woods. And I’m glad Thaleb’s gonna be out there making sure you come back in one piece.” He stuffed a large bite of a roll in his mouth, chewing slowly to avoid talking.

Jim only shook his head. “Right. Thanks. So less about me and more about you,” he said sarcastically. “Come on, Bones. You’ve been miserable since you got here, but earlier, you were the one trying to make sure I was coming out to celebrate. Something happened.”

Leonard returned the unspoken question with a long-suffering sigh. The last thing he wanted was to hash over the details right now, because this time, he really couldn’t blame it on Jocelyn. Telling Jim would mean that he’d have to admit that he wasn’t going to see his daughter, and it was his own damned fault. He’d just spend the rest of the evening berating himself. Venting about the ex-wife over booze? That was easy. Raging against his own stupidity? That was just self-punishment.

But then, Jim was nothing if not a persistent bastard.

Leonard took a sip from the glass of water he’d been ignoring since Jim had put the bourbon in his hand, and cleared his throat. “I just had a lovely chat with my ex-wife. That would be enough to put anyone in a foul mood.”
Jim let out a low, sympathetic whistle. “Oh, yeah... I can see how that would do it.” His face brightened. “But hey, you’ll have your daughter soon! And you’ll get to spend all that time with her until you ship out. That’s a reason to be happy, right?”

“Yeah, it is.” He bit off another large bite of the roll.

Jim nudged his shoulder with his own. “See? It’ll be fine. You just need to eat something, blow off some steam, and forget about the old battle-axe for now. Right?”

“Yeah,” Leonard said noncommittally. “So... when do you leave for your survival training?”

Jim’s grin turned smug in an instant. “Tomorrow morning, actually.”

Leonard felt his heart sink. If he couldn’t have his daughter, he’d hoped to at least spend a few days with Jim. Maybe hit the town. Or go on that weekend trip to the Sierra Nevada range they’d discussed. Camping and fishing and stupid guy shit. Forgetting about responsibility for a few days. Instead, Jim was leaving first thing in the morning for a couple of weeks of hellish training – no outside contact allowed – and if his reckoning was right, Jim wouldn’t even get back before Leonard had to leave for the *Athena*. So... he was alone for the whole summer.

A couple of years ago, when Leonard had resigned himself to a life of seclusion, leaving behind his family and friends and accepting his lot as a lone drifter, it might not have mattered. Now, having found himself a home port and safe harbor, he felt like he’d been cut adrift again. It was disorienting.

“Bones? Hey, you okay?” Jim was nudging his shoulder again.

Leonard gave him an almost-annoyed look, and tried to keep his tone light. “Yeah. I’d just figured you’d be around this weekend. Spend some time before I shipped off.” As soon as he’d said it, he realized that he’d slipped.

Jim narrowed his eyes. “I thought you were heading to Georgia to see Joanna tomorrow morning.”

“Slight delay,” Leonard said as evenly as possible. “I’d figured I was still tired from practicals this week, and maybe you and I could go rent that cabin we talked about for the weekend, seeing as I’ll be gone all summer.”

“Bones.”

*Very* persistent bastard. “And Joanna is visiting Joce’s sister this weekend. I’d forgotten to check. So it was easier just to wait until Monday.” He gave Jim the best look of sincerity he could fake. “I’m still going, and I’ve still got her for a week. I just delayed it.” He didn’t need to mention that the delay was currently indefinite. Or that Joce’s sister lived on Mars.

Jim didn’t really look convinced, but he nodded and downed the last of his beer before grabbing the roll from Leonard’s plate and taking a large bite.

Leonard sputtered at him. “Jim, you social degenerate! Eat your own damned food!”

Jim winked at him. “Yours is tastier.”

Leonard was about to reply when the waiter reached down and deposited a double of bourbon in front of him, replaced Jim’s empty beer mug with a fresh one, and put a frosty mug of root beer at Thaleb’s spot. “Your food will be out in a few minutes, boys. Anything else for now?”
Jim pasted his best smarmy grin on his face. “Only the comm ID of the most gorgeous woman I’ve seen all night, if you’re interested.”

She gave him a friendly but patronizing smile. “You’re cute, Starfleet, but I’m taken. I’ll bring out your food when it’s ready.”

Jim sighed dramatically, then thanked her with a mock-salute.

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Juvenile.”

Some things never changed.

*******
“Incoming!”

Jim hit the ground hard, facedown, with the pack of gear on his back knocking the wind out of him as the sound phaser fire mingled with disruptor blasts overhead. A nearby explosion shook the ground beneath him. He raised his head, coughing through the smoke and dust and trying to see what had happened to the rest of his team. Another explosion kicked up more debris, and something hot and sharp glanced off his cheek.

“Fuck!” he hissed, pressing himself flat against the ground again. He low-crawled through dry leaves and tangled brush until he reached a large fallen tree trunk a few meters ahead, then shrugged out of the straps of his pack and rolled onto his back. He coughed again as he simultaneously hoisted his phaser rifle and activated his comm.

“This is Kirk. All units report in!” Jim yelled over the turmoil of weapons fire.

“This is Stuart. Fire Team Alpha all present with visual. Minor injuries only.”

“Fire Team Bravo has lost commo with Pierce and Thaleb. Their position took a direct hit.”


After a few more tense seconds, punctuated by more weapons fire and flying dirt, the comm activated. “Patrol Leader, this is Douglas. Second Squad took direct fire. Lost both fire team leaders. There are four of us left, two injured. We’re still laying down suppressive fire. Waiting for orders, sir!”

Jim clenched his teeth. How the hell could he give orders? He had no idea what was going on. With the first volley of the ambush, every unit had taken cover, and Jim still wasn’t completely sure where the teams had ended up.

He risked a peek over the tree trunk, only to have a phaser shot hit so close to his head that he could feel the heat from it. “Shit!” He dropped back down, his back pressed against the solid bulk of the trunk. With a rough brush of his arm, he wiped the sweat that was beginning to ooze into his eyes, noting with detached amusement that the smear on his sleeve was red, then he yelled into his comm again. “All units, continue laying down suppressive fire and stand by for instructions!”

A chorus of responses came back over the comm. Jim crawled to the end of the tree trunk where he’d remain obscured by the dense upended roots, and tried to get a visual on the small wooded valley that had become a chaotic battlefield. Within thirty seconds, he’d located everyone on his patrol team, and the small band of Klingons on the ridge. Ducking back down behind the tree trunk, Jim took a moment to think.

The patrolling assignment had been to trace a specific route through a narrow valley to towards a Klingon bunker. The facility was reportedly under minimal security, but had control of the regional power grid. If his team could take the bunker, they could disable the shields over a nearby Klingon command post and allow the beam-out rescue of several high-profile Federation prisoners. At least, that was the story behind their mission.

Simply put, Jim knew that they were being set up for an ambush. The terrain had made the setup...
obvious. He’d immediately requested permission to take a different route, to have his patrol unit trace a long trip around the valley and along one of the ridges so he could maintain the high ground. The request had been denied, of course. The instructors wanted to see how they’d hold up to an ambush.

Seeing as he’d already lost a quarter of one squad and most of the other squad, he’d say the mission was a spectacular bust. Still, some people were alive, they still had a power grid to disable, and he still had a decision to make. Swallowing tightly, he activated his comm unit.

“Kirk to Douglas, you’re leading Second Squad now. Reform into a single fire team and consolidate your position if possible. Continue to lay down suppressive fire between vectors 260 and 310. Grab the weapons from anyone who’s incapacitated and double up your fire. Make it look like we’ve got more people than we do.” He flinched as another explosion rocked the tree trunk.

“First Squad, Alpha team, lay down fire along vectors 280 to 350, aiming high. And Bravo Team – you’re our assault team. See that draw along the northeast corner of the ridge? That’s one of our two routes up to the bunker. Be ready to move up that draw towards the bunker on my orders. Alpha will cover you. Hold your ground until further notice. I’m setting up a diversion. Confirm orders, over.”

Every team reported in quickly. He knew they had no idea what he was planning to do, but he knew they expected him to have a plan. He had one. He just had no idea if it would work.

Quickly, he pulled his water canteens out of the pouches on his harness and dropped them by his main pack. He wouldn’t need them for the moment, and they’d just weigh him down. Then he grabbed several thermal grenades from the weapons compartment of his pack and tucked them into the empty canteen pouches. Leaving his main pack and extra gear behind, he slung his rifle along his back then slapped his comm unit. “This is Kirk. I’m heading up the west ridge and planting a set of grenades. That will be your diversion and your signal to move on the bunker, Bravo Team. Alpha Team and Second Squad will provide cover while you move. All teams confirm orders.”

“Kirk, this is Stuart. What do we do if we lose contact with you? How long do we wait for your grenades to go off?”

Jim felt himself freeze. He wasn’t sure how long it would take him to get up the ridge. He also didn’t know if he’d make it without getting shot first. But Stuart was second in command of the patrol team after himself, and if he were in Stuart’s shoes, he knew exactly what he’d want to hear. “Stuart, trust your instincts on this one. If you feel like you need to move, or I’ve taken too long, take command of the whole unit and send Bravo team to take the bunker.”

There was a pause, then, “Orders received. First Squad confirms orders.”

“Second Squad confirms orders. We’re ready.”

Jim nodded, hoping it was good enough. “Good. Patrol Leader is on the move, heading vector 310. Lift fire, lift fire! Don’t shoot me, guys.”

Staying low, Jim crawled through the thickest patch of brush he could find, heading due west towards the base of the ridge. It wasn’t a large valley, but it was enough for just a few Klingons on the ridge to effectively ambush and trap the patrol team. But Jim wasn’t with the rest of the team. He could move alone, unseen. He’d never make it all the way to the bunker, but if he could get to the ridge, he could cause some damage, and create a diversion so Bravo Team could complete their movement.

The valley floor began sloping up along the western ridge. The branches scratched his face as he
crawled, sticks and rocks dug into his knees, but he had to stay low. After several arduous minutes, he was in position for the first grenade. He synchronized the grenades to detonate together, and left the first one in place. Crawled another ten meters, and placed the second.

After a few minutes, he’d placed six thermal grenades along the area of the ridge just below the Klingons’ position. Grinning with satisfaction, he hurried back down the ridge, just far enough to get out of range. Sure, it was training, and the explosion from the grenades wouldn’t be nearly as strong as from real weapons, but he had to play it as if they were real. Only an idiot would stay within range of a thermal grenade as it detonated. Besides, even the fakes would leave him with one hell of a headache if he was too close when they went off.

Finally out of range, Jim pulled out his comm unit. “This is Patrol Leader. All units, report in. Have we lost anyone else?”

“Fire Team Alpha has one minor casualty. Still at full firepower.”

“Fire Team Bravo has regained contact with Pierce. Pierce is incapacitated, Thaleb is still missing.”

Jim bit his tongue. Bravo Team was the only team in place to move on the bunker, but could he have them leave a wounded person behind? They had to complete the mission, and time was short.

“Second Squad reporting - no further casualties. Holding position.”

“Nice work, team,” Jim said into the comm, trying both to keep his voice down and to still ensure that his team could hear him. “I’ve placed grenades along the west ridge, less than one minute until detonation. The blast should create enough of a diversion to disrupt the Klingons. Fire Team Bravo, prepare to move up the northeast corner of the valley as soon as you hear the grenades blow. Confirm.”

“What about Pierce?”

Jim steeled himself. He knew the right answer – the one his instructors would want to hear – but that didn’t mean he wanted to give the order. “You’ll have to leave him for now. Confirm orders.”

“Bravo Team confirms orders. Ready to move.”

Jim checked his detonator, which was time rigged. Twenty seconds. He grinned. Then he heard the whine of a disruptor charging behind him.

“Drop your weapon, human.”

Jim dropped his phaser rifle. It didn’t matter. He’d done his part already. His team could move without him now. But that didn't mean he was going to go down without a fight.

“Turn around.”

Jim turned to see one Klingon aiming a disruptor squarely at his chest. “I’m sorry, did you want something?”

The Klingon sneered. “Honor and glory for the Klingon Empire!”

“Oh, well, if that’s all, then I can’t really help you. I was gonna offer some deodorant. Is there anything else I can do for you?” Jim asked, killing time. Nine seconds.
He gestured crudely with the disruptor, fingering the trigger, taunting him as Jim had expected. “Die.”

“Mmmm... not today.”

“Today is a good day to die!”

Jim shrugged. “Maybe for you. But I’ve got other plans.”

Jim saw the split second of confusion on the Klingon’s face before a deafening explosion rocked the ridge. Startled by the blast, the Klingon looked back over his shoulder just long enough for Jim to launch himself at him.

The disruptor went flying, landing nearby as Jim attempted to land a blow to the Klingon’s cranial ridge. The Klingon blocked the blow and threw Jim head over heels. Jim landed on his back with a heavy thud, and hadn’t recovered from the landing before he saw the Klingon rushing at him. Bracing himself, he kicked out with his feet and sent the Klingon flipping over his head. Fueled by adrenaline, Jim lunged for the disruptor, only to fall short as the Klingon grabbed his ankles. His face snapped down into the dirt, and he felt the Klingon crawling over him, holding him down as he scrambled for his weapon.

Jim couldn’t let him get his weapon back. He had not gone on a fucking suicide mission. He was in this to win. Desperately, he used the slope of the hill to push the Klingon off of him, sending them both rolling, grappling. He was starting to feel the thrill of the fight when his momentum slammed him into a tree, with the weight of the Klingon landing on top of him. A searing pain lanced through his shoulder.

He tried to move, but he couldn’t. The Klingon was off him now, but he still felt like he was being crushed. His eyes were watering from the pain, which was shooting from his shoulder up his neck, and he couldn’t see clearly. He heard the whine of a phaser charging up, not a disruptor. The fucking Klingon must have gotten his phaser. He braced himself for the blast – it was only set to low stun for the training exercise, but getting shot fucking sucked – and heard the shot.

But it never struck him. Through his hazy vision, he saw the Klingon fall forward. A tall, blue blur was standing behind where the Klingon had been.

Feeling oddly giddy, Jim grinned. “Thaleb... you... are a lifesaver;” he gasped. A surge of pain from his shoulder made him wince. “Ow.”

In a second, Thaleb was in front of him. “My communicator was damaged, so I was unable to regain contact with my team, and I could not regroup without exposing myself to open fire. However, I saw you moving, and thought you could use backup.”

“You... are awesome.” Jim tried to nod, but his shoulder hurt too much.

“Are you injured, Kirk?”

“Just my shoulder,” he said, trying to breathe evenly through the pain. “Grab my comm. Check on the others. See if they’ve reached the bunker.”

Thaleb nodded and took the comm unit from Jim’s harness. Jim only half-heard the conversation between Thaleb and the other units. His blood was roaring in his ears, and his shoulder was throbbing.

“Kirk,” Thaleb said, his voice ringing with triumph, “the rest of Bravo Team has reached the
bunker. The one Klingon guarding it has been taken prisoner. The power grid has been deactivated.”

Jim grinned, feeling delirious. “Mission accomplished?”

“Mission accomplished.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “Good. Call for beam out.” He thought he heard Thaleb call for a beam out, but with the knowledge that the mission was over, and that they’d been successful, Jim let his body sag against the ground in relief. A moment later, the pain faded into unconsciousness.

*********

“Ow.” Jim clenched his teeth as the field medic pulled on his shoulder.

“Did that hurt?” she asked.

“No, it tickled,” Jim said flatly. “Did you have to wake me up before you set the damned thing?”

“Yes,” the medic said with a smirk that almost reminded him of Bones. “Shock is more serious than a separated shoulder, cadet. Having you regain consciousness was more important than putting your AC joint back together.” Without warning, she did something to his shoulder, and that time, he felt a distinct shifting of bones and muscles.

“Mother fu- OW.”

“Much better,” she said pleasantly.

He glared at her. “Your bedside manner is charming.”

“Your vocabulary is charming. Besides, what did you expect after getting into a tussle with a Klingon? You know that some of our best Security personnel play those roles, right?”

“Yeah. I know.” He blew out a slow breath in annoyance as she stuck a regen unit on him, then secured his arm with an immobilizer.

“Thirty minutes ought to put you back in working order, cadet, but it’ll be sore, and you’ll need better treatment once the course is over. Now go to your debriefing.”

“Thanks.” He meant it. Really. At least they weren’t sending him back to campus.

With a sigh, he walked over to the clearing where everyone was gathering around Commander Mendoza for the debriefing. The rest of the team had already been mostly fixed up from their injuries. Similar to the aftermath of several of their other missions, there was an assortment of mild phaser burns, scratches, and bruises. Pierce had a large patch of dermagel on his neck where the phaser shot had hit him, but the damage had been superficial. Other than that, the worst injury of this particular mission had been Jim’s own separated shoulder. In all honesty, the damage to the team had been pretty modest today compared to some of their missions earlier in the week. Sometimes, it was hard to remember that none of this was real. Of course, that was the point.

There were several groups taking the course simultaneously, but each team of 20 cadets trained in complete isolation from the others. Aside from the officer leading and evaluating their training, the “enemies” they encountered, and their team’s medic, they were cut off from civilization. Technically, they didn’t even know where they were. Based on the types of trees and wooded terrain, Jim figured they were somewhere in the middle of North America, but that was all he really
knew.

Even though they had an officer there to give them their assignments and evaluate their performance, they were effectively out there on their own. They went on missions during the day, slept in shifts to maintain a defensive position at night, and woke up frequently to the sound of phaser fire and explosions. They’d been sent out on one-cadet and two-cadet assignments as well, doing individual reconnaissance missions as well as overnight survival excursions. All of their supplies were in their packs, and they were expected to survive on minimalist gear. No resupply was allowed, so food had to be carried, and water had to be found and sterilized. Everyone had been injured at least twice, with access to only basic medic services. If an injury was severe enough to require a medevac, they failed the course, and had to wait until the next cycle to try again. So far, they’d only lost one person, and it was because he hadn’t properly sterilized his water. He’d be fine.

Still, it was better to fail the course because of a medevac than to fail because your decisions or leadership ruined a mission. In the Tactics and Survival capstone, cadets took risks and laid it all out on the line. Even though it was technically just a course and a credit, everyone knew that commanding officers looked closely at the cadet evaluations from this course when accepting new graduates for shipboard postings. This was the chance to show people what they could do. How much they could take. Whether they would hesitate or give it their all.

Every cadet on the team took turns in different roles for each mission. They’d be evaluated on their overall capability and performance in basic survival, but also how well they performed their duties as team members, fire team leaders, squad leaders, and patrol leaders. It wasn’t merely good enough for the mission to succeed; it was about how the mission went. As the patrol leader for this mission, Jim was in the hot seat. And he’d learned one simple fact about these mission reviews: there was no such thing as a perfect mission. At some point, he was going to get grilled.

“Ah, welcome back, Sleeping Beauty,” Commander Mendoza said lightly as Jim approached the group. “Have a nice nap?”

“All the beauty sleep in the world wouldn’t fix my ugly mug, sir,” Jim replied with a grin. He appreciated Mendoza’s sense of humor. The man worked them hard, but he kept the atmosphere from getting too dark. Jim stepped into the center of the small clearing, surrounded by the rest of the cadets. Most of them were seated, but he needed to stay on his feet for this.

The Commander nodded in approval. “Well, Kirk, seeing as you’re already well on your way to an accurate self-assessment, let’s get started here. Re-state the mission.”

Jim took a deep breath. Time to play the game. “Sir, the mission was to follow the valley route to a reportedly poorly guarded Klingon bunker, secure the bunker, and disable the power grid. This would drop the shields at the main Klingon command post, allowing the rescue of the Federation’s political prisoners.”

“And what was your plan?”

Jim barely managed to keep the annoyance from his expression. “My plan was to take First Squad by a route to the east of the valley, along the ridge, with Second Squad following at a distance of 500 meters as a reinforcement team. However, this plan was rejected.”

“Why did you propose a route that specifically contradicted the one assigned in your orders?”

Damn, but he hated justifying the obvious. “Because, sir, the specific assigned route wasn’t essential to the completion of the mission. Putting ourselves in a valley like that, which was
bordered on the east, west, and north with high ridges and hills, was setting ourselves up for an ambush. It’s bad tactics to take the low ground, especially with only one escape route.”

“Noted. Your observation of the terrain is being taken into account for your assessment. But without the option of changing the route, what did you do?”

Jim looked around at his team, catching the supportive nods of the cadets who had been assigned the roles of his squad and fire team leaders. He stood straighter at the boost of confidence, despite the fact that it made his shoulder ache. “We moved into the valley in two columns by squad, staggered by fire teams. That way, if we got ambushed, we had four separate reinforcement positions. First Squad took the east side of the valley, Second Squad moved along the west side of the valley floor. Alpha and Charlie teams were to get into place to provide suppressive fire, and then Bravo and Delta teams would overtake them and move on the bunker.”

Commander Mendoza nodded. “Why the redundant plan? Two prongs of the attack essentially mirroring each other?”

At this, Jim smiled. He knew he’d gotten this part of his planning right. “If one team was wiped out, the other was ready to move into position. Based on the topographical data we were given about the valley, it would be hard for an ambush from a single location to hit both teams at once, given the small rise in the center of the valley. I positioned myself in the middle for command-control and to keep visuals on both squads, and I could order either team to move depending on who had the advantage.”

The Commander tapped something into his PADD. “So, what happened?”

“We moved into the valley as planned, and took fire as we approached the bunker at the north end of the valley. Bravo Team of First Squad was hit, and most of Second Squad went down. At that point, I reassessed our fields of fire, the position of the Klingons on the ridge, and personnel available to complete the mission. We needed enough suppressive fire to keep the Klingons on the ridge down until we could create a diversion, thereby allowing the rest of Bravo Team to move up the ridge and take the bunker.”

“A reasonable idea, Kirk... but let’s discuss a few possible problems with that. First, what if there had been a squad of Klingons in the bunker? You only sent three cadets up that ridge. If they’d met resistance inside the bunker, they would have been taken out.”

Jim took a deep breath. Let the grilling begin. “Sir,” Jim said with more confidence than he felt, “Klingons like to meet an attack up front. It doesn’t match their species’ psych profile for them to stay in the bunker. They’d be outside, participating in the ambush. If anything, there would be one Klingon in the bunker... maybe two. And I trust my team to be able to handle those numbers.”

Mendoza raised an eyebrow, tapped something else into the PADD, but said nothing.

Jim felt his face flush with the pressure. “Additionally, sir, Alpha Team knew from the pre-mission briefing that they would to follow Bravo Team if there was a problem in the actual assault.”

Mendoza turned to Stuart, the tough-looking woman who’d led Alpha Team. “Stuart, was your team ready to move if Bravo Team had failed to take the bunker?”

Cadet Stuart nodded immediately. “Yes, sir. Cadet Kirk had thoroughly briefed us on various contingency plans. If any movement in the mission failed, the backup team would move in immediately. We already knew that second squad was immobile, so we were ready to follow Bravo Team if they didn’t manage to secure the bunker.”
“If that was in your briefing to the team, I’ll take it,” Mendoza said, jotting something else onto his PADD. When he looked back up again, his expression was even more critical. “Kirk, how strongly do you feel that this diversion tactic of yours was necessary to the mission? Do you think that setting up some pyrotechnics on the ridge made a significant contribution to the success of the mission?”

“I certainly think it gave them a better chance,” Jim said firmly.

“Did it?” Mendoza challenged.

Jim opened his mouth, but he really didn't have any proof that it had done anything to help the team. He had just been so sure that it was necessary. It had been... hadn't it?

“Sir, if I may?” Thaleb spoke up.

Mendoza tilted his head. “Go for it.”

Thaleb stood. “From my position, I was able to pay close attention to Klingon activity on the ridge. As soon as the grenades went off, the intensity of the disruptor fire dropped significantly. The grenades created a significant amount of smoke and dust. The Klingons couldn’t see through it, which gave me sufficient cover to move to Kirk’s position and offer him aid. I assume it also gave Bravo team enough time to move on the bunker with less incoming disruptor fire. Kirk’s diversion did indeed give the team a much better chance.” Without hesitation, he sat back down.

Mendoza looked down at Stuart. “Did you notice any change in the amount of incoming fire on your squad's position after the charges went off?”

Stuart nodded. “I did, sir. Significantly. Bravo team had to travel across almost 100 meters of open terrain to reach the bunker. We would have been sitting ducks if the Klingons had a clear line of sight, but nobody got shot.”

Jim felt himself release a lungful of air in relief.

Mendoza finally gave a nod of approval. “I’ll accept that.” Again, he tapped something into his PADD, then shifted his stance. “Kirk... when you said that Bravo Team would move when ‘we’ created a diversion, you actually meant you... and only you. Didn’t you?”

Jim frowned. Mendoza’s tone was unexpectedly critical, even more so than before. “Yes, sir.”

Mendoza nodded slowly. “And can you explain to me why you, as the patrol leader, decided to undertake a one-man mission up the side of the ridge to plant a set of grenades, right under the Klingons’ noses?”

So that was it. As the leader, he should have been giving orders, not putting himself in the line of fire. It was standard operating procedure for Starfleet... but as far as Jim was concerned, it was protocol that he didn’t particularly like. Especially when he had the best – and only – chance of creating a diversion.

Jim took a half-step closer and looked evenly at Commander Mendoza. “Because, sir, there were no other reasonable options. I needed the larger teams to lay down suppressive fire and to move on the bunker, and I didn’t want to split them up. I was already moving alone, and a single operative, staying low, had the best chance of planting the charges unseen.”

“Well,” Mendoza replied with a shake of his head. “Well, I don’t think that’s a sufficient reason for a single man to take such a serious risk.”

Jim released a lungful of air in relief. “But you still had a responsibility to your team. Did it even occur to you to try to delegate that mission... planting the charges... to someone else? You felt that...”
the best way to lead your team would have been to potentially leave them without a leader?”

Knowing that self-confidence was part of the evaluation, Jim pushed forward. “I have an entire
team of leaders, sir. That’s what the chain of command is for. And I felt that my job, as a leader,
was to give my team the best possible chance to complete the mission successfully. If that means I
end up getting ripped to pieces by a Klingon... I guess that’s what’s got to happen.”

“But Kirk, that would only be true if you succeeded. You were a single operative, moving directly
towards the enemy. Recognizing tactical errors is part of why we have this course. What do you
think were your odds of succeeding?”

Jim refused to look away. “Better than anyone else’s, sir. I was in a position where I could reach
the slope easily. Maybe someone else could have done it, but I wanted to keep the teams together.
It made tactical sense. If anyone was going to do it, it had to be me.”

“Even if your little stunt had turned into a suicide mission?”

Jim felt a surge of anger, hot and tight, welling up in his throat. He hadn't gone on a damned
suicide mission. He had been playing to win, and he'd won, hadn't he? “Sir... I took a calculated
risk. This is Starfleet. Risk is our business. I knew I was in no position to directly aid the assault on
the bunker, and everyone on the team already knew their jobs. I had two tactical choices: I could
either attempt the diversion, or just sit there and bark orders into the comm. If I made the attempt
and failed, the team lost nothing in a tactical sense. But if I succeeded, I gave them a better
chance.”

“So... playing the martyr to give your people a chance at survival... that’s a habit that runs in the
family, is it?”

Jim felt like someone had just kicked him. In the gut. With a steel-toed boot. Mendoza had never
mentioned his father or the Kelvin incident. In fact, in the past year, that issue had died down
around campus and almost nobody mentioned it. This had come out of the blue, and it had
blindsided him. “I don’t think that’s relevant to this situation, sir,” Jim said as evenly as possible,
even as he felt his blood running cold.

“It’s relevant if it’s part of your decision-making process,” he said plainly. “Part of this course is
for every cadet to understand why they make the decisions they do. You can’t lead until you
understand the decisions you make. So, did you go on your solo mission to give your team a better
chance of succeeding, or to stand out and play hero in the woods?” Mendoza’s tone was oddly
light, and Jim didn’t like it

Sure, the guy had a sarcastic sense of humor with the cadets, but Jim had never thought that he’d
say something like that. Maybe it seemed like a small deal to Mendoza – a tease to challenge Jim’s
motivations – but the Commander had no idea about the can of worms he’d just opened up.

There were a million things racing through Jim’s mind, and he didn’t want to say any of them. My
father played the hero, and it got him killed. I’m not here to play hero, I’m here to do a fucking job
and try to get out the other end alive. I’m here to prove what I can do, and that I can survive it, not
die in some ridiculous hero’s mission. I’m not my father. I’m in this to win.

Instead, he stood a bit straighter and said, “This wasn’t about me, sir. It was about the mission, and
it worked.”

“It did.” Mendoza’s expression was unreadable. “And you believe that the extra risk to your own
life was a fair trade for the mission working?”
Jim forced himself not to clench his hands into fists. “Absolutely.”

“Would you make the same choices again?” Mendoza’s tone left no room for wavering.

Despite the rushing blood in his ears and his growing desire to raise his voice, Jim was too well-trained to let it show. And he had only one answer. “Yes.” Then, considering this, he shook his head. “Almost.” He indicated his shoulder with a nod of his head. “I would have rolled the Klingon into the tree instead.”

The whole team chuckled lightly, and even Commander Mendoza cracked a smile. “Okay. Not too bad. Successful mission, but keep in mind what I said.”

“Yes, sir.” Jim said, trying to act as though it hadn’t bothered him at all. Just another mission review comment. Nothing more.

Mendoza looked at him for a moment, then nodded. “Okay, Kirk, take a seat.” He looked out over the whole squad. “Now, let’s look at squad-level movements and tactics. Stuart, describe the mission for First Squad.”

Taking a deep breath, Jim sat down on a rock just outside the main circle of trainees and half-listened as Cadet Stuart launched into a discussion of her squad’s mission.

He needed to shake this off. This course wasn’t just about physical and mental challenges; everything was on the table. Emotional and psychological cracks were there to be explored and exploited. If it was something that could be a weakness for a Starfleet officer, it would be prodded, poked, and razed open to bleed out to see if a Cadet really had what it took to lead other people out in the black. It was the difference between an officer and a crewman. It was what made them leaders, and why Starfleet entrusted them with the lives of not only their crews, but of the many beings they would encounter.

Jim felt confident that he’d made the best decisions possible for today’s missions. Yes, he knew that he’d bent protocols more than just a little bit. Mendoza was right; if he’d gone by the book, he would have sent someone else up the ridge. He wouldn’t have moved alone. But damn the book, because he knew he was right.

He’d done things like that during other missions – moving on his own, taking advantage of opportunities when he saw them, even if he didn’t have orders. And, naturally, he’d been reminded a couple of times that he was supposed to be part of the team, not a solo operative. He’d been lauded on his creativity and ability to think on his feet, but he knew that wasn’t everything. He was still at the Academy, and Pike had been right – Starfleet didn’t have much of the leap-without-looking mentality. They wanted their cadets to play by the book, and dammit, hadn’t he done exactly that? Hadn’t he pulled back enough? Wasn’t he playing as part of the team? Did they really want him to fall in line like everyone else and lose what made him Jim Kirk?

I guess so, he thought bitterly.

And now, to top it all off, he was being compared to his father. After everything he’d been through in the past two years, between Terra Prime and the fucking shuttle crash and his crazed roommate and everything else, they were actually asking him if he was doing this shit to play the hero or follow in his father's footsteps? Did they have any clue what actually drove him?

Screw them.

His memory flashed back to a miserable night in Iowa and a drunken, dazed conversation with a
pushy Starfleet Captain. Pike had been talking about his father, sanctimonious and preachy, about no-win scenarios and leaping without looking and hero crap, and damned if it hadn’t gotten to him, but he’d never told Pike why the message had hit home.

“Sure learned his lesson,” Jim had replied.

And that’s exactly what he’d meant. Pike had dared him to do better? Well fuck it all, of course he was going to do better, because if his father had done it right, the bastard would still be alive, wouldn’t he?

It felt like his dirty little secret. He hadn’t joined Starfleet to live up to his father’s name. He’d done it because he had been running all his life and it just seemed like another way to run. He’d done it because he had wanted to be good enough, a mantra that he’d still never quite been able to get out of his head, even after he’d understood where it had come from. And, buried deep in a part of his psyche that almost never saw daylight, he knew he’d done it because he wanted a chance to do things right where his father had royally fucked up.

Sure, in the two years since then, he’d taken on other reasons, and his own drive to succeed had been tempered by his experiences. Immersed in a world he couldn’t have understood from the outside, he’d become part of something bigger than himself with Starfleet. It hadn’t been all about him anymore. It was about the people around him, the team, and the mission. He had even told himself he understood why Captains sometimes go down with their ships.

But that didn’t mean he’d been able to forgive his father. Not completely.

He’d been a young boy with a distant and depressed mother, an angry older brother, a broken family, a history of fuck-up after disaster after catastrophe, and a surname like a damned yoke around his neck. Of course he’d been angry. And on some level, even though it was buried deeply, he knew he still was.

He’d studied the Kelvin. He’d read Pike’s dissertation. He’d gone and found records and recordings and reports. He’d considered everything from a cold, calculating, and objective point of view. Tactically, he’d come to the conclusion that his father had done the rational thing. His childish fury at the father-who-wasn’t-there had finally dimmed, but there was an anger still smoldering. Because as much as he tried to rationalize it, at the end of the day, he still couldn’t make himself understand it.

And he’d never been able to admit that to anyone... including himself.

The heat of the afternoon had sweat dripping down his face, and he brushed his forehead with his good arm. This time, there was no fresh blood – the medic had already mended the cut – but there was still a smear of dry blood on his uniform sleeve. It matched the smear from yesterday. He’d already destroyed one of the three uniforms he’d packed, and he’d have to wait until they found a river or stream if he wanted to clean either of the two that hadn’t been shredded. Not that clean uniforms were technically a priority, but fuck, they were filthy. And then, of course, he doubted he’d have enough time to actually clean them even if he found a river. There was usually barely enough time to sterilize water and refill canteens before they had to start moving again.

Damn, he was thirsty.

Jim blinked and realized he’d completely zoned out, and quickly grabbed one of his canteens and downed half of it. One of the first rules of leadership was that if you couldn’t take care of yourself, there was no way you’d ever be able to take care of anyone else. Out in the field like this, it was
harder than he’d expected it to be.

He had to admit, he was exhausted. Hell, maybe that’s why he was plowing through memories and dark thoughts he didn’t need to be considering just then. They’d covered well over a dozen kilometers of rough terrain each day, although it was hard to keep track of the actual distance. Sleep had been scarce, and ration bars were definitely not good for morale.

But really, he was glad to be out here. If he passed this course, he’d become a Cadet First Class. Technically, he wouldn’t even need the courses he’d signed up to take over the summer. He’d start the autumn semester on the same standing as the rest of the cadets graduating that year. However, even more importantly, passing this course made him eligible for an internship posting on a starship for the summer.

Jim finally allowed himself a small grin at the thought, letting his dark mood fall away.

Pike had presented him with the opportunity during their meeting, and with a list of all the ships still accepting cadets for training missions that summer. Jim had only one ship he wanted: the USS Athena. The approval had come through to his PADD before he’d left his dorm the morning the Tactics and Survival course had begun. Therefore, in five days, he’d get back from his course and barely have enough time to shower and re-pack his bags in order to catch the shuttle to the Athena in space dock.

Oh, Bones was going to piss himself.

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“Doctor McCoy, welcome aboard.” A man in a science blue uniform and Commander’s stripes greeted him with a welcoming smile and an extended hand as Leonard stepped out of the shuttle. The shuttle bay was noisy and chaotic and Leonard hadn’t had nearly enough coffee; to Leonard’s perception, this man seemed like the calm in the eye of a storm. “I’m Doctor Tavin Brex. Looks like we’ll be working together for the next few weeks.”

Despite his trepidation for the start of the mission and his discomfort with the chaos of the noisy shuttle bay, Leonard relaxed a bit as he accepted the handshake. Doctor Brex was a man of slender build, with a gentle manner and... black eyes. Actual black irises, that despite their odd coloration, were warm and friendly. “Doctor Brex,” he returned the greeting. “Thanks for accepting my application. I didn’t know if any shipboard doctors would think it was an important enough project to use up the research slot.”

“I think it’s an excellent project, and I believe the *Athena* is privileged to have you working on it with us. Most often, when ships take on cadets, they get glorified medical students or residents. With you, we have a fully trained surgeon and brilliant scientist who just hasn’t earned his commission yet.”

“Uh... thank you, sir,” Leonard replied, slightly taken aback by the boldfaced compliment.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Brex said with a conspiratorial look. “I’m planning on putting you to work.”

Relaxing marginally, Leonard shrugged. “Great, and here I was hoping to get off easy by playing the fool for eight weeks.”

Brex smiled. “I think we’ll get along just fine.” With that, he tilted his head, indicating for Leonard to follow.

Leonard nodded as he hoisted his duffel bag strap higher on his shoulder, and they made their way through the thick knot of cadets, officers, and crewmen offloading from the shuttle and finding their respective points of contact around the shuttle bay. It was fairly organized mayhem, but it was more than enough at this ridiculous hour of the morning after only one canteen of coffee. There were two more shuttles of new personnel scheduled to arrive within the next hour, and Leonard had taken the early shuttle so he could beat the last-minute madness of a mission launch. He was more than happy to follow Brex out of the shuttle bay.

Although it would be nice to hide in his new quarters until he’d unscrambled his own brain from the shuttle ride, he figured they’d be going directly to medical bay. There was certainly a ton of work to be done with the impending mission launch. Still, maybe he could ask if they stop by his new quarters first... get a moment to unpack...

“We can go to medical bay first if you want, Doctor McCoy, but I’d already figured you might want to stop by your quarters first. Drop off your bag and get settled in.”

Leonard startled at the sudden sense that Doctor Brex had responded directly to his thoughts, then the facts seeped through his caffeine-deprived brain. The black irises made sense now. “I almost forgot. You’re Betazoid, right?”

Brex nodded. “Well, yes. I assumed you already knew.”

Leonard shrugged. “I knew, but I hadn’t much thought about it.” Then he frowned. Sure, he’d
become more comfortable about working with other species than he had once been, but he’d never worked in close quarters with a telepath. “I’m sorry to ask... but... did you just read my mind?”

“Well, you were just about to ask where we were going, so the thought was pretty clear,” he said easily. “It would have been hard not to notice it.”

“So... you don’t go... uh... digging?” Instantly, he wondered if perhaps he’d asked something rude. He’d barely passed his Interspecies Relations class as it was, and he still wasn’t always easy with meeting new sentient races. He had no natural sense of how to interact, and this guy was going to be his direct supervisor for the next two months.

He was a bit relieved when Brex gave him a patient smile. “A lot of humans ask me about this if they’ve never worked with a Betazoid before. Some of you seem to have this idea that we can go sifting through a person’s memories like an open-access data file. That’s not exactly how it works. At least, not for most Betazoids. Every telepathic species is different, and even individual Betazoids are different. We’ll sense active thoughts the same way you automatically look at things that are right in front of you. I wouldn’t ask you to walk around with your eyes closed, would I?”

Leonard nodded slowly. Even though it felt like Brex could see right through him, his gut instinct upon meeting him was that he liked the guy, and that hadn’t changed. Sure, this was something new, but wasn’t that what Starfleet was all about? “No, I don’t think you would. I guess it makes sense.”

“I’m glad,” he said easily. “You know, it took me a while to learn that humans don’t always think what they mean to say. When I first started in Starfleet, it took me some time to stop answering questions that people didn’t actually want answered.”

Leonard could only imagine how that would go, and he couldn’t quite suppress his own smile. “I could see how that would be pretty funny.”

“It was, in retrospect, but at the time... I definitely learned not to address the question if a human wonders if they look fat. But I’ve been working with my current staff in sickbay for so long that they’re all used to it when I answer their questions before they ask them aloud.”

Leonard tried to imagine what that would be like. “That might be a bit... uh... unusual at first, but... I don’t think it would be so bad. Hell, it might be more efficient. I’ll bet that would have been helpful on some of the trauma surgeries I’ve worked.”

Brex tilted his head appraisingly. “It certainly can be. You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if you had a higher psi score than most humans.”

Not certain whether he should be reassured or not, Leonard shrugged. “Dunno. My mother always said I was a sensitive kid.”

“It makes you a good doctor.” He gave a sympathetic nod of his head. “And it’s probably where you learned to keep things so bottled up.” Then he laughed at what Leonard realized must have been his stunned expression. “I didn’t read your mind for that one. I read your psych profile summary that was sent with your application. Standard protocol.”

“Oh.” Now he just felt embarrassed for assuming.

“It’s okay, McCoy. Really.” He sighed. “Humans often say that Betazoids have no tact. Betazoids say that humans don’t know how to speak their minds.”

“Well, as far as humans speakin’ their minds... ain’t that the truth,” Leonard said as they walked
into a turbolift.

“Deck eight,” Brex said, smiling subtly. “Really, though, we do value many of the same things. For example, there’s a reason I accepted your research proposal for this internship. Betazoids know that health involves mind and body. Human medical practice has come a long way in treating ailments of the mind, but it still doesn’t seem to get the focus it deserves.”

The turbolift stopped, and they stepped out as Brex continued to talk. “Starfleet doctors usually focus first on the bodies of our crew members, keeping the mechanics functioning, but we sometimes forget to treat the mind. Neither of our species make our natural home in the air above our planets, or in the vacuum of space. Even for the bravest of us, an instinctive fear of the black gets to people every so often. Your project will hopefully devise coping techniques and help improve the mental health of personnel on long space missions.” He smiled again. “What could be more important than that?”

Leonard smiled in return. “I don’t think there’s much more important than that.”

“Good to hear. And... here are your quarters.” They stopped in front of a door. “Because of your credentials, I managed to convince the captain to give you junior officer’s billeting instead of throwing you in with the rest of the cadets here on the internship rotation.”

“I appreciate that,” Leonard said, feeling a bit of tension release from his shoulders. Enlisted quarters were pretty crowded, and while Leonard had dealt with worse, bunking in with a bunch of cadets on opposite work shifts would probably make it a bit more difficult to rest or focus. “I might actually be able to get some work done this way.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Brex replied. “I don’t know if they’ve assigned anyone else to your quarters yet, but better one bunkmate than five.” Brex tapped a code into the small panel on the wall, and the door slid open. “You can program your own access code once you’re inside. Take an hour or two to get yourself settled, and then meet me in the medical bay no later than 1000 hours, ship’s time. Your equipment arrived yesterday, so everything is ready for you to get started.”

“Thank you, Doctor Brex.”

“You’re quite welcome. It’s a pleasure to have you aboard.” With that, he turned and walked off down the hall.

Leonard watched him go, and decided he had done pretty well for himself in getting this assignment. In just a few minutes, he’d become certain that Brex was thoughtful, compassionate, and dedicated as a doctor. Plus, Leonard had read Brex’s professional and academic record, and the man was a skilled surgeon and talented pathologist. Hard not to respect a guy like that.

And maybe... he could get used to saying what was on his mind for a change.

Finally, Leonard nodded to himself, then walked through the doors of his quarters.

As they hissed shut, however, and Leonard looked around the sterile, unadorned features of his room, he was suddenly struck with the overwhelming sensation of being completely alone, with nothing familiar or reassuring. Of course, that’s what many Starfleet personnel had to contend with when they went on new assignments, and that’s part of what he was studying. He could research short-term fears of flying and space flight from Earth. The conditions aboard a starship were different, and those conditions were all contributing factors in the psychological status of the crew, including any issues of aviophobia. That’s why he was here.
At the moment, however, he was pretty damned cynical about his own psychological status, aviophobia be damned. As much as he liked to tell people, including himself, that he was a loner, that he liked his solitude, and that he didn’t need anyone, all it had taken was two weeks on a nearly deserted campus with its empty hallways and his empty dorm room to make him feel like part of himself had withered and died. In truth, he was a social animal, and he needed connections. Even when he was complaining about them, he needed his colleagues, classmates, and friends -- some more than others.

With a sigh, he dropped his duffel on the bed and looked around. The room was small, with two standard bunks against one wall, separated by a small partition. Each sleeping space had its own locker. A common seating area had two desks on opposite walls and a pair of armchairs with a coffee table between them. There was a drink slot in the room, which was handy. A small bathroom off the common area completed the room. Additionally, being a very junior and temporary member of the crew, he wasn’t privileged enough to have an exterior set of quarters with a viewport.

*One of the few benefits of low rank*, he thought sardonically.

Leonard also noted that it didn’t look like anyone else was living there yet. Even though he wasn’t too happy about being so isolated, he really didn’t feel like being tossed in with a random stranger right now. The room was utilitarian and basic, but for the moment, it was a bit of peace and privacy where he could get his work done. He always complained that he got interrupted from his work too often, and that there were too many people around when he needed to concentrate on his research. Really, though, when he had complained like that, he usually meant that Jim was underfoot, and he didn’t actually want Jim to leave. That’s how their friendship worked. In fact, if Jim didn’t come around to his dorm frequently enough, the room felt too empty and unnaturally quiet.

Too empty and too quiet, like his new quarters. *Dammit.*

Pushing it out of his mind, Leonard set to work emptying his duffel into the drawers. Even though he took his time, unpacking took less than thirty minutes. After washing up a bit in the tiny bathroom, and drinking a cup of coffee from the drink slot that made him desperately wish he’d brought his own coffee maker with him, Leonard was more than ready to head down to the Medical Bay and get to work. A quick check of the ship’s layout on the computer terminal at his desk gave him simple directions to the Med Bay. Take a left out of his quarters, sixty-five meters to the turbolift, three decks up, and he should be right there. He tucked his PADD under his arm, took one last peek at himself in the mirror, and with a silent bullshit pep-talk, he left.

The corridors were fairly busy. With the *Athena* in spacedock, there was a flurry of activity aboard the ship. From what he’d overheard on his shuttle trip, the impulse engines had been upgraded, the dilithium chambers had been refueled and recalibrated, and a quarter of the crew had rotated out for new assignments. The last shuttle of new crew members had probably already arrived. As soon as they received clearance from spacedock, the ship would disembark.

While the regular crew would be continuing on for a two-year mission of exploration towards the outer reaches of Federation space, Leonard and any other cadet interns who happened to be aboard were only staying with the ship for eight weeks -- long enough to accompany them for their first major mission of out space dock -- before meeting a transport ship at Space Station 83 and catching a ride back to Earth in time for the next semester. Not a long time onboard a ship, all things considered, but long enough.

Their first stop would be the Axanar system to pick up two Axanar diplomats, plus several other Federation Ambassadors and delegates. While the USS Constitution would be playing primary host
to the various prestigious delegates attending the actual Peace Conference on Axanar, the *Athena* would be transporting delegates from Axanar to the colony planet of Araxis III, and then participating in the talks on Araxis. It was a lesser mission, but part of the bigger picture of the Peace Conference.

If Leonard cared about politics, he would have been jealous about missing the actual Peace Conference. Ten years ago, a single Starfleet Captain, some guy named Garth, made the decision to violate orders and interfere with the conflict between the Axanar and the Zhitors, a species that was slaughtering the Axanar for a compound in their blood. The Zhitoran attacks had escalated, and they were teetering on the brink of an all-out invasion. Garth's actions led to other Federation ships being called for backup, and a massive battle ensued, laying waste to the planet’s major cities, but the battle was credited with ultimately saving the planet.

It was a radical reinterpretation of the non-interference clause of the Prime Directive, and the planet of Axanar had spent a decade rebuilding to recover from the mess. Politics and power in the region had changed. Now, the groundwork had been laid for peace between the Axanar and the species that had once hunted them. The Federation was providing the chance for all the planets involved to have a better future.

Of course, the only things that interested Leonard less than politics were transporter physics and extravehicular space walks, so really, he didn’t give a damn. Besides, he wasn’t here for political intrigue. He was here to run a med-psych research study. He’d have plenty to do to distract himself from being trapped out in the middle of nowhere without his friends and family.

Suddenly feeling sharply homesick, Leonard shook his head and shut off that line of thought. It would just make him more worked up than he already was. He’d be home to see his baby girl soon enough.

For now, he had plenty of work to keep himself busy. He’d be starting the initial interviews with his first research subjects as early as tomorrow, if he could get his roster approved and finalized. Plus, the plants on Araxis reportedly had some exciting medicinal qualities. Maybe he’d get permission to take a break from his regular research project to visit the planet and meet with local medical personnel there.

Leonard was so lost in thought that he was walking through the doors of the medical bay before he realized he’d gotten there. Instantly, he felt his mood lift at the familiar sights and sounds. Whether it was a small hospital on Earth or a medical bay on a starship, in Leonard’s experience, the facilities designed for the caretaking of sentient life were always a source of comfort. The med bay wasn’t very large, but it was well-lit and active. Nurses were hurrying back and forth, checking supplies and equipment for pre-departure inspections. A couple of techs were carrying small crates to what must be a back storage room. And Doctor Brex -

“Ah, Doctor McCoy!” Brex emerged from behind a small partition wall and spotted him. “You’re here sooner than I expected.”

Leonard shrugged. “I didn’t have much unpacking to do, and I’m chompin’ at the bit here.”

Brex pursed his lips in confusion, obviously at the colloquial turn of phrase.

“Just an old saying, Doctor. Means I’m eager to get to work.”

“Ah, sounds great then! Actually, I could use a hand right over here.” He tilted his head back towards the partition, which Leonard realized must be an exam area. “I was trying to finalize crew rosters and transfers in the system before we depart, and get everyone scheduled for the mandatory
baseline physicals, but then we got our first patient.”


“Not quite. This one showed up on the final shuttle with some injuries from his last assignment, and they told him to report to medical as soon as he arrived here. Nothing critical, but his shoulder needs some work, he’s got a little bit of internal bruising, and there are some abrasions and contusions that should be treated.”

Leonard couldn’t help himself -- he rolled his eyes. “So the new crew is showing up already injured? If I were superstitious, I’d say that’s a bad sign. What the hell happened to the guy? And couldn’t the doctors on his last assignment do their jobs?”

Brex shrugged. “The young man is another cadet. He was on a field training assignment that just ended this morning. They only had a medic with them, not a doctor. He told me that if he’d gone to the campus infirmary before reporting for this assignment, he would have missed his shuttle here - -” Brex froze mid-sentence.

At the same moment, something in Leonard’s chest squeezed for a second. It was gut instinct. A hunch. He felt his eyes widen just a fraction. It couldn’t be. “Wait... you’ve got to be kidding me...”

Doctor Brex frowned at him, puzzled. “Do you know this cadet, Doctor? Either way, I don’t think that it would be a problem for you to treat him. Simple injuries. I really need to finish the roster checks, but if you - -”

“I don’t have a problem with it... I’ll take care of it. No problem at all. I just need to see...” Turning away from a very surprised-looking Betazoid, Leonard hurried over to the partition and came to a clumsy halt at the foot of a biobed, on which sat a bruised, beaten, shirtless, but delighted-looking Jim Kirk.

“Bones!”

For a few seconds, Leonard stared at Jim’s smug grin, speechless. He opened his mouth a couple of times, sputtering, searching for words to describe the swirl of emotions – surprise, relief, irritation, happiness, belated worry, exasperation – and finally came up with something wholly inadequate. “This is what you weren’t telling me! You had this planned since the night after graduation, didn’t you?”

“Surprise!” he said slyly, still grinning so hard his eyes crinkled.

“Dammit, Jim!”

Jim snickered. “Good to see you, too. And this is where you say, ‘Jim, what a wonderful surprise! I missed ya, kid. How was your Survival and Tactics course?’”

Leonard forced his stunned expression into a critical frown. “I can see quite clearly how survival training was.” Snapping into doctor-mode to hide his absolute astonishment at the unexpected twist in his morning, he grabbed the nearest tricorder and began scanning.

“Come on, Bones,” Jim said with light dismay, the amusement on his face not waning. “Seriously?”

Leonard scowled. “Yes, seriously. You show up in the medical bay, beaten to a pulp, with me on
duty, and you expect anything else? You’d better believe I’m serious,” he said, brandishing his tricorder.

“It’s just bumps and bruises,” Jim protested, still holding fast to his best winning smile. “I haven’t seen you in two weeks. Put down the tricorder and say hi first, would ya?”

Leonard grumbled and looked back down at the readout on the tricorder. “Not even counting the superficial abrasions, lacerations, and contusions, you’ve had four ribs cracked that were only given the most basic repair treatment, you bruised your left kidney --”

“Huh, maybe that’s why I was pissing red,” Jim said casually.

Leonard glared at him. “That’s not funny, kid. You separated your damned AC joint, and it wasn’t put back together correctly.” He cast a glance back up at the main biobed readout. “You’re malnourished and dehydrated, your electrolytes are completely out of whack, and you’ve even got a goddamned sunburn!”

Jim’s ludicrously sunny expression didn’t dim in the slightest. “Thanks for asking, Bones. I had a great time! We battled Klingons, did solo survival treks, ran patrols, and slept under the stars. I passed with flying colors, and so I could take the internship on the Athena.” He tilted his head to the side, looking unnervingly like a puppy wondering why he hadn’t gotten a treat yet. “And now, you say, ‘That’s great, Jim! I’m happy for ya.’”

“I’m happy that you still seem to have all your limbs still attached, even if just barely,” Leonard muttered irritably. The ribs needed a round of osteostim treatment, and his shoulder was going to need minor corrective surgery. Leave it to Jim to be less interested in the severity of his injuries and more focused on whether or not his little surprise had worked. “Didn’t they even take care of you while you were out on your training course? Hell, did they even feed you?”

“Sure, but there’s a reason they call it survival training. We carry field ration bars with us. They’re supposed to be complete nutrition but... they’re really gross. We get a field medic to patch up the basic stuff, but if we need to come back in from the field for treatment, we fail the course and have to re-take it. If I’d done that, I would have missed this.” He gestured around with his good arm. “The Axanar Peace Mission? This is big stuff!”

“We’re not going to Axanar, Jim. We’re going to Araxis.”

Jim shrugged, wincing at the motion, but he grinned anyway. “We’re stopping by Axanar first, and we’re still part of the peace mission. Besides...” His tone changed slightly, and his expression became more thoughtful, and almost plaintive. “I told you I wasn’t going to let you go up into the black without me.”

Leonard’s mouth fell open and he stared at Jim blankly for a moment, but then Jim’s smug expression came back full force.

“Anyway, Bones, I couldn’t let you have all the fun up here while I was stuck back on campus taking classes. I heard the summer courses are mind-numbing. And how was your week with Joanna?”

Leonard shook his head at Jim in disbelief before turning to the nearby supply cabinet. He was relieved to find that the drugs he was looking for were readily accessible, and grabbed them along with a hypospray.
“Come on, Bones, are you at least a little bit surprised to see me?”

“I am never, never going to be surprised by anything you ever do again, you goddamned menace,” Leonard said flatly as he snapped a fairly strong analgesic and moderate muscle relaxant into the hypospray. He’d bet anything that Jim was in a lot more pain than he’d ever admit.

“You keep saying that, Bones, and yet, I keep surprising you.”

“Shut up and hold still.” He deftly administered the dose, pleased that Jim didn’t protest, then turned to get the osteostim units. When he turned back to Jim, the kid was looking at him with an unreadable expression. “Jim?”

“You can’t tell me you’re not happy to see me.” The question was meant to sound careless, but it was tainted by the slightly wounded expression that almost nobody else would have noticed.

Putting the osteostim units down on the bedside table, Leonard sighed. “Of course I’m happy to see you, kid. You took me by surprise, but yeah, I’m really happy to see you.” He tried to smile, but he was sure it came out broken. “Actually... dammit, I... I’m relieved to see you. You could have done a dozen different things this summer. Maybe got yourself assigned to one of the ships actually going to Axanar. I figured I was going to spend the whole summer alone. I... I really wasn’t looking forward to being alone out here. So... thank you.”

Jim’s smile brightened again. “You’re welcome, Bones. I wanted to be here. So, the summer’s off to a great start. I got promoted, you get to put up with me, and you got to see your daughter.”

For some reason, looking at Jim's enthusiastic grin, Leonard just couldn't keep lying anymore. “I... uh... didn’t get to see Joanna.”

Jim’s eyes went wide. “Wait, what? I thought you had it all worked out. What did the old battle-axe do?”

“Actually, she didn't do anything. Not really.” Leonard wrapped his arms around his torso. “It was my fault. And it wasn’t all worked out. I just assumed I could... aw hell, we can talk about this later. Not in here, okay?”

Jim nodded. “That’s fine.” Then he blinked. “Whoa, what was in that hypospray?”

“Painkiller and a muscle relaxant.” He reached out and ran his fingers lightly along the deeply bruised areas around the ribs on Jim’s right side, frowning at Jim’s instinctive flinch. “The muscles around your ribs have been bunched up in knots all week, and I need the intercostals to relax so I can treat the fractures.” He withdrew his hand. “Hell, I’m surprised you can breathe.”

Jim shrugged stiffly, although to Leonard’s marginal satisfaction, he barely winced this time. Even so, those had been some damned strong painkillers, and he was still hurting. “It’s a little sore.”

“Masochist.”

“The finest.”

Leonard shook his head. “Unbelievable. You know I have to fix your shoulder surgically, too.”

Jim’s face fell. “What? It’s not that bad! I’ve been using it all week. It’s just achy. Can’t you just wave your magic wand and make it better?”

“Keep dreaming, kid. You’re a classic case for under-reporting symptoms, you know that? Oh, and
while I’ve got you stuck here, you’re getting fluids and a dermagel treatment, too.”

“Sadist.”

“The finest. Here, lie down.” He helped ease Jim onto his back, and quickly placed the stim units, despite Jim’s token protests. “You sit tight there while I get some supplies, and we’ll finish patching you up in no time.”

“Fine,” Jim said, then he turned his head to the side. “Bones?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“Even if you are a sadistic bastard...” His expression softened into a fond smile. “I’m glad I managed to get this posting.”

Leonard returned the smile, then reached and squeezed Jim’s good shoulder. “Me, too, kid. I’ll be right back.”

Doctor Brex was in his office, engrossed in his work, presumably ship rosters. He looked up immediately as Leonard entered, then offered an enigmatic smile. “How’s your patient?”

“Did you know that’s my best friend sitting there?” Leonard asked without preamble, ignoring the question.

Brex’s smile became a bit sly. “Only with certainty after you’d walked around the corner and saw him for yourself. You’ve got some... loud emotions regarding Cadet Kirk. Just like the first part of your verbal conversation.”

Leonard stiffened. “I... guess we were a bit too loud. Jim’s good at throwing people off guard.”

Brex waved him off with a grin. “Not to worry. I’m glad you’ll have someone on the ship for this mission who will make you feel more at home.” Then his expression sobered. “Are you okay treating a friend of yours? If not, I can pull Doctor Singh. She’s testing and calibrating the stasis fields for our live cell specimens in the lab, but it can wait.”

Leonard waved him off. “No, it’s fine. Trust me, it’s nothing I haven’t done before, and this is all small stuff. I’ve got his ribs under osteostim right now. His AC joint was fused incorrectly in the field, so I’ll need to detach it and realign it properly. His kidney is stable and healing on its own, but a few hours with the biobed’s regen field will help speed it along. While I’ve got him here, I’ll give him IV fluids to correct the electrolyte imbalance. A bit of regen on the lacerations, dermagel treatment on the sunburn, and he’ll be good to go.” It almost felt comforting to rattle off a patient treatment plan.

“What about you?”

Taken aback by the question, Leonard furrowed his eyebrows. “What about me?”

“Are you good to go?”

For a moment, Leonard wanted to protest the insinuation, but Doctor Brex was both a medical doctor and a telepath. Plus, he was a colleague and supervisor now. Leonard let his shoulders slump, just marginally. “Mostly. I just don’t much like seeing my friends hurt.”

“You’ve seen it too many times before?”
Leonard nodded. “Yes. And I’m sure it won’t get any better after I graduate. But... I’m a doctor. At least I can fix him. I think that actually makes it easier.”

Doctor Brex studied him for a moment, and Leonard had to once again quell the uncomfortable feeling that the man could see right through him. Then Brex smiled. “Have Nurse Walsh assist you for the surgery. Treatment bay one is fully equipped for minor procedures like that. Report back to me when you’re done, and we’ll get you set up with your general duty roster and research protocol.”

“Thank you.” Leonard took his dismissal and left the office, stunned at how his morning had turned upside-down so quickly... and at how relieved he was that it had. Somehow, Jim managed to turn everything on its head, no matter what the situation. Usually, it was for the better. Leonard looked at the partition, hiding Jim from his view, and shook his head fondly before turning and looking towards the nurse’s station.

“Nurse Walsh?”

A petite nurse with a pale complexion and a shock of red hair stood up. “Yes, Doctor...?”

“McCoy. Leonard McCoy.” He extended a hand in greeting, which she shook in turn. “I’m here for two months for an internship - research project and general practice. Doctor Brex told me to have you assist for a minor surgery on the patient over in bay one. He’s a little bit stubborn, so he might need a firm hand. Are you good with that?”

She grinned deviously. “Is he a type-A personality who would insist that he’s only got a paper cut when he’s bleeding out?”

“That would be Jim.”

“That would be a large number of Starfleet personnel. I’ve got it covered. Stubborn patients are my specialty, Doctor. I’d guess that’s why Doctor Brex told me to help you. He’s... observant like that.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. Maybe having a highly intuitive supervisor would be even better than he’d thought. With a nod to Nurse Walsh, he turned and led her towards the treatment bay.

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“I thought you said you’d have me patched up in no time.” Jim’s tone was a delicate balance of boredom and annoyance. “It’s almost eighteen hundred, it’s my first day on a starship, and I spent the entire day on a biobed.”

“You needed it, Jim. And I’ll say you were far more exhausted from your training course than you thought you were, because you slept over four hours after the anesthetic wore off.”

“Should have woken me up,” Jim mumbled.

Leonard raised an eyebrow at him. “I don’t know, Jim... you’re a much more cooperative patient when you’re out cold. Besides, your kidney still had diminished function until twenty minutes ago, and the extra IV therapy was good for you.” In one deft motion, he pressed down on the back of Jim’s hand with a gauze pad and pulled out the IV catheter.

Jim hissed in irritation. “You need to stop sticking me with those things.”

“You need to stop needing them. You still haven’t asked to use the bathroom yet, and don’t think I
Leonard smirked and taped down the gauze. “Leave that there for a second.” He discarded the used supplies in the biohazard reprocessor, then grabbed a cup of water from the shelf and handed it to Jim, who dutifully began chugging the drink. Leonard gave a satisfied nod. “Besides, nobody needed the bed here for other patients, and your other option was being stuck in your quarters all day.”

Jim sputtered around the last bit of water. “Stuck in my quarters? No way. I’m sure I missed a half-dozen briefings today. First day out of space dock is bound to be really busy.” He put down the cup, peeked under the gauze, rubbed the back of his hand, then tested out the range of motion in his shoulder.

“Hey, go easy on that shoulder! I just put the damned thing back together. Don’t need ya messing up my handiwork. And no lifting for twenty-four hours.” Leonard shook his head as he handed Jim his uniform shirt. “Besides, hot-shot, we tagged your name on the ship’s duty roster as being medically restricted from duty. Don’t worry, your chain of command knew where you were.”

“Well, they knew I was coming up here anyway.” He pulled his uniform shirt roughly over his head, and he continued to talk, muffled through the fabric. “I met with Lieutenant Commander Shao and Lieutenant Finney when my shuttle docked. Shao is overseeing the cadet intern program, and Finney is my immediate section leader for the mission.” His head popped out through the neck hole. “Do you remember Lieutenant Finney?”

Leonard frowned. “Can’t say I do.”

Jim grinned. “He’s an assistant instructor at the Academy. Ran my first hand-to-hand class, and was a TA in Ship Operations. He’s a friend. Anyway, they sent me straight over here from the shuttle bay when I arrived, but I told them that I’d be back as soon as you guys released me.” Jim gave him a look that said he was extremely put-out by the situation.

“And seeing as you haven’t been released yet, you’ve kept your word.”

“But I told them it wouldn’t take long –”

“It takes as long as the doctor – which is me – says it takes.” He grabbed Jim’s pants off a chair next to the biobed and dropped them unceremoniously into Jim’s hands. “And no, you wouldn’t have been allowed back on duty today anyway. That was my call.”

“Wouldn’t have been allowed? Fffu... fine.” He slid off the biobed and inelegantly stepped into the pants, keeping a scowl fixed on Leonard’s face the whole time. “At least I showed up here, as ordered.”

“Will wonders never cease,” Leonard deadpanned. “Jim Kirk actually showed up to a medical facility of his own volition when injured and ordered to report.”

“Sure, Bones. Thanks for the vote of confidence.” He sighed in obvious resignation. “But either way, my duty day is over, and I’ve got nothing else on my agenda until tomorrow. Although I did manage to check in with Lieutenant Finney on the PADD I charmed from Nurse Walsh.”

“I told her to give it to you to get you to be quiet and keep your blood pressure down.”

Jim shot him a look. “Ruin all my fun, why don’t you? Anyway, I got my duty rotations for the
next week, quarters assignment, and mission briefing material to review.” He stuck his feet into his boots and zipped them. “And what were you doing all day while I was being lazy?”

“Well, once you were snoring away, I got a lot done. Successful separation and microfusion surgery on an acromioclavicular joint for starters. Always fun cutting up my friends and putting them back together.”

“Bones...”

“Relax, Jim,” he said mildly, letting a note of affection seep into his voice. “I’m messing with you. It’s a common injury that was given piss-poor treatment in the field, which is not your fault and I don’t blame you for it. Okay? It’s fixed now. I’m just glad you made it through your course... and yeah, kid, I’m proud of you for passing.”

A bright smile lit Jim’s face. “Thanks, Bones.” Then his smile became more sheepish. “And... uh... thanks for fixing up the shoulder. Feels better now.”

Leonard let himself grin as a warm sense of pride swelled in his chest. “No problem, kid. But try not to make a habit of it.”

“Believe me, nothing would make me happier. So... your day?” Jim asked as he reached for his belt. “Regale me with your exciting tales of medical bay heroics.”

Leonard snorted. “Heroics. Right. You’d make a guy believe that this is more than tedium and routine. In addition to treating a couple of engineers for plasma burns, I finalized my research protocols with the members of the ship’s crew roster who will be participating in my study.” He let a self-satisfied grin twist his mouth. “If I get even a fraction of the results I’m expecting, I’ll have enough data to finish my thesis. I’ll have it submitted before midterms next semester.”

“That’s great! See? No heroics needed. Good things happen on starships. It’s not all silence and darkness and disease and danger out here, right?” He reached for his duffel, but Leonard grabbed it first.

“I don’t think so, kid. I told you – no lifting for twenty-four hours unless you want me to go poking around inside your shoulder again.” He looped the strap over his own shoulder, then sighed at the dejected annoyance on Jim’s face. “Listen, I’m off-duty now anyway, so I’ll help you carry this back to your quarters. Then maybe we can get a bite to eat down at the mess hall, and you can tell me all about your heroic escapades battling Starfleet security officers dressed up like Klingons.”

Jim gave him a look of exasperation. “You sure know how to take the wind out of a guy’s sails.”

Leonard grinned and clapped Jim lightly on the back of the neck, steering him towards the door out of the medical bay. “If you behave, I’ll even let you have a cookie.”

“How generous.”

“That’s me.”

Leonard caught a quick peek back into the room to see Doctor Brex standing at the door to his office, leaning lightly on the door jamb, smiling gently. It struck Leonard with an odd, indefinable, yet soft and reassuring emotion. Despite the fact that he was on a starship, racing through the vacuum of space away from Earth far faster than the speed of light... something just seemed good and right with the universe just then. He managed a smile back at Doctor Brex and a slight wave before his momentum took him out into the corridor and the door slid shut behind him.
Jim looked at him sideways. “It had better be chocolate chip.”

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The mess hall aboard the *Athena* was a fraction of the size of the mess hall back at the Academy, but the familiar clinking of cutlery and the light-hearted buzz of conversation instantly made Jim feel more comfortable. It didn’t matter if it was Murphy’s Pub packed with locals back in Riverside, a school cafeteria, or a mess hall on a starship hurtling through space at warp speed – the sound of a room full of people eating and talking was always the same.

Bones nudged his arm with an elbow. “It’s kinda packed. Wonder if there will be a place to sit.”

Jim scanned the room. Bones was right; it was pretty full. “I’m sure we can figure something... hey!” He caught sight of a familiar face and a wave near the back wall. “There’s Lieutenant Finney and some of the other cadets. They’ll save us a seat. Let’s grab some food.”

He didn’t have to check over his shoulder to know that Bones was following him.

They made their way through the crowd to the service line. It was only then that Jim realized that he was the only one in the room in cadet reds, and he stood out almost comically amongst the regular crew members. Even the other cadets in the room, however few there were, must have been down to the Quartermaster during the day and had been issued temporary duty uniforms – identical to the crew uniforms, only with a gray outer tunic instead of a branch color, and a non-branch insignia. Jim tried not to feel embarrassed at being out of uniform as he grabbed a chicken sandwich and fries from the line and quickly began weaving towards the back of the room.

“Jim, maybe I should find some of the medical staff to sit with,” Bones said from behind him.

“You’re going to spend every waking minute with them over the next few weeks,” Jim shot back over his shoulder. “What’s the problem?”

Bones shrugged. “Dunno... just figure I should get to know my own team, I guess. I don’t really interact with the other cadets on campus.”

Jim shook his head. “We’re not on campus, Bones. When we finally get stationed on a ship after graduation, you’ll need to meet other people from other specialties. Come on, meet the other cadets.”

Bones’ shoulders slumped marginally in defeat. “Fine. Lead the way.”

Lieutenant Finney waved to them as they got to the table, and raised his voice just a bit above the din of the room. “Cadet Kirk! So nice of you to join us, just in time for...” He made a show of looking at a nonexistent chrono on his wrist. “Dinner!” The words were teasing but the smile was welcoming.

Jim offered him a look of chagrin as he set his plate down. “Believe me, sir, I would have been much happier to have been on-duty all day, instead of being stuck in sickbay.”

“I know, Kirk. How’re you feeling?”

“Good as new,” Jim said easily, sitting in one of the two open seats at the table. “Hey guys.” He gave a nod of greeting to the five cadets at the table. Two of them he didn’t know, but he recognized Nadeau, Liu, and Wilcox. “Glad you made it, Wilcox.”

“Are you kidding me?” said the young woman with a dirty blond ponytail and broad shoulders. She
had started in the general Command and Tactics track at the Academy, but had decided to specialize as a pilot in her second year. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world. I passed my Class Two flight certification, so once we get to our specialized rotations, I’ll get to fly this bird. I turned in my thesis at 0400 hours this morning and still made it on the first shuttle.”

“At least you showed up ready to work,” Finney said to her. “Kirk here showed up looking like he’d just gone ten rounds with a Klingon, and then he spent the day napping in sickbay.”

“Thank you, sir, may I have another?” Jim deadpanned.

“There’s plenty more where that came from.” Finney leaned back in his seat and looked up at Bones, who still hadn’t made a move to sit down. “And you’re Cadet McCoy.”

Bones looked surprised, and a bit unnerved. “How do you –”

Finney waved a casual hand. “Just because your training is handled through Starfleet Medical Academy doesn’t mean you get to live in a bubble.” Then he grinned broadly. “Besides, anyone who knows Kirk knows who you are.”

Jim looked up in time to see Bones casting him an unreadable expression, but Finney kept on. “So come on, have a seat. I know you medical cadets keep to yourselves for most of your studies, but we’ll be working together a little bit, so you might as well get to know them. Just watch out for the security cadets,” he said with a wink.

“Gee, and I haven't even had a chance to scare him myself,” Cadet Liu said with mock-offense. Jim knew him from hand-to-hand training. Liu was a good fighter, and an all-round decent guy to have on your team.

Bones snorted and took a seat with obvious reluctance. “I’ll have to remember that one,” he said with a nod before grabbing his sandwich and taking a huge bite.

Finney laughed. ”I know you’ll be spending most of your time doing your research project, but there are certain aspects of shipboard operations that even doctors ought to know. Commander Shao and I already discussed cross-discipline training for all the cadets, and we talked to Doctor Brex about including you. You’ll attend some of our training modules later in the rotation. Technically, it’s not mandatory, but it would be really good for your record if you want a shipboard posting.”

Bones shrugged, looking oddly uncomfortable. “I’ll be pretty busy with my own research, but... yeah, I’m looking for a shipboard posting, so I guess it would be good to know how these flying tin cans work.”

A dark-skinned cadet Jim didn’t know well leaned forward on the table, folding her arms in front of her. “Do I get to say you work on meat sacks, Doctor?” she said lightly.

“I... what?”

She gave him a sarcastically demure smile. “Lovely to meet you, too, Doctor. I’m Cadet Buhari. Engineering. Or tin-can expert, whichever you prefer.”

“Oh... hi, then,” Bones said awkwardly. “Doctor McCoy. Meat-sack expert.”

Finney was laughing. “As long as you don’t call the ship a ‘tin can’ around the engineers, you’ll do just fine, Doc.” He turned back to Jim. “You missed all the orientation briefings today, Kirk, but I don’t think it’s anything that will set you back too much. Go over the data I sent to your PADD,
ask me any questions you have, and that should cover it. Oh, and stop by the Quartermaster before duty tomorrow. There are three duty uniforms waiting for you, so you can get out of those reds. Once you leave the Academy, a red uniform is nothing but a target.”

Jim started to laugh, then frowned. He glanced sideways at Bones, who had paused with his sandwich halfway to his mouth. “Bones?”

“A target?” Bones asked hesitantly.

“Figure of speech,” the other cadet Jim didn’t know chimed in, “and a long-running joke out here in the black. Of course, the Ops guys hate it, but it’s true.” His tone was neutral, but his expression was a bit terse. “When something goes wrong, Ops guys are the first in the line of fire. Anyone with a red shirt, basically. Something blows up in Engineering, or a landing party gets attacked... my brother has seen a lot of it. He’s a security officer.” He gave a grin that looked just a bit off. “That’s why I went with the sciences. Biochemistry. It’s Hererra, by the way.”

Bones muttered a cordial, “Nice to meet you,” before shaking his head. “So there’s actually a job around here more dangerous than the crazy stuff the command folks do?”

Lieutenant Finney nodded. “Oh yeah. The unofficial thinking is that they picked red for Ops uniforms because it hides bloodstains better. At least, it does for folks with iron-based blood.”

Slowly, Bones put down his sandwich. “Great. Tell me why I wanted to work on a starship again?”

“Because of your incredible sense of adventure, Bones,” Jim said, elbowing him lightly.

Bones raised an eyebrow at him, but Jim only shrugged and stuffed a French fry in his mouth.

Finney laughed, then quickly downed the last bit of his drink before setting the cup on the table with a heavy clack. “Anyway, I’ve had a long day and I still have training plans for the week to review with Commander Shao.” He stood, and waved down the table of cadets as they instinctively moved to stand with him. “You’re free for the night. The recreation rooms and fitness facility are available, but don’t stay up too late. See you all tomorrow at 0800 on the secondary bridge.”

The cadets at the table waited until he was out of earshot before Nadeau leaned in. “I’ll fill you in on the unofficial parts of the briefings today, Kirk. We struck gold getting Finney for trainer. He’s planning on taking the whole bunch of us down to the surface of Araxis, and maybe even to Axanar if there’s time while the Captain plays diplomat with the Axanar leaders.”

Jim felt a jolt of excitement at the prospect of getting so much landing party time. “Yeah, Finney’s like that. Believes in first-hand experience.” He took a bite of his sandwich and talked around it. “You guys get a feel for Commander Shao? I don’t really know her.”

Cadet Liu shrugged. “Seems to go by the book, but not too stiff about it. I think she’ll give Finney a lot of freedom with us as long as it’s all technically within regs. Finney’s really the one running things with us. We did pretty well with this assignment, I think.”

“Kind of a shame we’re not going to get to be on Axanar itself for the main negotiations,” Nadeau said, not hiding his disappointment. “That’s gonna be historic.”

“Wait a second,” Bones said hesitantly, something in his tone catching Jim’s attention. “If we’re
the first Starfleet ship going to Araxis... I mean... how much do they really know about the place? And don’t look so surprised, Jim. I read the report. If most of that is second-hand, how do we know it’s correct? Is the place secure? They’re sending cadets on a mission like that?”

Jim flashed Bones his most reassuring smarmy grin. “I’m impressed, Bones. You almost sound like a command officer, doing mission risk assessments. But it’s no different than a lot of assignments. We’re Starfleet, even if we’re cadets. Officer interns, actually. There’s always some element of risk. That’s why we signed up. But really, it’s a quiet little colony planet with a population eager to join the Federation. While the senior officers sit in negotiations, we’re going to stand around and look pretty. And don’t worry – I’m pretty enough to cover for you, too.”

Everyone at the table groaned, and Wilcox punched Jim in the arm. To Jim’s satisfaction, Bones rolled his eyes and dug into his salad.

Conversation bounced between assignment speculation and next year’s courses for a few minutes before Nadeau pushed his chair back. “I’m gonna get going, guys. Unlike Kirk here, I didn’t get to sleep through half the day.” He offered a light-hearted smirk that said he was mostly kidding. “Kirk, you’re sharing quarters with me, Liu, and Hererra, so I’ll see you two later.”

“Actually, I’ll come along now,” Hererra said, standing as well, followed quickly by Liu.

“I’ve been up since 0300 this morning. I’m beat.” Liu said heavily as he pushed his chair back under the table.

“I guess I’m abandoning you, too,” Wilcox said, following suit. “We were almost done when you got here, and Buhari and I are going to hit the fitness facility before turning in.”

“Sure, guys. Leave me here by my lonesome.”

“Thanks, Jim,” Bones said.

Jim subtly nudged his knee against Bones’ leg under the table and gave him a look, then nodded back up at the other cadets. “See you down in our quarters. I won’t be too late.”

As soon as they’d all left the table, Jim turned towards Bones, and wasted no time. “So what happened with Joanna?”

In a heartbeat, Bones’ stiff posture sagged as he leaned heavily on his elbows and stabbed a cherry tomato with his fork as if it had personally offended him. “You’ve been waiting since this morning to drill me with that, weren’t you?”

“You know me.”

“Yeah, I do.” He sighed and popped the tomato into his mouth, obviously killing time as he chewed slowly. Jim waited in silence, and finally, Bones put down his fork and folded his arms on the table top. His voice was low, but Jim could hear every word. “The divorce wasn’t just her fault, Jim.”

“I know... you told me... your father...” He was cut off by Bones slowly shaking his head.

“Final straw, kid. That wasn’t really the start of it.” He closed his eyes and in that moment, Jim thought he’d never seen Bones quite so desolate. “I thought I was doing wonderful things for humanity, putting everyone else first. My patients, my research. I told myself that it wasn’t just about me getting ahead, becoming the youngest staff doctor ever at Atlanta Medical Center. It took all of my time, and I told myself that was okay. And then, when my father got sick, I started
squeezing even more hours out of the day, trying to find a cure for him. And I’d just expected Jocelyn to be there, even though I was never there for her and our daughter. That her life would just naturally revolve around me doing all these wonderful things for humanity. Right?” He opened his eyes and looked at Jim, his expression pleading for something that Jim didn’t quite understand.

“Well, you were doing good things for humanity,” Jim said hesitantly.

“Sure... but in the process, I took Jocelyn for granted. I took Joanna for granted, and she was just a baby. I acted like they’d just be there when I had time. It’s no wonder Joce started to resent me. So... when I got a week with Joanna for the summer... I did it again.”

“Oh?” Jim asked, confused, but trying to sound neutral.

“I just assumed I could show up in Atlanta anytime, and Joanna would just be there, ready for me whenever I wanted.”

“Oh.” Jim was starting to understand. “So, where was she?”

“Mars,” Bones said, looking absolutely gutted. “Joce's sister lives on the Mars colony. They were visiting. I think Joce did it on purpose, because she knew when the Academy’s summer semester began, but fuck, I never actually communicated when I’d be available to see Joanna. This was my fault. Absolutely my fault. I did it again. I took my own kid for granted.” His eyes fell shut again, framed with tight lines of distress, lips pressed together miserably.

Jim really wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he went for the gut of it. “So you screwed up. I've fucked up plenty of times. Like you've told me... learn from it.”

“I fucked it up once before, and I obviously didn’t learn from it the first time.”

“So learn this time,” Jim said forcefully. “Send the old bag a subspace comm. Chew a little bit of humble pie, tell her when you’ll be back, and ask if you can see Joanna once we get back from this internship.”

Bones shrugged noncommittally. “I guess.”

For a moment, Jim studied his face. “Bones, what’s really eating you here?”

His back stiffened, but he didn’t meet Jim’s eyes. “What do you think? I haven’t seen my daughter in person for almost two goddamned years.”

“I know that, but Bones? There’s something else. Come on, I know you too well.”

He waited while Bones stubbornly remained silent, stuffing another bite of sandwich into his mouth, chewing more thoroughly than he needed to. Finally, he swallowed and let his shoulders slump. "I don't even know, Jim."

Jim frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means... it... dammit, Jim." He groaned and leaned his face into his hands for a moment before looking up again. "It means I'm a fuck-up of a father and a human being and... I'm probably a fuck-up of a friend and -" 

"Whoa, slow down there! Bones, you made a mistake. You'll fix it. I know you. And you've always been a great friend." He ducked his head down, forcing Bones to make eye contact with him. "I'd be dead if it weren't for you. Friendship doesn't get much tighter than that."
Bones, however, went wide-eyed and shook his head, looking spooked by the whole line of discussion. “But it’s... it wasn’t...” He came to a stuttering halt, like he'd just run into a verbal brick wall, and Jim wished like hell he knew what was going through the guy's head at that moment. Then Bones heaved a sigh. “Did you know the coffee onboard this ship is the worst I’ve tasted since the swill in the Riverside diner?”

Jim stared at Bones incredulously, registering the complete shift in the conversation, then forced himself laugh. “That stuff back in Riverside was pretty nasty. That’s why I stuck with the beer.”

Bones’ expression finally morphed into something between a grateful smile and a broken plea. “Yeah.” He looked down at his half-eaten sandwich on his tray. “Maybe I should turn in early.”

Jim wanted to argue with him, ask him to come down to the rec room and socialize. But Bones looked tired, and Jim knew he needed to get down to the Quartermaster and settle into his own quarters. “Okay. But I'll catch you tomorrow, okay? Dinner after alpha shift?”

“It'll depend on my schedule,” Bones said, noncommittally. “I'll let you know.”

They cleared their plates from the table and parted ways at the turbolift when Bones got out on deck eight. As the 'lift door slid shut after Bones, Jim stared at it for a long moment, not moving. He'd followed Bones into space, and now, he was wondering if Bones was still parsecs away, back on Earth, trapped by his past.

“Please state your destination,” the computer chimed helpfully.

With a heavy sigh, Jim said, “Deck ten.”

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Sure, it wasn’t the main bridge of a starship, but hell, it was a real bridge, and Jim was pretty sure he’d never been in a place that felt more... right. His cadet squad had spent the entire morning becoming familiar with the basic station functions on the secondary bridge, a fully-equipped command center located two floors up from main engineering within the secondary hull. It wasn’t as large as the main bridge, but it would work if the main bridge was compromised. None of their access codes had given them actual control of the ship, but had allowed them to learn all the systems fairly well. Sure, they’d practiced in simulator facilities meant to mimic the functions of a ship, but a simulation wasn’t the same. A simulator could never feel like this.

Jim couldn’t get enough of the command chair.

Even though the main tactics station and pilot’s controls had been interesting enough, he kept looking back over at the chair. The last time he’d felt that depth of want-need-longing had been almost two years ago, in the gray light of pre-dawn on a clear Iowa morning, looking up at the shining hull of the half-completed USS Enterprise. Someday. Maybe.

At the moment, he was finishing up his turn at the environmental controls. He’d never quite thought about how complicated it was just to maintain basic life support -- temperature, atmospheric mix, gravity, humidity, radiation shielding. It was really complex, and the weight of responsibility for keeping all hands on-board alive prickled heavily against the back of his neck. Still... the chair.

“Okay, everyone finish up and sign out of your stations.” Lieutenant Finney leaned against the wall by the viewscreen, watching the cadets as they finished their assigned tasks and gathered at the front of the bridge. “Good work. You’re all got one hour for chow. I want everyone back here at 1300, and you’ll meet the officers you’ll be shadowing for the next three days. Any questions?”

Six heads swung side to side, almost in unison.

Finney smirked. “You’re all full of it, but that’s okay. We’ll tackle questions after lunch. Okay then, dismissed.”

Jim was turning away to head out with his squadmates when the sound of his name stopped him short.

“Cadet Kirk, stand fast.”

Turning back, he found himself confused and just a bit worried. “Sir?”

Finney offered a reassuring smile. “I just wanted a minute of your time, nothing serious.”

Jim glanced back at the turbolift doors sliding shut behind the rest of his squad. “Okay, sir.”

“Relax. I actually had this chat with all the other cadets before the internships started. I couldn’t do this with you until now because you were only officially enrolled in the internship at the very last possible minute.”

“Okay,” Jim said as neutrally as possible. Probably just a simple review of expectations and such.
“So, I saw the results from your Survival and Tactics course.”

Something in the Lieutenant’s tone made Jim feel suddenly uneasy. He’d passed, of course. As far as he’d been aware, his assessment had been very positive, but there was some element of critique underlying Finney’s statement. “What do you mean, sir?”

Finney twisted his mouth as though pondering Jim as an object. “Well, you passed with flying colors, so congratulations there.”

Jim forced a smile. “And I only broke two bones in the process.”

“Four,” Finney said with no shortage of amusement. “I read the report on your duty restriction yesterday. At any rate, your natural aptitude for tactics and solo survival are beyond reproach, but Kirk... you’re still playing the lone wolf.”

Jim tried to push down the flush of heat that started creeping up his neck. When he’d taken Basic Tactics, Finney had talked to him about that. He’d made so much progress, though. And he wasn't trying to play the lone wolf. He had just made the best decisions he could, and some of them happened to involve him going solo. Mendoza had lectured him about this, and the last thing he needed was another re-hash with Finney. But he held back his irritation and gave a respectful nod. “I know. I’m working on it.”

“I have no doubt of that, but...” He hesitated, and by the pathetic look of apology on his face, Jim knew what he was going to say before he even said it. “Commander Mendoza put a comment in your file. He was concerned that you were trying to emulate your father on some level.”

The air in the room suddenly seemed too thick to breathe. Jim cleared his throat, trying to ignore the way his heart was suddenly beating a bit too loudly. “Believe me, sir, that’s the last thing I want to do.”

“Easy there, Kirk,” Finney said, holding his hands up innocently. “That's not what I'm saying. That’s just what the report said. I know that you're not trying to put yourself in your father's shoes. But you stand out in your own way. While you're here, I really need you to focus on blending in.”

Jim forced himself to unclench his fists. “I thought Starfleet wanted people to stand out.”

Finney gave him a look of utter sincerity. “Kirk, you could stand out anytime, anywhere, just by showing up. It's going to get you noticed, and you're going to go far. And don't pretend you don't know that. But here on this internship? This isn't the Academy. It's not a competition out here – it's a team, and we need everyone to play their part.”

“I know that, sir.”

“I know you know that... in your head. But this is your chance to internalize it.” He offered an encouraging smile. “That’s what an internship is for. We’re going to work on everyone’s strengths and weaknesses for the next two months. There’s not a single one of us who has everything right, including me. Like I said, I had a talk with everyone else on this internship squad, and everyone has things they need to work on. We’ve got a good training team, and I’ve got all of you shadowing great officers for the next couple of weeks.”

Jim felt himself relaxing a bit as he remembered he wasn’t being singled out any more than anyone else. Finney wouldn't do that to him. “I'm looking forward to it,” he said, trying to sound as enthusiastic as he should be.

“Good. And what I want you to do, besides following orders and learning every technical skill you
can, is to really watch how people around here demonstrate their trust in each other. Learn the fine line of obeying your superiors and giving them every reason to trust you as a subordinate, while also watching how the superiors earn the trust of their subordinates. You need to learn how that trust works, both up and down the chain of command, in a practical setting.” He offered an encouraging smile. “You’ve learned to trust your peers, Kirk, and I can see that they trust you. It’s a huge jump from where you used to be. Now, build on it.”

Jim licked his lips, which had become dry. Suddenly, the simple act of shadowing officers around the ship seemed like a much bigger challenge. So much to observe, not just basic technical skills. This is what he was really here for: to learn how to command. “I can do that, sir.”

“I know you can.” Finney nodded at him, then gave a thoughtful look. “There will come a time when someone will need to play the lone wolf. Be the hero and all that. Eventually, you’ll find yourself in a situation where someone needs to stick their neck out, put themselves on the line, dig their heels in, and go down fighting. One man by himself. And I know you’ve got it in you to be that person if you have to be, and it’s got nothing to do with your father. But Kirk, you’re still a cadet. An officer intern, actually. It’s not an easy role to play, but that’s what we need you to do. The crewmen are expecting you to act as an officer, even though you’ll be learning technical skills from them. The officers will expect you to act like crewmen, even though you were trained to be a leader. It’s a fine line to walk. Support the mission. Trust your orders, and learn how to make that trust work. And then, when you’ve seen more, and done more... you’ll be ready to step up, take command, and do it right.”

“When I become a Lieutenant like you, sir?” Jim asked, trying to look casual and just a bit ironic despite the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat threatening to make his voice crack.

Finney shook his head, and gave him a sincere look with no trace of irony. “No, Kirk. There’s a reason they’re called Captains.”

Lacking the ability to respond verbally, Jim nodded, and was grateful when Finney gave him an easy grin.

“Go get some lunch. I’ll see you back here at 1300 hours. Oh, and to let you know, the training rotations for the first few weeks will take you through every major department on the ship. You’re assigned to one of the engineering teams for the next few days, and I think you’ll have a good time with that. Lieutenant Kim runs the primary power grid for the whole ship, so you’ll get to see everything. It’s a great way to get ground-up experience with ship operations.”

Jim nodded again and found his voice. “I do like tinkering with machinery,” he said, even though his thoughts flashed to his ex-roommate, the sociopath whose engineering experiment had almost killed him. All things considered, he’d done pretty well getting past that. “I’m sure it’s a great way to learn the ship.”

“And a great way to get used to working with the team that keeps all the machinery running.”

“Yes, sir.”


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Finney had been right. Despite his previous misgivings about engineers, the engineering team was a lot of fun to work with. They were a bit eccentric, highly competitive, and liked to play as hard as they worked... even during duty hours. That was how Jim found himself paired with Petty Officer
First Class Timothy Johan in a breakneck race to finish a recalibration of the primary power conduits on deck four before the other half of the team recalibrated the conduits on deck five.

“How’s it coming in here?” Lieutenant Kim’s voice had a note of laughter. She was a slender woman with a prim outward demeanor and a tight bun of black hair. She had reminded him more of officers he knew who worked in admin or tactics, rather than the rough-and-tumble work of Engineering. Jim was more than aware that looks were deceiving. Beyond first impressions, there was nothing prim about her. She was a brilliant engineer who loved digging her hands into the gritty aspects of the job, and she was damned good at it. From what little Jim had experienced in two days, she was also an excellent leader.

“Two minutes, sir,” Johan replied without looking up from his tricorder’s readout, his low voice as steady as his hands.

Jim kept his mouth shut and continued to hold the magnetic field as still as possible over the conduit.

“That’s what Goldberg said two minutes ago, one deck down. Come on, guys... who’s going to get the water shower rations today?”

Johan didn’t reply to the Lieutenant, but glanced up at Kirk. “Adjust the polarity of the field by negative zero-point-three-seven degrees.”

“Adjusting,” Jim said, carefully, holding the device steady.

“Looks good. Hold it.” Johan put down the tricorder and tapped a few commands into the control panel, adjusting the power matrix in the conduit junction. “Okay, turn off the field... now.”

Jim only noticed after he stepped away that Johan had been holding his breath, and it was only when Lieutenant Kim started clapping that the breath was released.

“Nice job, Johan. I didn’t expect that technique to work. Goldberg and Hodges tried something similar... and Hodges is in sickbay right now, getting a second-degree burn fixed. Small burn, and she’ll be fine, but she won’t try that again soon.” She grinned deviously. “And she won’t forget to do a safety check on the tolerance margin of her EM caliper next time, either.”

Jim turned to the Lieutenant in surprise. “Sir, you said they were expecting to be done in two minutes, too.”

Johan elbowed Jim as Kim gave them a wink. “Come on, Kirk... that’s her favorite way to keep us on our toes.”

Lieutenant Kim nodded. “How are you guys going to be able to perform under stress if we don’t work like that regularly? Do you think the Klingons would sit back and wait for us to fix the power grid at our leisure after they fry it? Not that we’re expecting Klingons anytime soon, but who knows what we’re going to find on any given day, right?”

Jim began nodding in admiration of the approach. “Always a new adventure, sir.”

“You bet it is.” She leaned against the wall casually. “You two get the water shower rations. Nice work, Kirk, are you sure you don’t want to become an engineer officer? I can already see you’ve got a good aptitude for puzzles and hands-on work, and that’s exactly what you’d get to do in an engineering position.”

Jim forced himself to suppress a flush of pride. “I did a bit of extra work studying ships’ systems
because any decent command officer has to know their ship inside and out, but... I really do love tactics and command.”

She nodded slowly. “Well then, I think you have a fair shot at becoming a decent command officer. Captain Porter is an excellent commander, and I’m proud to serve with him, but he’s better at breaking the power grid than fixing it. So... anytime I get a chance to cross-train one of you future gold-shirts into a decent engineering proficiency, I’ll take it. You might even manage to do more good than harm around the engineering department.”

Jim nodded, not quite sure if it was a sideways compliment or an insult.

Kim gave him an easy smile. “Relax, cadet. You’ve got plenty of time before they put you in the hot seat.” She tilted her head towards the turbolift. “And speaking of the hot seat, I’m going to run and check on Hodges. You two go find Goldberg and help him finish deck five, then we’ll reconvene in main engineering at 1700 for the daily review.” She turned smartly and strode off to the turbolift.

Johan elbowed Jim again. “If you’re not careful, Blues, she’s going to suck you into the Engineering track.” He grinned and made for the access ladder that went between decks.

Jim shook his head and hurried to follow. “If I was an engineer, I wouldn’t get to join the landing party on Araxis. And why do you keep calling me Blues?”

Johan stepped onto down the ladder. “With peepers like those, isn’t it obvious? Hodges has been staring at your pretty little saucers since you joined us yesterday.” He laughed again, then winked before climbing down, still talking. “Had to remind her that you’re officer material, and there's no fraternizing between enlisted folks and the brass... even brass-in-training... sir.”

Jim felt his ears burn, but it reminded him of what Finney had told him – he was supposed to act like an officer. Even though he’d trained for this, it still felt a bit awkward now that he was starting to understand that people he’d be expected to lead might have years of practical experience over him. Johan was still chuckling from below the deck as Jim stepped onto the ladder and began climbing down. “Come on, do we have to do the sir thing?”

“Why do you think we're going with Blues, Blues?” Johan grinned in amusement. “Besides, everyone ends up with a nickname around here.”

“Oh yeah?” Jim said, dropping the last step onto the floor of deck five. “What’s yours? Stretch? Arms? How tall are you?”

“202 centimeters, and not so fast, Blues. You’ve gotta earn that.” He turned and began walking down the corridor, leading Jim. “Engineering is quirky like that. So... you sure you don’t want to give it a try as a career?”

Jim shook his head definitively. “No way. I mean, sure, Engineering is great work, but I want to see what’s out there. Be the first to step on a new planet.”

“I’ve only been out here for two years, and trust me, landing parties aren’t always what they’re cracked up to be. I’ll trade some of the excitement for a better chance of coming back in one piece. Where do you think the redshirt joke really came from? Here’s a hint - it’s not from engineering.”

Jim cringed slightly. “It’s a lousy joke.”

“But it’s true.” His expression suddenly became serious. “And you watch yourself if you get to go on the landing party to Araxis. It’s a new planet. You never know what you’re getting. I haven’t
been on many landing parties myself – I'm a tech, and I like it that way, but we still pay attention when we send folks down.”

“I don’t think they’d send us down there if they didn’t think the situation was stable. They wouldn’t want a bunch of cadets messing up the mission.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Blues. It’s impossible to really know what you’re getting out here until you’ve got your feet on the ground and phasers firing.” He tilted his head up as they rounded a corner in the corridor. “Ensign Goldberg, are you lightly toasted or well-done?”

“Ha ha, very funny,” Goldberg replied, his head still inside the access hatch. “You try a magnetic recalibration on an unstable junction and tell me just how toasty you are.”

“We did try it.” Johan said, picking up an EM caliper and smugly adjusting the settings. “It worked just great, didn’t it, Kirk?”

“You bet,” Jim said lightly, admiring how easily the team members could razz each other, while simultaneously backing each other up.

“Yeah, well, we’ll chalk it up to beginner’s luck for the cadet,” Goldberg said flatly, his voice tinny inside the hatch before he ducked his head out and looked at Johan. “And I was always better at the theoretical stuff at the Academy anyway.”

Johan leaned on the bulkhead and grinned. “That's why they put you on your rookie assignment with us, sir.”

Goldberg gave Jim a look of surrender. “The Academy teaches us all the leadership stuff, but I swear, the tech schools for crewmen do a better job with the nuts and bolts.”

Johan grinned at both of them, whistled softly, and lightly tossed his magnetic spanner into the air and caught it again.

Goldber blew out an exasperated breath, but he seemed amused enough. “Yeah, yeah... so are you gonna show me your fancy calibration skills or not?”

Johan laughed and made short work of helping to finish the calibration as Jim watched. It was interesting learning the real way the enlisted crew members interacted with the officers. The Academy was so focused on officer training, with cadets playing the roles of enlisted crewmen as well as officers in training scenarios, that he'd never really seen how the dynamic would work in a real setting. He was beginning to understand now. Johan and Hodges were highly skilled techs who had attended a Starfleet technical school, and they had a lot of specialized, hands-on experience. But they hadn't gone to the Academy, and didn't have the same broad-based leadership training Jim was receiving as a cadet. Officers respected the crewmen’s skills and asked for their input, but at the end of the day, the officers called the shots. Jim had known these things in theory, but it wasn't something he could have understood just from his classes at the Academy. Once again, he was grateful he'd managed to get the internship.

In no time, Johan and Goldberg had sealed up the junction, packed up their equipment, and were on their way back to main engineering.

“So... Blues,” Johan said hesitantly, “is it true... Captain Kirk was your father?”

Jim’s stride faltered slightly. That had come out of nowhere, but it didn’t seem like there was any reason not to answer. “Yeah,” he said flatly. “You’ve been wanting to ask that since yesterday, haven’t you?”
Johan shrugged. “Between the name and... well, you look like him.”

Trying to keep his shoulders from tightening with nerves, Jim nodded. Everyone learned about the Kelvin at the Academy, so it wasn’t surprising that people had seen his father’s picture. People around the Academy campus had stopped constantly associating him with his father’s name, but he was in a fresh environment now. He should have expected at least a couple of people to ask. Until he made a proper name for himself, he knew he’d have to deal with the association everywhere he went. He was George Kirk’s son. That was his identity until he earned a new one. He just hoped that day would come sooner rather than later. “I know, but... hey, it’s not like I remember him. I’m just trying to work on this from the ground up, right? Just like anyone else.”

“Fair enough,” Johan said. Goldberg nodded.

“Besides,” Jim said, giving an ironic smile, “you two made it longer than most people before asking that. I figure that’s got to be a good sign.”

“So,” Goldberg said slowly, “is that why you want to go command track? Not engineering?”

Jim shook his head. “It’s not like I want to do what he did just because he did it. Maybe I’m just hard-wired that way. It’s what I want to do.”

“No hero complex?” Johan asked as he led them to the turbolift. “Main engineering.”

It would have felt like a dig, and Jim was still a bit raw from having the topic broached by Commander Mendoza and again by Finney, but here, he figured it was just the same sort of ribbing the whole team gave each other. He got the sense he could just answer honestly. “No,” he said simply. “I mean, that’s not the intent. I guess... I want to do big things.” He liked these people, but he wasn’t about to air his dirty laundry and issues with them.

It seemed to be a sufficient enough answer, as Johan grinned at him and clapped him lightly on the shoulder. “That’s why we all join Starfleet, Blues. And then we learn that it’s not hero stuff, but the small stuff, every day, that makes us part of the bigger picture.”


Jim raised an eyebrow. “Plato?”

Johan rolled his eyes as Goldberg snorted. “He thinks too much. By day, mild-mannered engineer. By night, classical philosopher.”

“Better than wasting my time on those old comic books you like so much, Parker,” Johan said evenly as the turbolift stopped and they stepped out into main engineering.

Jim gave Goldberg a sideways glance. “Parker?”

Goldberg folded his arms huffily across his chest. “Spiderman. It’s a classic. Earliest days of comics.”

Jim nodded, and decided he was satisfied with Blues.

“Besides,” Johan continued smoothly, “philosophy is important. You need some perspective out here. Skills are half of it, but you’ve got to be able to internalize a balanced view of the universe so that when you come up against a wall, you’re ready to make the right decision. See things for what they really are. Understand your role in a much bigger picture.”
They turned the corner into one of the equipment bays off main engineering, and Johan and Goldberg immediately began pulling their equipment out of their packs to run the regular diagnostics before putting each piece back in their storage slots. Johan's motions were confident and practiced, and Goldberg wasn't far behind.

Jim, however, stopped at the door and watched them. “Funny you should say that,” he said dryly. “I keep coming up against my role in the bigger picture more often than I care to. But I... I want to be in the middle of big things. I don’t necessarily need to stand out, but... I want to see everything. I can’t wait until we get to Araxis. To be one of the first humans to set foot on a planet – who wouldn’t want to do it?”

“Sounds exciting,” Johan said sagely, “and dangerous. I’m telling ya, just because you’re a cadet doesn’t mean they can keep you safe. Don’t let yourself believe that they know as much as they say they know.”

“I know nothing’s safe,” Jim said, feeling a twist in his gut. “Hell, I almost died in a shuttle accident last year at the Academy.”

Goldberg looked up, startled. “Whoa, shit, that was you?”

Jim frowned. “I figured you would have known. It was all over campus.”

“I... uh... didn't make the connection,” he said, sounding embarrassed. “Sorry.”

Most engineers, especially theoretical ones, seemed to ignore everything except their tinkering. Yet another reason why Jim was sure it wasn't the career for him. “It’s okay. But yeah, that was me.”

Johan turned away and placed his tool kit in its slot on the wall, and spoke without looking at either of them. “Then maybe you understand better than most cadets. I respect that. It'll make you a better officer. Just don’t forget how fast it can all change. And know what you’d be willing to sacrifice when the shit hits the fan.” With that, he walked out of the equipment bay, walking past Jim without even glancing at him.

Jim blinked, then looked at Goldberg. “What was that all about?”

Goldberg gave Jim a resigned look. “Eight-hundred people made it off the Kelvin. One-hundred seventy three didn’t, Blues. Not just your dad.”

Feeling like his stomach had just acquired a lead brick, Jim looked from Goldberg to the door and back, overwhelmed by the sense that the universe was both so much bigger and simultaneously smaller than he’d thought. At a loss of what to say, he finally breathed the single word. “Fuck.”

“You said it.”

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Chapter 5

The *Athena* wasn’t a huge ship – not like the new Constitution Class models that were rolling off the line now – so Leonard was surprised when he walked into sickbay on his fifth day aboard to discover that he had an office. Doctor Brex had decided that if he was going to interview people about something as sensitive as psych issues and phobias, then he should have a place that wasn’t open to the entire medical bay.

So, Brex had brought in a couple of engineers overnight, and they’d constructed a small office at the back of the lab. It was nothing like a CMO’s office. It had temporary walls and just barely enough room for two people, a desk, and a bit of equipment, but it was more than he’d expected. It also gave him the strange sensation of being welcomed home, as though he actually had a place here. He hadn’t had an office since he’d lived in Georgia... before his marriage and his career had imploded. Having one again was a good feeling.

Brex grinned broadly as he carried one of Leonard’s small crates of equipment into the office, set it on his desk, and wished him luck just as the first interviewee of the day arrived.

The day passed smoothly, and by 1800 hours, Leonard had completed preliminary interviews with eight more volunteers, and the last volunteer had left his office. With a satisfied grunt, Leonard allowed himself the luxury of slouching in his chair as he reviewed the data from the interviews and began writing up his assessments for individual protocols. All but one of the volunteers he’d met that day qualified for further study. He had nineteen qualified volunteers from his interviews over the previous two days, for a total of 26. He'd begin actual testing and designing treatment plans tomorrow.

All in all, he was really feeling good about this assignment. He was certainly in a better frame of mind than he had been when the summer had begun. As the light years sped by, it was becoming easier to push the problems at home to the back of his mind. And wasn’t that part of what he'd wanted anyway? A new career that would take him away from the troubles of his past?

He’d told himself to stop fixating on how he’d messed up his week with his daughter because there was nothing he could do about it from a dozen sectors away. Besides, he was a doctor and a researcher. He was busy enough with his work. Sure, Jim had told him to contact Jocelyn and he'd said he would, but he didn't want to. He'd already talked to her before he'd left and given her a time when he was returning, and he'd deal with it when he got back.

But a voice in the back of his mind kept telling him this was exactly how he’d messed up his life in the first place. He should feel guilty for indulging in this sort of mental freedom, light years of distance be damned, but he pushed his guilt aside and ignored it. His sense of self-preservation firmly told that voice to shut up, but it didn’t quite work.

Naturally, his internal argument meant he was thinking about it again. So much for mental avoidance.

He growled to himself as he tapped his PADD to close the data file on his last interviewee. A full day of blissfully therapeutic distraction, and he was right back into his mental funk. *Great.*

His shift had technically been over for more than an hour, but he’d stayed later to finish an interview and squeeze in another. It was time for supper, but he wasn’t hungry. He wasn’t assigned to clinic duty today, but maybe he could volunteer for a clinic shift. He could go back to his quarters and work on his paper, but he didn’t really have enough data yet to begin. He didn’t really
want to be alone, but he didn’t want company. Jim was probably busy, but he was pretty sure that an evening with Jim would lead to some sort of discussion he didn’t want to have. To be honest, Leonard really didn’t want deal with the possibility of needing to actually talk about anything important.

Maybe he could just do some preparation for the next phase of his study. Get some equipment prepped. Just to keep busy. Anything for the distraction.

Shaking his head to himself, he reached down into his box of equipment and pulled out the biofeedback device he’d modified. It was only one of the six different techniques he was planning to use, but it was the first line approach for those who qualified. He might as well get it calibrated and set up for tomorrow, now that he had a permanent work space.

However, as he straightened up to set the machine on his desk, he heard the door open. He looked back to see Doctor Brex standing in the doorway.

“You know, if there hadn’t been a steady stream of your research volunteers into and out of the lab all day, most people wouldn’t have known you were in there,” Brex said.

Leonard frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Well, let’s see,” Brex said as he eased himself into the other chair. “Other than when you came through the main bay around lunchtime, and then rushed back less than 10 minutes later carrying half a sandwich, you haven’t come out all day.”

“I took a few bathroom breaks. And besides, I’ve been working,” he replied, not bothering to hide his confusion. “I mean, isn’t that what I’m here to do? I’ve done seven interviews, and in between those, I was sorting data. And I was just about to run a calibration on my biofeedback device... what?”

Brex was shaking his head and smiling. “We’re all busy, but social time is important. You should take a longer lunch, and spend it in the mess hall. Talk to people.”

“I’ve been talking to people all day.”

“You’ve been interviewing research volunteers all day. Don’t pretend that’s the same thing.” He sighed and crossed his ankle over his knee. “Listen, I understand what it’s like to be out of your element in a place where you don’t know anybody, but a cadet internship isn’t just about work. It’s about getting used to life aboard a starship.”

Leonard grumbled. “I’m aboard a starship and I’m alive. I think that qualifies well enough for life aboard a starship.”

Brex actually chuckled. “You know, it’s pretty hard to convince me of that when you don’t even believe it yourself. And you have a doctorate in psych? Come on, you’ve buried yourself in your work since you got here, and it’s only been four days. You can’t do that for two months. At least you’re lucky enough to have a good friend aboard.”

Instantly, Leonard felt a flash of guilt – he’d barely seen Jim since their first day. He hadn’t exactly made an effort to see him. And just as quickly, he could see on Brex’s face that he’d caught that thought from him.

“Leonard, it threw you for a loop when you realized Jim was on this mission. You were so relieved it almost hurt. So why haven’t you spent any time with him? And if you say it’s because you’re busy, I will personally take you off duty until you’ve spent some time out of sickbay, talking to
other sentient beings in a non-work context.”

Leonard searched Brex’s face for any sign that the guy was kidding. He wasn’t. Leonard leaned heavily on his desk. “I’m only here for two months, and I figured I’d be so busy that I didn’t even consider socializing. I’ve been a bit of a loner since my divorce. Jim’s usually the guy who drags me out of my cave when it’s been too long since I’ve seen the light of day. But I’m sure Jim has been busy as hell, too, and he’s always social with the other cadets, so they’re probably doing stuff together in the evenings...”

Brex gave him a look that clearly said he wasn’t buying a word of it.

Leonard sighed. “Okay, okay... I’ll comm him later. First, I need to calibrate this thing.” He started to reach for the biofeedback device, but Brex beat him to it.

“Let me help you,” he said, an enigmatic smile quirking his mouth.

“I don’t really need help. It’s just a basic biofeedback device.”

“I know, but I’d like to see what you’re doing with your research.” He looked over the unit and quickly located the button to activate it.

Leonard didn’t know why this was making him nervous. “The neural scanner is much more interesting, and I’m going to work on that one tomorrow....”

“I might be busy tomorrow,” Brex said as he looked over the control panel.

“I... uh... who’s watching sickbay?” Leonard asked.

“Doctor Singh arrived for her shift at 1600. I’m off-duty.”

“You know, maybe I’ll just do this tomorrow. I’ll go down to the mess hall. I’ll invite Jim to the rec room for some R&R. I’ve heard there’s a pool table in there, and that’s the only game where I have a chance of beating Jim.”

“Leonard.” He removed the sensor device from the main unit. It was a bracelet lined with sensors that fed biorhythm and other essential data back to the processors. A visual display gave the patient instant feedback about how their emotions were impacting their physiology, and from there, the patient was supposed to learn how to control their reactions.

But as Brex held out the sensor towards him, Leonard knew that it didn’t take a biofeedback session or a telepath to know that his little recluse act was a facade. He was hiding, and it was bullshit. Brex probably already knew that. The feint with the biofeedback unit had been for his own benefit. And this was confirmed as Brex nodded solemnly and put the sensor bracelet back in its slot on the main unit.

Leonard shuddered. “I’m sorry.”

Brex frowned. “You have no reason to be sorry. I sprang that on you... but you know I did it because I needed you to realize that you’re not emotionally healthy right now, and that hiding in your office and avoiding things doesn’t help. I’m your leader while you’re on this assignment, and that doesn’t just mean I’m your boss. It means I’m responsible for you, and I’m concerned. I have no idea why you’re feeling like this, but more importantly, I don’t think you really understand either.”

“I know full well that I’ve got issues,” Leonard said defensively. “I had something personal come
up at the start of the summer, but I can’t do anything about that now. I just need to settle in. Get a routine. That’s all.”

But Brex just shook his head. “You’re hiding in your routine. You’re running from something back home, and avoiding it. And you’re avoiding your best friend. It all comes from the same root. So make the connection.”

Leonard grimaced and stared down at the surface of his desk. “Why don’t you just make the connection for me, seeing as you’re already picking apart my thoughts?” When Brex didn’t answer right away, Leonard looked back up.

Brex was regarding him with a mix of annoyance and patient sympathy. “It’s not like your mind is a book and I can flip through the pages at my leisure. What I’m seeing here is obvious stuff. Sure, I noticed faster than some people, but trust me, other people will notice soon, too. So... when will you figure it out?”

For a long moment, Leonard held Brex’s firm gaze like a challenge until he realized there was no challenge there. Just support. It surprised him. With a huff, he rested his elbows heavily on his desk and stared at his hands folded in front of him. “It’s about my daughter.” There were several seconds of silence, and Leonard realized that Brex was letting him talk, uninterrupted.

Squaring his shoulders, and wondering why the hell he was spilling this information so easily, he launched into the full-disclosure details of his divorce, his two years without seeing his daughter once, and how he’d completely screwed up his first chance to see Joanna since the divorce. It should have felt awkward – Leonard ‘the-H-must-stand-for-Hermit, Bones’ McCoy did not talk about his personal life with anyone.

But then, other than Jim, nobody had ever really asked.

“... and so, if I’m lucky, I might be able to squeeze in a week with her after we get back. And I won’t know for a while, so I’m trying not to think about it.”

Brex was nodding slowly. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to. That’s not a pleasant situation. But even if you want to avoid thinking about your daughter, why would you want to avoid everyone else, including your friend?”

“I...” He almost said I don’t know, but that was a lie. Sure, there was the pathetic excuse that he just didn’t want to think about things. But after his chat with Jim over dinner the day they’d arrived, he’d gone back to his quarters and stewed. Brooded, actually.

Jim’s words had kept ringing in his ears. You’d never walk away when someone needs you. Heh. How poetic. And he was absolutely certain Jim believed every word of it. But somehow, Leonard just couldn’t bring himself to believe it.

Given the chance, Leonard avoided problems. Oh, he was damned good at trying to get other people to face their problems – a patient who needed to lose weight, a colleague who was spreading himself thin, Jim being Jim – and that just made him the world’s biggest hypocrite. He’d walked away from his problems time and time again. He hid from them. Whether he was hiding in his job or at the bottom of a bottle, it was all the same. He’d ended up in Starfleet because he was running away from his problems so much that he’d been inches away from running out of rope, and so he’d hidden in Starfleet. And he was still using it to hide.

He’d told himself that while he was on assignment on the Athena, he didn’t have the time to deal with how he’d messed up his week with his daughter, but that was a convenient, ugly excuse. He
was hiding. And he hadn’t just walked away this time – he’d flown out of the sector at warp three.

If he could do that to his daughter, he could do that to Jim. He could do it to anyone. He could walk away. So, he’d decided that it was better to simply not be there in the first place, because if he wasn’t there, he couldn’t walk away. It was easier. Safer. He couldn’t fuck it up.

God, he was an idiot.

“Leonard?”

He had to swallow to wet his throat, which had gone dry for some reason. “I suppose... I think that if I could mess up that badly with my daughter, I could do it to anyone, including Jim.”

To his surprise, Brex smiled. “Finally, you’re being honest with yourself.”

Leonard growled low in his throat. “Yeah, well, I learned long ago that being honest with myself was a sort of masochism that I couldn’t quite handle. And look where it got me. I ruined everything I had, lost my family, almost destroyed my career... hell, I don’t even have a place I can really call home anymore.”

Brex’s smile became enigmatic. “Of course you have a home. You just happen to be lucky enough to have him assigned to the same ship.”

Leonard felt his eyes go wide. Brex’s words cut through to something that threatened to make his chest ache and his eyes water.

Brex nodded slowly. “So, why are you avoiding people, especially Jim?”

Leonard could only shrug. “I guess, if I avoid them, I won’t mess it up.”

“So you’re going to mess it up,” Brex said flatly. “And then you’re going to fix it. It’s not as though friendship is a pass or fail.”

Leonard snorted. “If it was, I’ve probably got a pretty crappy record.”

Brex’s expression softened again. “I doubt that. If you did, then Jim wouldn’t have come in here at the end of alpha shift, looking for you.”

Suddenly feeling like he’d been slapped, and not nearly hard enough, Leonard sat up straighter in his seat. “Jim came in? When? Is he okay? Was he injured? Why didn’t he... or you... why didn’t someone say something?”

Brex held up his hands. “Easy there. He wasn’t injured... but he did seem a bit flustered, and he was hoping you were off-shift. I told him that you were still doing an interview, but when I asked if he wanted me to interrupt, he shook me off and apologized for intruding.”

“And then he walked out the door like someone was trying to light his tail on fire, didn’t he?” Leonard filled in. When Brex nodded, Leonard sighed and leaned forward on his desk again. “Dammit, Jim.”

“You’ve already worked more than a full shift,” Brex said gently as he stood, tilting his head towards the door. “Go on. Get out of my sickbay, and don’t let me see you until your shift tomorrow, or until you’ve spent some quality time talking to your friend, whichever comes last.”

“I think I can do that,” Leonard said, nodding wearily. Then, with a groan, he stood and stretched
his neck side to side and was rewarded with a pair of satisfying cracks. “I’m too old for this,” he grumbled as he stepped out of the office with Brex right behind him.

“Well, I’m glad you’re going to go find Jim, but that old man act? Leonard... you’re still young. You need to give yourself permission to enjoy that.”

Leonard grimaced. “Yeah, but as they say back on Earth, it ain’t the age – it’s the mileage.”

Brex gave him a patient nod, and Leonard took his leave.

Outside sickbay, Leonard flipped open his comm. “McCoy to Kirk.” He waited a moment, then frowned at the lack of a response. “McCoy to Kirk. Hey Jim, are you there?” Still no reply.

Frowning more deeply, he walked to the nearest computer panel and tapped the screen just a bit harder than necessary. “Computer, give me the location of Cadet Kirk.”

“Cadet Kirk is in the Fitness Facility.”

“Well, where’s the Fitness Facility?” Leonard growled, not caring that he looked ridiculous snarling at a computer.

“The Fitness Facility is on deck six, section thirty-seven.”

“Well, looks like I’ve gotta go hunt the kid down,” Leonard mumbled to himself.

“Unable to compute. Please re-state the inquiry.”

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he snapped before hurrying off down the hallway.

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If Leonard’s guess was right, and it usually was, Jim hadn’t eaten. He’d probably stopped by sickbay as soon as he’d gotten off his shift, and when he’d discovered that Leonard had been busy, he’d gone directly to the fitness facility and was currently taking out his masochistic tendencies on the exercise equipment. So Leonard stopped by the mess hall, grabbed two meals to go, and toted them with him to the fitness facility.

As anticipated, he saw Jim immediately, running on a holo-treadmill, drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. It was too fast of a pace for a distance run, and Leonard was pretty sure Jim had already run several kilometers at that speed. He sighed, put down the dinners on a table by the door, and wove his way past other fitness equipment and sweaty people towards Jim’s treadmill. The holo program wasn’t activated, but Jim was staring intently ahead and didn’t even seem to notice Leonard’s approach until he waved a hand in front of the kid’s face and snapped his fingers.

“Bones!” Jim’s stride faltered and he almost stumbled, but the treadmill’s safety field quickly caught him. “Uh... computer, slow to... twelve kilometers per hour.” The treadmill slowed to a much less breakneck pace, but Jim was still breathing hard. “What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” He shook his head, still feeling a bit guilty for missing Jim earlier. “I’m sorry I was still working when you came by. I didn’t know.”

But Jim just waved a casual hand. “It’s fine, Bones. I didn’t mean... to interrupt. Sorry I bothered your boss. I’m fine, and I figured... it gave me time to do... a solid endurance run today. Haven’t done a good once... since I got back from... the survival training, and...”
“And according to the readout,” Leonard said flatly as he looked over at the treadmill’s display panel, “you’ve run nearly sixteen kilometers already, so that’s more than enough endurance for one night. Shut it down and get something to eat.”

“But Bones!”

“Doctor’s orders. Get off that dang fool contraption and come along. I grabbed dinner for both of us.”

Jim gave him a startled look that quickly morphed into something almost painfully hopeful, and Leonard would be damned if Jim ever gave a look like that to anyone else. Finally, Jim nodded.

“Computer, end program.”

The platform slowed and stopped, and Jim grabbed a small hand towel as he stepped off and followed Leonard back through the room, wiping his face and neck. Leonard grabbed the dinners and Jim followed him out of the fitness facility without a word. The silence between them wasn’t awkward, just familiar. They were waiting until they got to Leonard’s quarters to talk, just like Jim would silently follow him back to his dorm room on campus.

People had often wondered why they didn’t share a dorm room. A lot of folks had figured they were roommates, but they weren’t. It had just worked out that way.

When they’d first arrived at the Academy, they already had room assignments, and they didn’t really know each other anyway. When they’d become friends later in the year, Jim hadn’t wanted to make waves, so even though plenty of cadets requested roommate transfers, he didn’t bother. And then, after his sociopath roommate had been arrested and removed from the academy last year, the housing officials decided to let Jim keep the double room as a single. Plenty of space, and no reason to move.

On the other side of things, as a cadet who already held two doctorate degrees, Leonard had been given special housing the day he’d arrived. It was a small apartment designed for one person, not two, and it was too nice of a suite to give it up for normal cadet housing. It was just wasn’t designed to fit two people comfortably. But still, his apartment had a sofa. Jim crashed there often enough anyway, and the arrangement worked. Leonard had the impression that Jim liked having a place to go in addition to his normal “home.” And... strangely... the apartment didn’t feel like home if Jim stayed away too long.

Damn Brex for being right. Home was wherever Jim was. Leonard just hoped he’d never walk away from the kid like he’d walked away from the rest of his life once before.

They got off the turbolift on deck eight, walked down the hall, and a moment later, the door of Leonard’s quarters had whooshed shut behind them.

Leonard set the dinners down on the coffee table and looked back over at Jim, who was leaning tiredly against the wall and toeing off his running shoes.

“Mind if I use your shower?” he asked roughly without making eye contact. “I earned some water credits today.”

Leonard nodded, frowning. “Go for it, kid. Towels are in the cabinet. Then come sit down and eat something.”

“Thanks,” he said, and slipped quietly into the bathroom.

Leonard listened to Jim shuffling around the bathroom, and then the sound of running water. He
waited for Jim to start humming to himself the way he normally did in the shower, but it never happened. Yeah, something had set the kid off.

With a heavy sigh, he lined up his boots neatly by the door, and grabbed the running shoes that Jim had kicked off and set them by the door as well. He pulled off his own uniform and traded it for a pair of sweat pants and a worn-out t-shirt. Then, realizing that Jim didn’t have any clean clothes with him, he went into the bathroom and grabbed Jim’s sweaty workout clothes off the floor. He ran the whole pile quickly through the sonic cleaning unit and deposited them back on the shelf in the bathroom, all before Jim had finished showering.

A soft, “Thanks, Bones,” was barely audible over the running water.

He went to the drink slot and ordered a glass of water for himself and an electrolyte-rich sports drink for Jim and set them both on the coffee table. Finally, he went and sat in one of the armchairs and waited. A few minutes later, Jim joined him, hair still wet, t-shirt sticking slightly to damp skin. Jim sat down heavily in the armchair without a word or eye contact. He drank half of the sports drink immediately, took a bite of his sandwich, then poked half-heartedly at the pile of fruit salad.

Leonard waited patiently. When Jim got like this, he’d speak when he was ready, and not a moment sooner. He busied himself with his own sandwich while Jim ate. He had a huge bite in his mouth when Jim finally started talking.

“I’m a self-centered asshole.”

Leonard’s eyebrows furrowed together tightly, and he swallowed as quickly as he could without choking. “What the hell is that supposed to mean, kid?”

Jim leaned back heavily in his chair, slouching, but not relaxing in the slightest. “I’ve been working with one of the engineering teams for the past three days. Ship’s power grid. It’s a lot of fun. Good guys. But...” He shook his head again. “Bones, all these years, and I never, never thought about the other people who died on the Kelvin.”

At that, Leonard’s eyebrow went up. “Oh?” That seemed like something that had come out of nowhere.

“It wasn’t just my father. Sure, most of the crew got away, but one hundred and seventy two other people, besides my father... they’re dead, floating around in a vacuum with scorched chunks of the ship’s hull and bits of wire. Nothing but space vapor and debris.”

Leonard cringed at the grotesque description. “You didn’t know other people died?”

“Of course I knew,” Jim scowled at him. “I studied the Kelvin, Bones. I know the numbers.”

“Then...?”

“I never fucking thought about it.”

Leonard shifted in his chair uncomfortably as he processed that. “Well, who said you had to? Jim, it’s a big galaxy and shit happens every day.”

“Yeah, and this is shit that comes with my name attached,” he said bitterly.

“Now hold it right there, kid,” Leonard cut in sharply. “That’s not your name, that’s your father’s name, so don’t go acting like you’re responsible for any of it.”
“I never said I was.” Jim’s voice was tinged with dark irony and, oddly, amusement.

“Then what are you going on about? What the hell set you off about this?” He shook his head in dismay. “You can’t worry about a bunch of people you’ve never met, never served with, and have nothing to do with you.”

To Leonard’s surprise, Jim started laughing. It wasn’t a pleasant sound. “Never met... that’s too funny, Bones. I used to think Starfleet was huge, but it’s a small place. Tight circles.”

Comprehension settled into Leonard’s gut like a lead brick. “Who did you meet today, Jim?”

Jim’s hand twitched, and he gripped the arm of his chair. “One of the guys on the engineering team,” he said flatly. “Lost his father on the Kelvin, too.”

Leonard should have guessed it was something like that, but really, how could he have known? “Damn.”

“Yeah,” Jim said dryly. “That’s one word for it. Mine was fuck.”

“Did you talk to him about it?”

Jim gave him an incredulous look. “Are you kidding me? Bones, what the hell was I supposed to say? And he didn’t even tell me directly – one of the other guys on the team said it, after he’d walked away. After he’d asked me if George Kirk was my father. After he’d made this weird quip about what I’d be willing to sacrifice for the greater good.”

“Shit.”

Jim drew a wan smile. “Now you’re getting closer.” He sighed and slouched deeper into his seat, letting his head fall back against the cushion. He stared blankly at the ceiling. “I stopped by the ship’s archives room and did some quick research before I came down to sickbay. I’d wanted to look up who Johan had lost. It was his father. So I decided to look up everyone else I’d ignored while I was wallowing in my own fucking self-pity. One hundred-and-seventy-two other people died on the Kelvin. They all had names and families that they left behind. Two-hundred-and-fifteen people lost their parents. Eighty-four people lost their spouses. Three-hundred-and-twenty-seven parents lost their sons and daughters. Two-hundred-and-fifty-eight -”

“Okay, okay!” Leonard blurted out, cutting him off. “Fuck...”

“Now you’re getting the idea, Bones.”

Leonard shook his head angrily. “That’s not what I mean. You went and looked up the names of all the other people who died aboard the Kelvin, and compiled a list of all their relatives just so you could torture yourself with the numbers of people who lost someone that day?”

Jim shrugged. “We got off our shift a bit early. Seemed like a good use of time.”

Leonard lurched over and leaned heavily on his knees, rubbing his face roughly with his hands and closing his eyes. “Dammit, Jim.”

He heard a heavy sigh. The armchair creaked as Jim shifted. A few seconds later, a cup clacked back down on the table, and silence again. Leonard looked up to see Jim hunched over, staring at his empty glass on the coffee table. His face looked like he was trying to keep it blank, but there were lines of stress around his eyes that were even tighter than they’d been just a moment ago.
“Jim?”

The muscles in Jim’s neck strained, and his knuckles went white as he dug his fingers into his knees.

“Come on, Jim... you’re starting to worry me.”

Jim’s head twitched like he was trying to shake a no, then he suddenly leaned back and thudded one fist against his thigh a couple of times, in a frustrated, agitated movement. Leonard was just about to verbally prompt him again when Jim finally spoke.

“Bones...” His voice was tight and pitched a bit too high. “I’ve never told you this. Hell, I’ve never told anyone this, but after today... after last week...” He shook his head to himself, jaw clenched. “Fuck it all. Listen, I’ve never admired my father.” It sounded as thought there were more, but he stopped again, full halt.

Leonard raised an eyebrow and waited, knowing more was coming. Jim just needed a moment.

Jim nodded his appreciation, then took a deep breath, and stared at the floor. “It’s something that most people seem to assume – that I admired my dad. The Great George Kirk. He died saving my life and all that crap, so when I was a kid, people tried to make me feel better by telling me how heroic he was. It wasn’t worth arguing with them, so I let them think it. But...” The muscles in his neck tightened again, and he swallowed thickly. “I’ve actually been furious at him most of my life.”

Leonard thought maybe he should be surprised at this pronouncement, but he wasn’t. Even though Jim had never said as much before, it made sense. A parent who had disappeared, leaving a broken family behind? Of course a kid would be bitter. But this was Jim – there was always more to it. “What do you mean?” he asked as evenly as possible, knowing Jim would fill in the blanks as much as he was willing.

Jim growled, low in his throat. “Every damned time I hear the fucking Kelvin story, it’s George Kirk this and George Kirk that. Sure, the archives have the more pedestrian background information, but the story is always about my dad and my name and fucking sacrifice for duty and love and heroics and all that crap, and nobody ever says a damned thing about the hundreds of other people who died that day.” His voice was getting tighter and tighter with each word. “Everyone talks about the people my father saved, but there’s never a word about the other people he didn’t save. There’s never any talk about what he might have done differently, whether he could have gotten out alive, and how he fucked up. Self-sacrificing bullshit.” He snorted irritably, then coughed and cleared his throat. “Everyone talks about him being some sort of martyr hero, but...” Jim’s fingers were beginning to dig tightly into the arms of his chair. “Who the hell said that playing the hero was a good idea, huh, Bones?”

Leonard sucked in a sharp breath, taken aback at the sudden intensity of Jim’s rant as much as the surprising content. How could Jim be angry at the idea that someone else had played the hero after all the shit he’d done? “Jim,” he started, desperately hoping that he could choose his words correctly, “since the day I met you, you’ve set up a pretty solid track record for yourself of playing the hero. The way you played your training sims, the way you handled Terra Prime...”

But Jim was shaking his head, his expression warped with anger and pain. “Bones, I was playing for survival. I have never pulled a stunt where I didn't fully plan to get out of it alive. My father... he set the damned ship on a collision course and rammed it into the Romulan ship. He wasn’t in it to win – he was on a suicide mission. Fucking martyr. That’s not... he didn’t...” Jim growled deep in his chest. “He fucked up, Bones. He died, and other people died. He went on a glorious suicide
run, like a damned kamikaze pilot, and I will never understand what the hell was going through his head.”

Leonard was at a loss. He’d never heard this sort of thing out of Jim before. Sure, he’d known that Jim had a love-hate relationship with the history of his father and the circumstances of his own birth, but this was a bit unexpected. Okay, really unexpected. “I thought you told me once that you didn’t believe in no-win scenarios, just like him.”

“Bones... it’s not like...” He slouched back in his chair again, but at least he was making eye contact this time. “We can convince ourselves of a lot of shit when we need to. I studied the Kelvin. I made myself do it. I read Pike’s dissertation. I tried to pretend I wasn’t personally living with the aftermath, and look at it objectively. And then, so I could deal with it, I told myself a story about my father and the whole mess that was distant and impartial, wove my own myth and lessons around it, and made myself live with it. And it worked, Bones. But even if my father didn't believe in no-win scenarios, it doesn't matter, because he didn't win. I will never be able to stop thinking about the fact that he failed, because the idiot is space dust now.”

Leonard nodded slowly. Okay, so Jim had taken the parts of the Kelvin story he could use, mentally created a narrative he’d repeated to himself until he could act like he believed it, and on the surface, he’d discarded the rest. But underneath, this was a kid who had never quite gotten over the idea that his father had abandoned their family. That changed everything.

Jim nodded warily. “Pike dared me to do better than my father, Bones. That’s how he tried to sucker me into Starfleet. And yeah, I took him seriously there, but not the way he realizes.” He squirmed slightly in his chair as if he couldn’t get comfortable. “I’ve replayed that conversation over and over in my head. He’d told me he just wanted information on the cadets who had jumped me that night, but I’d known where that conversation was going from the moment he called me by my full name. And I told myself that I should run the other way because there was no fucking way I was going to get myself into the same crap my father had. But then he had to go on like some sort of poster-boy recruiter, talking about how I could do better than my father had. And after he left, I went for a ride, intending to forget about the whole crazy idea.”

He paused, and Leonard said softly, “But you couldn’t.”

“I’m here, right?” Jim absently kicked his foot against the coffee table, making the glasses shake.

Leonard wasn’t sure how to respond to any of this. Jim was lost and uncertain, tripping over himself and angry. This was a Jim Kirk he hadn’t seen since early in their first year. It was unnerving.

“I thought,” Jim said slowly, “that I wanted to do better than my father because the man fucked it up.”

“Are you saying you don’t still think that?”

Jim sighed and raked a hand through his hair, then roughed up the still-damp mop before he let his arms fall limp at his sides. He looked worn out and defeated. “I do... and I don’t. Look, I’m not claiming I’ve figured any of this out. Like I said, I did a lot of research. I tried to dissect what he did. Take it apart tactically. Figure out what he did wrong. And the damned thing of it is... I wasn’t there, so I’ll never know what other decisions he could have made. What did he miss? What tricks or tactics or opportunities went untouched until all he had left to do was to go and fucking blow himself up? And all I can come up with is that he went on a damned suicide mission when there had to have been another way. There always has to be another way.”
Jim clenched his hands into fists, and for a moment, Leonard almost thought he was going to lose it, but then the kid shook his head slowly. “All those... well... *incidents* I’ve had? Bones, I never went looking for trouble. At least, not the sort of trouble with a permanent end. If there’s a way to get *out* of trouble, I’ll find it. And sure, I’ve taken *risks* in training exercises. In fact...” He smiled, but it was a grim expression. “I got chewed out during Survival Training for sticking my neck out and going solo a couple of times. Commander Mendoza even asked me if *playing the martyr* ran in my family.”

With a flash of sympathetic anger, Leonard clenched his jaw and sat up straighter. “That bastard had no business bringing your father into -”

“Drop it, Bones,” Jim said, waving him down. “It’s a moot point now. But what I’m saying is that even when I’ve pulled some of those stunts in training where I took risks, I wasn’t playing the martyr. The shit I do... I only do it if I think I can win. Everything I’ve been doing here... since I got to the Academy... I’m trying to be good enough so that I always have the best chance of getting out alive. And that means the people around me, too, but... self preservation, Bones. I’ve seen too much life thrown away and fought too hard to think mine is worth tossing out, even though everyone used to think I was self-destructive. I don’t believe in no-win scenarios because while my father might have saved eight hundred people, he still died in that mess along with 172 other people, and I refuse to believe that was the best answer. When my father set the collision course into that Romulan ship, he *knew* it was suicide. Not just a risk, but a sure thing. It was a losing game. He made the choice to go and kill himself. And... even though I’ve analyzed the battle and tactical decisions from every angle, over and over... I don’t think I’ll ever understand why he did it.”

Leonard watched something like a shadow fall over Jim’s face. The kid seemed to shut down, and Leonard knew he was done talking.

Maybe Cadet Kirk was still fixated on solving a tactical puzzle, trying to figure out what had gone wrong and whether Captain Kirk could have saved more people and gotten out alive. But Jim was still the kid who was furious at his father for abandoning his family to the massive shitpile that was his youth. And maybe they were part of the same problem.

No matter how hard Jim was arguing against it now, Leonard knew the kid’s instincts. Jim was the sort of person who *would* risk his life for someone else, without hesitation. The kid would walk into the mouth of hell with nothing but his fists and his wits if he thought it would save someone else’s life. While the thought left Leonard worried sick sometimes, it was also one of the reasons Jim was so important to him. So the fact that Jim was arguing against his own instincts meant that he was really, *really* hung up on this. The loss of his father had destroyed his family, ruined his childhood, eventually sent him to Tarsus IV, and left him on a downward spiral. He’d spent his entire youth just surviving, and blaming his father for not surviving. That wasn’t something that *research* and *rationalizing* could fix.

And at that moment, Leonard hated himself just a little bit for never realizing Jim had been carrying this burden for so long. Jim hadn’t thought of all the other people who had died on the Kelvin, and Leonard had never thought about this. Some goddamned friend he was.

But... at least he was here. And he wasn’t going to walk away.

Jim wasn’t going to figure this out tonight. It sounded like he’d been working on it for years, and it would probably take years of experience for him to put it together. The idea of a captain going down with his ship was the stuff of legend and myth – a noble idea that looked heroic from a distance, but was really messy when you started picking it apart. Maybe the heat of battle and the
weight of command did something to people, but Leonard didn’t have any experience with either of those things. Not like that. And while Leonard was absolutely sure that George Kirk hadn’t thought of his actions as a suicide run, he hadn’t been there. There was no way to know what Captain Kirk had been thinking in that famous moment when he’d made the decision to stay with the ship. It certainly wasn’t something that a cadet, even one like Jim Kirk, could figure out on a personal level.

Leonard wanted to do something, but there wasn’t much he could do.

Then he remembered one little thing he’d packed, more for sentiment and luck than for the actual contents. Without a word, he stood, pretending that his knees and back didn’t crack and pop as he did. He felt Jim’s eyes track him across the room to his bedside drawer, from which he pulled his father’s flask, filled with three ounces of Knob Creek.

“I wasn’t supposed to bring any alcohol with me, so I didn’t bring any bottles,” he said conversationally, “but this is a personal good luck charm, and I wasn’t about to leave it behind.”

He started to hold the flask towards Jim, who closed his eyes and groaned.

“Bones, I don’t need a drink.”

“No, Bones, he wasn’t being an asshole. He was doing what he was supposed to do. Push my buttons. Make me see things differently. Make me question my motivations and decisions now, when I’m still a cadet, before I can cause some real damage. That’s part of the purpose behind that training... and behind this internship. And maybe I... I’m starting to wonder if I’m sticking my neck out too much.” Something in his voice sounded too tired, too damaged. Leonard didn’t like it.

“You stick your neck out,” Leonard said carefully, “because you’re damned good at it, and you know what you’re doing. Sure, I call you reckless, but...”

Jim shrugged. “Finney told me that I needed to sit back and learn to just be a cadet. Told me that someday, I’d be ready to step up, take command, stick my neck out... but not now. I’ve pulled
some great stunts at the Academy, and I like to think I’m smart... but it’s real out here. I’ve been working for the past three days with a guy who lost his dad because my dad didn’t save him.”

“Jim, you can’t -”

“So maybe it’s time for me to learn my place,” Jim said right over him. He reached over to his dinner, sitting half-uneaten on the coffee table, and prodded a piece of pineapple with his fork, but made no move to pick it up and eat it.

Leonard looked at him in defeat. There wasn’t much he could do for Jim right now. No advice he could give. No way he could help Jim figure out that the universe just wasn’t right if Jim Kirk suddenly decided to start acting like everyone else. So, instead, he grabbed Jim’s empty glass, walked over to the drink slot, got a refill, and set it back down in front of him. Then, he settled back into his own chair and looked across the coffee table at this shadow of his best friend.

“Jim... I’d trust you over most of the clowns on this ship any day of the week, but... you have to do what you think is best.”

“They’re not clowns,” Jim said softly. “They’re experienced. They know what they’re doing. I’m a cadet, Bones. I need to start acting like one.”

Leonard sighed. “If you say so,” he said noncommittally.

Maybe Jim’s bizarre mood had been brought on by the unexpected revelation of the day, and it would pass by tomorrow. Maybe he’d have a chat with the guy whose father had been on the Kelvin, and Jim would sort out his emotional hangup. Maybe once Jim settled into shipboard life a bit more, once they got to Axanar and had something interesting to do, he would feel more like himself. Maybe if Leonard actually spent some time hanging out with his best friend instead of avoiding human contact, Jim wouldn’t have worked himself into a funk like this.

Whatever the case, there was only one thing Leonard knew for sure. He wasn’t going to walk away.

Leonard shifted the conversation to shipboard assignments and let Jim talk about what he’d been doing onboard so far. Jim actually asked about Leonard’s research, and listened attentively. He was being a good friend, and he knew it, and part of him was satisfied by that. Still, by the time they’d finished talking and Jim had left for the evening to go back to his own quarters, Leonard couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d missed something really important.

As he settled down in his bunk for the night, he looked across the room at the uninhabited bunk, and couldn’t help but feel that maybe he should have told Jim to stay. Feeling really uncertain about everything, and hoping a good night’s sleep would help some of that, he turned his back to the rest of the room.

“Lights.”

**********
“We’ll have three hours on the surface,” Lieutenant Finney said evenly.

Six cadets sat in rapt attention. Their first landing party. Part of the Axanar Peace Mission. It was huge.

It wasn’t Jim’s first time on another planet, but this... this was different. Tarsus IV hadn’t been a mission; it had been a nightmare. This, on the other hand, was the beginning of an adventure. He was a Starfleet cadet now, but not just a cadet. This time, he was an officer intern, functioning as a true representative of Starfleet and the Federation. Absently, his hand reached up and traced the insignia on his gray duty uniform as Finney continued with the briefing.

“We’ll beam down to the front terrace of the capitol building. After a brief formal welcome, Captain Porter and the Federation Ambassador will attend some meetings that we don’t have to worry about, and we’ll get a chance to look around. There will be a reception with refreshments, and that’s where I’m expecting you each to put your diplomacy training into practice. Engage yourselves in at least three diplomatic conversations – at least one with an Axanar, and if you can, try to interact with some of the other species, too. Also, I’ve been told that we can request a tour of the Capitol Square, so if you’ve finished your diplomatic small talk, feel free to ask for the tour.”

His gaze skimmed over the assembled cadets. “Keep your eyes open, but be judicious about what you say. Observe more than you talk. We’re just getting to know these people. We’ll reconvene in front of the Hall of Lords for beam-up at 1400 hours. Then, once the higher-ups are ready, the Axanar ambassadors will come onboard along with the other delegates we’re transporting, and we’ll set course for Araxis. Questions?”

Jim found himself slowly shaking his head, along with the other cadets. This might be completely new, but with all the drills and training he’d been through, including first-contact and landing party simulations, it felt like all that remained was to simply do it. Additionally, Finney had given them an enormous information file at the end of duty yesterday. Homework, even in space. When his bunkmates had turned down for the night and grumbled at him to turn off the small light over his own bunk light, he’d gone to Bones’ room to finish reading.

Jim smiled to himself. He hadn’t even needed to guess that Bones would be wide awake at zero-fuck-hundred hours, working on his research. It had been good to spend some of the evening in Bones’ quarters, just studying. It felt comfortable. Neither of them mentioned Jim’s little breakdown a few nights ago, and Jim had regained his emotional footing just fine. He just needed to settle into his duties, keep his nose out of trouble, and do things the normal way for a change. It was an internship. He wasn’t in charge. It was okay.

Finney nodded to the cadets. “As we said, atmospheric methane isn’t toxic, and you’d be perfectly fine for much longer than three hours, but some of the natural byproducts might make you a bit queasy, so speak up immediately if you experience any unusual symptoms.”

“I still wonder how any culture can develop technology on a planet where lighting a fire could torch the whole atmosphere,” Nadeau said under his breath to Jim.

Jim looked at Nadeau cynically, but before he could say anything, Finney replied. “Are you making a joke, Nadeau?”

Nadeau’s head pulled back in surprise, and he replied hesitantly, “I was just wondering, sir. That’s all.”
“The atmospheric concentration of methane is just under 3%, cadet. Methane doesn’t burn below 5%. Didn’t you read the whole briefing file I sent to you?” His expression was neutral, but it was instantly obvious what he was digging at.

Nadeau opened his mouth, as though ready to protest, but he must have realized he’d already tipped his hand. He shook his head. “Not the whole file, sir. I concentrated on the historical background for the peace negotiations and the settlement of Araxis.”

Finney kept his poker face. “So, you figured that if there was something about the atmosphere that was worrisome for a landing party, one of the science officers or your section leader would tell you, right?”

Nadeau glanced side to side at the other cadets before saying, “I guess so, sir. I mean, if something like the atmosphere or geology of an area is dangerous, that’s always been at the forefront of the briefing. I was just curious about the rest of it. The overview of the mission said Axanar has a nitrogen-methane atmosphere, so I figured methane was one of the major components.”

“You figured, huh?” Finney’s voice was oddly nonchalant. “Often, designations for atmospheres are meant to indicate which components are outside the normal range for Class-M planets. If the atmosphere was flammable, Axanar wouldn’t be class-M... would it?”

“No....” Nadeau said, sounding a bit like he was grasping for a rope.

Finney nodded. “Go report to Commander Shao and ask for another duty assignment for the day, Cadet Nadeau. I don’t think you’re ready for the landing party. Dismissed.”

Nadeau’s mouth fell open, but without a word, he stood and left the briefing room. Finney watched him go, waiting for the door to slide shut before he spoke again.

“Cadets... when you get a mission briefing, whether you’re the low man on the team or the damned mission leader, you read every word, top to bottom. You never know what detail of a mission briefing might save your ass when your boots hit dirt. There is no way to know what’s important until after the mission is over, so you treat every word of that report as though your life depends on it. Do you hear me?”

“Yes sir,” came a weak chorus of replies from around the room. Jim kept glancing at the door, realizing just how easily any of them could lose privileges. This was real, and nobody was messing around. Yeah, he’d do well not to stick his neck out right now. Play completely by the book. Constraining himself to being just a cadet felt like wearing clothing that didn’t quite fit, but he’d get used to it. He was doing better already.

Lieutenant Finney looked as though he was about to speak again when the familiar intercom whistle sounded, followed by the deep voice of Captain Porter.

“Attention crew, this is the Captain speaking. We’ve arrived in orbit around Axanar. Greetings have been exchanged with the planetary authorities, and we are cleared to beam down landing parties. All landing party personnel, please report to the transporter room. And, might I say, here’s to our whole crew for being part of such a historic event. Captain Porter out.”


Jim felt his heart speed up with anticipation as he fell into step with his squad, following Finney out of the briefing room. The corridors were buzzing with activity, and Jim could barely hold back the urge to walk faster. They rounded the corner into the transporter room, only to stop short behind
the queue of landing party personnel. Security officers, a couple of science officers, the command team, and...

“Bones!” Jim kept his greeting as quiet and professional as possible. He hadn’t expected to see Bones lined up for the landing party, and he grinned broadly as his friend startled and spun around. “I didn’t think they’d send a doctor on a diplomatic mission.”

“Jim,” Bones said with a light grumble. “I’m here because, as a cadet, I’m supposed to go on a landing party. And...” He took a notably uneasy breath. “Doctor Brex insisted that studying the psychology of a landing party would be just as valuable as studying shipboard and flight phobias.”

Jim nodded, still grinning. “Sounds like an observant man.”

Bones shrugged. “I think he is. Besides, the Captain insisted that the Medical team needed to be represented in the landing entourage. Brex dislikes diplomatic posturing as much as I do... and he outranks me.”

Jim narrowly held back a chuckle as Lieutenant Finney clapped him on the shoulder.

“Kirk, form up. We’re the third group to beam down.”

Jim nodded at Finney, then he threw Bones a wink, earning him an eyeroll as he fell back into formation.

The first team approached the transporter platform. Three official delegates to the Peace Conference, accompanied by Captain Porter and Commander LaSalle, took their positions and faded from existence. Jim's eyes, however, were on Bones, and he watched as a deep shudder worked through the man. His grasp on his med kit was all white knuckles and straining fingers. He swore he could see the hairs on the back of Bones' neck stand up, and... was he sweating?

“Come on, Bones,” Jim whispered under his breath. “Don't tell me you're scared of transporters, too.”

At that, Bones' head whipped around – damn that man's superhuman hearing – and he glared at Jim, but the annoyance in his expression was undercut by thinly veiled panic. Before he could say anything, however, the transporter chief's voice cut through the room.

“Transport complete. Team two, please take your places on the transporter pad.”

Like a man being led to the gallows, Bones walked up the steps to the transporter pad and took his place behind one of the security officers. His stance was proper, and anybody else wouldn’t have noticed his hesitation, but Jim wasn't anybody else. Bones' gaze flashed from Jim, to the transporter chief's operations console, and back to Jim. For a moment, Jim was absolutely certain that Bones was going to bolt from the transporter pad and run like a madman back to sickbay.

Instead, despite the pallor and beads of sweat lining his brow, Leonard McCoy held his ground as the Lieutenant said, “Energize.” In the last fraction of a second before he disappeared, Jim saw him squeeze his eyes shut.

Damn, Bones, Jim thought, but his team was already being called up to the platform. He followed Finney up to the pad, and a moment later, the transporter room disappeared around him and the surface of an alien world resolved into view.

They were in a large, open square, elegantly tiled with a slightly opalescent stone resembling translucent marble. Abstract sculptures lined the terrace, and on all sides were massive buildings
with architecture of the kind that Jim had only seen in cultural briefing documents. They looked like fortresses, both richly ornate and heavily fortified at once. There were plants with massive purple-green leaves forming hedges that divided up the terrace into smaller areas, sculpted benches made of an off-silver metal alloy, and a fountain in the center of the square. An entourage of Axanar officials was standing at the base of the steps of the largest building. They were humanoids with a reptilian appearance, dressed in ornate, formal robes. It was one hell of a first view on a new planet, and Jim had to admit, he was impressed.

But something was missing.

_Bones._

Jim's eyes went wide as he realized he couldn't see Bones anywhere. He looked around at the whole landing party, but the telltale cadet’s gray duty uniform with the broad shoulders, ridiculous side-parted brown hair, and ever-present med kit were nowhere to be seen.

An Axanar official stepped forward, extending his arms in formal greeting as he addressed the landing parties. “My Federation friends, I am Chancellor Rshaxaan. Welcome to the Capitol Square of Axanar City. Ten years ago, this site was a mere pile of rubble, reduced to dust and grit by the horrible battle that our civilization narrowly survived. It was by the good graces and protection of your leaders, particularly of Commander Grath, that we have been able to rebuild. Our Capitol Square was completed only ten years ago, just in time for this ceremony, so it is with great pride that I present it to you. All that we have, we offer to you in gratitude.”

Jim was listening to the Chancellor, but his eyes were rapidly scanning the square. Bones should have still been standing with his group. It was possible that a slight miscalculation had deposited him a short distance away, but that didn’t happen often.

Captain Porter stepped away from the collective landing party. “Chancellor Rshaxaan, I am Captain Porter of the _USS Athena_, presenting representatives from the Federation planets of Fillandria and Kashet, as well as members of my crew. On behalf of my crew, we appreciate your hospitality.”

Jim almost broke rank, but he held his ground. Formal reception. Opening remarks. Major diplomatic event. Their first moments on a new planet. He had to hold it together. But _fuck it all_, because Bones was missing.

“No appreciation is necessary, Captain. It is our honor and duty. The delegates and representatives who have already arrived on the other ships are enjoying refreshments in the Hall of Lords,” he said as he indicated the tallest of the four buildings around the square, “and exploring our gardens of Capitol Square. Please, allow your crew to fully indulge in what we have provided.”

Jim thought he heard Captain Porter releasing the landing parties to explore the grounds, and his conscious mind caught the fact that he had permission to break formation. In a heartbeat, he began working around the square, looking behind plant hedges and around statues.

“Bones? Come on, man, where did you go? Bones?”

“Cadet Kirk, is there a problem?” Finney's voice was firm but definitely concerned.

Jim glanced back at Finney. “Bones... uh... Cadet McCoy beamed down with the second group, but I don't see him.” He shook his head, and started to reach for his communicator when he heard something.
“Dammit, Jim.”

The voice was muffled and coarse, but it sent a wave of relief through Jim as he followed the sound behind a hedge of plants to find Bones sitting on a bench with his head between his knees. Jim hurried over and sat down on the bench next to Bones. From there, it was obvious that the man was shaking.

“Shit, Bones, are you okay?”


Jim glanced at Finney and said, “I’ve got him, sir,” as Bones waved him off without looking up.

Finney nodded and said, “Report back to me before you go to explore the grounds. The other cadets are heading into the Hall of Lords, and I’ll be in there.”

“Aye, sir.”

Finney walked away, leaving Jim and Bones by themselves. After a moment, Bones lifted his head weakly, revealing a gray complexion and slightly bloodshot eyes. “Well, that proved one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Immersion therapy doesn’t work for transporter phobias.”

Jim stared at Bones for a moment in bemused disbelief. “You’re scared of transporters, too? Seriously?”

“Never much liked them on principle,” he grumbled, “but I’ve never gone through one. Had hoped it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“What do you mean, it was bad? I mean, it kinda tingles a bit, but it doesn’t hurt.”

“Neither does flying unless you crash, genius.” He blinked, then gave Jim a quick apologetic look, and said, “Sorry. Didn’t mean it like that.”

Jim shrugged it off. “It’s in the past, Bones. But come on... transporters?”

Bones growled low in his throat. “Yes, transporters, you asshole. I’ve read medical reports on cadavers – or what was left of the cadavers – after transporter malfunctions. Molecules missing... parts scrambled...” His voice trailed off as he blanched and squeezed his eyes shut again for a moment. “Goddammit.”

“Wish you’d told me, Bones.” Jim waited for a moment, then shot him a devious look. “Do you need a doctor?”

That drew an instant scowl. “Shut up.”

“I could call up to the ship for a medic, if you’re too sick to continue the mission,” Jim continued, putting on his most obnoxiously helpful smirk.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” he said, but the unhealthy green-gray tint to his skin was fading.

Jim grinned. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m the doctor, because you’re looking better already.” He got to his feet and held out a hand to Bones. “Come on, shake it off and join the party.”
Bones sighed. “I suppose now that I’m down here, I might as well enjoy it.” He took Jim’s hand and let himself be pulled to his feet. “Just don’t know how the hell I’m going to handle the return trip.”

“Got some anti-anxiety stuff in your medkit?” Jim asked as he started walking towards the Hall of Lords, with Bones falling into step beside him.

“Yeah,” he said under his breath. “But technically I can’t dose myself with anti-anxiety meds when I’m the doctor on duty.”

Jim gave him a sly look. “Then I’ll dose you. You’ve jabbed me with that damned hypospray enough times. Time for payback.”

“You’re still an asshole.”

“The finest asshole,” Jim said with a chuckle as they began climbing the steps to the Hall of Lords. “Now come on... three hours on Axanar, and we’ve got a whole planet determined to impress us. Let’s see what interplanetary hospitality is like.”

As they entered the building, a vast room opened up in front of them. It was even more ornate than the Capitol Square. Jim let out a low whistle. “Dang, fancy,” he mumbled.

“I’ll say,” Bones said back in an undertone. “I hope they put as many resources into taking care of the health of their people as they put into their architecture.”

“If they’re petitioning for entry into the Federation, I’m sure they do,” Jim said back, his eyes still taking in the high arches of the ceiling, carved artwork on the walls, and what appeared to be precious metals glinting in the light that shone through opalescent windows. He was so busy staring at everything as he moved into the room that he almost crashed into an Axanar who was approaching him with a broad platter.

“Honored guests,” the Axanar said, keeping his head slightly bowed, “please allow me to offer you refreshment. Do you desire food containing large quantities of sucrose? Ethanol-based beverages? High protein delicacies?”

Jim blinked, but before he could reply, Bones waved him off. “I’m not feeling so great, uh, sir, so... thank you anyway.”

If anything, this flustered the Axanar, who only bowed his head lower. “I am addressed without name or title, sir. I am here to serve you. If you are unwell, I shall fetch a healer for –”

“No, no... I... it’s okay. I’ll be fine.” Bones was rapidly looking even more uncomfortable, but instead of a gray pallor, his cheeks were flushing red.

And Jim had to admit, the degree of subservience being demonstrated by the Axanar felt positively awkward, almost creepy. Still, he’d been trained well enough to accept cultural differences without trying to apply human standards to them, so he quickly wrapped a hand around Bones’ upper arm and cut into the conversation. “We accept your hospitality. My friend doesn’t require medical assistance, but...” He mentally scrambled for something to say. “I’m curious, what are the windows made of? It looks a bit like a rare stone from my planet, but I’ve never seen such big pieces before. They’re... uh... impressive.”

The Axanar’s expression suddenly shifted to raw delight. “The windows of the Hall of Lords are carved from silacite, a compound with a complex molecular structure of silicon and rare impurities. We are honored that it pleases you.” Balancing his tray on one hand, he quickly plucked two cups
off the tray and handed them over. “I am told that your species requires much water, even when you are uninterested in sustenance. This water is purified from the ice of our polar caps. Please accept our hospitality. I shall return soon with your desire.”

“My desire? What do you... mean?” Jim’s voice trailed off as he watched the Axanar scurry away from him. He blinked, glanced down at his cup, and then looked sideways at Bones, whose expression showed as much confusion as Jim felt. “What the hell was that all about? My desire? I...”

Bones was slowly shaking his head, staring off in the direction the Axanar waiter had gone. “My mamma taught me proper southern hospitality, Jim... but I’ve never seen anything like that. That was...”

“Weird. Yeah.” Jim took a small sip from his cup. The water was cold and refreshing, and sure tasted better than the reclaimed water he’d been drinking aboard the *Athena*. “The water is good, though. You should drink some.”

Bones looked down at his cup warily. “I’m starting to feel like if I don’t, I’ll start an interstellar diplomatic incident.”

Sipping their water, Jim and Bones wove their way through the loose crowd of Starfleet personnel, ambassadors of various species, and Axanar representatives and waitstaff engaged in polite discussion. Sure, Jim had known that the whole mission was going to be absolutely diplomatic in nature, and their only job was to look professional and observe everything, but this all felt awkward and staged, and they’d only been there for fifteen minutes. When he spotted Finney through the crowd, he tugged Bones’ sleeve and they made a beeline for the Lieutenant.

Finney greeted them with a nod. “Feeling better, McCoy?”

“Yes, sir,” Bones replied. “I think my stomach disagrees with being taken apart and reassembled atom-by-atom.”

Finney laughed softly. “So that’s what that was all about. If you’ve never done it before, it’s an odd sensation, but you’ll get used to it.”

“If you say so,” he replied noncommittally.

“Sir,” Jim cut in, “I know the cultural data we received said that the Axanar are extremely hospitable to guests, but... does this feel weird to you? After a long history of their contradictory behavior, it’s...” He paused, trying to find the right word.

“It’s unexpected by human standards, Kirk. And you’re right, it’s going to feel odd, but that’s how they run things.” He held up his own glass, which contained a deep purple liquid. “And I’ve got to admit, I’m rather appreciating their efforts. The server who brought this to me explained that they fully analyzed the chemical compositions of humans’ preferred beverages to select the best ones to serve at this event. Seems a bit extreme, but I can’t argue with the results. This tastes like someone combined the best red wine with the aroma of honey. You’ve got to try it.”

Jim frowned. “Maybe later, sir.”

Finney nodded. “Well, it’s good to see you’re back on your feet, McCoy. Now both of you go on. We’ve only got three hours here. Remember your assignment, Kirk. Three diplomatic conversations, and a full report on each of them when we get back to the ship.” He glanced at Bones. “I don’t know what Doctor Brex assigned you, but... try not to throw up.”
Bones pressed his lips together grimly. “Aye, sir.”

Milling through the crowd again, Jim let Bones break off from him. Jim found two of the other cadets, and he assumed Bones found the science staff. He kept sipping at his water, which would be refilled by one of the Axanar servers before he could even recognize that the cup was almost empty. After one dry conversation with a Benzite delegate about agriculture and another conversation with a small group of delegates about interplanetary economics, Jim found himself pulled into a lively discussion with an Axanar official, a Tellarite, and a Vulcan Ambassador about the colony planet of Araxis.

Sure, he’d read the briefings. Seeing as his group was going to Araxis for the main part of the mission, it had seemed pretty damned essential to know the history. It had been straightforward enough: classic colonization story with a few twists.

A couple of centuries ago, a small group of Axanar left their home planet to establish a colony. The reasons hadn’t been fully clear. It looked like a political disagreement in part, but also a desire on the part of the colonists to avoid the brutal harvesting attacks from the Zhitorans, a mercenary race from a nearby star system. The colonists had dubbed their new home Araxis, had renamed themselves as Araxians, and had avoided their parent planet for almost two centuries.

Since the Battle of Axanar, and the tentative truce between the Axanar and the Zhitorans, as well as the other worlds that had harvested the Axanar, it looked like the Araxians once again desired relations with their parent planet. More to the point of the Federation’s interest... Araxis had dilithium.

The Axanar and the Araxians hoped to enter the Federation together, and the dilithium was on the table as a bargaining chip. The Araxians seemed eager to provide their resources to become part of this agreement. After centuries of isolation from each other, two parts of the same species were coming back together. The various species that had once hunted and harvested the Axanar were making reparations, including the Zhitorans. The Federation ideals of cooperation and peaceful relations were coming full circle after they’d almost crumbled before the Battle of Axanar over a decade past. It looked like a deeply gratifying mission of homecoming, reunification, and new alliances.

At least, that’s what the briefings said.

However, the Tellarite and Vulcan in this small discussion had been digging for more information than the official briefings had given them, and Jim found it almost mind-blowing how elegantly they were working together to pull information.

The Vulcan, Telak, was watching the Axanar closely as he pressed his point. “So, Ambassador, we have been told that the Araxians have offered their dilithium as part of their request to rejoin Axanar, which will be part of your bid to become Federation members. Studying the history provided, this seems illogical. If the Araxians left and almost completely broke contact with Axanar, and managed to live for nearly two centuries without coming under harvesting attacks, why would they expose themselves at all? As successful isolationists, it would be counter-intuitive that they should wish to break that isolation. If they’d wanted to offer the dilithium to the Federation, it seems far more probable that they would do it on their own.”

The Axanar, a being named Kazhrin, bowed deeply. “From my understanding of your culture, sir, it would be difficult for you to understand. We Axanar find strength in numbers, and security in the ordered structure of society.”

The Tellarite – Jim hadn’t caught his name and was too embarrassed to ask – lifted his chin in a
gesture Jim knew meant he was essentially scowling, throwing down a challenge. “As do we, Councilman. And as do Vulcans, and Terrans such as the Cadets here. Your assumptions about our cultures seem... limited.” Really, for a Tellarite, he wasn’t remotely confrontational. He’d obviously had extensive training in interspecies diplomacy to be an Ambassador for this event, seeing as he hadn’t insulted the Axanar’s parentage yet to instigate the debate.

Still, Kazhrin bowed more deeply, in nervous subservience. “I meant no offense, sir! I am merely trying to explain. The Axanar who left our world nearly 200 years ago broke with the deepest instinctive structures of our society. They did survive, but they did it without protection. They did it without the bonds of societal structure. It would be a life without purpose, cut off and disjointed. As the young ones on Araxis found their roots over the last few decades, and those who had led the exodus became too old to direct the colony, their natural need for our greater society returned.”

“In the short span of ten years?” Telak asked calmly. “It seems highly improbable.”

“The Vulcan is right,” said the Tellarite. “Such a complete turnaround in so little time? Ludicrous.”

Kazhrin stood a bit straighter again, and actually looked the Tellarite in the eye for a moment. “Over the past fifty cycles, small ships have traveled between our two planets. Axanar have rejoined lost family on Araxis, and some have become new colonists for no other reason than our need to reach out to our people... to bring them what they had lost.”

Jim raised a hand to interject. “Wait a minute. I’m sorry to interrupt, but the records we received said that there hadn’t been travel between the two planets until the Battle of Axanar, only ten years ago.”

The Axanar looked horrified for a moment, but quickly bowed again. “It was meant that no official transit took place until after the Great Battle.” His face twisted into an odd frown. “Individuals occasionally maintained contact between the worlds, and individuals decided to venture outside of the protection of Axanar to make their way to Araxis. But yes, as reported, official conversation between the planets began after the Great Battle.”

Really? Jim thought to himself as he filed away that tid-bit of information. This guy is saying that the official history the Axanar had reported was... wrong? “So...” Jim began carefully, “The Araxians had been out of contact for 150 years. Then, few rogue small groups left Axanar for Araxis, but otherwise, there was no real contact. Then, after the Battle, the Araxians decide to offer your planet all of their dilithium so that you can both join the Federation?”

Telak looked sideways at Jim and raised an eyebrow in what seemed like approval. “Precisely what I was wondering. It would seem to us that the dilithium belongs to the Araxians. Why would they simply come out of isolation and give everything to your planet, allowing their resources to be used for bargaining?”

The Tellarite again gave a challenging lift of his chin. “That’s what I’d like to know, too.”

Kazhrin actually seemed confused by this. “They have asked to rejoin the Axanar society... to come back under our structure. They wish to join the Federation as a colony of Axanar, not as the isolated planet of Araxis. Why would they not offer their dilithium as part of our people’s mutual resources?”

Cadet Wilcox looked sideways at Jim before saying, “They founded the colony, established a society, and took ownership of an otherwise uninhabited planet. If they had wanted so much to start their own society, but still had interest in joining the Federation, why wouldn’t they ask to join the Federation as their own planet?” She looked like she was trying to hold back. Jim could tell she
was feeling as awkward as he was about some of the odd quirks of this culture.

For a moment, Kazhrin looked lost, and maybe a bit dumbfounded, but then he shook his head sadly. “I indicated that you might not understand. Please... in their hearts, our brothers on Araxis are Axanar. They had been lost, but they are with us again.” He looked past the Vulcan Ambassador’s shoulder, then bowed very deeply. “My honored guests, I have been summoned. Please, do enjoy our hospitality. All that we have is yours.”

The Axanar bowed again and hurried away, leaving two Ambassadors and a pair of cadets standing in awkward silence.

Jim looked around at the others before blowing out a slow breath and saying, “That was...”

“Damned peculiar, if you ask me,” came a familiar voice from behind him.

Jim automatically stepped aside to make a space in the small circle for Bones. “Oh? Did you hear what we were talking about?”

Bones gave a respectful nod to the Vulcan and Tellarite, saying, “Ambassadors,” before looking back at Jim. “I didn’t hear anything you folks were saying, but by the looks on your faces, I’d guess it was similar to the odd conversation I just had with the Secretary of Health Services for the Axanar here.”

Telak gave a tilt of his head. “Would you share the content of your conversation with the Secretary, Cadet...?”

“McCoy, sir. And it’s also Doctor McCoy. And...” He shook his head. “I know that every culture on every planet is different, and that as long as cultural quirks aren’t in violation of the basic ethical code of Starfleet, we’re not supposed to judge, but this is just uncanny.” He looked Jim square in the eye. “Did you know that doctors are considered incredibly powerful individuals on this planet?”

Jim startled, then puzzled, “I do now... but why is that such a bad thing, Bones? I mean, haven’t you been saying for ages that you wished doctors had a bit more clout?”

Bones started to nod, then shook his head. “Not like this.” He looked around the whole group again. “It seems as though the doctors around here are... I don’t know... revered. Patients will offer the doctors any and all of their belongings in exchange for treatment, as though the exchange for saving the patient’s life is... well... anything the patient has. Including himself.”

“A life for a life, only in a symbolic form?” ventured the Tellarite.

“Something like that,” Bones said, “I mean, the Secretary didn’t flat-out say any of it like this, and I pieced it together from there, but... something just isn’t sitting right with me.” He sighed. “But then, who the hell am I to say anything? This is the first time I’ve been on a planet other than Earth, so I guess everything’s making me uneasy.”

“It’s always a challenge to become comfortable around completely foreign cultures,” the Tellarite said. “I must admit, when I met a Terran for the first time, I attempted to engage him in debate, and discovered that Terrans mistake our finest discussions for... fighting. I believe my opening remark was taken as a true invitation to fight, which led to an exchange of words about our mothers, which didn’t make sense at the time.”

Jim couldn’t help himself – he laughed. “Must have been a good argument, sir.”
“It was a fine argument... until he struck me.” He wrinkled his nose. “I have since learned the value of restraining myself in diplomatic situations until I can better anticipate a being’s reaction to a good argument. Sadly, some species will never understand the thrill of the debate.”

Jim grinned. He’d debated a Tellarite once during the spring of his first year at the Academy. He’d had his ass handed to him, but it had been a lot of fun. He was about ready to offer the Ambassador a debate challenge (no shame in losing a debate to a Tellarite) when Telak cut in.

“I offer, as a hypothesis, a Vulcan axiom to explain the unusual behavior of the Araxians in their offering of the dilithium to the greater good of the entire Axanar-Araxian population. I propose that they function under the principle that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

Jim turned sideways to look at Telak straight on. “I remember reading that in the writings of Surak,” Jim said.

Bones startled and stared at him. “You’ve read Vulcan philosophy?”

Jim smirked. “Didn’t you say you’d never be surprised by anything I ever did again?”

Bones rolled his eyes.

“It is a logical philosophy,” Telak said with a nod. “If the Araxians do indeed consider themselves, once again, to be part of the Axanar species, it would be logical for them to use their resources to further the collective good of the many in their society. They have simply ritualized and integrated this principle at all levels of their culture and social structures.”

Jim nodded, but it still seemed as though he was missing something. He was about to ask if anyone knew of any other species that had such an extreme interpretation of that philosophy when his comm unit chirped. Wilcox’s comm unit was chirping, too. A split second later, Bones’ comm beeped. Jim looked over at Bones. “Well, looks like the party is over. That’s the recall signal for the cadets.”

Wilcox nodded quickly to the Ambassadors. “Thank you for the discussion, Ambassadors.”

“Ah, young cadet, this was not a real discussion. Someday you will enjoy the delights of a true discussion with a Tellarite! But for today, restraint in the name of diplomacy.”

Wilcox smiled and said, “Of course, sir. Thank you,” before hurrying off.

Jim gave a respectful tilt of the head to the Ambassadors, then grinned at the Tellarite. “I would welcome the chance to debate with you, Ambassador.”

The Tellarite gave a short, satisfied nod. “I suspect you would offer quality debate for a Terran. I accept your offer!”

“It has been satisfying to engage in diplomatic discussion with you, cadet,” the Vulcan said with a serene nod. “You have clearly been well-trained and have studied the appropriate materials for this occasion.”

Jim grinned broadly. High praise indeed from both of them. Maybe he could handle this whole just being a cadet thing. “Thank you, Ambassadors.” He grabbed Bones by the arm. “Come on, Bones, let’s get out of here.”

“Great... just what I need. Another ride through the atomic dis-assembly machine,” Bones grumbled, letting himself be pulled along.
“You worry too much. Did you have a good time down here at all, other than discovering that you might be worshipped if you lived here?”

“Not bad. I mean, the hospitality has been beyond compare -- and don’t you ever tell my Ma I said that -- but...”

“Yeah, I know, it’s a bit off-putting. We’re not used to a system of subservience, but Axanar society is structured on that. It seems balanced, though, and Starfleet has never seen any sign that any of this is forced slavery. It just seems to be what the Axanar like.”

“Hmmm,” Bones mused as they made their way around a knot of beings locked in discussion. “Makes me empathize with the Araxians for leaving. Even if it wasn’t forced, I don’t think I could live with that.”

“Neither could I, Bones. But hey, a whole galaxy of new planets and new species out there. We can’t necessarily agree with all of them.”

“I s’pose...”

“Starfleet Cadet, sir!”

Jim didn’t know why he was sure it was directed at him, but he stopped in his tracks and turned around to see an Axanar hurrying towards him, carrying a large, flat object wrapped in a blue cloth and tied with a silver cord. Then he recognized the Axanar as the first waitstaff who had approached him earlier with drinks and snacks. “Uh, yes, uh... Mr...?” Why hadn’t he gotten the guy’s name?

“There is no need to address me, sir,” he said as he came to a stop in front of Jim. With a formal bow, he held out the wrapped item. “I am sorry it took so long. I needed to gain permission from the groundsmaster, but I have brought you the object of your desire.”

Jim looked sideways at Bones with a sudden sinking sense that he’d said or done something he shouldn’t have. “The... uh... object of my desire? I didn’t... I mean...” Being tongue-tied wasn’t a normal experience for Jim Kirk, but he had to admit, he was stuck right now. This was his first landing party, and such an enormous occasion, and had he already fucked it up? He hadn’t asked for anything, had he?

An elbow in his side got his attention as Bones said in an undertone, “Jim, if you don’t regain your diplomatic bearing and accept the damned thing, you might start an interplanetary incident.”

“I...”

The Axanar seemed to be getting flustered, and held out the package even closer to Jim. “Sir, you expressed that our silicite windows pleased you. Please accept the hospitality we offer.”

Jim blinked. Hard. The Axanar was giving him one of their opal windows. Maybe opal wasn’t as rare on Axanar, but this was a hugely valuable object, and how the hell could Jim accept something like this? He hadn’t asked for it! He wasn’t supposed to do anything except make small talk and observe. This wasn’t a souvenir-hunt!

An elbow in his side got his attention as Bones said in an undertone, “Jim, if you don’t regain your diplomatic bearing and accept the damned thing, you might start an interplanetary incident.”

“How...”

The Axanar looked positively distraught.

“Take the gift!” Bones hissed in his ear.

Quickly, Jim reached out and took the wrapped package, only slightly surprised by how heavy it
was. He had enough training to cover himself. “I accept your generous gift. I’m sure that it will please the Federation.”

Instantly, the Axanar’s expression changed from distress to delight, and he bowed deeply. “On behalf of the Axanar, I am grateful that it pleases you.”

Without another word, he hurried off, no doubt to another task of service. Jim stared at him as he went, then looked down at the package in his hands, then up at Bones.

“Shut your mouth, Jim. You’re gonna catch flies like that.”

Jim closed his mouth and swallowed uneasily. “That was...”

“Damned peculiar,” Bones said under his breath. “Yeah, it was. So let’s get back to the rendezvous point and get out of here.”

Hoisting the heavy window up against his torso, Jim nodded as he followed Bones out of the doors to the main terrace. “I’m with you. Even the transporter seems less unnerving than this, right?”

Bones snorted. “Speak for yourself, kid.”

*********

The cadets were clustered around the table in the debriefing room, and Jim’s gift from the Axanar was laid out on the table. Apparently, he wasn’t the only person with an odd story to tell.

Liu was going over his experience. “And when I said I don’t eat real meat, the waiter just about fell over himself, because he’d been told, as he quoted, that humans appreciate the fruits of the hunt. Which, I’ve got to admit, made me nervous as hell that he thought our ‘hunting’ was the same as the Zhitorans who had hunted the Axanar.” He forced an uneasy laugh. “I’m just glad one of the Vulcan Ambassadors stepped in and helped to explain that some humans abstain from meat in the same manner as Vulcans. I keep forgetting that human diets are unusually varied compared to many other sentient species, so the Axanar figured we all eat the same things. Anyway, the Vulcan Ambassador’s explanation seemed to satisfy the waiter. But then he suddenly excused himself, and came back maybe two minutes later with a huge platter of fruit, hell-bent on making sure I had accepted his hospitality. And I’ve got to admit, that was some of the tastiest fruit I’ve ever had. Although I’d suggest not eating the yellow pods. They’re bitter.”

“I had one of those pods,” Hererra said. “The Axanar told me to remove the husk. The seeds inside are soft and sweet. Tasted a bit like chocolate with spices.”

Liu flushed. “Oops. Well, I amend my report – everything was amazing.”

Lieutenant Finney nodded and leaned back from the table, threading his fingers together over the back of his head. “So, all in all, everyone had a great time. You had top-notch dining, interacted with some of the most distinguished ambassadors and diplomats in the Federation, and saw some of the most incredible architectural art in the quadrant outside of Betazed. Some of you even brought pieces of it home.”

Jim groaned. “I told you, sir, I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay, Kirk. Don’t worry about it. You did the right thing. You gave them a compliment on something in an attempt to be diplomatic, you didn’t actually ask for it, and when presented with the item, you accepted graciously. The question for all of you now, is what does all this mean? You’ve studied the briefings and reports.” He looked around the table carefully. “I’ll admit, I’ve
been on more than a few landing parties and I read the briefings for this one thoroughly, but I feel like we missed something. So, what do you fresh-faced cadets think?”

Jim pressed his lips together, then heaved a sigh and leaned his elbows on the table. “Sir, there wasn’t anything specific we observed that wasn’t perfectly in keeping with the reports we got. We were told that the Axanar are eager to please, detail-oriented, and have a strong ethic of hospitality, and that’s exactly what we saw. But... Cadet McCoy made an observation while he was speaking with the Axanar Secretary of Health Services. Doctors are almost... well... worshipped down there, from what McCoy said.”

Finney gave him a nod. “I heard about that, actually. It seemed odd until I looked at it in context. Come on, Kirk, you’re supposed to be a tactical genius, so put it together.”

Jim narrowly managed to keep himself from scowling at Finney. “Well, doctors help heal people, and the Axanar have a history of being attacked. Doctors would be some of the few people in a passive society that could effectively protect the population. And the Axanar put a premium on the concept of protection. That’s part of why we were told to expect over-the-top hospitality - that the Axanar are showing hospitality to us as potential protectors. But... McCoy said that the patients would offer doctors everything, sir. Their belongings, their wealth, their... their servitude. I know the briefings said that the Axanar don’t engage in any sort of slavery, but this seems really over the top.”

Finney was slowly nodding to himself. “I don’t need to give any of you the Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations lecture, so I won’t. The question to ask is... can we attribute what we’ve observed to IDIC?”

One by one, the cadets around the table nodded in turn. Jim nodded too, then stopped and looked down at the incredible chunk of opal sitting on the table. The Axanar called it silicite, but it was definitely opal, and it was intricately carved to accentuate the fire and color inside the stone. The Axanar would give away anything and everything of themselves to please the Federation in their bid for membership... and protection.

Jim thought about the conversation with the Tellarite and Vulcan Ambassadors. Perhaps Telak had been right, and this was a species in which the needs of the many always outweighed the needs of the few. It was... yeah, it was logical. But Vulcans subscribed to that philosophy, and they didn’t act like the Axanar. No, something was niggling at the back of Jim’s mind, something about how the Axanar were negotiating with the Araxians’ dilithium. He just couldn’t pin it down. He looked over at Wilcox, who had been in on the conversation, too. Wilcox seemed to be having the same sort of internal struggle he was, and it seemed just as fruitless. She glanced over at him and shrugged helplessly.

“As long as none of it is forced or coerced, then I guess I don’t see anything wrong with it,” Wilcox said for the both of them.

Jim started to nod in agreement, then frowned. He’d almost forgotten to mention this. “Sir, the official reports said that the Araxians only re-established contact with the Axanar after the Battle, right?”

“Yes, Kirk. Why?”

“Because one of the Axanar I was speaking with said that ships had been going back and forth between the planets for the past fifty years, unofficially. So the Axanar have been sending people to Araxis for half a century already. What do you make of that?”
Suddenly, Finney’s easy posture tensed up, and he leaned forward on the table. “They said that?”

Jim nodded. “Well, one of the Axanar officials said it, but I got the impression that what he said was accurate. And also that he seemed upset that he’d let it slip. That seems like an unusual oversight. I don’t know if that’s important to the reports, but... I thought I should mention it.”

“That’s definitely an unusual oversight,” Finney said.

“Do you think it means something?”

At that, Finney pressed his mouth into a flat line and tilted his head slightly. “I have no idea, but I’m going to put it into my final report. We’ll let people with a lot more rank deal with what it might mean.” His easy grin settled back into place. “For now, finish your written reports and have them ready to submit at 0800 hours tomorrow. We’ll convene for a brief meeting, and then you’ll receive your next set of shipboard assignments. I think you’ve all had enough excitement for today. Oh, and after all that food down on the planet, I might suggest a slightly longer stop by the fitness facility this evening. Dismissed.”

An amused groan echoed around the group as they stood and made their way to the door. Jim was about to exit when a hand caught his shoulder. “Just a quick moment, Kirk.”

Jim turned around and faced Finney. “Sir?”

Finney had a pensive look on his face. “Kirk, I know McCoy is under his own training and assignment schedule here, but could you ask him to write up a detailed report on his discussion with the Axanar Secretary of Health Services? I could ask Commander Shao to send the order through Doctor Brex, but rather than try to push something like that, I’d like to see if he’d just be willing to do the report anyway.”

“I... yes, sir. That shouldn’t be a problem. Why?”

Finney shrugged. “Because information should never be wasted. You know that.”

Jim gave a silent chuckle. Finney had drilled that fact into the whole Basic Tactics class. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. And also... take your pet rock with you.”

Jim’s mouth fell open. “Seriously?”

“They gave it to you, didn’t they?”

“Yes, sir, but... I mean, I didn’t ask for it! And it’s ridiculously valuable. How am I supposed to accept something like that? And besides, where am I going to keep that thing?”

Finney was laughing at him. “Graciously, cadet. You accept it graciously. Stick it under your bunk. Now go on, get out of my briefing room.”

Chagrined, Jim grabbed the opal window pane, tucked the folds of cloth around it, and hurried out the door.

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“Thank you, crewman,” Leonard said as he saved the data file on Crewman Silfes, one of the crew members on the roster for his research.

Silfes, like the other people on his roster, had been pre-selected based on her basic psych profiles. Like all Starfleet personnel, her profile was well within acceptable parameters, but showed a higher tendency than the average Starfleet personnel for anxiety related to uncontrollable events such as transporters, zero-atmosphere, and space flight in general. All people who met the parameters for the study were offered a chance to join the study, but none of it was mandatory. To Leonard’s surprise and pleasure, almost everyone on his list of candidates had volunteered. They were just beginning the data-collecting phase, creating detailed lists of triggers, coping techniques, and personal histories, as well as beginning the preliminary biofeedback sessions. The data was already excellent.

Silfes smiled. “No, thank you, Doctor. I’ve been able to keep my... uh... issues under control on my own, but it would be wonderful to find a way to really get past the fears. I’d love to be able to get into a shuttle without needing to tell myself to breathe.”

“Well, ma’am, that’s the goal. And every bit of data we get will help people throughout Starfleet, I hope.”

She nodded and stood. “Tell me, Doctor McCoy, why did you choose a project like this?”

“Simple,” Leonard replied as he stood to match her. “The first time I got aboard a shuttlecraft, I locked myself in the latrine, panicked, yelled at an officer, and threw up on the guy sitting next to me.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Impressive. And now?”

“I’ve made a lot of progress... with a lot of help from the guy I threw up on.”

She laughed lightly. “Well, if you can come this far, I think I’ve got a pretty good chance. Thank you.”

Leonard watched her leave with a measure of satisfaction, and was just about to sit down again when a hand snaked around the edge of the doorframe and knocked. The voice of Doctor Brex was followed by his face peeking around the corner. “Got a moment, McCoy?”

“Sure. I was just finishing up interviews for today. What can I do for you?”

“I just wanted to know how your project is coming along,” he said as he strolled into the tiny room and helped himself to the chair that Crewman Silfes had just vacated.

Leonard had gotten used to Doctor Brex stopping in at the end of each shift, or randomly throughout the day. Maybe Brex wasn’t nearly as old as Leonard’s father, but in the short time he’d been onboard, Leonard had felt just a touch of something he hadn’t experienced since his father died – paternal pride. It was still within the realm of the professional, but it had been something Leonard was discovering that he’d missed terribly, and he couldn’t help but latching on to Brex’s approval and support a bit more than he’d expected. The man’s advice had been invaluable. He’d gotten Leonard to stop hiding from his problems, and had given Leonard an opportunity to open up in a way he hadn’t in years. It was a good feeling.
Leonard shrugged casually at Brex’s question. “It’s just started, really, but it’s looking good.” He picked up his PADD and visually scanned through the list of interviews he’d completed. “I’m already finding patterns in coping techniques that we can start using for the next phase of research. The volunteers are willing and cooperative, and we’ve already begun biofeedback tests. We’ll be ready to begin more advanced techniques with a few of them by the end of next week.”

Brex nodded slowly, rubbing his chin with his thumb as he considered this. “Good... very good. I’m glad that’s working so well.”

“But that’s not why you really came in here, is it?”

Brex offered a conspiratorial smile. “And you told me you’re not a telepath,” he said wryly, then he let out a soft sigh. “As per standard protocol, I requested that the Axanar delegates report to sickbay when they arrived aboard yesterday for the routine screening that we give to all passengers.”

Leonard set down his PADD and stared at Brex’s expression, which was disturbingly unreadable for a Betazoid. “Wouldn’t that have been part of the regular routine for anyone coming aboard the ship who isn’t...” Leonard thought back to shipboard regulations. “A full scan within four hours of arrival is routine for any crew members who aren’t coming aboard during a standard crew rotation, or any non-crew personnel brought aboard at any time?”

“Nice job, McCoy. You say you hate regulations, but you seem to know them perfectly.”

“I’ve gotta know them if I’m gonna complain about them.”

“True,” Brex said with a smile, and the expression held a hint of fondness. Then his tone became business-like again. “The other delegates we’re transporting all showed up for their appointments – even the Zhitorans – although the Tellarite and Vulcan were late. They both said they’d been pulled into an unexpected conference.”

“Glad I’m not a diplomat,” Leonard grumbled. “But they still arrived within a reasonable time frame.”

“Yes. And when I sent the initial request for the Axanar, one of the Ambassadors’ assistants actually came down promptly, stating that the two actual Ambassadors and their other assistants would be along as soon as their meeting with Captain Porter was over.”

“But the others never came down,” Leonard filled in.

“Right. I submitted the request again today, and received a reply that they’re coming down after the meetings and subspace conferences they’ve got scheduled with all those diplomatic uppity-ups, which should be quite soon.”

Leonard found himself chuckling. “I knew I liked you,” he said plainly. He really was finding it refreshing that he could be openly honest with Brex, too.

“I picked up that phrase from you,” he said with a grin. “And I picked up this one, too: damned peculiar.”

Leonard twisted his mouth, considering. “Was there something unusual about your exam with the assistant?”

Brex pursed his lips. “Technically, no. Based on Axanar physiological parameters, he was in excellent health, carrying no virulent microbes, and he was very cooperative.”
“But...?” Leonard prompted.

Brex’s eyebrows furrowed slightly. “The only odd thing was when he asked if I was human towards the end of the exam, and I told him that I’m Betazoid. He seemed a bit flustered at that point, but it could be because he didn’t seem to know anything about Betazoids or how to interact with us.”

Leonard frowned. “Couldn’t you tell more specifically than that?”

Brex shook his head. “I read every species differently. Some species, I can’t read at all. I could read the Axanar a little bit, but not clearly. Just vague impressions. From what I could sense, he and the rest of them are afraid of offending people and violating diplomatic and hospitality protocols, and I was a species this particular individual hadn’t studied. It could be that he was just worried that he’d made a mistake without knowing it. I would have dismissed it as the usual discomfort I’ve seen in beings when they meet new species, but then, the Ambassadors never showed up for their appointments.”

“That’s... “

“Damned peculiar,” Brex said for him with a dry laugh. “Yes, I know. Anyway, the rest of the Axanar delegation should on their way now.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Well, that’s a good sign. Maybe they were just busy with everything. Meetings and getting ready for the mission and all.”

“Maybe,” Brex said, noncommittally. Then he shifted his posture, folding his arms across his chest. “You told me a little bit about your romp down on the planet.” The statement wasn’t exactly a question, but it demanded a response.

Leonard leaned a bit back in his chair, crossing his right ankle over his left knee. “I did. And it was just like I said, sir. Hospitality to the point of... well... I found it unnerving, and I’m from Georgia.”

Brex quirked a frown like a physical question mark. “What would be the significance about Georgia?”

At that, Leonard had to chuckle again. “We’ve been accused of smothering people to death with hospitality.”

“And then... you mentioned the way the Axanar regard doctors.”

“One of the highest stations in society,” Leonard said, still trying to wrap his head around it. “That’s what the Secretary of Health Services was telling me, anyway. But not in the same way doctors are respected on Earth, and other planets I’ve studied. Doctors are demigods around there. And the assistant who was tailing him seemed to be in absolute awe of...” Leonard trailed off as he saw the pensive expression on Brex’s face. “Sir?”

Brex let out a heavy breath. “I had wondered... if they honor doctors so highly... well, it just made me curious why they would have skipped out on an appointment. But as you said, they might have been stuck in meetings. Aaaah, I wouldn’t want to be a diplomat.” He grinned.

Leonard relaxed back into his chair a bit. “Neither would I. Although, if it weren’t for the transporter leaving my stomach in knots, I could get used to that sort of food. If I hadn’t been so distracted, I should have brought some back for you.”

Brex shook his head, still smiling. “I’ve been out here in the black long enough to have sampled
plenty of exotic delicacies. Your turn for the delicacies and the diplomacy.”

“Gee, thanks,” he said with a put-out tone.

“You’re quite welcome,” Brex said wryly. Then he stood suddenly, stretching his arms behind his back, then over his head. “But in the meantime, the Axanar should be arriving soon. Doctor Ankewicz won’t arrive for his shift for another hour, and there are four Axanar coming. I need to get to a meeting at 1700, and I could use an extra set of hands. Care to join me?”

Leonard shrugged. “I know next to nothing about Axanar physiology, but any chance to examine a new species looks good on my resume, right?”

Brex tilted his head back towards the main sickbay. “I thought you might say that. Come on. Let’s go examine an Axanar.”

**********

Leonard crammed a bite of turkey sandwich into his mouth and swallowed before he’d chewed nearly long enough, then immediately took another oversized bite and chewed as Jim watched him. When he swallowed again, he gave Jim a sideways look. “I thought you said you were hungry.”

Jim glanced down at his sandwich then looked back up. “I was until I saw you ripping apart your food like a Klingon in a famine. Damn, Bones, haven’t you eaten all week?”

“I should have eaten three hours ago,” he grumbled, glancing around at the nearly empty mess hall. Dinner was almost over, but at least it was quiet and isolated in the back corner of the room where they were eating. Jim said he hadn’t eaten yet because he’d been working late with his new assignment in the communications lab, so at least he had someone to gripe to. “I had a long day of interviews, only got a small lunch, and then I stayed late to help Doctor Brex do the physicals on the Axanar Ambassadors and their henchmen.”

Jim’s eyes popped a bit wider. “I’ll bet they’ve got some crazy physiology.”

“You bet. You should see where the equivalent of their kidneys are.” He made a motion towards his armpits, and was rewarded with a slightly disturbed expression from Jim.

Jim pushed his plate away. “Thanks, Bones.”

“Anytime, kid.” He tore off another bite and chewed roughly, then put down the sandwich and looked up at Jim. “They’re an odd bunch. And it wasn’t the subservience this time. I mean, these are the Ambassadors. They’re not in a role of servitude, so they don’t have to impress us the same way, but...” He shook his head to himself. “There’s nothing they did that I can put my finger on, because they were absolutely polite, but I’ve got this gut feeling that they didn’t like Doctor Brex.”

Jim tilted his head. “I remember Brex, from my first day onboard, and then that other day I stopped by looking for you. He seems like a really friendly sort of guy. What sort of problem could the Axanar have with him?”

“No idea. I mean, they cooperated with him, but they asked if he was really Betazoid, and... it was odd. They didn’t ask for anything, but I got the impression that they wanted me to do the exams, rather than Doctor Brex, which really doesn’t make sense. Brex has far more experience with various humanoid species than I do, and he’s the CMO. The other actual doctors weren’t on duty at the time, and I’m a cadet, so I told them I was only assisting.” He sighed. “Which, of course, was bullshit, because I’m a fully qualified doctor, but it was an easy excuse. Brex asked me to help because it was getting late and doing four full exams would take a while, and he needed to get to a
meeting. It was also good for me to get some experience doing basic exams on new species. But then there’s the fact that the Axanar had already skipped out on their original appointment, which was supposed to be yesterday and..." Leonard held up and caught his breath for a moment. “And I’m rambling, and I probably shouldn’t be saying half of this.”

Jim was looking at him thoughtfully. Slowly, he pulled his plate back towards himself, stabbed his fork into a piece of cauliflower, and held it up as he looked at it thoughtfully. “Well, you know I’m not going to tell anyone you were breaking medical confidentiality.”

“It isn’t medical confidentiality unless I tell you what my exam showed medically. It’s everything else that’s just... sitting funny with me.” He hunched his shoulders and shook his head. It wasn’t as though there were any sort of problem. He just felt like he needed to dissect the situation, tease it apart, and see how it all fit together because there was something there that he just didn’t understand. Well, of course there was: the Axanar. He didn’t understand the Axanar. And Jim was always the perfect person to talk to when he needed to piece together a puzzle when he didn’t even know the picture. “What do you think, kid?”

For several seconds, Jim said nothing. And then, “I think... Bones... maybe you’re over-thinking this.”

It was Leonard’s turn to feel his eyes widen. “What?”

“No, I mean... we’re going to meet all sorts of weird species with strange behaviors. The Axanar are strange, but I’m sure we’re just as odd to them. They seem to barely know what to do with humans. Maybe they’ve never met a Betazoid. But I...” He grimaced, as if having an internal argument, then shook his head. “How’s your research project going?”

Leonard stared at Jim as his head caught up with the sudden and complete shift in the conversation. Maybe there wasn’t anything specific for Jim to dissect, but he’d expected Jim to say... something. He wasn’t sure what, but Jim always had something to say. And he was dismissing the whole thing. “Jim?”

“Find anyone on the crew roster more phobic of anything related to space travel than you are?” Jim’s expression was carefully blank.

Unable to meet Jim’s eyes, Leonard looked down at the rest of his sandwich and realized that his voracious appetite had mostly vanished. He took a deep breath and let it out. Maybe Jim was right. He was getting worked up over nothing. He was nervous just by virtue of the fact that he was in the middle of deep space, and he was jumping at ghosts. “You know I can’t tell you specifics... but no. Looks like I’m still the biggest basket case of the bunch. These are mostly folks who have already been on deep space assignments. They’re more accustomed to the conditions out here, and they’ve found different coping techniques. I’m... still adjusting.”

“You’ve adjusted pretty well since I met you, Bones,” Jim said mildly, and Leonard had to smile.

“Yeah, well, I had help.”

Jim returned the smile. “I could help you with that transporter issue of yours.”

Leonard pressed his lips into a line. “One step at a time, kid.”

“Sure.”

Feeling the need to keep the conversation tame, Leonard pushed his plate away and leaned on the table. “What about you? What are you and the rest of your group doing for the next week or so
while we’re in transit?”

“Rotating assignments around the ship,” he said easily. “We’re taking turns in various leadership positions, shadowing officers. I’m heading down to commo next. Getting to play with the entire communications array.”


“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” His easy smile suddenly slipped. “This isn’t right. We both know we’re bullshitting here.”

Leonard gave another glance to his half-eaten sandwich. “Yeah. I’m sorry, kid.”

“No need to apologize.” Jim eyed his own sandwich with a grimace. “You’ve got research to consolidate, and I’ve got to memorize the schematics for the entire commo array by tomorrow morning. How about your quarters for study time?”

In his current mood, Leonard should have been happy to have Jim stop by. Always good for a healthy distraction. And after Brex’s admonishment a few days ago, he’d made a point of having Jim visit more often. But tonight, his instinct was to turn Jim away, go back to his room, and... and then what? Work on his research project in silence alone, rather than in silence with Jim around? Jim was actually a very considerate study partner when he knew it was really time to work, and Leonard rarely turned Jim away unless the kid was in one of his more raucous moods. But Jim was being fairly subdued tonight, and there really wasn’t any reason to turn him away. Huh. The Axanar must have really left him uneasy.

“Bones? Hey Bones? Study time? Yes or no? Or are you about to fall asleep on your dinner plate?”

Leonard blinked to see Jim staring at him with a bit of concern. “I... I’m sorry, Jim. Just thinking.”

Jim was still frowning. “Maybe you should just go get some sleep. I’ll go study in the observation lounge if my roommates are being too noisy.” He grabbed his sandwich off his plate, leaving most of the cauliflower, and picked up his tray with his other hand as he stood.

Leonard nodded and followed suit, leaving all of his food on his tray, which he deposited in the reprocessor slot behind Jim’s. “Maybe you’re right. For once.”

“For once? The emotional abuse I endure at your hands, Bones. I don’t know how I take it without suffering horrific psychological damage.” Jim’s eyes crinkled up at the edges as he grinned smugly.

Leonard rolled his eyes and cuffed Jim lightly upside the head as they walked out of the mess hall, earning a laugh from the kid. “Brat.”

“Yup.” But then his expression sobered. “But Bones... if you need anything, comm me, okay? You just seem off.”

“I know. But I’ll be fine. Thanks, kid.”

They parted ways, with Jim heading towards the enlisted quarters and Leonard heading back towards the junior officers’ quarters.

It wasn’t as though anything in particular had happened. And the Axanar had actually been quite pleasant to them and cooperative during the exam. They had repeatedly expressed their reverence for doctors, and asked whether Federation doctors would share their knowledge with the Axanar if
they were accepted as members into the Federation. They were curious about the technologies aboard the *Athena*.

And yet… they’d seemed skittish around Brex. They’d asked Leonard to do the exams. Leonard had figured Brex would want to discuss it, but they hadn’t even finished the exams by the time Doctor Ankewicz arrived at 1655 hours. Brex had needed to run out the door to his meeting, giving Leonard little more than a nod as he left. There had been no time to ask him anything. Ankewicz had helped to finish up the exams, and the Axanar had been absolutely courteous to him… not that they’d technically been anything less than courteous to Brex… and *damnit*, Leonard couldn’t put his finger on it, but something still felt *wrong*. There was just nothing solid to support that feeling.

With a sigh, he tabbed his access code into the panel outside his quarters and stepped inside. Unzipped his boots and lined them up neatly by the door. Pulled off his outer uniform shirt and tossed it into the sonic cleaning unit next to the bathroom. For a moment, he stared at his bed, debating the luxury of flopping onto the bed fully clothed and falling asleep just like that, but he really did need to get a little bit of data organizing done before tomorrow.

He allowed himself a satisfying groan as he sat down at his desk and activated his PADD. He started with his message cache. Since he’d left the sickbay lab, he’d received three messages from his study volunteers with questions about how they should practice some of their visualization techniques, a note from his student advisor at the Academy, and a message from Doctor Brex. Curious, Leonard pulled up the note from Brex first.

*Doctor McCoy,*

*First, thank you for assisting me today with the physicals. I’m sorry I couldn’t stay to finish up, but the meeting couldn’t wait.*

*Second, you said you’re working on a report for Lieutenant Finney regarding your experience down on Axanar. Could you send me a copy of that report when it’s done?*

*And finally, I would like to discuss any observations you might have made today while we were examining the Axanar. I know you noticed their odd behavior, too, but I was having difficulty reading any coherent thoughts from them. I have a theory about that. Please report to sickbay an hour before your first research session tomorrow so that we’ll have time to talk. Meet me in my office.*

*Thank you,*

*Doctor Brex*

Leonard slowly leaned back in his chair, considering the message. He thought about the prep work he still needed to do for his research before tomorrow, which he’d felt was a higher priority than writing a report for Finney about his pitiful attempt at diplomacy with the Axanar landing party. But then, Brex had asked for the report, and all things considered, maybe it was more important than it seemed.

With a sigh, he activated the stationary computer terminal at his desk, interfaced his PADD, and pulled up the sparse file which was supposed to become his report for Finney. He’d get to his own research later.

He started typing.

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Sickbay was quiet when Leonard arrived at 0700 hours. No patients. One of the nurses said hello as he came in, then went back to restocking equipment in one of the treatment bays. Doctor Singh was working quietly at one of the computer interfaces, but she looked up and greeted Leonard with a nod.
“What brings you in so early, McCoy?”

“Doctor Brex asked me to meet him before I started my research sessions today.” He glanced sideways at the chrono. He was still actually a few minutes early. “Has he arrived yet?”

Singh shook her head. “Not yet. He’s on the rotation for 0800, but if he said he was coming in early, I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

“Oh okay.” He glanced around. “Anything you want me to do while I wait?”

“Nothing in particular,” Singh replied. “Quiet morning. Reviewing my reports from the night shift. One person with a headache, and another one with insomnia, which isn’t surprising given the amount of stress onboard, and another clumsy engineer. I just need another doctor to sign off on the shift report, if you’ll do that for me. Then I don’t have to bother Doctor Brex with it when he arrives.”

“Sure,” Leonard said, taking the PADD. He skimmed over the reports. One Napean petty officer with a headache, a human engineer ensign with a broken toe, and a Deltan Lieutenant who couldn’t sleep. All in all, a quiet night in sickbay. Leonard signed off and handed the PADD back to Singh.

“Thank you, doctor.”

“You’re quite welcome, doctor,” Leonard said with a smile. It was nice being treated like a real colleague instead of just a cadet. He looked at the door, then at the chrono. “I guess I’ll go set up my equipment for my research testing while I wait for Doctor Brex.”

“Sounds like a fine plan. He’s pretty prompt, so I’m sure he’ll arrive soon if he told you he would.”

Leonard nodded and let himself into the lab. He kept glancing at the clock at first, but soon gave up as he became engrossed in calibrating his sensor equipment and testing things against his own biorhythms. When he finally heard the door to sickbay slide open again, revealing Doctor Brex, his eyes strayed to the chrono. It was 0754 hours.

Frowning, and a bit perplexed, Leonard put aside the equipment he was working on and stepped out into the main bay, following Brex to his office.

Doctor Brex offered a tired-looking smile to Leonard. “Good morning, McCoy. Here early today?” he asked as he stepped into his office, immediately sitting down heavily in his chair.

Leonard stopped in the office doorway. “Uh... yes, but, sir? You asked me to meet you at 0700 hours. Are you okay?”

Brex quickly gave him a look of pure confusion. “What? Why would I do that? I already had you working late last night, and you’re busy enough with your research. Why would I ask you to meet me early?”

By the expression on his face, it was clear that Brex had no idea what he was talking about. Somewhere in the back of Leonard’s mind, alarm bells were ringing, but he had dealt with more than enough psychological oddities in his career, and his well-trained responses kicked in. *Remain neutral, don’t show signs of alarm, don’t upset the person showing signs of memory loss.* Keeping his expression calm, he explained, “You sent me a communiqué last night, requesting that I meet you to discuss the Axanar physicals we did yesterday afternoon.”

Brex looked even more confused. “No, I didn’t. What would I want to discuss about the physicals? They were perfectly normal. Are you certain you’re feeling well, McCoy? You’re upset and
disturbed. What’s wrong?”

“I...” He vaguely entertained the notion of letting it slide – the message had been sent at a late hour, and Brex had been under a lot of stress – but he respected Brex too much. And this was too important.

Leonard reached into his bag and pulled out his PADD. If a person was having a memory lapse, a solid reminder often helped trigger the memory to return. “Here, let me show you the message.” He tapped the screen and pulled up his message cache, but...

“What message?” Brex asked.

Leonard stared at the screen. “It was here.”

“What was there?”

“I swear, it was right here!” The message was gone. Quickly, he tabbed into his discarded message cache, searching through the history, but there was no sign of it. “I don’t understand...”

A warm hand rested on Leonard’s shoulder. “I understand that you’ve been under unusual stress lately, Leonard. Perhaps you should cancel your appointments today and take a mental health day for yourself?”

“Physician, heal thyself,” Leonard murmured, but he was still staring dumbly at the message cache on his PADD. “But... I know it was here.”

“I’m not calling you a liar,” Brex said gently. “But acknowledge the chance that you may have remembered something incorrectly under stress. I know the Axanar make you uneasy. You could have had a dream about it, and being overtired, mixed up the memory.”

“I know... it’s just...” He shook his head to himself. He had no idea what had happened, but he was going to get to the bottom of it. “I’m sorry, Doctor. I’ll... let me go to my office and contact my research participants for the day.”

He barely noticed Brex’s nod as he turned and walked out of the office. A moment later, he’d flopped down heavily in his chair, still staring at the PADD.

This wasn’t right. This was seriously and severely not right. He hadn’t been asleep and he hadn’t imagined it. He could almost picture the words on the PADD. How could Brex have forgotten? What the hell was going on here?

He stared out the door to the main sickbay, then back down at his PADD. He needed to get ready for his first research tests of the day. Brex had told him to take a day off, and while the thought was tempting, he wasn’t about to back down. But then... what if Brex was right and it was Leonard’s memory that was faulty? Still, Leonard’s instinct was that Brex had completely forgotten the whole thing.

Leonard focused on the screen of the PADD, trying to picture the communique. He could see it if he thought hard enough. It hadn’t been a dream. It had been real, and he was sure of it, and if only he could get that through to Doctor Brex....

A wordless shout from main sickbay snatched him from his thoughts. Then, “Doctor McCoy!” It was the voice of Nurse Walsh.

Leonard tossed his PADD aside and ran out into the main sickbay to see something that felt more
unreal than imagined communiques and missed appointments.

Doctor Brex was sprawled facedown on the floor of sickbay, barely a meter outside his office door. Walsh was bent over him, checking his pulse manually as she repeated his name over and over again.

Leonard grabbed a tricorder as he ran to them. “Jesus, what the hell happened?”

“He took two steps outside his office... he was saying something...and he just collapsed.” Walsh was shaking her head, looking stunned.

“What was he saying?” Leonard barked out as the tricorder began spitting back readings, and Leonard would be damned if he could make sense of anything more than the basics. “No head or neck injuries. No internal bleeding. He’s safe to move. Quick, help me get him to a biobed.”

“He was mumbling,” Walsh said as she grabbed Brex’s right arm and helped heave him up alongside Leonard. “Saying something about remembering a message and that he was sorry for being late, and then he just fell over.” They lifted him up and stretched him out on the biobed. Walsh activated the bed’s scanners. “But what’s going on? Why did he collapse?”

Leonard was splitting his attention between the bed’s biosensor displays and the detailed readings from his tricorder. “I don’t know.” He wished Doctor Singh hadn’t just gone off-shift. “I’m not really familiar with Betazoid physiological norms...”

Walsh reached over and tapped something rapidly into the biobed’s control panel, and the readings on the display changed. She gave him a pointed look. The bed had automated settings for all sentient species known to the Federation, and the sensors could recalibrate instantly, displaying readings alongside the normal ranges for each species.

He felt himself flush with embarrassment. “Oh... thanks. I knew that.”

“Understandable, Doctor. It’s your first non-human emergency aboard a starship,” she said, with the trained calmness of a seasoned medical professional, but also with the obvious underlying fear of someone worried about a colleague and friend. “I’ll help. And Betazoids are very similar to humans. But... what’s going on?”

Shocked out of his own chagrin, Leonard focused on the readings again, using what he’d learned about translating vital signs for other species. “There are no injuries. No typical signs of shock. Normal nutrient levels. He’s well-hydrated. Blood pressure is... actually a little bit high, but not too bad. Cardiac rhythm is slightly irregular. That shouldn’t...” He shook his head to himself. He was lying to himself if he pretended this was anything but neurological.

Without saying a word, he tapped a new set of scanning parameters into the biobed controls, focusing on central nervous system activity. A moment later, a confusing picture emerged. He grimaced as he tightened the scan.

“What is it?” Nurse Walsh asked softly.

“Doctor Brex was supposed to meet me this morning at 0700 hours,” Leonard said flatly, not taking his eyes from the readouts. “But he showed up at 0800, acting as if he had no recollection of the message he’d sent to me last night, when he asked me to meet him early. You said that he came out of his office saying he was remembering a message, and I think I know what he was remembering. But if you look here...” The image resolved into a sharper scan. “According to the species standard, the electrical activity in these regions of the brain is abnormal. Vascular system is
normal, oxygen and glucose perfusion are normal, and there are no structural abnormalities, but electrical activity is atypical in... okay, yes, those are the Betazoid equivalent of temporal lobes, and... page Doctor Singh. I can pull up references, but she might know more about Betazoid neurology, and this is an emergency.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Walsh said, and quickly hurried over to the Nurse’s station to send the message.

Which gave Leonard a quiet moment to boggle at how quickly his day had turned on its head. And forget just today... if his gut instinct was right, this was going to get uglier before it got better.

Sometimes, he hated his gut instinct.

Putting aside the tricorder for a moment, Leonard did something he knew would make Brex proud: he reached over and took Brex’s hand, and whispered, “Hey, I’m here. But... what have they done to you?”

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Chapter 8

There was no evidence of physical injury.

Leonard dragged himself out of the conference room, where he’d spent the past hour being grilled by the Captain, First Officer, and the familiar face of Doctor Swerdlow, Chief of Neurology at Starfleet Medical, conferencing via subspace. And before that meeting, he’d spent the day running back and forth between sickbay and conference rooms. He was exhausted. His head hurt, his back hurt, and he was pretty sure even his hair hurt.

There were no foreign substances, chemicals, or objects in Doctor Brex’s body.

There was nothing to say that wasn’t already in his report, but he had been asked to repeat it, over and over again, as if repeating the information would somehow change it. It felt like an interrogation. It was too close to the feeling of being put on trial when someone close to him had been injured... a horrible feeling which he’d experienced all too recently. Those scars really hadn’t healed yet, and now, this.

The only abnormalities that could be detected were the unusual electrical activity in the temporal lobe and the associated imbalance of neurotransmitters.

The artificial lights of the hallway seemed too bright, and Leonard squinted against them. He was too tired, and it was hard to focus. He’d been battered mentally and emotionally, and he wanted to go to his quarters, take a headache pill, turn off his lights, and go to sleep. However, he knew that sleep would be hard-won. No, he’d just lay there, awake, staring through the darkness and wondering what the hell had happened.

At the moment, Tavin Brex is perfectly stable. His level of consciousness has not increased or decreased appreciably since the first complete scan taken less than ten minutes after he lost consciousness, but his vital signs are good and show no signs of deterioration.

Brex had been in perfect health when the USS Athena had left spacedock. He’d used himself to calibrate a tricorder and a full-body scanner earlier that week, and there hadn’t been a single thing that could have precipitated a collapse like that. But to hell with it, there wasn’t anything he could find now that could be causing this!

All standard techniques for reviving comatose patients have failed. We will continue with standard protocols until we discuss the matter further with the Betazoid Healers.

They’d already contacted the Betazoid authorities asking for medical references and advice that might not be common knowledge. The Healers were going to contact them again once they’d thoroughly reviewed the scans and other data, but there really wasn’t much they could do from a distance. In the meantime, Leonard had spent the entire morning and most of the afternoon working shoulder-to-shoulder with Doctor Singh, running detailed scans and trying every technique in the Federation’s vast medical databanks to get Brex to regain consciousness. Nothing had helped.

They were at a medical impasse, but Leonard didn’t want to believe that medical intervention was the only thing he could do for Brex. What remained, however, was both the source of the controversy and of Leonard’s rapidly intensifying headache.

Apparently, the eve of one of the biggest diplomatic events in decades of Federation history was not the time and place to level any sort of accusation against one of the main parties involved in
those diplomatic dealings. Captain Porter seemed to have a normally calm and jovial personality, and the buzz around the ship was that he was an unusually good commanding officer with an open-door policy and an open mind to match, but when Leonard stated that he suspected foul play on the part of the Axanar, his eyes widened and the veins on his temples bulged.

There was no evidence! No tangible sign of foul play! No way to connect Brex’s collapse to the Axanar, who had been in their quarters all night! Not on my ship!

Leonard McCoy didn’t give a flying fuck.

Something smelled funny about this whole damned mess. There was a man lying unconscious in sickbay with no mechanism of injury or underlying cause of illness, and Leonard did not feel like leaving this alone. Didn’t much matter, though. When he’d tried to push his theory and his flimsy– nonexistent, dammit– evidence, reiterating his discussion with Brex before the Axanar physicals, the missing communique, and Brex’s odd mutterings just before he’d lost consciousness, he’d been slapped down. Okay, so maybe he’d pushed it a bit too far, but what could they expect of him? Porter’s voice was still ringing in his ears.

“Drop it, Cadet! We have our security teams investigating, and they’ll deal with any matters of foul play. You are not a commissioned officer, despite your medical degree, and your involvement ends at the doors of sickbay. Do I make myself clear?”

Yeah, he’d made himself pretty damned clear. And if Leonard was any good at reading people– which he was, dammit– he didn’t think Porter was actually going to investigate the Axanar.

And why should he? Sure, Leonard wasn’t exactly privy to the official reports outside of what he’d witnessed himself, but people were talking, and his hearing was excellent. The Axanar schedule had been packed with meetings, some of which were unplanned. Their first day onboard, Araxian leaders had requested a meeting via subspace with the Axanar and some of the other Ambassadors, and had then held the Axanar for further discussions. That’s why the Axanar had missed their appointments. Nothing sinister at all– just diplomatic horse shit. Beyond that, the Axanar had been the most cordial and cooperative guests possible. At least, that’s what Leonard had overheard.

Sure, it made sense not to start a diplomatic incident with an investigation. Plenty of sense. Leonard couldn’t actually begrudge Captain Porter for not wanting to level accusations against the Axanar. With their historical background? Their species’ psych profile, overwhelming hospitality, and innate courtesy didn’t fit with their involvement in something underhanded. Besides, there was no physical evidence whatsoever to indicate any sort of foul play in Brex’s condition. Everything that made Leonard suspect the Axanar was circumstantial at best, and even the circumstances were weak. At this particular moment in history, when the Axanar were on the cusp of joining the Federation, there was no comprehensible reason for them to do something like this.

That still didn’t mean Leonard could switch off his gut instinct, which was starting to add nausea to his damned headache.

To top it all off, although it felt like a trivial and self-centered concern at the moment, the medical staff was now short-handed. The Athena wasn’t a big ship, and only carried a staff of three regular doctors, five nurses, and five techs. Despite being a cadet, Leonard was going to have to function as a full member of the regular staff in order to fully cover sickbay. Aside from the nurses, there were only Doctor Singh, Doctor Ankewicz, and himself. Which, naturally, meant he’d have to divert time away from his research.

Goddammit.
He rounded the curve of the corridor to his quarters and... he should have been surprised to see Jim Kirk leaning against his door, but he wasn’t.

Jim looked up at the sound of footsteps, unfolded his arms from across his chest, and stepped away from the wall. He didn’t smile, and didn’t offer a sarcastic quip about how Leonard looked like he’d just come off a three-day bender. Instead, Jim gave a solemn nod that told Leonard he understood, and something that had been knotted tightly in Leonard’s chest loosened a little bit.

“Jim,” Leonard said softly as he approached.

“I heard.” Jim rested a warm hand on Leonard’s shoulder and gave a squeeze, and the gesture felt familiar and comfortable. “You’re not okay.” It wasn’t even a question. Jim knew. And Jim knew that as exhausted as he was, there was no way he was going to be able to fall asleep right now, and he didn’t want to be alone. So Jim wasn’t going to let him be alone.

Leonard inclined his head towards the door, giving Jim the unspoken and unnecessary invitation, then turned and tabbed in his passcode. The door slid open, and Jim followed him into the room.

Without a word, Leonard unzipped his boots and kicked them aside. Jim lined them up by the door, the way Leonard liked them. Leonard stumbled further into his room as he yanked off his uniform top, undershirt, and pants and tossed them into the sonic cleaning unit. He turned towards the bathroom to get his bathrobe, only to find Jim handing it to him.

Leonard nodded appreciatively and wrapped his bathrobe around himself. For a moment, he looked longingly at his bed, but instead, he collapsed into one of the two armchairs with a groan, rubbing his temples and trying to get the ache from the day to disappear. A moment later, a hand unfurled in front of his eyes, presenting him with a small white pill that Leonard recognized. Another hand offered a glass of water.

Leonard looked up at Jim, hoping his expression conveyed at least a pathetic echo of the gratitude he felt as he took the headache pill and tossed it back. Jim gave him a faint smile before he settled himself on the other armchair and put his feet up on the coffee table between them. A few minutes later, when the headache began to ease away, Leonard sighed in physical relief, and put his feet up on the coffee table to match Jim’s.

He looked up at Jim, who merely responded with an expression of acceptance, waiting for Leonard to say... whatever he needed to say.

“Jim... I can’t... it’s not just what happened to Brex... but the way the Captain... he just dismissed it –”

“It’s okay, Bones,” Jim said softly. “You don’t have to say a word. I caught enough of the scuttlebutt around the ship. You can tell me the real story tomorrow. For now... I’m here.”

Leonard nodded once, then closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the armchair. “Thanks, Jim.”

“You’re welcome, Bones.”

And for now, that was good enough.

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The atmosphere aboard the *USS Athena* had gained a distinctly unpleasant edge to it. It was a small ship, and even with the recent turnover of almost a quarter of the personnel, the crew was fairly
tight, and everyone knew the CMO. The celebratory vibe that had been infectious since their first arrival at Axanar was gone. A cloud of suspicion hovered over everything, but there was nothing for it to stick to. So it just hovered.

As far as Jim was concerned, it fucking sucked.

Instinctively, he wanted to dive into the guts of this mystery. He’d spent years not being able to leave things alone. He wanted and needed to dig his fingers into everything, pull back the layers, and see what was hiding beneath. However, he’d sworn to himself that he wouldn’t. It was frustrating and infuriating and he hated himself a little bit for it, but he wasn’t about to overstep his rank and position. Not this time. It was his first time serving aboard a starship, and he couldn’t fuck this up. His career depended on it.

That didn’t mean he wasn’t keeping his ears open while keeping his mouth shut.

The frustrating part of that plan, however, was that nobody was really talking about it. Jim wasn’t sure what he thought about that. After the first day of scuttlebutt and rumors, the theorizing had stopped as if someone had flipped a switch. Finney had told the cadets not to get into the rumor mill on this one, and similar talks had probably happened in every department on the ship. Still, even with Starfleet discipline, Jim had never seen people just stop talking about a mystery so quickly.

Everyone was concerned about the good doctor, of course, but the word around the ship was that it was nothing more than a medical problem. People seemed to have accepted it at face value. And why shouldn’t they? Strange things that can’t be explained happen when you’re exploring deep space, and medical mysteries happen all the time, so there was no reason they could be sure it was foul play. At worst, some people were worried that the ship had picked up an unknown pathogen from Axanar or one of the other delegates that had come aboard, and Betazoids were susceptible.

Nobody had suggested that the Axanar had attacked the man.

Except Bones.

Jim had barely seen Bones since the night after Doctor Brex had fallen into the inexplicable coma. Sure, it had only been a day and a half since then, but after Bones had settled down and let the headache pill do its work, he’d let loose a rant that could have burned the fur off the back of a targ. Jim had listened in near-silence, absorbing every detail, and finally helping Bones to bed when the guy started repeating himself and stumbling from exhaustion.

Since then, Bones’ words had buzzed around in his head, spinning and stewing with no outlet or input. He was churning his own theories around the whole mess, and it was driving him crazy, but he kept telling himself to ignore it. To be honest, he had no idea what to think. Bones’ suspicions could easily be nothing more than reaction to a colleague being injured, and he was looking for someone to blame. Everything else on this mission seemed to be running like clockwork. Jim could only hope that what felt like the start of something big was actually just a fluke, and it was all going to right itself. Nothing sinister. Not at all.

If he kept repeating that to himself enough times, maybe he’d stop smelling his own bullshit. Probably not.

Not for the first time, Jim wondered why the hell it seemed like he and Bones were always stuck in the middle of whatever crazy thing was happening. Then, he told himself that it was Starfleet, and there was always something crazy going on no matter who you were or where you were. Still, it didn’t help stop the feeling that he and Bones just kept getting wrapped up in bigger things than
they could handle. For that matter, it wasn’t their job to handle it.

Damn, he wanted to talk to Bones right now. The man had been on evening and night shifts, and Jim had been stuck in the commo lab with his hands full.

And yeah, it really fucking sucked.

“Cadet Kirk, have you run the morning system diagnostics yet?” That was Lieutenant Rahman.

Jim blinked and realized he was nodding off, and he quickly covered himself as he repositioned his hands on the controls. “Sorry sir, almost done.” And he was almost done, really. He pulled up the next set of parameters at his control station as Lieutenant Rahman leaned over his shoulder and looked at him sideways.

“Getting enough sleep, Cadet?” The words were firm, but there was a trace of concern in her expression. She was downright minuscule in stature, and outwardly soft-spoken, but she knew her department inside and out, and was very good at keeping the whole communications array in perfect working order. Jim had liked her from the start, and he respected her even a bit more for noticing that he wasn’t all there. She gave him a searching look. “I know you’ve been distracted for the past couple of days, like we all have, and I understand that. But still, we’ve got a job to do, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Jim’s cheeks burned slightly. Of course, everyone was a tiny bit off their game, and he had no excuse for letting his distractions impact his performance when others were expected to do their jobs. “I’m sorry. And... I admit, I haven’t been sleeping right. But you’re right, everyone is working under the same conditions.”

She patted his shoulder gently. “Good,” she said, and the note of approval buzzed pleasantly in the back of Jim’s mind. “So, today, we do our weekly review of the whole message cache for the commo system. How would you like to run the whole thing?”

“Any chance to learn something new, sir,” he said with a grin that didn’t feel completely fake.

“Good answer.” The computer pinged, and she tapped the display on Jim’s control station, bringing up the results of the basic diagnostic cycle. “Looks like everything is good to go, so come on over to the main computer station with me, and I’ll show you how we run the weekly review.” Her tone softened slightly. “It might help keep your mind occupied.”

“I think I’d like that.” Jim swiveled his chair and stood, following Lieutenant Rahman over to the imposing set of displays and control panels of the primary control station for the entire communications computer node.

An hour and a half later, Jim was thoroughly engrossed in what seemed to be the most complex data cache he’d ever seen. The data streams included received subspace transmissions, sent subspace transmissions, and intra-ship communications. With almost 300 souls aboard, including ambassadors, diplomats, and their aides, it shouldn’t have surprised Jim to see how many communiques had been sent and received, but it did anyway.

And Lieutenant Rahman had been right; it was certainly keeping his mind occupied. He hadn’t even looked up from his station almost the entire time, until he heard the sound of voices at the door. There was the familiar and boisterous sound of a Tellarite, and Jim had to grin. He turned around in his chair to see the same delegate he’d spoken to on Axanar.

Rahman was indicating parts of the communications lab and talking quietly, and Jim guessed that
the Ambassador had requested a tour of the ship’s facilities. Noticing that Jim was looking their way, she smiled and led the Tellarite over. “Cadet Kirk, this is Ambassador Skavrin, the Tellarite representative for the Araxian branch of the mission. He requested a tour of the ship.”

Skavrin. Jim filed away the name, glad he didn’t have to ask. Remembering his Tellarite courtesies, he got to his feet, folded his arms across his chest, and stuck his chin out. “Well met again, sir.”

“Aaah, Cadet! Well met again, indeed!” He stuck out his own chin. “I see that we’ll have the chance to debate after all! For I believe that you are misinformed regarding the politics of the Axanar and the Zhitorans, and aren’t fit for this mission in your ignorance.”

“I welcome the challenge, sir, and I’ll be happy to show you that you don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

At the next station over, Ensign Latkis gasped. Jim cast him a glance, noting that the Ensign looked absolutely scandalized.

Jim stifled a grin, and looked back at the Ambassador. “That is, of course, unless you’re too cowardly to debate a mere cadet,” he threw down for good measure.

Skavrin locked eyes with him for a moment, then threw his head back and let out a raucous laugh. “You might offer debate that isn’t utterly pathetic, for a Terran. When you are released from your duties, before we arrive at Araxis, I expect you to join me for debate!”

“I’ll see your challenge, sir. I will send notice when I am available, and we’ll cross words.”

Skavrin turned a glance at a very pleased-looking Lieutenant Rahman. “Your cadet would almost make a half-decent Tellarite.”

“He does have a few useful skills,” she said. “But for now, he’s got to get back to work. Right, Kirk?”

“Yes, sir.”

Grinning broadly, he sat back down at his station and returned to his work with renewed enthusiasm. A chance to debate with a Tellarite of Skavrin’s status? Now that would be an experience to take his mind off things!

Then he noticed he was being stared at. “Sir?” he said, turning towards Ensign Latkis.

The Ensign was giving him a look somewhere between confused and pissed off. “You just called an Ambassador a coward!” he said under his breath.

It was all Jim could do to keep his jaw from dropping. How the hell did this Ensign get his commission without realizing that Jim had been using the best possible manners towards a Tellarite? They were one of the Founding Races of the Federation! Annoyed, but determined not to show it, Jim painted a smug grin on his face and said, “I know. I would have insulted his mother, but I want to save that for debating him later.”

Leaving the ensign to figure it out for himself, Jim refocused on his task. With the data-processing of the subspace communiques underway, Jim turned his attention to intra-ship commo.

The data flowed like a river of time stamps and authenticity codes. Every time stamp came with an authenticity code, and cross-referenced to a data bundle. Every data bundle had an origin, a
destination, and a unique reference number, assigned sequentially. Ship-wide, every communique had a way to be tracked, completing a data stream that matched up beautifully, all to be archived once the record was verified. It wasn’t as exciting and challenging as working a tactics station, which he hoped he’d be doing on his next duty rotation, but given how tense everything had been lately, it was almost soothing to watch the data fall into place under his fingertips.

Until it didn’t.

Shrugging, Jim cross-checked the glitch. There was a missing data packet. One of the sequential reference numbers had a null data set. Rahman had told him that it happened at least a few times each week. An empty memo would be sent as a hiccup piggybacked on a real memo. She’d instructed him to file those aside to be cross-checked when he was done going through the whole message cache.

He flagged the reference number, then pressed onwards... and came to another glitch almost immediately. Same thing - null data packet for an assigned reference number.

“Lieutenant Rahman?”

“Yes, Kirk?” She walked over and stood next to him.

It was probably normal, routine glitches, but he had to ask. “How often do you get reference numbers with a null data set?”

“A dozen or more each week is pretty normal. We don’t worry until we get at least fifty of them in a week, and then we need to recalibrate our data processors.” She leaned against the wall by his console. “It’s one of the things we all learn pretty quickly once we leave the Academy. All of the theory and ideal conditions and lessons about how things are supposed to work? Those fly out the airlock as soon as we put them into practice.”

Jim narrowly refrained from snorting in amusement. “Don’t worry, sir. I’ve already figured that out.” He tapped his control screen. “I just wanted to be sure this was normal.”

“Never hurts to ask. Yes, they’re perfectly normal. When we cross-check them at the end of the day, you’ll be able to see where each of them came from. Keep up the good work.”

Again, Jim was alone with his data sets. The glitches popped up randomly throughout the record, and Jim understood why they had to check this weekly. Ensuring that the communications central array was working, that it was interfacing with the mainframe, and that data wasn’t being lost was essential to ship operations. There were so many tasks all over the ship to make sure everything was running smoothly. Once he became a Captain – if he ever became a Captain – he’d never take any of the small tasks for granted. It occurred to him that this was the point of learning everything from the ground up.

The morning wore on, and Jim was finding himself oddly grateful for the piles of mindless data. The ship hummed around him, and the data flowed on his screen. A quick lunch left him wishing Bones was on the same shift because damn, he wanted to talk, but instead, he sat with the other cadets and compared notes about the different departments around the ship.

By mid-afternoon, Jim was ready to analyze the glitches for his final report. It was actually a bit exciting, for being an utterly monotonous task. This was one of the reports that went directly to the Captain, and his name would be on it. Not bad, for a cadet.

One by one, the null-set reference numbers matched up to other messages sent. The proverbial
hiccups. There were a couple of them that he tracked down to processor malfunctions in the central cache, and he found the original messages by back-tracking to the source. Sleuth-work. It wasn’t terribly boring, really. And then...

“Lieutenant Rahman?”

“Kirk, you look like someone hit you with a stun-gun. What’s up?”

He glanced up at Lieutenant Rahman. “How often do we get null-set glitches that can’t be tracked at all? When there’s no data for a reference number, and it’s not a hiccup from the computer?”

She frowned. “Almost never. Why?”

“We’ve got two of them. What could cause it?”

Instead of answering, she waved him out of his seat, took over the controls, and started digging. “It’s a matter of experience, Kirk,” she said smoothly, and Jim thought she might make an excellent instructor. “Your focus isn’t communications, and it does take time to learn every sort of glitch. Over time, you learn to recognize the patterns behind each problem the same way children learn to recognize letter patterns that form words.” She worked in silence for a moment as Jim watched the screen.

Data flew by. Although she was much quicker than he was, she was doing exactly what he’d already done, so there was nothing new to be seen. Finally, she leaned back in her chair, staring at the screen, a look of annoyance on her face. “True null sets,” she said, her tone matching her expression. “Both of them.”

“What does that mean?”

She looked at him. “It means you get to take off early for the day, and I need to do some investigating.” She glanced at the chrono. “It’s almost the end of your shift anyway.”

“I... I’m sorry I didn’t figure it out, sir.”

Her expression softened. “It’s not your fault, cadet. Actually, you did an excellent job. I didn’t really expect you to finish during the shift anyway, so you’re ahead of the game as far as I’m concerned. You finished everything else. Not bad at all. I’ll tell Finney that you did a stellar job, and that I’m going to try to sway you into becoming a commo officer.”

He felt a flush of heat up his neck. “Thank you, sir, but I’m quite happy in the command track.”

She gave him a slight smirk. “Figured as much. Now get out of here and go enjoy your free time by studying the subspace physics of the transmitter array. You’re doing the routine maintenance on the array with Latkis tomorrow.”

Jim kept the smile on his face as he thanked her and left. As soon as he got out into the corridor, however, he let the smile drop away from his expression.

Before he’d called the Lieutenant over, he’d followed the trail of breadcrumbs as far as he possibly could, trying to track down the null reference numbers. Even though the messages were completely empty, the search had produced authenticity codes. It wasn’t much, but the codes were enough to identify the sender.

They had both been sent by Tavin Brex.
Leonard groaned as he rolled over in his bunk. His comm unit was beeping.

“*Kirk to McCoy.*”

He glared at his comm. The light on it was flashing.

“*Kirk to McCoy,*” came Jim’s voice again. “*Come on, Bones. Pick up the comm.*”

Growling, Leonard reached over to the small table by his bunk, grabbed the comm unit, and flipped it open. “McCoy here. What do you want, you pathological pest?”

“*Nice to talk to you, too, buddy-ol’-pal. I know you were almost ready to get out of bed anyway, and... I’ve got something you need to know.*”

Something in Jim’s voice had Leonard sitting starkly upright. “What?”

“*Meet me in the mess hall. You need breakfast, I want dinner, and... just meet me there, okay?*”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” Leonard said in a rush. “McCoy out.”

Jim could be a pest, but when it was something serious, he made it absolutely clear, and Leonard had learned not to brush it off. He threw himself out of bed, hurriedly straightened his bunk, tossed his night-clothes into the cleaning unit, and ran himself through his hygiene routine in record time. Ten minutes later, his stubble was gone, his hair was neatly combed, and he was in his uniform striding down the corridor to the mess hall.

It was 1545 hours – too early for alpha-shift supper, too late for lunch, and he easily spotted Jim sitting at a table in the far corner. He grabbed a bowl of oatmeal, and a minute later he had dropped himself heavily into the chair facing Jim. “This had better be good. I lost a whole ten minutes of sleep because of you.” He knocked back a sip of coffee, letting the almost-too-hot burn help to wake him up.

Jim gave him a tired grin, pushing his own plate to the side. “I know the night shift has completely messed up your sleep cycle, but yeah, this is good.”

“Nice to hear it,” Leonard grumbled around a mouthful of oatmeal. He swallowed and gave Jim a sharp look. “And speaking of sleep cycles and shifts, your shift isn’t supposed to be over yet, is it?”

“I was let out early.” His grin turned slightly conspiratorial. “I think I was dismissed because of what I found... even though they don’t know how much of it I did find.”

Suddenly nervous, Leonard leaned over the table and spoke in a harsh whisper. “Wait a minute, Jim... you’re working commo. There’s a ton of classified stuff down there. You’re not about to violate some sort of privacy regulation, are you?

Jim shook his head emphatically. “Come on, Bones, don’t you trust me?”

“As far as I can throw you.”

“Bones.” Jim’s face took on a stark look of sincerity. It perfectly matched the tone in his voice that had dragged Leonard willingly from his bed, and he remembered why he was down here early.

“I trust you, Jim. You know that.”
Jim nodded. “Good. Because I studied the regulations on restricted information. None of this is
classified. And they haven’t even unofficially told me not to say anything because they don’t know
I was able to track the problem as far as I did.”

“Track what?”

Jim leaned forward and spoke in an undertone. “The message Brex sent you.”

In an instant, Leonard was more awake than any amount of coffee could have made him. “I
thought it was gone!” He breathed.

Jim’s expression was grim. “It is.”

“Then how...?”

“I got assigned to the weekly data review in commo. I found a few glitches that couldn’t be
explained, and I tracked them. Two of them had Doctor Brex’s authenticity code, and they were
both sent the night before he went into the coma. I couldn’t track who they were sent to, but one of
the experts in the department has to be able to dig up something – who deleted the messages, who
the messages were sent to... something. But even if they can’t, there’s your evidence, Bones.” His
eyes were glinting with excitement. “Real evidence that someone deleted messages sent by Doctor
Brex, and that you weren’t imagining it.”

“I wasn’t imagining anything,” Leonard shot at him, but he could already feel the relief in knowing
that there was something that confirmed his story, no matter how tenuous.

Jim gave him a sympathetic look. “I know that. I just wanted you to know... well....” His expression
shifted to uncertainty. “I just wanted you to know.”

Leonard stared at him for a minute, trying to translate the subtleties of Jim’s body language before
deciding to go for broke. “Wait a minute... you just wanted me to know? What did you want me to
do with this little nugget of information?”

“I...” Jim hesitated. “I had to tell you, Bones. I had to tell someone, and it had to be you.” He shook
his head in frustration. “Fuck, you deserve to know, and I just wanted to make sure you had the
chance to know. But....”

With a heavy sigh, Leonard leaned on the table. “But I can’t say anything about this, can I?”

Jim frowned. He even looked a bit embarrassed. “I didn’t even tell Lieutenant Rahman that I saw
it.”

Leonard growled softly and jabbed his spoon into his oatmeal. “Right. Yeah. So if you or I try to
report this now, they’ll jump on you because you should have reported it to the lieutenant.” He
shook his head. “Dammit.”

“We can’t report it. But Bones? She’ll find the same thing I did.” His expression perked up a bit. “I
mean, hell, if I could find that information, I’m sure the officer who does this for a career will find
it in no time.”

“And she’ll report it to the captain,” Leonard said flatly.

“Exactly,” Jim said with the worst farce at reassurance Bones had ever seen from the guy. “She’ll
probably find a lot more information than I did, too. And then the senior staff can investigate, and
if it is the Axanar... or whoever else... they’ll have enough evidence to go after them.”
“Will they?” Leonard asked, bleeding cynicism into his tone.

“They have to.”

Leonard stared at him. He leaned over the table, and then dropped his voice even more, just to be sure nobody else could hear him. “You didn’t see the way the Captain just about busted an artery when I tried to tell him that I suspected the Axanar. I don’t think he has any intent of investigating.”

Jim leaned away slightly, looking a bit stung. “Maybe it isn’t the Axanar, but whatever the evidence shows – whatever they find – they can’t just ignore it. They’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Leonard blinked. Hard. “Jim... I don’t know what to say, kid, but this isn’t you. Don’t you want to know? Don’t you want to investigate? I mean... goddammit,” he hissed through gritted teeth, mentally apologizing for what he was about to say, “I think we learned pretty well last year how far we can trust people to investigate shit.”

In a snap, Jim’s face went stony. “That was low, Bones. Really fucking low.”

“I’m sorry, kid, but I just can’t believe you’d be willing to let this slide.”

Jim quickly looked around him, then hunched over the table so he was almost nose to nose with Leonard. “Shit, Bones, I’m not willing to let it slide! But I don’t think I’ve got much of a choice here! Look around us. Look at our uniforms. At least you’ve got a branch insignia, but we’re both wearing gray. You’re already practicing medicine, but neither of us has a scrap of actual authority. Well, not unless every commissioned officer aboard dies, and if that were to happen, I think we’d be toast, too.” He reached over and stabbed his fork into the small pile of pasta salad on his plate and studied the sad-looking cherry tomato he’d speared. “Internship. More than a crewman, less than an officer, in the middle of everything, and yet completely shut out of all the important shit. And if you step outside of anything beyond your assigned duties as a doctor, they’ll shut you down in a heartbeat.”

Leonard felt his breath catch hard in his throat. Jim was right – the instant he’d tried to assert himself beyond the scope of his practice – he’d been very directly reminded of his place. He was a doctor, but he was still a cadet.

Jim nodded at him, and not without sympathy. “You know it, too. We keep our eyes open and observe, learn a few things about how it really works out here, and let the real officers call the shots. Learn to take orders, and not to get ahead of ourselves... because what do we know, right?” He stuffed the tomato into his mouth.

Leonard watched him as he chewed, realizing he didn’t have much of an appetite anymore himself. He felt as though he should have been pleased that Jim was taking the advice he’d been given and not diving headlong into things that weren’t his business, but he wasn’t. When Jim had talked about it the other night, he’d been pretty fixated on the idea of holding himself back, but despite everything he’d said, Leonard hadn’t really thought he’d do it. It hadn’t seemed right for the kid, but maybe it was part of the maturity that Jim had needed. Now that the kid was following through, Leonard wasn’t so sure he liked it.

What do we know? Leonard thought bitterly. As much as any of these other clowns, that’s for damned sure.

He considered Jim – the brightest person he’d probably ever met. Clever as hell. A walking encyclopedia with a ferocious sense of purpose and a propensity to leap without looking.
Undeniably capable, in almost every capacity. Despite Jim’s lowly rank of cadet, Leonard couldn’t quash the notion that Jim would be just as good at getting to the bottom of this than anyone else. Maybe better.

But it wasn’t their place.

Leonard merely nodded. “Yeah. What do we know?” He reached for his coffee and took a sip, then another, wondering how he was going to be able to ignore the mystery around him, and how long Jim would be able to do the same.

“So, how’s your research going?” Jim asked, bringing Leonard out of his thoughts.

Leonard offered a thin smile. “Not too bad at all.”

They spent the rest of the meal talking over the most basic things they’d been working on, and when Leonard finally pulled himself from the table to get down to Sickbay, he felt like he hadn’t even spoken to Jim. Not really.

Two years ago, if Jim had a mystery or puzzle on his mind, nothing would have kept him from pursuing it with complete abandon. Not even Leonard’s adamant warnings about not getting involved. Now, he was holding back. It was something Leonard had hoped to see one day, but actually seeing it? It didn’t feel the way he’d thought it would.

Yeah, Jim Kirk had changed. Right now, Leonard wasn’t quite sure what he thought of that.

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Chapter 9

Jim needed to kill time before heading down to the end-of-shift meeting with Lieutenant Finney and the rest of the cadets, so he stopped by the fitness facility for a workout. He didn’t warm up, didn’t stretch. He ran too fast and did too many pushups, and everything ached by the time he was done. It felt good.

Here he was, finally out in the black, on a real mission, and he felt cramped and caged, held back and locked down. The constraints of low rank and discipline had become familiar at the academy, but this was driving him crazy. He had a new clue dangling in front of him like a particularly juicy piece of bait, and he couldn’t bite.

He’d made himself a promise that he wasn’t going to overstep his station. It left him furious at himself, both for the fact that he wanted to investigate so damned much, and simultaneously for the fact that he wasn’t going to do it.

Bones was right – he didn’t want to let it slide. Not one bit. It felt tight and uncomfortable, like wearing someone else’s uniform, a size too small and all the wrong shape, but what the hell was he supposed to do? He knew what his instincts were telling him, but he knew just as well that those instincts had gotten him in a world of trouble before. This wasn’t the time or the place to mess it all up.

Fuck it all.

He ran himself through the sonic shower in the locker room, pulled his uniform back on, and barely made it to the conference room in time for the meeting.

Finney was looking at this imaginary wrist chrono as Jim blew through the doors. “Amazing, Kirk. The one cadet who gets released early from his duties, and you’re the last one here.”

“I went to the gym, sir,” Jim said, still breathing hard, “and I still made it on time.”

“Relax, cadet.” Finney leaned back in his chair, threading his fingers together on the top of his head. “What happened to the Jim Kirk I met two years ago, who wouldn’t have even bothered defending himself for being late, never mind almost-late?”

Jim cringed as he sat down. “That was a lousy Kirk who had no discipline,” he deadpanned. “So I stuffed him in a torpedo tube and launched him before he could cause trouble aboard a real starship.” He gave Finney a steady look. “That’s what they want from officer interns, right, sir?”

Finney looked at him curiously, then half-nodded, half-shrugged. “So... let’s begin the reports for the day. Wilcox? What’s going on down in engineering?”

Jim focused on the reports from the other cadets, and gave the most neutral report possible from his own work of the day. He’d run an audit on comm data. Nothing more interesting than that. Certainly nothing controversial or related to the shipboard mystery.

The meeting was short, the cadets were dismissed, and even though Jim was more than ready to leave and go back to his quarters to bury himself in studying, he wasn’t surprised when Finney stopped him at the door.

“Sir?”
Finney was giving him an odd look. “You know, I expect a full report from everyone, but when something unusual is happening, I tend to expect extra details from a cadet like you.”

Jim frowned. “I gave you the full details.”

“Really now? You didn’t do anything unusual today?”

Not quite sure how he wanted to answer that, Jim threaded the line. “I found some unusual glitches in the comm data cache, sir, but there was nothing unusual that I personally did.”

“Then why did Lieutenant Rahman send me a memo asking for you to begin your rotation in a different department tomorrow, citing concerns over sensitive information?”

Shit. “She said some of the glitches were unusual, but she didn’t say I’d done anything wrong. Am I in trouble, sir?”

Finney shook his head, waving Kirk down. “No, no... not like that. In fact, Rahman repeated several times how thorough your work was. She was impressed, and wrote a good report for you. But she said that the stuff they found needed to be investigated, and that they really don’t want a cadet in there until they figure it out.” He furrowed his eyebrows and gave Jim a searching look. “What sort of glitch did you stumble on?”

Jim caught himself. He wasn’t in trouble. Finney was just curious. But he hadn’t reported to Rahman that he’d traced the empty message to Doctor Brex. For some reason, it seemed better for her to think he didn’t know. He couldn’t give Finney a different report than he’d given the section leader.

“I found some empty data files. That’s it. All files have sequential identification codes to let us know when they were generated, and to keep a complete inventory of all comm data. Most glitches in the record can be tracked to specific problems and sources, but I found two that couldn’t. I called Lieutenant Rahman over to my station, showed the files to her, and she took over. The files were empty, as if the contents had been deleted, so I have no idea what might have been in there. She just dismissed me for the day.”

“And that’s it?” Finney was still looking at him intently, and continued talking without giving Jim a chance to answer. “Kirk, I know you too well. I’m sure you have a theory about those messages, and I’ll wager it’s correct. So what do you think?” He folded his arms over his chest, and leaned against the wall. “Well?”

Jim blew out an exasperated breath. He was trying to lay low, and just be a regular cadet. Wasn’t that what they wanted? But he wasn’t going to lie, either. “I just wonder if it has to do with what happened to Doctor Brex. The messages were from the night before he lost consciousness, so I wondered if there was connection. That’s all. And I know we’re supposed to leave that alone, so I didn’t dig into it.”

“It’s okay, Kirk,” Finney said sympathetically. “You didn’t do anything wrong. As I said, Lieutenant Rahman praised your work, and you’re getting full marks for commo.”

Jim nodded, trying to look relieved and pleased with himself, and not being sure if he was succeeding. “So, if I’m getting pulled out of commo duty early, what am I going to do next, sir?”

“I don’t have your next assignment set yet, but I’ll have something for you at tomorrow morning’s meeting. How about warp engineering or weaponry?”

Jim gave what he meant to look like an enthusiastic grin. “I think that might be fun.”
“Good stuff,” Finney said with a grin of his own, clapping Jim on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about studying operational procedures tonight. How about... you read up on the Zhitorans. Write me an essay and send it off before you turn in for the night.”

“Yes, sir,” Jim said easily. And that might be just the thing to study, he reasoned... especially if he was going to debate a Tellarite about the Zhitorans.

“Good. Oh, and Kirk... when was the last time you checked in with your academic advisor?”

“Before arrival at Axanar. I’m sticking to the reporting schedule.”

Finney gave him a thoughtful nod. “Maybe you should call in an extra report. Just saying.”

Jim quirked an eyebrow. That was an interesting suggestion, and he was pretty sure he knew why Finney wanted him to do it. “Yes, sir.”

“Good. Dismissed.”

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Jim was sprawled on his bunk, studying the warp engine schematics. Maybe it wasn’t so bad to have been bounced out of communications a couple of days early. Commo had kept him occupied, but warp engineering was actually pretty interesting. He’d studied the theory. The real thing was so much better.

He’d spent the day shadowing a warp engine specialist, Lieutenant Magadan, and had even gotten to crawl down the Jeffries tubes that ran parallel to the warp engines. The thrum of the engine was intense down there, vibrating every molecule of his body in rhythm with the ship. There were internal access hatches that could only be entered safely while the warp engines were powered down, and naturally, they were at warp as they travelled to Araxis. Magadan had told him that if he really wanted a chance to crawl inside the actual warp conduits, to come back while they were in orbit around Araxis and he could go inside.

Jim had to admit that he was excited about that prospect.

So it had been an engaging day. The raw power of the warp core, the warp field testing, and the moment when Magadan had handed control of the whole core over to him for a half hour... it had been a lot of fun. Sure, he hadn’t needed to do much with the engine humming along perfectly, and Magadan was close by in case something went wrong, but it was a thrill.

Yeah, being switched off commo duty wasn’t such a bad trade.

He was finishing his review of the dilithium matrix structure when his comm beeped.

“Lieutenant Finney to Cadet Kirk.”

Jim frowned as he grabbed his comm. “Kirk here, sir.”

“Kirk, report to Comm Room three. You have an incoming live conference request. Finney out.”

Jim blinked and stared at the comm unit in his hand. That was... abrupt. But there wasn’t any need for a longer message. He’d figure out what was going on when he got to the Communications Room.

He rolled out of his bunk and quickly stuffed his feet into his boots.
Nadeau looked up at him from where he was studying on his own bunk. “Conference request? You always have something interesting happening, don’t you?”

Jim shrugged as he grabbed his uniform top. “No idea, Nadeau. I’m just doing what they tell me to do. For all I know, it’s my mom using her rank to give me grief about not comming her more often.”

“Lucky you.” Nadeau waved absently as Jim hurried out the door.

Jim was getting pretty familiar with the ship, and he easily found the general use Comm Rooms on Deck Three. Room three opened to him when he pressed his thumb to the ID pad, with a soft computerized voice saying, “Incoming Subspace Communication for Cadet James Kirk. Comm link is currently active.”

Jim slipped inside and let the door slide shut behind him. It was a small room with a pair of comfortable chairs, a desk, a computer terminal, and a teleconference screen on the wall opposite the desk. The screen activated, and Jim wasn’t actually surprised to see the face of Captain Pike looking back at him.

“Captain Pike,” he acknowledged, and sat up a bit straighter. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Kirk,” Pike said with a smile. “Good to see you. I didn’t send you a reply after your first mission report, but I wanted to take the chance now to congratulate you on completing the Survival and Tactics course and on your promotion to Cadet First Class. And...” His voice took on a touch of pride that never failed to inspire even more determination in Kirk. “I’m proud of you. You said you’d do it in three years. Looks like you will.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jim said, trying not to let himself look like a sap or get watery-eyed.

Pike nodded. “But for now, on with business. I received your extra report. I’d heard bits and pieces of rumors filtering back to Starfleet Headquarters, but after I got your report, I decided to ask around.” His smile took on an amused edge. “How is it that you and McCoy keep getting yourselves into all sorts of unusual situations?”

Jim opened his mouth, and then stopped. He hadn't gone into any of his suspicions in his message to Pike. He'd only reported what had actually happened, and then, only what he'd told Finney. He didn’t want to seem as though he was becoming paranoid or looking for trouble. “I don’t think I’m in any sort of unusual situation,” he said carefully. “McCoy has a bit of a medical mystery on his hands, and I guess I was more thorough at my commo rotation than people expected, but...” He trailed off as Pike shook his head.

“Kirk, that might work on the folks on the Athena, but I know you too well. What’s really going on?” Pike’s gaze was level and unyielding.

Jim took a bracing breath. “Sir... there’s nothing specific that’s going on, and I think that’s the problem. The timing of what happened to Doctor Brex looks suspicious with the missing messages and the arrival of our new delegates. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Pike put on a show of mulling it over. “That seems like enough to get your mental conduits firing at full capacity.”

Damn him, he’s good. “Well, it’s certainly got me thinking,” Jim finally admitted flatly. “And I think Lieutenant Finney knows it, so he told me to send you an extra report. And... I’m trying to keep my head down, sir. McCoy is suspicious, but he’s decided to let it go, too.”
“Probably a wise decision,” Pike said neutrally, then raised a questioning eyebrow. “Unexpected, for him, given the circumstances.”

Jim felt a flush under the scrutiny. “Well... I talked him into letting it go.”

Both eyebrows went up in mock surprise. “Really now? Who are you and what did you do with James Kirk?”

Jim snorted. “Just trying to keep us both out of trouble. So I haven’t gone digging or anything, but I just... wanted someone to know everything I know. Whatever you do with it, sir, that’s up to you, but I don’t want to stick my neck into the middle of it.”

Pike’s expression became more solemn. “You say you want someone to know everything you know. Are you saying you didn’t report everything to your chain of command on the Athena?”

“No, sir!” Jim said in a rush. “They know everything I know. They know more than what I know. That’s not what I mean. I just meant...” He hesitated, but he was already in too deep to back out. “I meant that I wanted someone on the outside... someone I really trust... to know what I know.”

Pike gave him a slow, searching look. “Don’t you trust your chain of command?”

Now that was a loaded question. “Professionally, of course I do,” he said with complete honesty. “But not personally.”

Damn, that man could read him. “I don’t know them, sir.”

“They’re Starfleet officers. That should always be good enough.”

Jim pressed his lips together. “Admiral Romano.”

The corner of Pike’s mouth twitched. “Point taken. But still, you need to be able to trust your chain of command. If you don’t have that, you’ve got nothing out there.”

“I know, sir.” He sighed. Even though he’d tried to bury his own uneasiness with the situation, talking about it was bringing everything to the surface. It was too easy to get wrapped up in suspicion and conspiracy theories. He’d gone down that path once before, and he couldn’t let himself do it again. Maybe... passing it off to Pike, someone he trusted explicitly, would let him take it off his own shoulders, and he could let it go. “But still, we’re all part of the situation out here, and it’s impossible to be objective in the middle of something like this. I don’t know if or what they’re investigating, I have no idea what the other factors at play are, and I know I’m supposed to trust them, and I do, but...” He trailed off.

“But you’re concerned.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you don’t like being in the dark on anything.” That look was all-too-knowing.

“Yes.” It was disconcerting to be read so easily, but it was Pike. Jim knew he should be used to this by now.

Pike leaned back in his chair and scrubbed a hand over his face. “Kirk, I understand your concerns. All of them. But sometimes, you need to be able to accept that you’re being kept in the dark on sensitive issues. In fact, given your rank, you’re going to have to expect that to be your reality for
Jim nodded uneasily. Of course he knew that. He just didn’t like it.

Pike twisted his lips. “As for the rest of it... I’m not really in a position where I have any influence over what folks on the Athena are doing. Starships are very autonomous. I respect Captain Porter. He’s highly experienced, a good Captain, and he’s seen plenty out in the black. I know he’s doing everything in his power to ensure a successful mission... which, I’m quite sure, requires considerations beyond just the safety of a single member of his crew.”

Jim’s deepest concern came bubbling to the surface – something he hadn’t even voiced aloud with Bones, something he’d been chewing on since he’d heard about Brex, something that had been burning a hole in his thoughts since he’d found the glitch in the commo records. “But sir... if someone did something to Doctor Brex, it’s not just a single member of the crew we’re talking about. If it was foul play, that means there could still be a threat to the rest of the crew, and we need to know why he...” Kirk trailed off as Pike’s expression took on a look of thin tolerance and a bit of exasperation. “And... you already know all of this, and I’m sure Captain Porter does, too, so there’s no need for me to run my mouth about it.”

Pike’s mouth quirked a smile. “See, Kirk? You have learned a few things in the past two years.”

“If I hadn’t, what does that say about Starfleet’s training program?” Jim asked, tongue-in-cheek.

“Nothing. It would say that I made a mistake,” Pike said, completely straight-faced. “And that’s not something I’m prone to doing.”

Jim felt a flush of warmth under his collar, and he hoped Pike couldn’t see it from the other side of the subspace channel. “Then... what do you suggest I do, sir?”

“Oh, not this again. Officially? You already know the answer to that, and you’ve been doing it by not overstepping, and doing your job. Finney’s report told me that you’ve made improvements on that. I know it’s not an easy lesson for you, and that it runs counter to your instinct to jump in, guns blazing. But that’s exactly what you’re supposed to do right now. Be the cadet, and nothing more.”

Of course, huh? Jim licked his lips, rolling that word around in his head. Something warm and tempting sparked in the back of his mind, and he reached for it. “And unofficially?”

Slowly, Pike leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands folded in front of him. Even from light years away, his gaze was piercing and intense. “You remember why I recruited you, Kirk?”

“Something about me not wasting my life as a genius-level, repeat-offender?”

An amused twinkle lit Pike’s eyes for the briefest of instants, then it was gone again. “That instinct of yours... to leap without looking, to go in with guns blazing, to take risks... I wasn’t kidding when I said it was something that Starfleet has lost. It’s something that’s necessary... in the right time, in the right way. You’re still a cadet, and don’t you forget that for an instant. But keep your eyes open. Report things to your chain of command when you see them. And... don’t ignore your instincts. Just make sure you do it the right way.”

Jim stared back at the screen, at Pike, and let the words sink in. It was an odd feeling, like his world paradigm had shifted, but he wasn’t quite sure how, or in what way, or what it meant. “Sir?” he asked weakly.

“You’re a cadet... but you’re also an officer intern, Kirk, and a member of Starfleet. Remember that you’re out there because we – because I – have the confidence that you’re ready for it.
"Remember your duty. Do the right thing." His expression softened slightly. "Make me proud, Jim."

“Yes, sir,” Jim replied automatically, but he was feeling a bit dazed.

“Good. Keep reporting on schedule... or sooner, if something unusual happens.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Pike out.”

The screen went black, and Jim sat there, staring at the blank wall, still trying to figure out what had just changed.

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Leonard was thoroughly convinced that he was working harder than he had during his residency. Research during beta shift, covering Sickbay through gamma shift, and trying to sleep somewhere between one day and the next. Gamma shift was usually quiet enough that he could work on processing his research, and the quiet was much appreciated, but dear God, he just wanted to be off-duty. He wanted to take off his uniform, wrap himself in his bathrobe, and slouch into his chair while he reviewed his research. Or hell, maybe he could even put down his research for a while and stop thinking for an hour. And damn, what he wouldn’t give for a bourbon... which he couldn’t bring with him on this assignment, as a cadet. And his personal good luck charm had already been spent. Dammit.

It was 0238 hours, and sickbay was surprisingly quiet. They would arrive at Araxis in the morning, and the ship had been buzzing with activity at the beginning of beta shift when Leonard had walked down to sickbay, but now, everything was calm. Nurse Lee was running weekly calibration and testing on biobed three. A crewman who’d gotten too adventurous in the fitness facility was lying on biobed one with her ankle under a ligostim unit. And Brex was laying quietly behind the screen in treatment bay two, where he’d been for the past three days.

A soft beep let Leonard know that Crewman Dunn’s ankle should be mended. Feeling every joint creak in protest, Leonard got to his feet and dragged himself across sickbay. “How’s it feeling, crewman?”

“Not bad at all, Doctor,” she said sheepishly. “Next time I hit the climbing wall, I’ll make sure I bring the right footwear.”

Leonard gave her a tired nod as he removed the ligostim unit from her ankle and began to test its range of movement. “You do that. It takes less time for you to haul your tail back to your quarters for your gear than it does for me to fix a pulled ligament.”

“And it kinda ruins my workout.”

“That too,” Leonard said lightly. He grabbed his tricorder and ran it over the previously injured joint. “Everything looks perfect. You’re free to go, but for the next week, no high-impact fitness activities. Work it gently, and be sure to warm up. Stop back here if it’s bothering you during normal activity.”

“Yes, Doctor.” She swung her legs off the biobed, and slipped on her boot.

“Good. Now get out of my sickbay,” he said with a smile.

“Gladly,” she grinned.
Leonard watched her go, then made a move as if to go back to his desk, then stopped. Sure, the privacy screens were fully drawn, but he couldn’t just walk past. Growling at himself, he walked over to treatment bay two, pulled aside the screen, and let himself in. He didn’t look at Brex’s face as he did a quick review of vital stats, checked nutrient levels, metabolism, and other basic functions on the biobed readout. Nothing had changed. By all outward appearances, Brex was perfectly healthy... except for the fact that he just wouldn’t regain consciousness.

His neuroelectrical patterns were still off, but there was nothing in the literature that gave them any idea of how that was impacting his consciousness level, or how to fix it. The Betazoid Healers had kept in close contact, but the simple fact was that if it was related to his telepathic functions, then he would have to be examined by a team of Betazoid Healers in person for proper diagnosis and treatment. There were things that even the finest technology just couldn’t do. It only reinforced Leonard’s belief that technology could never really be trusted to do the work of a real doctor. He just hated the fact that he lacked the full range of skills to treat all of his patients.

Finally, after he’d fully checked Brex’s vitals, he sat down in the chair next to the biobed – a place where he’d spent too much time during gamma shift. But what else could he do? Despite his comatose state, maybe Brex could still pick up on the thoughts of people nearby, just like human coma patients could sometimes hear voices around them.

He reached out and took Brex’s hand. “Just wanted to give you an update, sir,” Leonard said softly. “We’ve been in touch with the Betazoid Healers again, and gave them the latest scans, but there’s not much they can do from there. And Doctor Singh hasn’t been able to convince the Captain to divert the mission so we can bring you to Betazed before we get to Araxis. Hell, we can’t even divert to meet another ship that could bring you to Betazed. They said the mission to Araxis is too vital. And you’re stable, so we can’t convince them that this is really urgent enough to delay the mission to Araxis.” He let out a harsh snort. “I’ll bet you can guess what I think about that.”

Brex didn’t respond. Of course.

He sighed. “And maybe it’s not medically urgent because you’re stable, and maybe you’ll be just as fine if we get you fixed up today as if we get you treated weeks from now.” He gritted his teeth angrily at the idea of the Captain deciding that it was somehow okay to leave a patient in an unexplained coma for any amount of time. “But that’s just not good enough in my book. We’re going to keep looking for a way to revive you. Singh decided to try the normal techniques for reviving coma patients once per day, but no more. She doesn’t want to risk overloading your nervous and cardiovascular systems and causing damage. But even if you’ll be physically okay... we still don’t know why the hell this happened... or who did this to you.” He growled low in his throat.

“Hell, I don’t even know if you know how this happened to you. I don’t know what you’ll remember when you wake up. But in the meantime, we’ve got no answers. Some kind of doctor I am,” he said cynically. “Can’t even get a guy to wake up. I’m sorry. Damn it all, I’m sorry.”

Again, no reply. He didn’t expect one. Then...

“Doctors treat their patients’ ailments,” came a voice, “but healers heal their whole patients.”

Leonard startled, dropping Brex’s hand, and looked back over his shoulder to see a Vulcan standing at the opening in the privacy screen. “Excuse me?” he snapped instinctively, then suddenly realized that this was probably one of the delegates. He scrambled to his feet and added a hasty, “Uh... ma’am?”

The Vulcan didn’t seem bothered by his harsh reply, and merely inclined her head as she took a full
step into the treatment bay. She was more than a dozen centimeters shorter than he was, with a neat
ob of silver hair, but it was her presentation in formal Vulcan attire that made him feel both too
short and under-dressed. If she noticed his discomfort, she gave no indication. “I am formally
addressed as ‘Ambassador,’ but you may call me T’Val. I merely make the observation that it
would appear that you are both a doctor... and a healer.”

He bobbed a quick nod. “Doctor McCoy. And... respectfully, ma’am... uh... Ambassador... T’Val...
physicians on our world are just called doctors, not healers. It’s a different title.”

She raised a cutting eyebrow. “Indeed, doctor. Different titles with different meanings. Both apply
in this case.”

Feeling completely out of his league, not to mention a bit put off, Leonard did the most instinctive
thing he knew – he stepped between his patient and whatever was making him distinctly uneasy.
Sure, he knew that Vulcans were a trustworthy species, and he’d encountered a few of them in his
time at the Academy, but despite that, he’d never actually worked with one. And with all the
uncertainty aboard the ship, he wasn’t taking any chances.

Before he could say anything, she spoke again, this time sounding distinctly satisfied. “I rest my
case, McCoy.”

He pressed his lips together cynically. “I appreciate the compliment Ambassador... but this area
really isn’t open to visitors right now. I understand that you’re an honored guest aboard the ship
and all, and that you have open access to all non-critical areas, but we’ve got an unconscious
patient and a bit of a medical mystery.”

Without a single outward aspect of her expression changing, Leonard swore she gave him a look
that clearly said, So?

“I am not here as a visitor, Doctor McCoy. I am here to discuss the patient
with you.”

Leonard knew this should be setting off alarm bells in his head. Middle of the night. The most
junior doctor on staff was the only person on duty. And here was an alien who was not a doctor, or
a goddamned healer, strolling into his sickbay, announcing that she wanted to discuss a patient
case with him? The funny thing was... there were no actual alarm bells. Just nerves. “Ma’am...
T’Val... I’m sorry, but I’m not the right person to talk to. Doctor Singh is the acting CMO right
now. I’m just a cadet. I have full license to practice as a doctor, but I can’t override protocols.”

“You are the doctor who witnessed Tavin Brex’s collapse, are you not?”

“Yes, but that still doesn’t give me the authority to give you patient information.” It was sheer
force of will preventing him from fidgeting under her piercing gaze.

“I did not request patient information,” she said smoothly. “I said I wish to discuss the patient. In
this particular instance, I hope to provide information.”

It took Leonard a few seconds to fully register what T’Val was saying to him. Cautiously, and not
just a little bit suspiciously, he took a half step closer. “I’m not quite sure I take your meaning. If
you have information about how this happened to him, then that’s something you ought to tell the
Captain.”

“I do not know how he was injured. However, I believe I may be able to ascertain that
information.”

Leonard furrowed his eyebrows and frowned. “Begging your pardon, ma’am, but you’re an
Ambassador, not a doctor... or a healer. I know because Doctor Singh asked if there was anyone else on board with a medical background, and the answer was no.”

“An accurate assessment. I am not a medical expert.”

Leonard gave a curt nod of his head. “Glad we’ve got that cleared up. Besides, medically, I know everything there is to know about the patient, and there’s no way that information would be shared outside a need-to-know. No offense, ma’am, but as far as I’m aware, Ambassadors don’t get people’s private medical data.” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “And from what I know, the investigation is internal. I’m not actually cleared for the investigation data, and... I’m really not even supposed to discuss it.”

T’Val seemed utterly unphased, and Leonard wondered if all Vulcans were really that goddamned stoic. “I have contacted the Vulcan authorities regarding this matter. I am not a healer, but my father was, and I felt it was prudent to learn some of his skills. I have been authorized by the Council of Healers to passively assess the patient, but not to treat him, with the permission of this vessel’s doctors. As none of your other telepathic crew members have training as healers, or the particular mental disciplines required to make such an assessment, and it will be some time before he can be seen by a Betazoid healer, it was only logical that I offer what skills I can safely provide.”

This information was rattled off so evenly, Leonard could have believed it was a computer’s automated audio output. Then he blinked and shook his head a bit, trying to process this. “Wait just a minute... telepathic?” Somewhere in the back of Leonard’s mind, a red light was flashing, illuminating a giant “You’re an idiot” sign. He knew Vulcans were telepathic... touch telepaths, with extremely honed skills. “You’re saying you can go into his head and... let him think at you about what happened?”

“That is a very crude description, and not wholly accurate, but an adequate summary for your purposes.”

He realized his mouth was completely dry. Swallowing tightly, he said, “Does the captain know?”

“It is his ship. I fully informed the captain of my proposal before contacting the Vulcan authorities. It was he who endorsed this.”

“What about Doctor Singh?” Leonard challenged, not able to release his grip on his own discomfort.

“I held a conference with Doctor Singh, Captain Porter, and several other relevant officials. Doctor Singh has already approved my involvement, pending approval from Vulcan.”

Leonard couldn’t help himself – he rolled his eyes and let himself sigh. A long, suffering sigh. “Why am I always the last to know everything?”

She tilted her head slightly and raised an eyebrow. “I believe it is due to your status as a cadet.”

Leonard let himself lean back against the end of Brex’s biobed, tipped his head forward, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rhetorical, ma’am,” he grumbled. Gods above and below, he hoped he wasn’t going to end up working with a Vulcan when he got his first assignment. The literalism might be the death of him. But at least he knew he could trust Vulcans, even if he hadn’t worked with one. They’d been staunch allies since the beginning, and they didn’t lie because it wasn’t logical. He would certainly check Doctor Singh’s notes before letting Ambassador Pointy-Ears touch Doctor Brex. But instead, he looked up again and asked, “Why didn't you come down...
here during Alpha shift?"

“The approval from Vulcan arrived fourteen-point-eight minutes ago. I have not had a chance to inform Doctor Singh of the Council’s approval.”

“So you got here as soon as you could.”

“That is correct.”

Leonard cast a glance sideways at his unconscious colleague. He was sorely tempted to step aside and let the Vulcan do... well, whatever it was she was thinking about doing. Maybe she could solve this mystery. Maybe she could even wake him up. You don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, and all that. But as much as he relied on his gut instinct, which was telling him it was a good idea to let her assess Brex, he was still a scientist, and a Starfleet cadet. “What would you do to him?”

“I would forge a loose connection between our minds.”

“A loose connection...?” He hadn’t felt this small since the first time he did rounds as a med student.

“We are touch telepaths, doctor, as I am certain you have learned in your Starfleet medical classes. I would place my hands on his temples and form a mental bridge. It would not be nearly as intense as a mind meld. Our minds would remain entirely separate, but it would allow me to assess whether his mind has been damaged.”

“We’ve done brain scans. His brain shows no signs of damage.”

She gave him a thinly tolerant glance. “I speak of his mind, not his brain. The two are related, but not synonymous.”

“Oh. Right.” Maybe he should just shut up and let her talk.

“Doctor Singh informed me that the scans you have done do not appear as those of a truly comatose patient. If Doctor Brex has any awareness at all, I would be able to relay that information. I could possibly glean knowledge he is able to share with me through the link.”

Leonard found he was nodding slowly. He was skeptical, but how could he not be? This woman... Vulcan... wasn’t a doctor, a healer, or even a damned cub scout with a first aid badge.

But the Vulcan Council of Healers had given her approval. That wasn’t to be considered lightly.

And while Leonard had very little real experience dealing with telepathy, he knew it had been tested, measured, quantified, and proven. It was an essential neurological function in those who possessed the ability. It had different attributes in the various species that possessed the ability... but what was that thing they’d been drilling into his head since the day he arrived at the Academy? Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.

If Leonard, as a doctor, used every skill and sense and resource he had at his disposal to assess, diagnose, treat, and heal a patient... then why should telepathy be any different in that regard than his eyesight, sense of touch, or that damn gut instinct of his that he listened to far too often?

“I could wake Doctor Singh,” he said vaguely.

“If you feel that notifying him is prudent,” came the even reply, “I am unoffended. As a cadet who has been unexpectedly charged with the medical facilities of a starship, it is known that you have
accepted a duty without full training. It would be illogical for you to risk punishment for making decisions outside of your normal duties.”

“It’s not that,” he said quickly. “I...” He felt his eyes widen. He was a goddamned cadet in charge of the medical bay of a starship. It hadn’t really struck him until now. He’d been the brightest med student in his class. The youngest surgeon in his entire hospital back in Georgia. Ahead of his peers at the Academy because he already had two doctorate degrees. He’d taken lead shifts at the Academy clinic, and had even been the duty doctor for several shifts in the ER at Starfleet Medical. But this... felt different.

For the first time, he realized that at any moment, he could end up truly in charge of all medical decisions on a Starship. He’d always had someone directly above him. Part of it was his youth. Sure, he told Jim that he was an old man, but he wasn’t. Not in the medical world, that’s for sure. But he was a damned cadet, with only two years of Academy training, and...

“As you seem undecided, I shall retire to my quarters and return in the morning to confer with Doctor Singh. Thus, the burden of decision does not fall on you.” With no further warning, she turned and started to step away.

“Wait!”

She turned back and raised an eyebrow.

Dammit, he’d always thought he had the best raised-eyebrow expression in the quadrant. Damned Vulcans.

Aside the eyebrow, if T’Val left now and returned in the morning, he’d miss witnessing... whatever the Vulcan was going to do or say. There was a chance she’d reveal more information than just Brex’s consciousness level. There might be information about what had caused this in the first place... information that the Captain might deem “need-to-know.” If that was so, they’d probably decide that cadets – even ones who were doctors – didn’t need to know. And damn it all, he was curious.

Leonard grit his teeth, then nodded to himself. Was he or wasn’t he in charge of sickbay for this shift? And Doctor Brex was his patient. “Let me check something, Ambassador.”

She gave him a solemn nod, and resettled her posture to indicate that she wasn’t going anywhere.

Leonard hurried across Sickbay to his computer station and pulled up Doctor Singh’s official notes. He wanted to kick himself. Because he’d already been in Sickbay for beta shift, he had gotten all of the shift changeover information directly from Doctor Ankewicz during the course of the shift, between his research subjects. He’d checked in with the nurse. But he hadn’t read Singh’s full notes.

There it was. Ambassador T’Val, approved to conduct a passive telepathic examination on Doctor Brex once she’d received approval from the Vulcan Council of Healers. All the notes were there. Notes about privacy... classified material... yada-yada-yada....

He looked over at the nurse’s station, where Nurse Lee was engrossed in her computer terminal’s display, then back over his shoulder at T’Val. “Ambassador, do you have the official communique from Vulcan Council of Healers?’’

“I do.” She walked over, and he cleared the computer terminal and stood aside.

T’Val entered her authorization and pulled up the message from her cache. It was legitimate.
Leonard gave her a careful, hopeful look. “Okay. Let’s see what we can find out.”
Chapter 10

Jim swore his skin tingled if he stood close enough to the protective barriers around the warp core. Sure, he’d personally checked the radiation and energy sensor readings around the core, and he knew it was absolutely safe, but there was still something about that much raw power that was intoxicating. Not to mention, the engineers were a hoot. Sven, his sociopathic roommate from last spring, seemed to be an anomaly amongst them. Yeah, Jim was pretty sure that if he hadn’t already been completely set on command and tactics, he’d join the Engineering branch without a second thought.

But for now, Engineering was being set aside. Jim had only been on the warp core team for two days, and it wasn’t enough, but he’d finish that rotation later. All cadets had been pulled out of their current rotations for Security training and landing party briefings.

They’d arrived in orbit around Araxis.

The next week or more would be a whirlwind of security and diplomacy assignments. Barring unforeseen circumstances, Finney told them they’d be going down to the surface at least three times. The first time would be for the welcoming ceremony, and the others would probably be for various security assignments or maybe a tour of the main city. If he could finagle it, he’d try to get them into the Parliament building so they could witness some of the negotiations and discussions.

Now that would be something to write home about.

Most crew members - real crew members - weren’t even going down to the surface at all, and here were a bunch of cadets, getting to go down not once, but three times? For an event like this? All in the name of, as Finney had put it, “an unparalleled training opportunity”?

Oh hell yeah.

It was definitely worth leaving the warp engines behind.

The cadets had woken up early to catch breakfast in the mess before the first briefing, which would start at 0600 hours. It was an early morning, but the excitement was enough that the early hour didn’t bother Jim at all. Based on the bleary eyes and lack of discussion over breakfast, he and Herrera were the only ones who didn’t mind.

Nadeau had pounded down three cups of coffee and left the table to get to the briefing room early. To the guy’s credit, he’d stayed up late re-reading the entire mission brief. Jim had found him asleep on top of his blankets with his face flattened on the screen of his PADD. The guy still had the imprint from the screen on his forehead. Nobody had told him.

Herrera and Buhari had followed him a moment later, talking rapidly about the chance to see new scientific and engineering marvels. Wilcox hadn’t wanted to leave her coffee until the last possible moment, and Liu seemed indifferent, so the three of them had sat around the breakfast table, absorbing caffeine and watching the chrono until they had no choice but to run to the briefing.

Jim crammed the last bite of his toast into his mouth as stepped out of the turbolift with Wilcox and Liu, and they saw Finney standing at the door of the briefing room. He was wearing a broad grin.

He clapped a couple of times, looking far too energetic for that hour of the morning. “Come on, guys, the real party is just about to begin here! One morning of briefings, and then we get to step foot on a new planet. The climate is supposed to be vacation-perfect this season. Wilcox, you look
like you need some more coffee.”

She groaned lightly, not even bothering to deny the fact that she had deep circles under her eyes and was practically dragging her heels. “Lieutenant Kim kept me up late last night, sir. Goldberg and I messed up the energy grid on deck three, and -”

Finney held up a hand, stopping her. “Excuses, cadet?”

“Never, sir,” she said without missing a beat. “Just an explanation. I’m here on time anyway, right?”

Jim chuckled to himself, vaguely wondering how many cups of coffee it was taking to get Bones through his crazy schedule.

Finney just gave her an easy smile. “As long as you can stay awake. Besides, it’s good that Kim is working you hard. You’ll learn a lot on that team. But for now... adventure awaits. Get your tails in there.”

They filed into the briefing room, and Jim almost stopped short in surprise. Almost.

Grinning broadly, he sauntered over to the back corner of the room where Bones was clutching his coffee canteen and scowling blearily. He elbowed Bones lightly as he sat down, which only made Bones scowl harder. “I take it you didn’t get much sleep last night,” Jim said in a low tone.

“For your information,” came the gravely reply, “I’ve been awake since yesterday at 1500, and it’s been...” He shook his head. “We’ll talk after the briefing.”

Jim nodded slowly, sympathizing. He wasn’t trying to mock his red-eyed friend. Really. “Sure, but... why are you at this meeting?”

Bones graced him with a tolerant eye-roll. “What’s my rank, Jim?”

“Cadet.”

“See? You are a genius,” he said with his thickest sarcastic drawl, before taking a swig of his coffee. “All the cadets who got accepted to this internship get to go along for this little joyride... including me.”

Jim frowned. “But they’re short-staffed in sickbay.”

“There was something in Bones’ expression... he had something else on his mind, but it seemed like the sort of something that required a distraction approach. Jim gave him a sideways look. “You know you’re not supposed to bring drinks in here.”

Bones took another sip of his coffee, swallowed, and said, “Funny, that’s what the Lieutenant out there said, too.”

“Finney?” Jim’s felt his eyes widen just a bit. “How’d you get it past him?”

At that, Bones raised an eyebrow, staring at the canteen in his hands. “I may have implied that it was medically necessary for my sanity, and that removing this stimulant from my possession would have dire consequences.” He looked back at Jim, giving the appearance of being just a touch
crazed.

Jim nodded vaguely. “Uh... right.”

The only reply was a grumble, drowned by another swig of coffee.

Jim was beginning to hope the meeting would start five seconds ago when the door slid open.

Finney burst into the room, still looking far too energetic, with another Lieutenant in an Ops uniform following him. The cadets stood (Bones may have groaned in the process) as the security officer took the front of the room. Finney stood off to the side.

The Lieutenant turned a sharp gaze over the room. Short brown hair, and the obvious remnants of a natural tan from before the mission started. She wasn’t particularly tall, and there was nothing overt about her that seemed imposing, but between the muscled shoulders and the way she carried herself, Jim got the impression that she could twist him into a pretzel. He wasn’t about to test it, either.

Her expression softened slightly, and she nodded. “Good morning, cadets. I’m Lieutenant Voorhs. I’m one of the section leaders in Security, directly under Security Chief Gaynes. He’s more than occupied babysitting a bunch of diplomats -” she let a grin crack through “- so I get to babysit a bunch of cadets.”

Jim felt himself relax a bit. Next to him, he heard Bones’ classic long-suffering sigh.

At the front of the room, Lieutenant Voorhs activated the computer display and pulled up a map of the planet’s largest continent. “The people of Araxis have settled several regions across the main continent, mostly in small farming and research communities. Our mission will be isolated to the Araxian capital city.” The map zoomed in on a region near the southeastern coast of the continent, and resolved into a grid of city streets. “We’ll be covering all the basic security concerns for the duration of the mission, as well as specific roles you might be expected to play between schmoozing with the delegates. This is a training mission for you, so you’re going to be involved with various security functions as we go.”

Jim sat up a little bit straighter. He’d expected to be a passive observer, making small-talk and trying not to cause an interstellar incident. This? Was much better.

Voorhs continued talking. “While a security officer’s entire job is about planning for security, it’s also an important consideration for every member of Starfleet, especially during a landing party. Someday, most of you will be working hand-in-hand with security personnel to plan missions. This time, you get to play the pawns yourselves.”

The map zoomed in to the parliament building and other major structures around the settlement. The maps had just been updated with data from the Araxians, which showed far more detail. It was incredibly impressive. It was a settlement of only 200 years, and they not only had a complete advanced infrastructure, but also multiple towns and smaller settlements across a sizable region of the main continent. Jim wondered how many Axanar had originally gone to Araxis, how fast they reproduced, and how much technology they’d brought with them. The original records from Axanar had been sparse. And he wondered what their world would be like if the Axanar hadn’t reestablished contact.

Jim cast a sideways glance at Bones... who was staring solemnly at the screen, and frowning. He had that same look as before the briefing started - the one that said he had other things on his mind. Carefully, Jim leaned an elbow into Bones’ arm, and when Bones looked sideways at him, Jim
furrowed his eyebrows in the universally recognized sign for, *What gives?*

Bones shot him back a look with a barely-visible shake of the head, which Jim knew to mean, *Not now, Jim!*

“Gentlemen? Is there something relevant to the security of this mission that you wish to share with your fellow cadets, your instructor, and myself?” Lieutenant Voorhs was drilling holes through them with her eyes. Her hands were planted firmly on her hips, and Jim was starting to fear that he might yet experience that pretzel-like shape, and he probably wouldn’t like it. Yeah... never try to get away with *anything* in front of a good security officer.

Jim opened his mouth to apologize, but Bones cut in before he could get a word out.

“Sir, how sure are we that the Araxian intel is good enough to base security protocols on?”

Jim felt his jaw drop as he gawked at his friend. What the hell did Bones know about security protocols? For that matter, what did he care? “Bones?”

“Shut yer mouth, Jim.” Bones said, in an undertone. “If there’s a fly on this ship, you’ll catch it.”

Voorhs, for her part, was giving them both a searching look. She seemed to be debating several possible things to say, and finally let her hands fall to her sides. “Cadets,” she said, addressing the whole room, but looking at Bones, “We’re never sure if our intel is good enough. And we always have to plan as if our intel isn’t good at all. We get information, and we make the best educated guesses that we can. We have to bend for the needs of diplomacy, account for the variables, and prepare for the possibility of complete disaster... for every mission we run.” She gave a slight nod. “This mission is no exception. Does that answer your question, Cadet?”

Jim expected Bones to answer and just let the matter drop, but instead, Bones pressed his lips together and got that expression of his that threatened a more terrifying debate than a Tellarite could give.

Huh. That was an idea. Bones debating a Tellarite. Jim mentally filed that away as something he *had* to see before he died.

But right now, he was worried about living long enough to see the surface of Araxis. “Bones?” Jim whispered, not that anyone in the room didn’t hear him. “Come on, man, what the hell?”

Finney stepped forward. “Is there something you need to tell us, McCoy?” he asked, and it had none of the sarcastic tone that Voorhs had used.

Bones opened his mouth, cast one last sideways glance at Jim, then squared his shoulders and stood. “I’m a doctor, not a command or ops cadet. I know security and command and tactics and stuff aren’t my specialty, but -”

“Ah, you’re the medical cadet.”

Bones bristled just slightly. “Not just a medical cadet. It’s *Doctor* McCoy. And... it’s just that... aw, hell, I don’t know what I’m allowed to say here.”

Voorhs narrowed her eyes just slightly. “I believe I may know what you’re talking about. I’ve already received that briefing, McCoy, and we’ve taken that information into account for our plans. And while I appreciate your concern over our safety protocols, yes, we do know what we’re doing. I was up most of the night myself, reworking the security protocols with Chief Gaynes based on that information. Thank you for your work last night, but... really, we’ve got this under control. As
you said... security isn’t your specialty.”

Bones gave a thinly proper, “Thank you, sir,” as he sat back down, and if Jim knew Bones (which he did), that man’s mind was racing.

So was Jim’s. What sort of work had Bones done last night? What could he have done that ended up in a security briefing? And why did Jim feel like he was going to jump out of his skin if he didn’t find out for himself?

One last glare from Bones stifled any inclination Jim had to push him for information during the meeting.

He’d grill Bones as soon as they broke for lunch.

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Jim was pretty sure his head was swimming by the time they were dismissed from the security briefings. Sure, he knew security was more than a bunch of chumps beating each other up, and he’d taken Basic Security and Tactical Ops Security classes at the Academy, but damn, there was a lot for these people to consider in a real mission, especially the officers.

Still, all that information wasn’t enough to drown out Jim’s burning curiosity about what the hell was going on with Bones. As soon as they were a few paces away from the door, heading (Jim assumed) towards the mess hall for lunch, he turned towards Bones to begin drilling his best friend for details. Before he could say a word, however, Bones’ hand latched onto his upper arm in a claw-like vice grip, and he found himself tugged down a different corridor.

“Ow! Bones, where are we going? And what the hell was -”

“Put a sock in it, Jim. We’re going to my quarters.”

“But the mess hall...” Jim cast a desperate glance back over his shoulder, thinking of everyone else headed down for lunch. “Come on, if we don’t eat now, we won’t get a chance until after the welcome ceremony, and that could be hours!”

“There’s more important things than stuffing your gullet, kid.”

“I know, and I figured I’d ask you over lunch... was that about Doctor Br - !”

Bones’ free hand clamped over his mouth, none too gently. “Dammit, Jim, you really don’t know how to shut up!” he hissed.

“Mmmphff.”

“That’s better.”

They rounded another corner to a second set of turbolifts, and Jim swore Bones looked back over his shoulder before getting into the ‘lift. “Deck eight.”

“Bones?”

“Wait, Jim.”

It was less than a minute, but it seemed to take forever before they were securely ensconced in Bones’ quarters. Jim sat down in one of the armchairs, but Bones didn’t. In fact, the guy started pacing. Fucking pacing.
“Bones.” The man kept pacing, and Jim tilted his head in disbelief. “You’ve got to be kidding... Bones!”

Bones stopped mid-pace, almost stumbling. Two owlish, slightly bloodshot eyes blinked back at him.

Jim sighed. “You’re making me dizzy just watching you. So sit down before you fall over and I have to drag your sorry ass to your bunk.” Damn, this felt like a role reversal. “And tell me what the hell is going on here.”

Leonard shook his head and resumed pacing. “It’s classified and I’m not supposed to say a word about any of this.”

“And since when has that stopped either of us from discussing things?” He shook his head, thinking about what he’d told Bones about Brex’s deleted messages, even though he shouldn’t have said a word. But it was true - they never could keep anything from each other. “Come on, Bones... you brought me down here to tell me, so just spill it already. What happened with Doctor Brex?”

It was like someone flipped a power switch. The look of sheer exhaustion that Bones had held at bay during the briefings seemed to crash down on him. It was mingled with thick, nervous energy, and he seemed like he was running on fumes but unable to let himself land.

Jim decided not to use that metaphor aloud.

With a weary grunt, Bones dropped himself into the other armchair. “The Vulcan Ambassador came to sickbay last night while I was on-shift.”

“The Vulcan... wait, there’s a Vulcan onboard?” Jim felt a flash of excitement. “That’s great, Bones! They’re touch-telepaths with really specialized mental disciplines... the Ambassador might be able to figure out what’s wrong with Doctor Brex... what?”

Bones had closed his eyes, and was slowly, deliberately beating the back of his head against the cushion of his seat. “Thank you, Mr. Encyclopedia Gallactica, rogue genius and professional pest. Yes, you’re smarter than me, I know.”

Taken more than slightly aback, Jim blinked as though he’d been slapped. Why would his scant knowledge of Vulcans, little more than from his Federation Cultures class had taught him, make Bones upset? “Bones... I’m... sorry, just... tell me what the Ambassador said.”

Bones sighed. “You’re right. She did this touch-telepathy thing. She said it wasn’t a mind-melt or mind-meld or whatever they call it, but she sat up at the head of the biobed, touched his temples, and kinda went into some sort of trance. Sat there for a good while. It was the strangest thing I’ve seen in a good long while.”

“I guess you haven’t seen Ensign Zreen yet.”

“Jim.”

“Sorry.”

Bones shifted in his chair to face Jim a little bit more. Damn, he looked even more exhausted now. “She said he’s not fully unconscious under there, so there’s some awareness... but he’s confused and disoriented.”

“Can’t she help him get... uh... oriented?”
Bones shook his head, his frown deepening. “She’s not a Healer. She only knows some basics, so she had to get special permission from the Vulcan Council of Healers, and then... only to assess him. Not to treat him. And I understand why. I wouldn’t let some random idiot perform surgery with nothing more than first aid training.”

“Thanks, Bones,” Jim said, jokingly acting stung.

“Wasn’t talkin’ about you, kid. But this is the same deal. She’s got the equivalent of first aid training, and the mind is a delicate thing. Brex is a telepath, with a brain structure I’ve only seen in medical databases until now, and until we know how he was injured, we can’t even begin to consider treating the injury.” A ghost of a sly smile crossed his face. “And that would be like sending our hypothetical first aid idiot to do surgery without even telling him what was wrong.”

“I’ll make sure the idiots leave stuff like surgery to the experts,” Jim said dryly. “But Bones... that’s not what’s got you so worked up. I know you.”

“Yeah, Jim.” The faint smile disappeared without a trace. “So Ambassador T’Val said he was confused, and disoriented. He wasn’t really sure if he was awake or asleep. And... she said there were gaps.”

Jim frowned. “Gaps? Like his memory? Didn’t you tell me that he’d forgotten asking to meet you early that morning?”

Bones nodded. “And that he seemed to remember just before he passed out.” He rubbed a hand roughly over his face and jaw. “Based on the areas of the brain with the odd electrical activity, it makes sense that there are memory gaps. T’Val couldn’t tell me what he was actually missing, which makes sense, but simply that she sensed that his recent memories had been... scrambled.”

Jim nodded slowly. He knew where this was going. “And you think his memories were scrambled by someone.”

“I don’t have a scrap of proof, Jim.”

“But you’ve got the second-best gut-instinct of anyone I’ve ever met.” Jim flashed a smug grin.

Bones only rolled his eyes. “Kid, if you’ve got the best gut instinct, then I’d think you would have amassed fewer broken bones and slapped cheeks over the years.”

“Very funny,” Jim deadpanned, but he wasn’t going to let himself be sidetracked. Maybe he’d promised himself he wouldn’t start digging, but Pike had told him to trust his instincts. And honestly, his instincts were to trust Bones’ instincts. “Come on, Bones. What else do you have?”

Bones stared at the floor for a moment, then met Jim’s eyes straight on. “The only other thing T’Val could pick up with any certainty is that Brex is uneasy about the Axanar. That’s nothing that I didn’t already know. Doctor Brex and I discussed it briefly. But...” His eyes flicked towards the door, then back again. “T’Val couldn’t get any specifics, but it seems Brex picked up an odd thought from the Axanar, and it was still strong enough for T’Val to find, even with Brex unconscious.”

“What?”

“That the Axanar don’t trust the Araxians.”

Jim let that sink in for a moment before slowly repeating it. “The Axanar don’t trust the Araxians.”
“We don’t know that.”

“But you just said - !”

“Jim,” Bones said in a low tone, and damn, he really looked exhausted. “What I said was that T’Val, a Vulcan who is not a certified Healer, picked up a stray thought from an unconscious Betazoid with memory problems, which he seems to have picked up from the Axanar... one or more of them, we can’t be sure. And, if all of that is correct, which it might not be, then the conclusion floating around in Brex’s unconscious brain is that he believes the Axanar don’t trust the Araxians.” He shook his head. “And my gut instinct is to believe Brex... even when he’s unconscious. I sure feel like there’s a hell of a lot more to this mess, but... you tell me if there’s any way we can pin something solid on that.”

Jim stared back at Bones. The obvious response was no, there wasn’t any way to tie up anything cohesive with that string of information. At least, not officially. Not enough information to accuse the Axanar of attacking Brex. Not enough information to even begin to investigate why - or if - the Axanar don’t trust Araxians. He didn’t personally know any of the people involved, including T’Val, so he had no idea how much he could trust any of them.

Besides, as a cadet, it’s not as if he could do anything about this. Hell, he wasn’t even supposed to know. He was sure the actual officers were looking into this. Still, they were heading down to a new planet in two hours. It was a situation with too many variables to count, and plenty of unknowns. There was no such thing as wasted information. Pike would agree with that much, he was sure.

“Bones... what does your gut instinct say on this one?”

“Honestly?” Bones leaned back in his chair and let out a slow breath. “There’s a man unconscious in sickbay, he’s my patient, and even though I’ve known him less than two weeks, I’d say he’s my friend. He has no history of neurological problems or memory issues, but his memory is full of holes like a wheel of Swiss cheese... at least according to our Vulcan friend, and my scans support it. My gut instinct says that it’s not natural causes, and that whoever did this to him is trouble, Jim. Big trouble.” He closed his eyes. “That’s what my gut instinct says.”

Jim slowly settled deeper into his own chair, trying to stave off a shiver that was threatening his spine. Yeah, he trusted Bones. He just had no idea what to do about it.

“Something else, Jim.”

“What’s that?

Bones opened his eyes again, staring blankly at the ceiling. “Before she left... T’Val... she reached out and took my hand. Then she looked me in the eye and told me that I was... that I was both a Doctor and Healer... and that Brex is in the best possible hands. She... said I was a good friend, and a good man. And then she told me to ‘live long and prosper.’” Bones’ eyes blinked slowly. “I only realized later, that when she touched my hand, she must’ve read my mind.”

Jim opened his mouth to speak, then realized his throat had gone dry. He swallowed tightly, then said, “Well, Bones... it took a mind reader to figure out what I’ve known all along.”

For the first time in days, Bones smiled. It was threadbare and exhausted, but it was real. “Thanks, Jim.”

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Jim stepped up onto the transporter pad, trying to ignore his stomach, which was currently having a war of hunger growls and nervous jitters. He’d grabbed an apple from the mess hall after leaving Bones’ room, and ate it while running to his final assignment briefing. It wasn’t enough, but it had taken the worst edge off his appetite. His nerves, however, hadn’t been dulled at all, and it didn’t help that Bones wasn’t coming.

Justifiably, and understandably, Bones had contacted Doctor Singh from his quarters and gotten himself medically relieved from duty for sheer exhaustion. In all honesty, Jim was pretty sure that if Bones hadn’t done it, he’d have called Doctor Singh himself. Bones had been ready to collapse. He’d miss today’s landing party, but he’d make it up another day. Still, something about going down there without Bones wasn’t sitting right with Jim.

Actually, a lot wasn’t sitting right. And he had plenty of reasons to be nervous. Aside from the fact that this was an incredibly important mission, and forgetting that there was still a man unconscious due to an unknown cause, and ignoring the clues that the occupants of the planet below might or might not be as trustworthy as they seemed... he’d just received his assignment for the first landing party.

He glanced to his right, where the Tellarite Ambassador Skavrin was standing. He was assigned to be Skavrin’s shadow and assistant for the duration of the welcoming ceremony and the afternoon’s events. That would be easy, except for the fact that he still owed the Ambassador a debate.

Skavrin gave his ceremonial robes a rustle and looked over at Jim with a gleam in his eyes. His snout twitched. “I understand that they keep you cadets exceedingly busy, but I believe you turned coward and avoided the debate! We’ll cross words during the reception, and show these Araxians what a proper discussion looks like!”

All Jim wanted to offer was a bleak “Yes sir,” but he put on his game face. “I didn’t avoid you, Ambassador. I was too busy privately entertaining your mother.”

Jim swore that Skavrin actually puffed up in momentary indignation before letting out a raucous laugh. “Well, Kirk, let the games begin.”

Jim gave a steady nod in reply as the transporter room door opened, admitting the Vulcan Ambassador with Cadet Buhari, her assignment for the landing party. Her poise was solemn as she followed T’Val up to the transporter pad, but her eyes were laughing as she stood next to Jim and hissed at him softly.

“Can’t wait to see you get your ass handed to you in debate with Ambassador Skavrin.”

“Thanks. I needed that,” Jim whispered back.

The transporter room doors opened again, this time admitting the Axanar entourage, Captain Porter, the First Officer Commander LaSalle, a security officer, and...

“Is that a Kazarite?” Jim whispered in surprise to Buhari.

She shrugged. “Hell if I know. I passed Cultures class, but if it’s not made of conduits and energy matrices, I’ve forgotten most of it.”

Jim nodded vaguely, because he was pretty damned sure that was a Kazarite. They were Federation members, and Jim remembered that quite a few of them had come to Earth to work as ecologists and zoologists, but he’d never seen one. Must not be a lot of interesting ecology in Iowa. Definitely not as interesting as the Kazarite himself. Or herself. Or something else. Jim had no idea.
The attention was at the front of the room, and certainly not on the cadets at the back of the transporter pad, so Jim stepped a bit closer to Buhari. “He’s definitely a Kazarite. But... they usually only go on assignments that require ecological help, or handling animals.”

Buhari gave him an eyeroll. “Well, maybe there are animals on Araxis, Kirk, and he’s here to assess the local ecology. Or maybe he’s representing his planet... almost as if he was an Ambassador or something. What a funny idea.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Now that was a great way to feel dull-witted. Just what he needed before a debate with a Tellarite. “Welcome to Starfleet,” he mumbled to himself.

The Kazarite joined them on the transporter pad, along with the security officer who stood at the front of the platform and nodded to the transporter chief. “That’s everyone.”

“Aye, sir,” replied the lieutenant behind the controls. “Ready.”

“Energize.”

The transporter room dissolved away, and even in the transporter beam, Jim found himself trying to squint as the brightness of daylight hit him. As the beam faded away and his eyes adjusted to natural light, Jim took in the sights.

They had beamed down to the center of Parliament Square, which was the governing district of the capital city. The city itself was named Araxis - the cultural briefing said that the capital was intended to be the heartbeat of the whole planet, hence the same name. If first impressions were any indication, they had gotten it right.

Unlike the incredibly ornate detail of the architecture and the imposing size of the buildings on Axanar, the parliament building here was composed of clean lines, simple decor, and stately elegance. It seemed less overbearing somehow, without the fortress-like quality of the Axanar buildings. If anything, it just seemed more welcoming. It wasn’t small by any means, but it wasn’t excessive either. Despite its simplicity, and the notable lack of opal windows, Jim liked this place better than the capital of Axanar.

The buildings around the square looked like this species’ equivalent of office buildings, with an open design at all street-level entryways. The roads were straight and level, running away from the central square like spokes on a wheel. Tree-like plants dotted the walkways, completely unlike the purple-green plants from back on Axanar. Since they had only seen the regal buildings of Capitol Square on Axanar, Jim had no way to compare the architecture of normal buildings, but he got the impression that it was different from this, too.

In two hundred years, the Araxians had completely developed their own style, their own architecture, and... their own planet. The place felt brilliantly established. Comfortable. Jim had been on a colony planet once, and it had felt like a scattered frontier settlement. This, however... this felt like its own place.

Araxis.

Nice.

But very unexpectedly... quiet.

Jim frowned. Nice buildings, beautiful walkways, good streets, the landing parties, the Araxian delegates posed so properly on the front steps of the Parliament building, but... it was completely deserted.
There was no foot traffic along the streets. All the delegates, the Araxian security teams posted at key points around the Square, and now Captain Porter and Commander LaSalle, and the Axanar Ambassadors materializing in front of the steps of the Parliament building, but no pedestrians. No civilian crowds. For such a historic event, Jim expected to see people lining the Square, watching the whole affair.

“Where are the people?” Jim muttered, not even sure to whom he was asking.

The security officer who had beamed down with Jim’s group took a step closer to him. “The Araxian security forces decided that in order to ensure a formal reception, they weren’t permitting crowds around Parliament Square, just for this afternoon. After the meet-and-greet, the square will open again.”

“Understood, sir,” Jim said softly, even though he really didn’t understand. On Earth, this would be a widely attended event. But hey, each culture had their own way of dealing with formality, so who was he to judge?

It didn’t matter at the moment because an Araxian, obviously the one in charge, stepped forward. He didn’t approach Captain Porter, or any of the other delegates, but walked directly to the Axanar delegates. He bowed slightly to the junior delegate, then reached out and rested his hands on the arms of the senior delegate.

“Ambassador Ghizan, it is my privilege to welcome you formally to the planet of Araxis, home of the Araxians... now, once again, Axanar. Rejoined with our kinsmen. No longer alone. We welcome the protection of Axanar. All that we have... is yours.”

“Prime Minister Xhathan, we accept your welcome, and gladly take you and the rest of our lost family, back under the protection of Axanar. We accept the gift of your trust.”

Jim was quite sure the words were rehearsed, but they still gave him an odd chill. He watched as the two nearly identical beings maintained their pose for a moment, then broke apart smoothly. The illusion of Axanar and Araxis being so different seemed a bizarre contrast to how identical their people were. They were androgynous, so there wasn’t even a visible gender difference to help tell them apart. It was... yeah, weird.

Welcome to Starfleet, Jim thought to himself again.

The Prime Minister of Axanar stepped back, and bowed to the entire assembly. “Delegates, Ambassadors, distinguished and honored guests... please follow me to the House of Parliament for opening statements.”

Jim looked at Ambassador Skavrin, who merely shrugged jovially and quickly followed the retreating crowd. Jim cast one glance back over his shoulder at the oddly deserted square as he forced back a shudder. It wasn’t just the absence of spectators that seemed off. Something was making him uneasy, but he was at a loss as to what else was making him feel like this. He pursed his lips, shook his head to himself, and hurried after Skavrin and the rest of the delegates.

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“- and you know that the Zhitoran authorities had a standing policy of turning a blind eye to the activities of the triglobulin poachers!” Skavrin’s eyes were wild and delighted as he banged his empty cup against the table surface to emphasize his point. “The poachers had a reach far too broad to be controlled, and would only have led to societal degradation of their infrastructure due to the reallocation of resources. Any fool would see that!”
Jim leaned over the tabletop and gave Skavrin a feral grin. “Then this fool insists that the Zhitoran government had their own agents involved in the poaching. That’s why they turned a blind eye! Government operatives would happily look the other way because their own people were bringing in millions of credits worth of triglobulin, all at the expense of the Axanar.” Damn, this was fun. He should have debated with Skavrin sooner.

“If the Zhitoran government was profiting so grandly from their inside operatives,” Skavrin shot back, “then why would they have conceded so easily to the Federation demands that they cease their harvesting? A preposterous suggestion!”

“If the poachers were so far beyond the reach of the central government, as you claim,” Jim replied shrewdly, “then there’s no way the Zhitorans could have convinced the poachers to cease and desist. The only way they could have gotten the poaching to stop would have been inside operatives!” Jim narrowed his eyes. “Besides, I would have hardly called it an easy job to convince them. The Federation issued a standing order to track down poacher vessels and treat them as criminals against a Federation protectorate. The Zhitorans wouldn’t have stood a chance against that threat.”

Skavrin raised his glass and opened his mouth, ready to issue the next challenge, when Jim heard someone clear their throat behind him. Skavrin lowered his glass huffily as Jim turned around.

“Having fun, Kirk?” Lieutenant Finney looked at him wryly.

Jim grinned, knowing full-well that his face was flushed with excitement from the debate. “Yes, sir. I’d say it’s the best diplomatic conversation I’ve had in a long time.”

“Your cadet has been a most satisfactory associate,” Skavrin said with a satisfied grunt, stepping around the table to stand next to Jim. “If he does not have other duties, I would like to keep him on for the duration of this mission as my personal assistant.”

A crack of a smile brightened Finney’s expression. “We’ve got specific assignments that all cadets need to complete during their internship, Ambassador, but if Kirk has free time, I’ll send him your way.” He cast a deliberate glance over his shoulder and around the room. “You two seem to have an audience.”

Skavrin gave a sniff. “The finest aspects of diplomacy, Lieutenant. We are brightening this planet with the thrill of debate! Exposing them to new means of communication.” He narrowed his eyes. “Unless you would deny them this privilege. I would challenge you -”

Finney held up his hands in a show of surrender, laughing lightly. “No challenge necessary, Ambassador! I concede! I concede!”

Ambassador Skavrin snorted. “Concede! Hrrrgh. Your cadet clearly learned his debate skills elsewhere.”

“That he did,” Finney said with a nod, sobering his expression. “Can I borrow Kirk for a moment?”

“He’s your cadet.” Skavrin waved his hands in a shooing motion. “I’m the one borrowing him... for now. I may yet decide to keep him.”

Jim was grinning even as he followed Finney through the room. It was a large ante room adjacent to the main hall, full of tall round tables without chairs, set up for socializing. Chairs lined the walls for those who wanted to sit, but most of the delegates and guests were milling through the room, standing around tables, eating and talking. Jim nodded politely to several of them as he
followed Finney.

He also took a moment to appreciate the room. High ceilings, lots of light, and soft colors. Like the outside, Jim had discovered that the inside of the Parliament building was built and decorated in clean, uncluttered style. Simple decor, open floor plan. It was a stark contrast to the Axanar, highlighting yet again that these were two separate people... even though they seemed identical in both appearance and behavior. Not for the first time since they’d beamed down, Jim wondered how they could have been different enough to cause such a complete split two centuries ago. It was yet another thing he hoped to learn on this mission.

Finally, Finney veered off towards a side table.

Jim approached the table, slowing as he saw the expression on Finney’s face. “Sir?”

Finney leaned heavily on the table. “Drawing a lot of attention... cadet?” The meaning in the tone was obvious.

Jim felt himself deflate a bit. “I’m sorry, sir, but wasn’t it my assignment to act as Skavrin’s assistant and shadow?”

Finney blew out an exasperated breath. “I should have known better than to pair you with a Tellarite, but the Ambassador specifically requested you.” He shook his head to himself. “Yeah, I should have known. Only you would manage to hold up to a debate with a Tellarite.”

“The Ambassador seems pleased,” Jim said hopefully.

Finney smiled enough to let Jim relax just a bit. “Yes, Kirk, he is. And you’re not in trouble. I just want to suggest that you tone it down... not because you’re not performing well as Ambassador Skavrin’s assistant, but because... well... consider the issue of situational awareness.”

Jim frowned. “Sir? The situation is a multi-species reception and diplomatic function following a very successful set of opening remarks in Parliament.”

“When did you become a Vulcan?” Finney sighed, and Jim suddenly realized he looked exhausted.

“Sir... are you okay?”

Instantly, Finney straightened up a bit, standing taller, but his face still looked drawn and there were shadows under his eyes. “It’s been a long day, Kirk. By the time you saw me at the security briefing, I’d been up for several hours. That’s why I looked so awake. I’d already had enough coffee to wake the dead.”

Jim’s mind spun, and he suddenly realized that Finney must have been involved in what Bones had discovered overnight. Of course he was. Bones was a cadet, and Finney was involved in training all cadets on the ship. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Finney waved him off. “All I’m saying... is to remember to read situational awareness outside of the mission briefing. Beyond the obvious. Kirk... Jim... I read your whole academic profile before I accepted you to this internship, and reviewed the results of your Survival and Tactics course before you left sickbay that first day. You’re incredibly observant, and you notice things and put together details that far more seasoned officers might miss.”

“I... uh... thank you, sir.”

Finney just waved him off again. “I’m not saying that to expand your already over-inflated ego.” A
friendly smile took the sting out of that one. “I’m telling you that you need to have that ability of yours in full gear at all times on a mission like this. Situational awareness. You were so engaged in your debate with Skavrin… did you notice how many people were listening to every word?”

Jim tilted his head, trying to remember. “There were a few... the two tables next to ours, the Caitian delegate, three of the wait-staff, and…”

“Did you notice the Zhitoran?”

“Wha - oh shi-... no, sir.”

Finney was nodding slowly. “Do you want me to go make nice with the Zhitoran, or are you going to fix it, if it needs fixing?”

Jim swallowed the nausea rising in his gut. “I’ll fix it, sir. I’m an officer intern. I’ve got to fix my own messes, right?”

Finney favored him with a grin, and finally leaned back from the table. “I knew you’d learned a thing or two over the past couple of years.”

“Occasionally,” Jim replied.

Finney gave him a nod of agreement. “Go on. Back to your assignment. We’ll be heading back to the ship in approximately two hours, so there’s still plenty of time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and Kirk?” Finney’s grin suddenly became much wider, and somewhat conspiratorial. “I’ve never seen any human hold their own that well against a Tellarite. And you should know... there’s a reason they made Skavrin an Ambassador. He was a champion debater.”

Jim nodded vaguely and turned to work his way back through the crowd as that information sank in. Champion debater? Damn, now he wished he’d captured the debate on holovid. Who would ever believe him?

For ten minutes, Jim worked his way back through the crowd, looking for the Zhitoran Ambassador before giving up. He was nowhere to be found. Maybe he’d left for the evening. Maybe Jim’s debate with Skavrin had put him off. Or... maybe Finney had been screwing with Jim, trying to get him to be more situationally aware.

Jim felt a brief flare of annoyance, bordering on defiance, at possibly being played like that... but then... he hadn’t noticed the Zhitoran Ambassador either way. He hadn’t even looked to see if the Zhitoran had been nearby before starting that debate, which meant that Finney was right anyway - he needed to pay more attention.

Feeling like an idiot (almost hearing the word in Bones’ voice), Jim worked his way back to Skavrin’s table, where he found the Ambassador having a slightly less boisterous discussion with... one of the wait-staff?

“...which is a perfectly normal way of - ah, Kirk! We’ve got ourselves a curious Araxian!”

Jim walked up to the table a bit cautiously. Thus far, all evening, the wait-staff had been just as hyper-courteous as the servers on Axanar. Perhaps even more so. Actually... situational awareness, Kirk. Whereas the Axanar waiters had conversed easily, these people almost seemed nervous to engage in conversation. They had offered plentiful refreshments and prompt service, but they had
kept their distance, almost - and Jim wasn’t pleased that his mind supplied this analogy first - like a once-abused dog skirting just beyond reach.

Just as quickly, he reasoned that the Araxians had been isolationists for 200 years. When they’d left Axanar, their species was being hunted like animals. Perhaps it would take a while for them to get more comfortable with the idea of other sentient races that weren’t out to kill them.

Pasting a broad, friendly smile on his face, Jim tilted his head - less than a bow, more than a nod. “Hello, I’m Cadet Kirk of the Federation starship Athena. Pleased to meet you.”

The Araxian’s eyes widened slightly, and he gave a deep bow. “My apologies for intruding!”

Jim felt his smile falter. “Apologies? Uh... no need to apologize. After all, this whole event is about meeting new people. And your name is...?”

“I do not -” He stopped and glanced sideways at Skavrin, who gave a solemn nod. “I am called Zhareth,” he finally said. “But I’m here to serve, nothing more, sir.”

Jim spared a glance at Skavrin before focusing on Zhareth. “What are you curious about?”

Zhareth hesitated, then fixed Jim with a gaze that was surprisingly steady, despite the uncertainty in his words. “Well, I... you were arguing, sir. Challenging the Ambassador. He... he outranks you?”

Jim felt his eyebrows go up. So that’s what this about? “The Ambassador is a civilian, so he doesn’t outrank me in terms of Starfleet, but his position is...” Damn, he had to pick his words wisely here. “... superior to mine. I’m here as his assistant. But... okay, so in a way, I was challenging him, but I wasn’t challenging his position or authority. We were having a debate.”

“A glorious debate, Zhareth!” Skavrin interjected. “The interchange of words, testing your mettle, challenging one’s assumptions and seeing whether your own assertions can hold up to scrutiny. It’s the finest form of communication!”

Zhareth’s face screwed up in thought, as if he couldn’t make sense of it. “But your subordinate challenged, you, sir,” he said meekly, then his eyes widened. “And I am challenging you by questioning what you tell me! Oh, I can’t be seen doing this. I should return to my duties.”

“Whoa, hold on,” Jim said, trying to keep his voice down. “You’re supposed to be serving the delegates, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, we’re telling you to relax and join us for a minute.” Jim gave him what he hoped was an encouraging smile. “Anyway, as far as the Federation is concerned, even if two people hold different ranks - in Starfleet or society at large - both people have equal value. And when we interact, it’s about mutual respect.”

“Even if you’re challenging a superior? In a debate?” For a brief moment, there was a spark of something sharp and scrutinizing in Zhareth’s expression, eyes narrowing just slightly, but he quickly looked down at the floor then back up at Jim, wary and nervous.

“I’ve challenged plenty of my superiors,” Jim said, trying not to laugh. “Sometimes, I might have pushed it a bit too far... but there’s nothing wrong with challenging or debating someone else, regardless of rank, if you still have respect for their experience and status. At least, that’s how humans work, and so do a lot of other Federations species. Are you telling me that Araxians don’t
have debates?”

“We have debates, sir, but... we have been told that we should never debate against a superior, if we’re to remain under his protection.”

*That... was an odd statement, Jim thought. “You’ve been told?”* That didn’t sound like a person referring to his own wishes. “I thought the Axanar and Araxian system of service and protection was cultural tradition?”

“It is, sir! That is what I meant. I...” He looked over his shoulder, and suddenly shook his head. “Please, allow me to return to my duties. I shall bring you more refreshments, if you desire.”

Jim looked over at Skavrin, who merely shrugged and said, “I would enjoy another round of this exquisite beverage, and perhaps another fruit tart. Anything for you, Kirk?”

Jim shook his head. “No. Nothing.”

Zhareth bowed deeply and hurried off. Jim watched him go. Zhareth didn’t act quite like an Axanar, but then, he was an Araxian. Not that they seemed so different, but then maybe they were. Either way, he was obviously hung up on something.

“Cadet Kirk?” Skavrin asked in the softest tone Jim had ever heard a Tellarite use. “Something of concern?”

Jim looked sideways at him. “I don’t know.”

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Chapter 11

Doctor Ankewicz looked up from the PADD he was reading as Leonard walked into sickbay. He was a tall man who looked like he never quite fit the dimensions of the room around him. Long limbs and long face, with just a bit of gray hair at the temples. He made Leonard feel oddly young, even though Leonard was pretty sure the guy was barely ten years older. “Feeling better, McCoy?”

“Yeah,” Leonard said, cringing at how gravelly his voice sounded. “Twelve hours of uninterrupted sleep will do that to a guy.”

Ankewicz let out a low whistle and put the PADD aside. “Twelve hours? I’m not surprised, though. You’ve been working double shifts for almost a week.”

Leonard knocked back a swig of coffee from his ever-present canteen. “And getting up earlier than than my shift so I can work on my thesis. Yesterday just pushed me over the limit. I’m telling you, I got more sleep during my residency than I have so far on this internship.”

The other doctor chuckled as he stood and stretched. “Did you drink that much coffee during your residency?”

Leonard snorted. “When do you think I got addicted to the stuff?”

“Fair enough,” he said with an easy grin. “Do you have research appointments scheduled today?”

“I just a couple from the beta shift rotation, but... you don’t have to stay. I know you and Doctor Singh pulled longer shifts already so I could get some sleep. I’ll take over from here.”

“Thanks, McCoy. I wasn’t going to ask, but I was hoping you might say that.” He picked up his scrub jacket and draped it over his shoulder. “And if trends continue, it shouldn’t be too bad. Not too much happening around the ship. A couple of people with headaches, but that’s about it. And...” He frowned. “No change with Brex.”

It was all Leonard could do to keep from growling. “He might be stable now, but how long can this last? We need to get him seen by Betazoid Healers, in person. Forget this subspace teleconferencing. They can’t diagnose or treat him like that. I don’t give two hoots about this diplomacy stuff right now. The fact that they’re just letting it go on like this? Unbelievable.” He shook his head and leaned against the wall, letting his eyes drift across sickbay to treatment bay two.

“I know, McCoy. And for what it’s worth, here’s a bit of wisdom to take with you to your next assignment.” He reached down and grabbed his PADD, tucking it neatly under his arm. “This is how it always will be. Medical will always take a backseat to everything else on the ship. Your opinion has no major impact on the ship’s mission. Your captain will want you there to patch up his crew, advise on medical safety issues, and deal with alien bacteria and parasites. But at the end of the day, unless the mission is a plague sweeping across a planet, or the mysterious illness of an important diplomat...”

His voice trailed off and he shook his head. “I don’t want to disillusion you or anything, when you’re just getting ready to start your Starfleet career. I don’t always feel like this myself.” He cast a quick glance back at treatment bay two. “It’s just hard not to be cynical right now. This is my second tour with Brex. He’s a good friend.”

Leonard nodded, feeling slightly numb, trying to stave off the hollow sensation of hopelessness.
“Yeah,” he said vaguely.

“You take care, and page me or Singh if you need backup.” He gave Leonard a light clap on the shoulder and started walking towards the door.

The familiar sensation of having his shoulder clapped caused something to tighten in Leonard’s throat. He spun around. “Doctor Ankewicz?”

Ankewicz stopped and looked back. “Yes, McCoy?”

“I don’t think all captains would be like that. I’ve got to believe that the role of a ship’s doctor is more than mending broken bones and playing with alien viruses. There have to be captains who see that.”

“Really?” He shook his head, looking defeated. “Then I hope you get to serve under a captain like that. Have a good one, McCoy.” With a wave, he turned and walked out of Sickbay.

Leonard stared at the door. Barely above a whisper, he said to himself, “I hope so, too.”

With a sigh, he turned and pulled up the Sickbay log for the past 24 hours. Quiet. Very little to see. He signed off, then checked in with the duty nurse. Walsh had this shift. She had just finished checking over Doctor Brex, replacing the empty nutrition solution bag. Leonard had hoped he’d regain consciousness before he needed total nutrition supplementation, but that point had long come and passed. Now, there was an apparently healthy person lying on a biobed, completely dependent on tubes and nurses to survive.

But he wasn’t healthy, because he wouldn’t wake up. Dammit.

Even though he was well-rested, Leonard heaved a heavy sigh as he sat down in the chair next to Brex’s bed. It had become part of his routine. He would go and sit with Brex, just holding his hand and talking to him. Sure, the nurses all did that, too... but Leonard still felt responsible. It had happened on his goddamned shift.

Taking Brex’s hand, Leonard gave a quick squeeze. “Told you I’d be back. What’s new out here?” He began conversationally, as if Brex was wide awake. “Well, you might have noticed your Vulcan visitor last night. Or... this morning. Or sometime. I think I’ve lost track of time. Anyway, she said you’re still in there. And she said that your memory is a bit banged up, which makes sense if you look at the scans. I’ll show you the readings and all when you wake up.”

Come on, please wake up.

“So... the Vulcan, Ambassador T’Val... she’s not a healer, so she can’t fix whatever is going on in there, but she took a peek. She’s... an interesting individual. I dunno, maybe Vulcans are all peculiar like that, but hell, I haven’t met too many of them.” He shrugged to himself. “Haven’t met any, really. Pointy ears and green blood. If you know anything about Earth stories called fairy tales, you might know why that’s so damned funny. I think I like T’Val, though. She sent a report along with Doctor Singh to Betazed, and we’re hoping to get some more information back soon. Don’t know what we can really do for you, but we’ll try.

“We’re going to get you to a Betazoid Healer as soon as possible, but I have to be honest... I have no idea how long that will take. Unless the captain changes his mind, we’re stuck here until the Araxis mission is over.” He clenched his jaw slightly. “Captain Porter said that this mission is too important, and while I understand his point, that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Leonard hunched his shoulders, leaning a bit closer to Brex, and lowering his voice. “I hate that I
still don’t know how this happened to you. I hope you remember when you wake up.” He gave Brex’s hand another squeeze.

And felt a squeeze back.

It was faint. It could have been his imagination. “What the...” He looked up at the biobed displays. Without letting go of Brex’s hand, he reached over and pulled up a more detailed scan of brain activity. His scans had been mostly normal except for those few areas of reduced and atypical activity... which were now looking almost completely normal again.

Leonard whipped his head back around and gave Brex’s hand a tight squeeze. “Doctor Brex? If you can hear me, squeeze my hand. Come on. Give me a sign here.”

It wasn’t his imagination. There was a definite squeeze. Stronger this time.

Narrowly holding back his surge of excitement, Leonard called out over his shoulder, “Nurse Walsh! We’ve got a change in consciousness level!” Then quieter again, “Doctor Brex... Tavin... try to open your eyes. Can you speak?”

Hardly perceptible, Brex’s mouth moved.

Nurse Walsh burst into the treatment bay. “Has he opened his eyes? Are you going to try a stimulant?”

Leonard almost called for the stimulant, eager for more rapid improvement, but he shook his head. “No, and no. It’s never helped before, probably because this isn’t working like a normal coma. Let’s see if he’ll come out of it on his own.” He looked back down and leaned closer. “Come on, Doctor Brex... we’re right here. You can do it. Let’s see those peepers.”

Eyelids twitched. Fluttered. Blinked a few times.

“Computer,” Leonard said, “Reduce light in treatment bay two by seventy percent.”

The lights dimmed.

Brex opened his eyes. “McCoy?” His voice was rusty and dry, barely above a whisper, but the word was clear.

Leonard nodded, squeezing Brex’s hand again. “Yeah, it’s me,” he choked out, and realized that he was getting emotional. He swallowed it back. Professional. Right. Still, Brex had recognized him, which meant his memory wasn’t completely shot. Damn, it was a relief. “It’s me,” he said again. “How are you feeling? Are you in any pain?”

“No... thirsty.” He slowly turned his face to one side, then the other. “And stiff.”

Leonard looked up at Nurse Walsh. “Can you grab a cup of water with a straw?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling. Leonard didn’t mention the moisture on her eyelashes.

Leonard refocused on Brex. “Do you know where you are? Or how you got here?”

“I...” Brex looked around, taking in his surroundings. “I’m in sickbay. But... I’m a patient? What happened to me?”

Leonard breathed another mental sigh of relief. Brex was lucid and aware of his surroundings. “You lost consciousness, and you’ve been out for a while,” he said, not wanting to overwhelm the
man all at once. “Can you sit up?”

“I... yes, I can.”

Leonard helped Brex into a sitting position, watching his balance and muscular coordination, and was somewhat shocked at how easily he moved. Sure, Brex seemed a bit stiff from holding still for so long, but he sat up almost entirely on his own. That was certainly not normal for a coma patient.

Brex glanced from side to side as if looking for something. “What time is it?”

“Around 0200 hours,” Leonard said cautiously.

Brex nodded, and was still quietly processing that information when Walsh came back in.

“I’ve got some water for you, Doctor.” She held it out with a hopeful smile.

Brex started to make a weak grab for the glass, but Leonard reached out and took it for him. “Sorry for the indignity and all, but you’ve been unconscious for a while, and if your coordination is off, I’d rather not risk giving you an ice cold bath on the biobed.”

“I don’t feel uncoordinated,” he said in confusion. Still, he cooperatively accepted the straw as Leonard held up the water glass for him, but his eyebrows furrowed more deeply as he looked around. He looked alert, but really uneasy as he got his bearings. Finally, he leaned back from the water glass, frowning.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Leonard asked casually, hoping Brex would come to the memories himself, if possible.

The question seemed to distract him from his thoughts. “We were... there was...” He screwed up his face, eyebrows furrowing deeply. “I was on duty, waiting for the Axanar delegates to arrive at their appointment.”

An uncomfortable sensation started twisting in Leonard’s gut. There had been two appointments, neither of which had been the morning Brex had lost consciousness. “Which appointment?”

“What do you mean, which appointment? The one that they’re scheduled for. The same one that all visitors on the ship get scheduled for.”

“So... the Axanar haven’t missed their appointment?” Leonard asked carefully.

“How could they? They just came on board a few hours ago...” Confusion rapidly turned into dismay. “How long have I been out?”

Leonard swallowed tightly. “A week. You’ve been unconscious for a week.”

“What caused it?” Brex asked rapidly. “What did the scans show?”

Leonard shook his head. “We don’t know. The closest thing we can figure is that you fell into an inexplicable coma a week ago with no evidence of injury or illness, and we haven’t been able to revive you. You came around on your own.”

Brex was shaking his head. “If this was a coma, would I be this alert so quickly?”

“No,” Leonard agreed. “And it wasn’t... well... the scans didn’t look right for a coma, but you were completely unresponsive. There was no other way to classify your condition. And...” He looked up at Nurse Walsh. “Could you do me a favor? Go page Doctor Singh. She’d want to know about this
immediately. And... hell, I’m sure Ankewicz is still up, so you might as well pass on the news. Then send a communique to the bridge, letting them know. But until Singh gets here, give me a few minutes to talk to Brex alone and get him oriented.”

She gave a quick nod. “Yes, doctor.” Then she hurried off to the nurse’s station.

Leonard turned back to Brex, whose expression had shifted into something vulnerable and scared the instant the nurse had left the room. He recognized that sort of behavior. He’d seen it in people who were used to being in charge, and in Jim. “Doctor Brex? Are you sure you’re okay?”

This time, he shook his head. “McCoy, think something at me.”

“What?” Leonard actually startled at the odd request, and Brex’s unusually harsh tone of voice.

“Think something at me,” he said again. “As hard as you can. Loud. Think of a single, focused thing, anything that you can stick vividly in the front of your mind.”

“I... okay, but...” He didn’t understand why, but he didn’t question the request, and quickly called to mind the image of a hot, fresh cup of coffee, and thought about how desperately he wanted a cup right now.

“Are you doing it?”

“Yes, but...” Leonard’s voice trailed off as Brex began shaking his head. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t sense you.” Brex finally looked up and made eye contact again. His expression was bleak. “Nothing. I can’t hear your thoughts at all. Not even emotions. Nothing.”

“What?” Leonard spun around and tabbed a few commands into the biobed’s scanners, then grabbed the tricorder from the supply table and began a manual scan. “Is it just me? Can you sense anyone else?”

Brex was shaking his head slowly. “It’s like a ghost ship. There’s nobody there,” he said vaguely.

“Maybe it’s a side-effect of being unconscious for so long,” Leonard murmured, half to himself, half to Brex. “Maybe your brain just hasn’t caught up with being awake.”

“I don’t think so,” Brex said, but Leonard ignored him.

“We’ll need to do a more detailed scan, but it looks like you have slightly decreased activity in your psi centers,” Leonard rattled off. “We could try a stimulant. Or maybe it’ll improve once we get you up and walking around. Or maybe it’s -”

“Leonard.” Brex put his hand on the tricorder and slowly pushed it down until Leonard stopped staring at the screen and made eye contact. His demeanor was surprisingly calm, but Leonard could still see the anxiety hiding just below the surface. It was the sort of calm in the face of something terrifying that seemed like the hallmark of the best Starfleet officers. “We can’t fix it until we know what caused it. We need to contact Betazed. And -”

“We need to give you a chance to recover,” Leonard said firmly.

“We need to get to the bottom of this,” Brex said, not backing down. “And what’s this about the Axanar missing their appointment? If that happened while I was unconscious, how would I remember it?”
Leonard sighed inwardly. Doctor Brex was a man of science, and wouldn’t want information kept from him. “It didn’t happen while you were unconscious. That’s why I wanted to know what the last thing you could remember is. You had some odd electrical activity in your posterior cingulate gyrus and temporal lobes, as well as your anterior sub-temporal-lobe. We worried that it might have impacted your memory.”

Brex was nodding slowly. “I remember looking at the chronometer and thinking that the Axanar should be arriving any minute. It was absolutely clear.” Then he frowned, and tilted his head. His gaze fixed on the far wall. “That’s not right. There’s other stuff, but... it’s like a dream, just beyond the edge of memory. And...” He shook his head. “McCoy... how many days passed between the Axanar’s appointment and when I lost consciousness?”

“Two. Almost two full days. Are you remembering something?”

Brex shook his head again, still staring at the far wall. “Did anything odd happen in those days?”

“The Axanar missed their appointment and rescheduled to the next day. They came to that appointment, but you got a strange feeling off them, or so you said. You sent me a communiqué saying you wanted to meet me the morning after the appointment when they actually showed up... but you showed up an hour late, as if you’d forgotten everything. You passed out not long after you got here. The communiqué you sent to me is missing from the ship’s database, as if someone deleted it.” Leonard felt like he was lost. Scrambling. “Doctor Brex... what’s going on?”

Brex pressed his lips together, then shook his head. “I don’t know. But whatever else isn’t working, my gut instinct, as you call it, is working just fine, and it’s telling me that something more is going on here, and we need to find out what it is.” He looked down at the tube in his hand and then peeked under the sheets, obviously checking what else he was connected to. “And we need to get all rid of all this mess so I can get off the biobed.”

“Are you sure? You’ve been unconscious for a week. The body doesn’t bounce back from a coma this fast.”

“I’ve never been in a coma, McCoy, but I’ve seen enough people wake up from them to know that this is something else. Other than feeling a bit stiff, I’m lucid, and I don’t feel uncoordinated.”

“You’ve got a gaping hole in your memory, and one of your essential neurological functions has blown a conduit,” Leonard said flatly.

Brex gave him a chagrined look. “Yeah. But I’m not an invalid. Get me off this thing, and let’s see if we can get to the bottom of this. Oh, and I could really go for something to eat right about now.”

Leonard nodded, reluctantly. He grabbed a pair of gloves, a piece of gauze, and a dermaseal bandage from the supply cabinet and sat down to remove the IV, but before he started, he gave Brex a searching look.

“What?”

“You said you almost-remember things after that morning. A bit like a dream. I know you can’t rely on that, but...” Leonard trusted his own gut instincts. He trusted Jim’s. He didn’t trust much else in the world, but his gut instincts were telling him that he could trust Brex, too. “Do you still have any impressions from that? Anything you can pull out of those hazy memories?”

For a long moment, Brex was quiet. Then, “It’s just an impression... but I keep thinking of a set of twins... not identical... and one doesn’t trust the other. No... that’s not it. It’s not a trust issue. Like a
disagreement... something that can’t be reconciled. No compromise. But... gods, it’s a feeling, not anything I can describe without... well...” He pressed his lips into a bitter smirk and shook his head sadly. “Without telepathy. But even then, it’s so vague, and I have nothing I can pin it to.”

Leonard frowned. In the short time he’d worked with Doctor Brex, he’d known the Betazoid to be calm, emotionally balanced, and always in perfect control of himself. He’d never been flustered in the slightest. But then, of course, the guy had just lost one of his senses and several days of memories. That would send anyone into a tailspin. So Leonard just nodded. “I know it’s vague. I wasn’t expecting details. I was just... wondering.”

Brex gave him a defeated look. “I know. Sorry for the outburst.”

“No apologies needed,” Leonard replied. “Here, let’s get you unhooked and off the biobed. Doctor Singh should be here any minute, possibly with the Captain.” With practiced motions, Leonard pressed down with the gauze and pulled out the catheter. “Here, hold this. And...” He hesitated.

“What, Leonard?”

Leonard managed a wan smile. “It’s good to see you with your eyes open.”

Brex returned the smile, warmly and openly. “It’s good to have my eyes open. And... I don’t know how I’m so sure of this, but I know you’ve been sitting with me. Thank you.”

Feeling a warm tightness behind his eyes, Leonard opened his mouth to attempt an adequate reply, but the sound of the main door to Sickbay sliding opened cut him off. He sighed. “I think the welcoming committee has arrived.”

Leonard stepped back from the bed just in time for Doctor Singh to hurry around the curtain and grab a tricorder, speaking rapidly. Only seconds later, Captain Porter hurried through the doors, apparently having just beamed up from the surface when he heard the news. Ankewicz appeared after another minute, hair dripping wet, apparently having just gotten out of the shower.

In all the commotion, Leonard slipped out of Sickbay, unnoticed.

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Jim rubbed his eyes sleepily against the bright light of the hallway as he stepped out of his quarters. The door slid shut behind him. “This had better be important, Bones,” he said, then coughed and cleared his throat. “Your comm woke up everyone in the room, including me.”

Bones, who was fully dressed and looked far too awake for 0300 in the morning, rolled his eyes and grabbed Jim by the arm. “It’s important. Come on. Need a place where we can talk.”

Jim shook off his grip. “No, Bones. It’s the middle of the night, I only got to bed an hour ago, I need to be awake in three hours, and I’m out of uniform. Tell me here.”

Bones looked around warily, then sighed. “Brex woke up,” he said in a low tone.

Suddenly, Jim felt a lot more awake. “I... that’s awesome... how is he? Has he been able to talk? What did he say? Who did it to him?”

Bones was shaking his head slowly. “Physically? He’s doing a hell of a lot better than I would have expected. In fact, it’s crazy, but at first glance, he looks fine. Talking, lucid, mobile, but... he can’t remember anything. Nothing from the attack, or two whole days leading up to the incident.”
“That’s good... and bad,” Jim replied carefully.

“You said it.” He took one more nervous glance up and down the hallway, and then stepped closer to Jim, speaking barely above a whisper. “Also... his telepathy is gone.”

“What?” Jim hissed. “Shit. Not good. Really not good. And it’s specifically his telepathy and his memory from the two days before he went into the coma? Nothing else is wrong?”

“Everything else seems absolutely fine when we check his scans up against Betazoid norms and the scans that he took of himself earlier that week,” Bones said, shaking his head. “And even in the parts of his brain that process his telepathic sense and memory, there’s nothing structurally wrong.”

A hundred thoughts ran through Jim’s head, including the fact that he shouldn’t be getting into this, but his instinct was screaming that someone had attacked Brex with a really specific purpose in mind. The initial loss of consciousness was suspicious enough, but for a telepath to lose his ability to read minds just when fishy stuff was happening? It didn’t seem like a coincidence. However... Jim had enough personal experience with paranoid suspicions of sabotage to know better than to latch on to vague suspicions without solid evidence. Forcing his paranoia into a box with a tight lid, Jim asked, “What could cause that?”

“I don’t know. We’ve been in contact with Betazed about this since it began, but we sent a new communique when he woke up. We’re still waiting for a reply from the healers there, but until they examine him directly, even they might not have answers. It could be anything. Hell, it could be a result of the coma itself,” Bones said, but he didn’t sound convinced. “Could be a response to whatever happened to his brain and memory in the first place. Could be part of the recuperative process for this particular situation.”

“But you don’t think so,” Jim said, knowing Bones would keep filling in details as long as Jim gave him openings.

“I’ve done some research, and the literature from Betazed has some references to memory and sensory loss, including telepathic sense, after long-term loss of consciousness, but... I don’t know what I think, kid.” He wrapped his arms around his stomach and took a deep breath. “But I do have a question for you.”

“Hit me.”

“If I told you to think of an image of two people... twins, but not identical ones... where one didn’t trust the other... or had some sort of irreconcilable disagreement, what’s the first thing you think of?”

Jim frowned. “You mean like an allegory? Maybe two actual people, but maybe two groups, who are effectively similar but they’re at odds?”

“Anything,” Bones said, his voice carefully neutral.

“The Hatfields and the McCoys.”

Bones scowled in a way Jim had never seen before. “If you ever say that again, I will find ways to torment you that you can’t possibly imagine.”

Jim waggled his eyebrows and flashed his best lovable idiot grin. “Kinky, Bones!”

“Jim.”
“I know, I know.” He sighed. “It’s almost too obvious. The Axanar and the Araxians. And I almost
don’t want to know, but... did Brex say something like that?”

Bones nodded, then readjusted his arms across his chest. “Could have been something he dreamed
while he was out. Could be nothing. But Jim... there’s got to be more going on.”

Jim opened his mouth, but swallowed back his agreement before the words could form. He
couldn’t go there. Fuck, he wanted to dig right in, and he knew there was something more going
on, but if he admitted it, he’d be going down a rabbit hole and he didn’t know if he’d be able to dig
out again. Feeling angry at himself and maybe a bit sick, he forced himself to shrug. “It’s
possible.”

Bones scowled at him. “Jim, I know you said you don’t want to get involved, even though it’s
making me wonder who the hell you are and what happened to the real Jim Kirk, but there’s
something going on here.”

“I know, I know, I know!” Jim hissed. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes for a second,
trying to clear his head. “God damn... Bones, you know what happened last time I got too wrapped
up in mysteries and conspiracies and other paranoid shit. I can’t do this again. Not now! Not here!”

“Jim... slow down. This isn’t what happened last year. This is... this is real. We’re both seeing the
same thing, and there’s no mistaking it. I’ve seen it up-close. You know there’s something going
on. And I’ve been pulled into enough meetings with senior officers about Brex to get a decent
sense of what they’re doing with all this horse shit.”

“A whole lot of nothing,” Jim said tightly.

“Sure as hell seems like it.”

Jim pinched his bottom lip between his teeth. He really didn’t want to hold back anymore. It was
too late, and he was too tired. And fuck it, this was Bones... and Bones was right. Jim let out a
heavy sigh. “If there’s something going on, and they miss it, there could be real trouble,” he said,
voicing the root of the fear that had been nagging at him for days.

Bones eyes widened for just a split second before he nodded firmly. “Damned straight. They’ve got
enough evidence that... dammit, they should have found something by now!”

“They should have enough evidence to know that something fishy is going on,” Jim agreed.

“Then why the hell aren’t they treating it with more suspicion?” Bones growled. “How can they
not see it?”

“Because there’s nothing solid. It’s circumstance. And because the diplomatic situation is so
delicate, they’re going to sit on it,” Jim answered, trying not to sound like that idea made his blood
boil.

“Like a damned hen trying to hatch a rock.”

Jim snorted. “And you call me a farm boy.”

“Only to get a rise out of you. So... what do you think?”

Jim stared at Bones for a long moment, letting his thoughts swirl in his sleep-deprived brain.
Nothing solidified. “I don’t know.”
Bones pressed his lips together, staring at the wall. “Neither do I, kid. Neither do I.”
Chapter 12

At least the weather was nice.

While the negotiations of the Axanar-Araxian portion of the Axanar Peace Treaty were being hashed out in the Parliament building across the terrace, Jim was standing guard. Outside. Where he couldn’t see or hear a damned thing going on inside.

Yeah, this was why he was never, never going to join the Security branch of Starfleet.

At least it wasn’t raining or snowing. Also, his assignment was giving him a chance to observe.

The terrace seemed to serve as a city square to the community. The eerie lack of activity when they’d first arrived yesterday had transformed into the bustle of a town center. People passed through, sometimes stopping and chatting, sometimes sitting on one of the benches for a while, and sometimes hurrying on to their destinations. Even so, it wasn’t as busy as Jim had anticipated. Given the size of the city, it seemed really subdued. Jim had expected more foot traffic, more noise, more activity. It could be cultural. Jim wasn’t so sure.

Besides, security was thick as a pot of Andorian porridge around the entire Parliament Square and city center. Who’d want to go shopping with a squad of armed Starfleet security officers watching your every movement?

The amount of security had been the only truly interesting twist of the day so far. He’d beamed down with the team before sunrise, and had become a security operative for the day. And the security on this mission was crazy. Apparently, the Araxians had demanded it, which didn’t make sense, as the only people around were Araxians themselves plus the delegates. It was supposed to be a peaceful colony. Why did they need to pack the place with security like this?

On one hand, they were Axanar by heritage, with only a couple hundred years separation, which meant there would be significant physiological and cultural similarities. However, according to their history, they were also independent and confident people. It seemed that their legacy of leaving the Axanar and striking out on their own as isolationists should have given them a boldness that their parent race lacked. It made no sense for the Araxians to request so much... protection.

Maybe, with the breakdown in their cloak of isolation, their instinctive need for protection had returned. At least, that was the only explanation Jim could come up with for weaving so much security through a nearly crime-free society. It seemed like a pretty flimsy explanation, though.

So he was standing outside, at the northwest corner of the terrace outside the Parliament building, watching the world go by.

The shops and offices along the main terrace were open and modestly busy. Down the two streets that met at the terrace corner, a few pedestrians made their way. Small vehicles - some enclosed with two seats, and others a bit like motorized tricycles for single passengers - buzzed up and down the streets. Vendor carts with craftsman wares and local produce periodically changed locations, hunting for the best spots for business.

Jim watched it all. He’d been reminded to keep his eyes open. Notice everything. So that’s what he was doing. So far, he’d created a small list of observations.

First, the Araxians wore a different style of clothing than the Axanar. The formal robes he’d seen in the diplomatic proceedings had been similar to the clothes worn by their parent race, with only
slight modification in design, although the Araxians seemed to prefer brighter colors. However, the
daily attire was quite different, and if Jim had to pick a word, he’d say it was far more practical.
Even the waitstaff at the Araxian reception had been dressed in the shortened tunics with leggings,
rather than the longer robes worn by... well... every Axanar Jim had seen, including the ones in
recorded holos. The tunics with leggings, with some variation in style and color, seemed to be the
preferred attire for almost all of the Araxians Jim had seen around Parliament Square. As colonists,
practicality made sense. Still... an observation nonetheless.

Second, the Araxians seemed more egalitarian. While he’d been told that the subservience
protocols he’d witness on Axanar were standard for all of their society, that just hadn’t been the
case here. He’d watched the Araxians in the Square greet each other without any obvious dynamic
of superiority or subservience. If he’d been pressed, Jim would have had to admit that it made him
a lot more comfortable than what he’d experienced on Axanar. It seemed like a stark contrast to the
skittish subservience he’d seen in the waiter at the welcoming reception, but that could be
explained by the formality of the reception.

And finally... they looked different. It was subtle, but now that he’d seen enough of them, he was
sure that it wasn’t just the case with a small handful of the population. Most of the Araxians had a
different hue to their skin. It wasn’t blatantly different, but it was noticeable. Not all of them, no...
but quite a few. Most. Maybe it was just one of their natural variations, but he didn’t remember
seeing anyone who looked different on Axanar. He didn’t know much about genetics, and he
wasn’t quite sure what it meant, but he mentally noted it. Maybe he’d mention it to Bones.

Beyond that, he’d mostly been bored. So much for adventure and excitement on new planets. He’d
had far more excitement back on Earth. He stared at the main door to the Parliament building,
wishing he could trade out with Wilcox for an hour so he could see what was happening inside.
Although, if his estimates were good, the talks would be breaking soon for a mid-day meal and rest
period. In fact, the doors were opening, and delegates and support staff began exiting the building
in a leisurely manner.

Lunch break, Jim thought. He straightened his posture just a bit, continuing to watch. Some of the
delegates crossed the terrace, nodding at him as they passed, and moved off down the street, likely
to a restaurant, Jim guessed. Some sat on benches around the square, pulling out small computer
devices or packets of whatever passed for food on their world. Jim felt his appetite wane as he
watched the Kazarite delegate pull a small pellet out of a pouch around his neck and drop it into a
cup of liquid. The cup fizzled and bubbled, and the Kazarite proceeded to spoon up a grayish glop
from the cup, appearing to enjoy the food thoroughly. Jim saw the Vulcan Ambassador, T’Val,
having what appeared to be an intense conversation with Captain Porter. And...

“You are one of the Starfleet Cadets, yes?” It was an odd accent, a combination of guttural edge
and sibilant hiss.

Jim spun around, irritated at having been approached unawares as he’d been watching the delegates
and dignitaries strolling around the terrace. He was met by the view of a species he had never
encountered at close quarters before: a Zhitoran. Often, Kirk had been able to associate the physical
appearance of sentient beings with various non-sentient creatures he’d seen on Earth, whether
native or not. This time, he was having no such luck. All he could say was that this person was
about two meters tall, with skin that seemed both blue and orange, and generally scaly with an odd
tuft of fur or hair fringing his scalp. Jim quickly reminded himself that he probably looked just as
peculiar to the Zhitoran. Composing himself, he finally said, “Yes, sir,” despite being unsure if this
individual was male or female. “Cadet Kirk, currently interning aboard the USS Athena.”

At that, the Zhitoran made a sound that had to be a laugh. “It would seem that you are not currently
aboard the *USS Athena*, are you Cadet Kirk?"

Just what Jim needed - a weird alien with a witty sense of humor. Bones would love this guy. “Well met, sir,” he said, conceding graciously, then cocked his head. “I saw you at the welcoming reception. Ambassador...?”

“So, you are not as unobservant as it would appear.” He sounded pleased. “I am Ambassador...” His speech dissolved into an unintelligible string of consonants and chirps. At what Jim must have guessed was the gobsmacked look on his face, the Ambassador offered what appeared to be a smile and said, “But you may call me Kerz.”

“I appreciate that, Ambassador Kerz,” Jim said vaguely, wondering if even the legendary Talented-Tongue Uhura could master the Zhitoran language. Or, for that matter, even get the guy’s name right.

“I’ve yet to meet a mammalian humanoid who can pronounce words from our language. Although, a human once introduced me to a non-sentient Terran creature who repeated my name beautifully. I believe they called it a ‘parrot.’”

Jim couldn’t quite hold back a chuckle. “Yes, sir.” At the same time as he was laughing, he was really starting to wonder why this random ambassador was striking up a conversation with him. “I’m wondering... because I haven’t been inside the Parliament building today... how are the talks going?” Jim asked.

Kerz waved a casual hand. Paw. Claw. Whatever it was. “Talks are talks, young cadet. Everyone talks. Far more is said in what people do.” He leaned in a few centimeters. “I am right, yes?”

Okay, that was more interesting. “Yes, sir.”

“I heard you and the Tellarite Ambassador discussing Zhitoran government involvement in the... history we have with the Axanar.” Before Jim could get excited about inside information to win the debate, Kerz held up his hand, talons splayed. “You have the official statement from the Zhitoran government to the Peace Summit. It is my word as well. But...” His eyes crinkled oddly, and Jim would have called it mischievous. “What do you know of the Araxians?”

“Just what’s in the official briefings,” Jim said, trying to hide his hesitation. That was an unexpected segue, and he had no idea where Kerz was going with this line of discussion.

“The Araxians... noble beings, I say. Strong. Independent. Forging out against all odds, from a root society built on timid cowering and willing slavery in trade for protection. They have been glorious, not only in what they say, Cadet Kirk, but what they do! Marvelous!” He clasped his hands together in apparent delight.

A small part of Jim’s brain was wondering how Kerz didn’t impale himself with his own talons. The rest of his brain was thoroughly focused on the more subtle half of what Kerz had just said. “Forming a new colony takes a lot of bravery,” Jim said, being cautious. “But... about the Axanar... what do you mean, slavery?” But even as he said it, he knew there was no denying it. The Axanar lived in a system of slavery, willing though it was.

On any species, conspiratorial always looked the same. Kerz leaned in closer again. “You’ve seen it yourself, young cadet! Peculiar behavior. But, as your philosophers say, *infinite diversity in infinite combinations*, yes? And we Zhitorans have acknowledged that peace with all includes the acceptance of... lower behaviors.”
While Jim didn’t like to think of cultural traits as “lower behaviors,” he couldn’t help but agree with this one. The way the Axanar played their games of master-and-slave, servitude to the powerful, and groveling humility... it didn’t sit right with him. Still... *Keep it diplomatic, Kirk.*
“I’ve learned about a lot of traditions and customs since joining Starfleet. They may be foreign or odd to me, but I’ve tried to keep an open mind.”

“Open minds are good. Open *eyes* are better!” He leaned slightly back now, appraising Jim. “I liked your debate with the Tellarite. You are... observant. A respectable Zhitoran trait. So I would ask you... if your debate stance was correct -”

“I wasn’t arguing that because I *believed* it, sir,” Jim hurriedly explained. “I’m sorry if anything we said was offensive. I was just debating -”

“If you were correct,” Kerz said again, speaking right over him, “then why would our poachers not have pursued the Araxians after they left Axanar?”

“Because you...” Jim caught himself. Records had been verified that the Zhitorans knew about the colony of Araxis for almost 150 years. Not the entire history of the colony, but a lot of it. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted.

“History is an odd thing. Never so simple, is it? Always more than one story. So... would a young, fragile colony have been an easier target for... poachers?”

“It should be.” Somehow, Jim was sure he was skating on thin ice, but he had no idea how to back out of this.

“It should be, yes,” Kerz said, bobbing his head in his species’ equivalent of a shrug. “Now, I am curious... Terrans are meat-eaters, yes?”

Jim had never met a Zhitoran before. All he knew, right now, was that it was the first time a conversation with a new species had left him mentally dizzy, and he could only hope he wasn’t about to stumble into something he couldn’t get out of. “Uh... yes. I mean, we eat meat as well as plants. At least, a lot of us do. Not everyone, though.”

“So the flesh of other creatures is not forbidden... but you do not hunt sentient beings.”

“Of course not!” Jim blurted out, and he knew that any chance he had at appearing dignified and diplomatic was gone. It was all he could do to keep up with what Kerz was saying. “Sentient beings are considered sovereign individuals with rights under Federation law. We’d never hunt sentient beings.”

A victorious light glinted in Kerz’s eye. “And neither do Zhitorans. *Any* Zhitorans. We find it reprehensible.”

Okay, now Jim was *really* confused. “But... what about the poachers...?” And suddenly, the logic problem clicked. “You’re saying that you didn’t consider the Axanar sentient?”

“A matter of definition,” Kerz said solemnly.

“But you considered the Araxians sentient.”

“Yes.”

“But they’re the same species!” Jim all but blurted before he reined himself back in.
“Are they?” Kerz almost seemed amused by this.

Jim looked once around the square, glancing at the various Araxians walking about on their daily business. With only the tiniest differences, of course they were the same species. “That would be like saying that humans on colony planets are a separate species from humans on Earth. Besides, you consider both of them to be sentient now, right? If you’re negotiating with them?” Jim was trying to keep a calm expression while his mind scrambled to fit together how the Zhitorans could see only one of the same-yet-different races as being sentient.

“A matter of definition,” Kerz repeated, with slightly different emphasis.

Jim had no idea what that was supposed to mean. “But they don’t seem so different.”

“Really now? Ah, you are correct. They seem quite... similar. And ask yourself then... why is that so?”

“I...” Jim’s mind was reeling. He needed to process this. This whole conversation was sending him for a loop. A paradigm had shifted in his brain, but his conscious thoughts hadn’t caught up with it. He felt stupid and slow. Of course, his scant three hours of interrupted sleep wasn’t helping much. “If we’re following the logic puzzle, then that means one of them has changed... after they became two separate groups. After you decided that the Araxians were sentient.”

“Very good, Cadet. But... a mystery! Who?”

Jim frowned. “Zhitorans regard both species as sentient now. So if the Araxians were considered sentient first, then it would seem that the Axanar had changed something to be more like the Araxians.” Even as he said it, he knew it didn’t make sense. The Axanar had an ancient and established culture and society. From the records, their basic social structure hadn’t changed in almost two millennia, much less two centuries. But then, how else could the societies seem so similar now, and have the Zhitorans consider them both sentient?

Kerz gave him a look that, despite having no physical traits in common, made him think of Bones raising a skeptical eyebrow. “Perhaps. Or... has the definition changed?”

“How can... why... wait. What was the old definition?”

“We have a saying amongst Zhitorans. ‘Until the young leaves the nest, he has no life to claim for himself.’ The saying is, of course, more poetic in the original tongue.”

Jim couldn’t care less about poetic prose just then. “The Araxians left the nest,” he said, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm day.

Kerz gave a slow nod of approval. “As one of your Terran philosophers has also said: he who gives up freedom for security... deserves neither.”

“Do you...” Jim swallowed past a suddenly dry throat. “Do you read a lot of Terran philosophy?”

Suddenly, Kerz looked back over his shoulder. “Ah, the chronometer! Time is limited if I want food before the next session.” He looked back at Jim. “An enjoyable meeting, Cadet Kirk.”

“Thank you, Ambassador Kerz,” Jim said, touching two fingers to his forehead in the manner of greeting and farewell he’d learned for the Zhitorans.

Kerz quickly touched two talons to his own forehead. “May your path be vast and reaching.”
“May you journey far,” Jim replied vaguely, dropping his hand back to his side before the Ambassador turned and hurried off. His footsteps were smooth, and considering how unhurried he appeared, he moved quite quickly. Jim continued to watch Kerz until he’d crossed the terrace and disappeared down one of the many streets leading from the square.

For a long moment, Jim stared at the spot where Kerz had turned the corner, feeling dumbfounded, and not really caring that he wasn’t visually scanning the area for potential security risks. Finally, he shook his head to himself and let out a low whistle.

“Damn.”

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It wasn’t a damned thing like Earth, but hell, it wasn’t so bad.

At least, Leonard didn’t think the planet itself was so bad. In fact, it was a really nice day. Warm sun, cool breeze, a few light clouds, and just enough humidity in the air for it to feel almost soft on his face. Yeah, the planet was great. The transporter trip had been another matter, but at least it was over. A short-acting dose of anti-anxiety meds kept him from throwing up this time. He’d get used to it eventually, he was sure, but for now, he just needed to survive this mission.

He’d come down with a group of science officers who’d been invited to visit the city’s engineering facility and sciences research center. They were standing in a courtyard just inside the main gate of an impressive-looking campus, surrounded by large research buildings and open areas between them. Plant life, sculptures, and pathways wove the scenery. It was impressive, really, for such a young colony to have so many well-established facilities. And naturally, the locals would want to show it off to the visiting Federation entourage.

Leonard didn’t know what any of that had to do with him, but all cadets were required to visit the planet at least once (and he hoped it would be just once), so he might as well get this over and done with. He’d brought his own tricorder and medical kit, even though he was assured he wouldn’t need them.

You wanted a doctor, he’d said, so I’m coming down as a damned doctor.

Not that he was going to do anything remotely useful today.

Leonard stared blankly at Lieutenant Commander Harris’s blond ponytail as she handled the formal introductions, but his mind drifted. Maybe there would be some biomedical research going on in the biosciences lab instead of just the botanical and microbial studies that two of the officers in his group had been babbling about for the last hour. Or maybe the microbial studies would include local pathogens, and he could catalogue and document their research. Or...

“And this would be Doctor McCoy,” Commander Harris was saying to the Araxian representative. “He’s the only cadet with us, but a fully qualified doctor who has already been working as a member of our crew.”

“Doctor McCoy, a pleasure and an honor,” the Araxian, a being named Ghren, said with a broad gesture of welcome.

Pasting on a well-trained smile - a combination of Starfleet protocol and Southern manners - Leonard gave a slight bow and introduced himself. “A pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m looking forward to seeing your science facilities.”

At that, Ghren frowned slightly. “I apologize, Doctor. I did not realize you would wish to see the
Leonard frowned, too, seriously confused. “Isn’t that what I’m here to do?”

Ghren looked at Commander Harris before addressing Leonard again. “I had been informed that a doctor... one of your world’s medics... would be amongst your group. If that is you, then I had assumed you would wish to see our medical facilities.” He swept a hand towards one of the other Araxians. “One of our best medics - the professional equivalent of what you would call a doctor - has come to meet you and to escort you through our primary medical center. Medic Jethan?”

The other Araxian, a slightly shorter being, wearing a tunic with a different design than the others, stepped forward. “Doctor McCoy, if you would prefer to see our research facilities, then you’d be welcomed to do so, but I would greatly enjoy showing a Federation doctor what we’ve built here.”

“I’d love to see your medical facilities,” Leonard said in a rush. “I... uh, sorry. I hadn’t realized it was an option. I thought I was going to be shadowing everyone else.” He turned and looked at Commander Harris, hoping he wasn’t crossing lines or being rude. “Sir, if it’s acceptable, I’d really like to see what Araxians have for a medical system here so I can report back to Doctor Brex.”

Commander Harris gave him an amused smile. “I think that’s an excellent idea, Doctor McCoy. We’ll be on the surface until 1600 hours ship’s time, so you’ve got almost eight hours. As long as your escort can get you back here no later than 1550 hours, I can approve the change of plans.” She turned to look to the Araxian medic.

Jethan nodded. “I can ensure Doctor McCoy’s timely return. The medical facility isn’t far from here. Just a brief walk.”

A moment later, Leonard was following Jethan out through the campus gates, and he felt positively giddy. Here he was, on a new planet, about to compare medical notes with a brand new civilization. Sure, the Araxians were essentially the same as the Axanar biologically, but he hadn’t had the chance to see an Axanar medical facility. Plus, the Araxian medical technology had been developing separately for two hundred years. Anything could be different. Hell, maybe this whole space exploration thing really could turn out to be something he’d enjoy.

“How much of the surface have you seen, Doctor?” Jethan asked as they turned onto the walkway outside the research building.

“Only as much as you’ve shown me,” Leonard replied easily as he took a good look around. The buildings along the street were sturdy-looking structures with an elegant simplicity. Bright colors, clean lines, big windows. The walkways were wide on either side of the street, and plants that resembled tree-sized houseplants dotted the scene. “So far, so good. Seems like a nice place.”

“Ah, so you haven’t been down here with the others yet?”

“No.” Leonard couldn’t hold back the slight grimace on his face. “We had a situation up on the ship that had me awake through my sleep cycle, and I was too tired to come on the first landing party, so they took me off duty.”

“A situation? Medical?”

“Yes, but a good one. One of our patients made a significant recovery. It was a... uh... difficult case. I didn’t get any sleep, but he’s doing better.”

Jethan smiled, and Leonard wondered if the healers, doctors, and medics from all species just had some sort of inherent goodness that crossed the lines between species in a way words didn’t.
“Good news, then,” he said happily.

“Really good news,” Leonard agreed. He was already starting to like this guy.

“So,” Jethan said conversationally, “seeing as you haven’t been down here, welcome to the center of Araxis. We’re only a few blocks away from the Parliament building. That’s where the all the... talks are happening.” There was an odd hesitation in his voice, but he kept on. “When the city was founded, we planned carefully. We wanted to focus on accessibility of all vital functions for everyone. Parliament was the starting point, but also our advanced schools, research, recreation, and primary medical facility were placed within the central zone. While we eventually built smaller clinics and novice schools in the outskirt towns and more distant settlements that developed over time, our specialized centers are here. Accessible to all, open to all. At least, that’s what I wanted.”

Leonard was taking it all in as much as he could, but something had caught his attention. “Doctor... uh, Medic Jethan... what do you mean, ‘we?’ And ‘I?’ Wasn’t that 200 years ago?”

The man let out a hearty laugh... something he’d not heard once from an Axanar. “McCoy, I am two-hundred-and-fifty-eight years old... in our years, that is. Which would make me 317 in your Terran years.”

“Oh.” It was all Leonard could think to say, given that he’d just been informed that his host was over ten times his age. “So... you were here when Araxis was founded?”

“Oh yes.” His smile became fond. “It’s amazing how much we’ve grown here. 8,739 colonists originally. Although reproduction was more restrained on Axanar, we intended to populate and establish ourselves here, so reproduction became a highly encouraged priority.”

Leonard couldn’t quite hide his own grin. “How many now?”

Jethan’s smile grew even wider. “120,731, as of yesterday morning. I have produced twenty-seven children myself, almost all of whom have had children.”

Leonard let out a low whistle.

“Well, I did have two hundred years in which to do it, Doctor. We reach reproductive maturity in twenty-five years, and... children are precious to us. I hope we have given them the best possible life in the time we’ve had.”

Another curious comment, Leonard noted, but he said nothing.

Jethan shook his head to himself and sighed softly. “We were an idealistic bunch. I was one of the first medics to join in the movement to defect. It was hard to find other medics who agreed, which I couldn’t understand for the longest time. We were taught to heal all, and to serve all. I thought it was a position of service, and honorable for that reason. To relieve suffering - what could be more noble? Right, Doctor?”

“I’d be inclined to agree,” Leonard said. “Obviously.”

Jethan nodded, and his mouth twisted into a grimace. “In retrospect, I was naive, but I finally figured it out. Axanar Healers were addicted to the power and benefits of the position. They did their duties for the servitude of their patients, not out of compassion.” Then he stopped, quickly looked around, and let his shoulders slump. “I should not speak ill of the Axanar...”

“Medic Jethan,” Leonard said in an undertone. “I probably shouldn’t say this myself, but when I
was on Axanar... I saw what you’re talking about. Didn’t seem right to me, but I figured... different strokes for different folks, and all that.”

“Different folks,” Jethan echoed softly. “Yes.” Then his face brightened. “To continue your introduction... we were proud of the fact that our facilities were available to all without condition. There was no system of protection and subservience here. All were taught to be strong. All were taught to be wise. Courage was seen as a virtue for all, not some. And medics served the noble art of healing for the sake of healing, not for indebting their patients’ servitude. It was... it was beautiful, Doctor McCoy.”

Despite the warm sun and bright day, something on Jethan’s face had darkened, and Leonard stared at him, trying to put the pieces together as they walked. At first, he’d assumed that the lack of Axanar-style groveling in the scientists who had greeted him was due to their lofty status as the colony’s premiere researchers. Now, he wondered if this was just Araxian culture. If it was, the change was incredible. Sure, he wasn’t supposed to judge one culture against another, but his human preferences certainly swayed towards the Araxians, if this is what it seemed to be.

Finally, he replied, “It certainly is a beautiful thing, Medic Jethan. But... what do you mean... it was?”

“Times change,” Jethan said sadly. “Perhaps the Axanar way is a destiny we can’t escape, and our experiment was never meant to last.”

Leonard frowned. “Wait... you mean things are going back to the way they were on Axanar?”

Jethan looked at him, expression plaintive. “McCoy, when two opposite forces come together... something must inevitably yield. It is politics, Terran.”

Leonard felt his frown deepen to a scowl. “Well... I don’t know much about all that diplomatic stuff, but I’m pretty darn sure that the Federation would have no reason to stifle your way of life. That’s not how it works. We’ve got dozens of planets who have joined, and we’re all different. Ever compared a Vulcan to a Tellarite?”

“I can’t say I have, and I do not doubt you. But McCoy, we are not joining the Federation independently. We are rejoining the Axanar.” His voice was so carefully neutral that it sounded forced. He was looking straight forward as he walked, eyes on the sidewalk before him.

“You don’t approve.” Leonard was certain of that.

“It isn’t my place to approve or not. I am a medic, which gives me some privilege... but not everything.” Then his gaze shifted. “Look ahead. You can see the Parliament building down the street.”

Leonard half-expected another ornate palace-like building, resembling the one he’d seen on Axanar. Instead, the large building he saw, framed by the buildings at the end of the street, was a tribute to simple elegance. Built low for a building of its width, with an open design. Lots of doors and windows at street level.

“A shrine to democracy,” Jethan said, his tone wistful. He sounded as though he was speaking of something that was no longer there. But a second later, his face brightened. “And this is a shrine to the care-taking of patients and the preservation of health!” he exclaimed, turning into a broad doorway. “Welcome to the Primary Medical Clinic of Araxis.”

Leonard cast one last glance down the street at the Parliament building before following Jethan
A few hours later, Leonard had learned two new dermal regeneration techniques, used a blood chemistry analyzer unlike anything he’d ever seen, and taken a peek at the Araxians’ vast library of medical research. Two hundred years of research? It was incredibly impressive, especially for such a small colony. These people evidently had a strong dedication to the pursuit of knowledge. Admirable.

He’d also met a bunch of the other Araxian medical personnel, and had discovered that he really, really liked the Araxians. Nice folks. Good doctors. None of that over-the-top subservience he’d witnessed on Axanar. At least, not in the medical facility.

At the same time, he had noticed an odd undercurrent of tension whenever the Federation or the Peace Summit was mentioned. Leonard had figured it would be at the forefront of everyone’s thoughts, but it seemed like the Araxians here were doing their best to pretend it wasn’t happening.

There was also something surprising he’d discovered with the first patient he’d been allowed to examine. It was a routine physical, and the patient had volunteered to let the alien “doctor” take a peek. Leonard had examined the Axanar delegates on the Athena, and he still had the parameters from his scans programmed into his tricorder. He didn’t really expect anything different, but something caught his attention. Frowning, he reset his tricorder and scanned again.

“He doesn’t have the enzyme pathway to metabolize methane,” Leonard said, staring at his tricorder, then quickly cross-checking it to the Araxian scanner. Jethan laughed at him. “Why should he? We have no methane in our atmosphere!”

“I know,” Leonard said, recalling that he’d found it odd that a species capable of methane metabolism would choose a planet with none of that gas in the atmosphere. “But most species don’t lose genetic traits so quickly. Just because you don’t need a gene doesn’t make it disappear. Humans still have vestigial organs from before recorded history. I would have guessed that you’d still have the genes and enzymes for methane metabolism, even if you’re not using them.” He looked at the readout on his tricorder, shook his head to himself, then addressed the patient directly. “Were you born here?”

“Yes,” he said proudly. “Second generation, native Araxian. I’m one-hundred-forty-three years old. I’ve produced ten strong children.”

“Congratulations,” Leonard said offhandedly. “But this loss of the methane-metabolizing pathway... is this an unusual mutation?” Leonard asked, looking back and forth between Jethan and the patient.

“Unusual? Oh no, not at all. And it’s an intentional one,” Jethan said happily. “Axanar have both sets of respiratory pathways - oxygen/glucose and oxygen/methane. They rely on the methane for bursts of energy, but it can’t sustain metabolism indefinitely. Oxygen/glucose metabolism can, but only if it is uninterrupted by methane metabolism. We selected this planet for its oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere because we wanted to truly isolate ourselves. You see... several of our best founding medics were geneticists. We realized that in order to make ourselves stronger in this atmosphere, we needed to redesign our biochemistry to work without methane. It would be a planet ill-suited to the Axanar, but perfectly suited to our own progeny.”

Leonard stared at him, stunned. This wasn’t in the briefing. In fact, Leonard was pretty damned
sure he was the first Federation representative to hear about this. “You genetically modified your entire species?”

Jethan beamed. “We did. And our children are stronger for it. The founders and our earliest children didn’t have the genetic change, but the rest of us do.” He held his hand out next to the patient’s hand. “The mutation caused a slight change in skin color, as you can see. But aside from that, the only functional difference is their ability to maintain a steady metabolism without methane or the medication we founders must consume.”

Leonard blinked, then looked back at the patient. “What do you think of this? Having had your genetic code artificially programmed?” he asked, not caring if he was stepping over lines. The idea of mass genetic manipulation had been set aside by humans after Augments and World War III. To hear that a whole planet had done it was mind-blowing.

But the patient just grinned. “What would you think of it? It’s wonderful! They helped us adapt to our new home. It doesn’t change who we are, other than the simple fact that we’re Araxians, not Axanar. Besides, isn’t that what parents should do for their offspring? Give them every possible tool to be successful?”

“Yes, Reehn,” Jethan said. “That’s exactly what we wanted. And look at us! The Araxian people are strong and thriving. And... so are you.” He reached over and tapped the scanner, which powered down. “You’re all set for today. Healthy as a zheelath, but try to engage in a bit more sporting activity. It would be good for your vascular fitness.”

“Thank you, medic,” the patient said, hopping down off the bed, then looking at Leonard. “Did you have any other curiosities, medic... I mean, doctor?”

Leonard shrugged. “No, but thank you for the... insights. It was really interesting.”

Reehn waved and walked out of the exam room.

Leonard’s mind was reeling. “Is that the only genetic modification you folks made?” he asked, staring at the wall, not daring to look at Jethan.

“Yes. It did, however, have another beneficial effect.”

“Oh?”

“The methane-metabolizing pathway includes the triglobulin compound, which was used for methane transport in the bloodstream.” His expression turned sly. “With this mutation, the Araxian people would never be a target for poachers.”

Leonard nodded slowly. It made sense, even if the methods made his skin crawl a bit. “And that’s it? No other genetic changes?”

“It was the only modification of gene expression, yes.”

Leonard had taken too many genetics courses to fall for that. “What about chromosomal structure?”

Jethan said nothing for a moment, and the silence was broken only by the sounds of equipment being wiped down and put away. Finally, he said, “We merged two chromosomes into a single chromosome.”

Really? Leonard thought to himself. Aloud, he said, “Your species is androgynous, but you
reproduce by genetic exchange, right?”

“Correct.”

Leonard shook his head in awe. The entire planet had genetically isolated themselves. On purpose. With a completely different chromosomal structure, they weren’t Axanar anymore. They were a completely new species. It was mind-blowing.

Leonard slowly sat down on a low bench against the wall. “You really wanted nothing to do with the Axanar anymore, did you?”

A second later, Jethan joined him. “No, we didn’t.”

“Who knows about the chromosome change?” He looked sideways.

“Only our top medics, and... our previous Prime Ministers.” Jethan hesitated, then said, “And now... you.”

Leonard took a slow breath. “Why did you tell me?”

“Perhaps... it is because this is who the Araxian people are... and I would like someone to know. You are a medic who cares for people, and... I felt that I should tell you.” Jethan’s shoulders drooped slightly. “I presume you’re obligated to report this finding to your superiors.”

Leonard didn’t know what to say. Sure, he supposed he was supposed to report this, but for some reason, he didn’t want to. He liked the Araxians. He didn’t like the Axanar. And dammit, would this really matter to Starfleet? Of course it would matter, you idiot, he thought furiously at himself. This sort of information could turn the whole situation on its head. However, Leonard only shrugged. “I... I don’t know. I’m a technically just a cadet. This is a bit out of my league. But... wait.” He frowned. “Previous Prime Ministers? What about the current one?”

Jethan looked mildly annoyed. “I’m a medic, not a politician.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow.

Jethan sighed. “There are certain things beyond my scope. My duty is to the well-being of the Araxian people. First and always.”

Leonard nodded uneasily. He liked Jethan. Really, he did. However, with all the bizarre things happening, he couldn’t ignore this discovery. He wondered what it meant. He wondered what was different about the current Prime Minister. And he wondered... “If you didn’t want anything to do with the Axanar when you left... what’s changed?”

Jethan looked back at him for a moment, expression unreadable, before leaning his hands heavily on his knees and standing. “I believe we are already well past-due for the second meal. Does your species eat four meals per day?”

“Usually three,” Leonard said as he stood. “Although our adolescents seem to eat constantly.”

“Then as you would be an adolescent by our lifespan, it must be time for you to eat,” he replied cheerily. “Come along. There are many excellent food vendors in this area, and our basic nutritional needs are compatible. It would be my pleasure to show you our local cuisine.”

Leonard followed Jethan out of the clinic building, half-listening as the Araxian medic regaled him with tid-bits of Araxian history and local culture as he pointed out buildings and landmarks. They’d
built a lot in two-hundred years. They were approaching Parliament Square, the location of Jethan’s restaurant of choice, when Leonard saw a familiar figure.

There was Jim, having what looked like an intense conversation with a person whose species Leonard didn’t recognize. The unidentified alien said something, and with an apparently cordial gesture, quickly took off across the terrace. Jim stood and stared at him, still as a statue.

“Hey, hold on a minute,” Leonard said to Jethan. “That’s one of my friends over there. Can I have a moment to go say hi?”

“Yes. We have time. I’ll wait here.”

Grateful that Jethan wasn’t coming with him, Leonard hurried over to Jim. To his surprise, Jim didn’t even seem to notice him approach. Feeling that payback was always fair, Leonard clapped Jim firmly on the shoulder. “Nice security work, hot-shot.”

Jim, to his amusement, startled so hard he actually squeaked as he spun around. “Shit, Bones! Are you trying to kill me?”

“Nah, kid... just keeping you on your toes.”

Jim gave a shaky laugh. “Yeah. Right. So what are you doing down here?”

“Vacationing in a tropical paradise, what’s it look like I’m doing?” He gave Jim a pointed look. “Who was that you were just talking to?”

“Who, huh? Oh, that was the Zhitoran ambassador. He... uh... had some interesting things to say about the Araxians.” Jim looked flustered, which was just wrong. Jim never looked flustered. Not like this. Then his eyes focused more clearly on Leonard’s face. “So where have you been? I’m glad you finally made it to the surface, but I figured you’d come down with the other cadets. Which party are you with?”

Leonard shook his head. “Group of science officers. They wanted to send a doctor as a representative from Medical, but Singh is on-duty in sickbay, Ankewicz is off-shift and overtired after covering my ass, and Singh exercised her authority as acting-CMO to keep Brex onboard.” Leonard cracked a smile. “Of course, Doctor Brex swears he’s functional -- keeps saying that he’s ‘not an invalid,’ - and he wants to get out of the ‘damned sickbay’ he’s been cooped up in for ten days, even though he doesn’t remember any of it.”

“Glad to hear he’s on his feet. But that left you, huh?”

“Yep. And I’d figured I’d be stuck following the other science officers around all day, being given the grand-bland tour of their research center, but instead, I spent the morning at the local medical facility.”

Jim gave him a curious look. “Learn anything interesting?”

Leonard gritted his teeth for a moment, but he’d be damned if he was going to keep anything from Jim. “Yeah. I like the Araxians a lot more than the Axanar.”

Jim narrowed his eyes slightly. “Funny. That sounds a lot like what the Zhitoran just said.”

“Oh?”

Jim took a quick look around, then shook his head. “Not here. When do you report back to the
“Athena?”

“Around 1600 hours.”

“Same with us,” Jim said with a nod. “Then we’ve got the debriefing. Your quarters, 1900? We’ll talk then... and I’m going to talk to Finney, too.”

Leonard folded his arms across his chest. “Probably a good idea, Jim. I’m going to talk to Doctor Brex about...” He let his voice trail off as he noticed another familiar figure moving towards them. Dropping his folded arms, he took a subtle step back from Jim. “Ambassador T’Val, a pleasure to see you again.”

“I am grateful for your presence, Doctor McCoy,” she said in her clipped, business-like tone. “I received word of Doctor Brex’s recovery, and sent him a communique. Now that he is conscious, I need not be a trained Healer to work with him to recover his memories, if he requests my assistance. His reply stated his desire to meet with me when I return to the ship after today’s talks.”

Leonard couldn’t hold back the smile. “That’s great news, Ambassador. But why grateful to see me?”

“I am in need of a doctor. I have developed a headache, and while it has not yet impeded my ability to function, I am too busy for a healing trance unless absolutely necessary. I would like for you to ascertain the cause of the headache.”

Leonard was already opening his tricorder. “I’m not an expert on Vulcan physiology, ma’am, but from what I know, you folks don’t get tension headaches and migraines the way humans do.” He began scanning.

“Correct. Headaches are uncommon in Vulcans, and there is usually a direct cause,” she said as he scanned. “Until the headache ceases, I shall be unable to assist Doctor Brex.”

“Yeah,” Leonard mumbled to himself as he studied the tricorder readout. Seemed normal to him. He ducked down and looked at her eyes. “Well, forget about Doctor Brex for a minute. Let’s work on you.” He pulled down her lower left eyelid. “Look up for me, would ya?”

Her eyes turned upwards, but as they did, her body swayed in place. Leonard quickly released her eyelid and grabbed her arm. “Whoa, easy there! What just happened? What are you feeling?”

“I... I appear to be... to be experiencing mild vertigo,” she said, decidedly shaky. “Perhaps I should notify my assistant that I shall be returning to the ship instead of... instead of...”

As if someone had flipped a switch, T’Val’s eyes rolled back in her head and she slumped backwards. Just as quickly, Jim rushed in and grabbed her beneath her arms, stopping her before she fell.

“T’Val? T’Val! Shit, Jim, help me lay her out on the ground,” Leonard barked out, steadying the Ambassador as Jim helped lower her gently. “Keep her head cradled... there. Hold her steady.”

Suddenly, Jethan was standing next to them. “I saw her fall. What’s happening?”

“I wish I knew,” Leonard said, scanning with the tricorder while keeping a wary eye on the crowd around the terrace. Delegates and representatives had seen her go down and were already moving towards them. “Dammit. Jethan, I’m sorry, but I’m the attending physician here and I need to go back to the ship with her.”
“Understood, McCoy.”

“Bones, what’s going on? Brex, then T’Val?”

Leonard gave Jim a sharp look - not now, Jim! - and shook his head as he pulled out his communicator. “Doctor McCoy to the Athena.”

“Athena responding.”

“Notify sickbay, we’ve got a medical emergency. The Vulcan Ambassador T’Val has lost consciousness. Emergency transport requested. Two to beam directly to sickbay on my order.”

“Acknowledged. Notifying sickbay. Transporter room standing by.”

Leonard took a look around at the situation. The crowd was starting to gather, and people were already asking him questions he didn’t have time to answer. “Jim, I need you to stay and inform the folks down here. Find T’Val’s assistant and Captain Porter. Here... trade places with me... let me get her head. Easy there.”

Jim slid out from beneath T’Val’s head as if he was handling the most delicate thing in the universe. He looked positively spooked. “Bones?”

“Jim, I’ll see you at 1900 hours.” He glanced up. “Medic Jethan, thank you for your time today.”

“You are most welcomed, Doctor McCoy. Take care of your patient.” The expression on his face was unreadable.

Leonard spared him a nod of acknowledgement as he spoke into his communicator again. “USS Athena, we’re ready down here. Energize.”

It was only as the weight of T’Val’s head in his hands faded and his own body dissolved into nothingness that Leonard realized he hadn’t even thought about being scared of the transporter.

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“Why is it always us?” Bones groaned as he slumped into his armchair. “We’re just a couple of goddamned cadets on a goddamned internship on a goddamned backwater colony planet!” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, tossing his forearm across his face to block out the light.

Jim watched him from just inside the door of Bones’ quarters. He kicked off his boots and spared a moment to line them up by the door. “Because we’ve got a spectacular talent for being in the wrong place at the wrong time,” he deadpanned, then walked slowly to the other armchair. “Besides...” He dropped into the chair with a huff. “We’ve never been just cadets.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Come on, Bones... you’re a doctor, dammit, not a cadet!”

Bones dropped his forearm from his face and glared. “I will end you.”

“You’d miss me too much.”

“Like a hangnail.” He sighed, then leaned forward in the chair with yet another groan, resting his elbows heavily on his knees. “I don’t know what to make of this, Jim.”

“Well, I know what the command staff is making of it,” Jim said, not bothering to hide his bitterness. “It was supposed to be my turn to take a shift inside Parliament chambers tomorrow. I was going to get to see the actual talks. Instead, we’re going on a tour of the city.”

Bones raised a harshly critical eyebrow at him. “Considering that there’s an unconscious Vulcan ambassador in Sickbay and a Betazoid doctor with a gaping hole in his memory, I’d figure that thinking about your own damned opportunities would be a little lower on the priority list.”

The flash of guilt only made the bitterness well up like bile in Jim’s throat. “I’m not... what I mean is... they’re probably going to be discussing these events in there. It would be a chance to see how all of this is affecting the talks, and what the people in charge are really thinking. I want to know what they’re saying, and I know you want to know, too.”

With a reluctant grimace, Bones nodded. “Okay, I’ll give you that.”

They were silent for a moment. Jim stared at his feet. “What did you learn at the Araxian clinic today?”

Another moment of silence. “That I like them,” came the flat, blunt response. Jim almost prodded for more information, but Bones seemed like he still had more to say, and would say it when he felt like it. Another moment passed. “I like them because they’re the damned polar opposite of everything that hit me wrong about the Axanar. I like them because they don’t act like the Axanar.”

“They don’t?” Jim furrowed his eyebrows. That made no sense. Sure, there had been differences, but really, from what Jim had seen, they seemed a lot more similar than different. But the Zhitoran had said they had been different, and that something had changed. “Not even a little bit?”

“Not at all,” Bones said. “In fact, it’s almost hard to believe they came from the same parent race. Or that they’d want to come back together.”
Jim shook his head. “But they are rejoining each other. They’re coming into the Federation together. Araxis offered Axanar its dilithium! So... if they don’t want to come back together... Bones, are you sure?”

Bones didn’t move. “I’m not sure of a goddamned thing anymore, Jim. The guy I was talking to is one of the original settlers who was born on Axanar.” He shrugged. “Maybe the older generation still holds a grudge, and it’s the younger folks who want to reconnect with the old planet.”

Based on the tone of his voice, Jim was certain that Bones didn’t believe a word of that. “Now tell me what you really think.”

For a moment, Bones said nothing. Jim waited, and finally, Bones looked up at him. “Jim... they changed their genetic structure so they’d be a whole different species.”

“What?”

But Bones held up a hand, silencing him. “Their whole culture is different. Egalitarian. Democratic. None of that protection and subservience bullshit. And... they created a mutation that eliminated the metabolic pathway for methane. Makes them more metabolically stable in atmospheres without methane. And hell, if you look twice, you can see it changed their skin color, just a bit.”

“But... genetic engineering...” Jim started to say, shaking his head in dismay.

“I know, Jim. It grates me the wrong way, too, but... I talked to a patient who was born on Araxis with the artificial mutation. If the rest of them are anything like this guy, then the younger folks know what their founders did to them, and they’re proud of it.” He let out a long, slow breath as he leaned back in his armchair again. “Also... nobody was talking about the negotiations. They’re avoiding the topic. It’s as if it wasn’t even happening.”

Jim felt a shudder work up his spine. “That doesn’t make sense. It’s the biggest thing that’s happened on that planet in years. Everyone should be talking about it.”

“I know. That’s what makes this whole thing...” He gave a humorless laugh. “Damned peculiar.”

“That does seem to be the theme,” Jim said vaguely before fixing Bones with a look. “Bones, I know you got distracted with T’Val, but do you remember I said the Zhitoran had told me something?”

Bones raised an eyebrow. “Yeah? What was that all about? Those folks were the ones hunting the Axanar, weren’t they?”

“They were.” Jim considered his words. “Well... the Zhitorans considered the Araxians sentient... but not the Axanar... until very recently.”

It was Bones’ turn to look shocked, and he sat upright like he’d been pinched. “How the devil do you explain that?”

“Search me,” Jim said with a shrug. “Ask the Zhitoran. The guy practically spoke in riddles. But... I think I figured it out.”

“Oh really now? Enlighten me.”

Jim swallowed tightly. “He said it was a matter of definition: the Zhitoran definition of sentience. And if I take all of what he said and step back, it sounds like the Zhitorans had to change their...
definition of sentience to include the Axanar... after they’d already considered the Araxians sentient.”

Bones’ face instantly morphed into a scowl. “Just how the hell do they figure --”

“Hold on, that’s not everything,” Jim said, cutting him off. “He said the Zhitorans admired the Araxians for their differences from the Axanar. He spoke really highly of them. He said they were noble, strong... independent. He talked about how they’d left the Axanar culture of slavery and subservience... and yeah, he really didn’t speak well of the Axanar. But then, he said they were similar now. Well, I said they were similar, and he told me I was right.”

“But they’re not similar,” Bones protested. “I mean, are you kidding me? Have you even met any of the Araxians?”

“Well yeah. I met their security forces, and the staff working the welcoming reception in the Parliament building. I met a couple of their representatives, too.”

Bones was giving him an odd look. “Did you meet the Prime Minister?”

Jim forced an uncomfortable laugh. “Not really. I mean, I saw him with the official welcoming party, but I haven’t talked to him. Why?”

But Bones was shaking his head. “Jim... you met a bunch of people tightly clustered around the official leadership. I met a bunch of people in a medical clinic, including housekeepers, patients, medics, and even a very chatty secretary. Heh. He could have given my Aunt Betty a run for her money. And I’ll tell you, if the Araxians I met were typical, they’re nothing like the Axanar.”

Jim shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Well... the ones I met weren’t quite as subservient, and nobody tried to give me pieces of buildings this time, but they seemed nervous in a different way, and didn’t... what?”

Bones was still shaking his head, now with an expression of complete dismay. “Jim, we’re seeing different parts of the puzzle here. We have to be. And there are missing pieces everywhere. Brex’s memory. T’Val... goddammit, I ran every test I could, and it looks like the exact same thing that happened to Brex. T’Val was the best shot we had at recovering Brex’s memory before the mission was over, and now -”

“It’s like someone took her out of the equation before she could help Doctor Brex,” Jim finished.

Bones nodded. “Sure looks like it. And before you ask, yes, I voiced my concerns to Doctor Brex, Doctor Singh, and directly to the Captain and his Security Chief. And no, I have no idea what they’re going to do with the information.”

Jim stared at Bones, then past Bones’ shoulder at the wall. Finally, he slumped back into the armchair. “And here we are... blind, deaf, and dumb, with a few puzzle pieces to play with, and no big picture.”

Bones slouched back in his own chair with a grunt.

“Big picture...” Jim said softly to himself, then to Bones, “I never finished telling you what I thought the conclusion was.”

“Go for it.”

Jim braced himself mentally. “The Araxians and the Axanar are similar because the Araxians are
reverting back to the Axanar ways.”

“But I... wait.” His eyes widened. “I almost forgot. How could I have forgotten this? Jethan said something like that, early in the day, before we got to the clinic.”

Jim felt a strange sensation work through his chest. Something breathless and not entirely pleasant. “What did he say?”

Bones’ eyes were distant as he tried to recall the words. “Something about... when opposite forces come together... something has to yield.” Then he shook his head angrily. “But... I don’t buy it, Jim! The folks I talked to sure didn’t sound like they were interested in behaving like the Axanar! Jethan spent half of the day preachin’ the virtues of democracy and egalitarianism, and I didn’t see much dissent from the other folks around the clinic. So I don’t know or care if the folks you met around Parliament were acting like Axanar. The ones I met seem to like being Araxian just fine.”

But Jim shook his head, feeling the strange sensation in his chest settle into something hardened and angry as the scattered puzzle pieces finally snapped together in his mind. “But Bones... don’t you see?” His voice sounded distant to his own ears. “I never said they were doing it willingly.”

“Kirk, there had better be a damned good reason why I’m awake at 0200.”

Captain Pike certainly looked like he’d just rolled out of bed. And Jim knew what time it was, because all ships in Starfleet had their chronometers set to the same time as Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco. He was going to regret this later, he knew, but he had to report. “You told me to report in if something was happening.”

“Yes, I did. Through normal comm channels. At normal hours.” Pike shook his head and scrubbed his hands roughly over his face. “How did you get a Priority Two comm channel at this hour of the night? For that matter, how did you get a Priority Two comm channel at all?”

“I learned a lot when I worked a rotation in the communications lab.” In truth, he’d traded twenty days of water shower rations for this. Sonic showers worked well enough, even if he hated them. He briefly pulled his lower lip between his teeth, trying to figure out how to broach the topic.

Pike must have noticed his hesitation. The man was really good at reading people, and despite the fact that Jim knew he could be a thorn in the Captain’s side on occasion, Pike seemed to like him. His posture softened. “It’s okay, Kirk. If you had to comm me at this hour, I’m going to guess it’s important. So instead of keeping me in suspense, spill the beans already.”

Jim nodded to himself - full disclosure - and plowed into it. “Doctor Brex woke up, but he’s lost his telepathic ability and a chunk of his memory. And now, Ambassador T’Val has fallen into a coma just like the one Brex was in. She had been planning to help the doctor regain his memories, but she just passed out, right in the middle of the square in front of Parliament. Same thing as Brex - they can’t find anything wrong with her.”

“Just a minute, Kirk -” Pike started, but Jim kept going. “That’s only the start of it, sir. There’s something weird going on with the Araxians... like they’ve got two entirely different cultures on one planet. One of the Araxians said something that makes me think their culture is reverting back to the Axanar ways, and I don’t think it’s a willing transition. The people in their Parliament are acting like the Axanar, but the rest of them are... completely different, sir. Bones described them as democratic. Egalitarian. Oh, and Bones said
they’re different species now. The Araxians changed their genetics.”

“They genetically engineered their whole species?” Pike asked vaguely.

Jim kept talking. “It’s got to be tied in together, sir. This all started after the Axanar boarded the Athena. The only person around who would have a chance of seeing through any sort of deception is Doctor Brex, the only full telepath on the crew, but he currently has a lower psi score than I do, which was pathetic if you remember. Parliament is holding a restricted session until further notice, and I have no idea what’s going on.” Jim had blurted it all out so fast that he’d run out of wind, and he sucked in a deep breath and finished, “Sir.”

Pike stared at him.

“I’m sorry, too much?”

Pike closed his eyes and shook his head slowly for a moment before looking back at Jim. “How much of this is classified?”

Jim shrugged, as if to say, Classified? How should I know? “Sir, I’m a cadet on a Priority Two channel with a Starfleet captain. If I know something, it’s nothing a captain can’t know, and the channel is secure. I checked the regulations.”

A gleam, something like pride mixed with chagrin, flashed across Pike’s face. “This is why you’re trouble, Kirk. You know the regulations... and how to manipulate them.”

Jim had to struggle to keep himself from looking smug. “Actually, Cadet McCoy is even better at it than I am.”

Pike raised an eyebrow. “Really? I wasn’t aware of that.”

“That’s how good he is.”

Pike nodded slowly. “I’ll have to remember that. So... down to business. You said, first of all, that the Axanar and Araxians are different species?”

“That’s what McCoy told me. He got to examine one of the Araxians. The Araxian doctor - they’re called Medics here - told him that it was an intentional mutation, designed early on by their scientists.”

Pike seemed to be digesting this carefully, his eyes focused just below and to the left of the screen. “And the Araxians seem to have two cultures?”

“That’s what McCoy told me. He got to examine one of the Araxians. The Araxian doctor - they’re called Medics here - told him that it was an intentional mutation, designed early on by their scientists.”

“Just say it.”

“No servitude.” When Pike didn’t say anything, Jim pressed on. “I know I have no proof, but I think somehow the merge between the Araxians and the Axanar is creating a clash of cultures, and somehow, the Araxian culture is getting subjugated to the Axanar. The Zhitoran Ambassador and one of the Araxians both said things that support that theory, and with everything else going on, I don’t think we can ignore it.”
Pike didn’t even seem to react, still staring below the screen, deep in thought. “Okay. Anything else of relevance?”

Jim couldn’t understand why Pike wasn’t reacting more strongly to this. “No, sir, but I don’t know if Captain Porter is -”

“Hold it there, Kirk.” Pike raised a hand to stop him. “No speculation about what the captain is doing. I already told you that. You need to trust the officers in positions above you. And because I’m a captain and you’re a cadet, there are things I can’t tell you.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Do you, now? Good then. It’ll make this easier.”

Jim didn’t like the sound of that.

“I didn’t know everything you just told me. There’s some new information there. I’m assuming you gave full disclosure to your chain of command.”

“Of course I did, but -”

“Then you need to let them do their jobs. I’ll send a communique to Captain Porter in the morning. And no, I’m not going to tell him it’s because of you. I’ll tell him that I’m just calling as the Commandant, checking in on all the cadets.”

“But what about -”

“And you’re going to do whatever they tell you to do, because you’re a cadet. I want you to put your best instincts to work, but you will not act on your own. Do you read me?”

“Yes, sir, I wasn’t planning to do anything. You told me to be a cadet, and that’s what I’m doing. But all of this... what’s going on... it can’t be normal. I’m worried about -”

“Jim... it’s space. It’s Starfleet. There’s no such thing as normal. There will always be something unusual, unexpected, and inexplicable out there. It’s part of the job.” His expression softened again. “I know you’ve had some experiences above and beyond most Starfleet cadets, but you can’t always be in the middle of everything. Sometimes, all you can do is to play your part. This time, your part is to be a cadet, and nothing more. Now, I fully expect you to be one of the best and brightest cadets, so don’t let me down there... but let your superiors handle this. I think, if anything, that’s what you most needed to learn on this internship. Learn to be a subordinate.”

Jim forced a melancholy smile. “Isn’t that what Commander Toland tried to teach me two years ago?”

Pike actually chuckled. “Did the lesson stick?”

“I’m still not sure, sir.”

“Well... we’ll find out when I receive your full assessment from Lieutenant Finney and Commander Shao, won’t I?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim said, trying not to sound sullen. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected from Pike, but he felt as though he wasn’t getting it.

“Good. And now... it’s 0215 in the morning, and I have a meeting at 0800 with the full Academy
command staff, so you hit the bunk, and I’ll do the same.”

“Yes, sir,” he repeated.

“And Kirk? Make me proud.”

That caused an unexpected flutter in Jim’s stomach, but all he said was, “Aye, sir.”

“Good. Pike out.”

The screen went blank, leaving Jim by himself in the tiny comm room. He didn’t move for nearly a half hour.

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Jim was starting to wonder if bad weather existed on Araxis. Sure, he’d studied the climate, and this region had more than adequate annual rainfall. They just happened to be in the dry season right now. With the bright blue skies and wispy clouds, it was hard to argue with the timing.

On the other hand, he’d love to argue with just about everything else right now.

They’d beamed down about a kilometer northwest of Parliament Square to meet their tour guide for the day. The street was almost deserted. Jim supposed it had something to do with increased security. The Araxian they met had introduced himself as Nraxhan, Sub-Minister of Infrastructure. Jim figured it was a fancy term for “not important enough to be in the meeting.” He was rambling on about the various sights they’d see on their walking tour. A historical bridge, the first house built on the planet, the water pumping station, the power plant, and the Archive Museum. All very interesting.

Jim didn’t care. He wanted to get into that meeting at Parliament. He wanted to know what the hell was going on. He wanted to investigate what had happened to Brex and T’Val, because he knew it had to be tied to whatever was going on with the Araxians and Axanar.

Instead, he was going to be a good cadet, just like Pike wanted. He was going to follow Nraxhan around the city, play the part of the junior diplomat, ask inconsequential questions, and let the real officers do their jobs. There was no need for heroics, no need to stick his neck out. Maybe, someday, he’d even get used to the idea.

He looked over at Lieutenant Finney, who was standing comfortably at ease, with his hands folded below the small of his back. He was the picture of the perfect young Starfleet officer. Smiling mildly and enjoying an easy mission.

Jim knew better.

“I understand, Kirk,” he’d said last night in the debriefing. “And... I think you’re right. Or, at least, you could be right. But you’ve done all the right things already. You told me, you told Lieutenant Gaynes, and we’ve briefed Captain Porter.”

“But what happens if... well, if something happens?” The question had sounded stupid to his own ears, but at least Finney hadn’t mocked him for it.

“I know what you mean, and... we’ll just have to be ready for anything. But isn’t that what we’re trained for? Believe me, I’m suspicious, too. You keep your eyes open, and I’ll keep my eyes open. But for now... trust the Captain, and... play it casual.”
So Finney was playing it casual. It was a convincing act, too.

Jim looked over to the side, where Bones was doing a piss-poor job of looking casual. He narrowed his eyes just slightly at Jim, who replied with the barest of nods.

They were splitting up the cadets. Add that to the growing list of things Jim really didn’t like at the moment. Thinking he was doing them a favor, their tour guide had looked into the cadets’ specialties, and concluded that a doctor and a biochemist wouldn’t be nearly as interested in infrastructure, so they were going on a tour of the research facilities. Bones had made a sarcastic quip about getting to see them after all, but then he’d fallen silent. So Bones and Hererra would go see the science research facilities, while Jim, Wilcox, Nadeau, Liu, and Buhari went on the grand tour of the city.

No, Jim didn’t like this at all.

“... and once we’ve concluded our tour of the power generator and turbine station, we’ll return through the Archives, where historical artifacts are kept, and the Museum, which details the history of the colony. The Museum building has grown each year as new additions house new chapters of the colony’s history.”

“Does the Museum have anything from Axanar?” Nadeau suddenly asked.

Jim felt the tension level rise exponentially, with its epicenter fixed squarely on Nraxhan.

“Records from Axanar are kept in the Archive,” their guide said stiffly, “not in the Museum. However, the Araxians may now have reason to retrieve the old records once again.”

Jim frowned at that. It could simply be a different use of Standard... after all, the Axanar had only widely used Standard for a decade, since the Battle. That meant the Araxians had used it even less. But still... it sounded as though this individual was referring to the Araxians as them. Not in so many words, but it always sounded as though Nraxhan was speaking of the Araxians as though he wasn’t one of them. A glance over at Finney didn’t reveal anything; the man was still smiling casually, not showing anything out of the ordinary.

“So,” Nraxhan said firmly, “the guide for your bioscience cadets has arrived, and here we shall part ways.”

An Araxian in what Jim guessed was a research robe had approached them. “I’ve been told that I will be escorting some of the finest young minds of the Federation!” he said cheerfully. “Who might they be?”

Bones, to Jim’s shocked amusement, snorted. “I’m not exactly young, and the jury is still out on the other part... but I guess I’m coming along for the ride.”

Finney scowled. “Cadet McCoy, if you don’t want to be here -”

“Ah, delightful!” the Araxian scientist exclaimed, ignoring Finney. “I’ve been told that humans appreciate this sort of humor. Sarcasm, correct?”

Bones raised an eyebrow, looking back and forth between Finney and the Araxian. “Uh... yes, sir. Always happy to entertain.”

Finney was still scowling, but it was clear that the breach of protocol hadn’t caused a problem. If the situation had been any different, Jim swore he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself from snickering hysterically. The Araxian reminded Jim of an old schoolteacher he’d had once, when he
was seven years old. He’d been a grandfatherly man with a wild tuft of white hair and an
inextinguishable joy for everything he taught. He’d been the man who had fueled Jim’s insatiable
curiosity about everything the world had to offer. That curiosity had almost been snuffed out as
he’d gotten older... but never completely.

Jim liked this guy. He found himself wishing he was going with Bones on the science tour.

The Araxian scientist beamed. “Excellent! Oh, yes, excellent. I am called Rhexen. Please, come
with me. So much to see! Years of research! Oh, I can’t wait to show you.” Without another word,
he began walking off.

Bones looked around. “Guess we should follow him.”

Hererra nodded, grinning. “Doesn’t sound like such a bad deal, does it?”

Bones’ eyes fixed on Jim’s. “Not too bad at all,” is what his mouth said. His eyes, however, said,
*Jim, be careful.*

Jim knew that look too well. He gave a nod in reply, and he knew Bones would understand his
message. *You too, Bones.*

Then they were gone.

“Okay, cadets!” Finney said with enthusiasm that sounded real enough. “You joined Starfleet to
seek out new life forms and new civilizations, and here we are! Let’s get a move on.”

The group began to move, following Nraxhan as the stuffy Sub-Minister began rambling on about
local architecture on their way to the oldest house in the city. He was set on protocol, fixated on
rank, and determined to impress the group. He seemed a lot like an Axanar, now that Jim was
thinking about it. Of course, that was ridiculous. He was a ranking official in the Araxian
government. Still... he sure seemed like a perfect example of what Kerz had been talking about, and
Jim was absolutely convinced that the two groups were more similar than not.

But then... Rhexen. The old scientist. If he was typical of an Araxian, then Jim was starting to see
what Bones meant.

Hiding his grimace behind a feigned look of polite interest, Jim followed the group of cadets down
the street.

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“You’re one of the founders, aren’t you?” Leonard asked as he kept pace with Rhexen’s energetic
footsteps.

“Why, yes,” came the startled reply. “Did you guess because of my age?”

“Well, to be honest, I can’t even begin to guess age on an Araxian,” Leonard said, even though he
could tell that Rhexen was far from young. “But... you remind me of someone I met yesterday.”

“Oh I do? Well, I must say, all you Terrans look alike to me, aside from the differing colors of fur
on your heads, so perhaps we Araxians look alike to you.” Before Leonard could start to explain
who Rhexen reminded him of, the old Araxian launched into an enthusiastic discussion of Araxis’
history of scientific research, and how the pursuit of knowledge had been opened to everyone,
regardless of their parentage or background.
Yeah, he reminded Leonard of Jethan, and listening to the old Araxian solidified in his mind that the Araxians were as different from the Axanar as they possibly could be. Again, he wondered how these two groups could possibly come back together.

As they walked, Rhexen continued to pile on information, but Leonard found himself distracted by something else. Aside from a couple of pedestrians, the streets were almost empty. It was the middle of the day, so perhaps people were at work. It was possible that the Araxians had tightened security around the center of the city, given the concerns regarding the conference. Whatever the reason, it was noticeably quiet.

Before he knew it, they were at the entrance to the research complex. Leonard had been there briefly yesterday, before Jethan took him to the medical facility, but he hadn’t had a chance to look around. It was a beautiful campus that took up an entire city block, with large buildings and a wide open quad in the middle full of plant life and park benches. As much as he’d enjoyed his day with Jethan, Leonard realized he’d almost missed quite the experience of seeing the research facility, and he was really looking forward to this.

Rhexen was rubbing his hands together, his face alight with the glee of a child on his birthday as he surveyed the campus. “I think... we should begin with our biochemical engineering department. We’ve developed a new method of protein manipulation in the past few years, using short-range magnetic fields to manipulate molecular dipoles. We can actually construct new compounds without needing to adhere to the old rules of organic chemical reactions. It’s most extraordinary! Let me show you how it works.”

Hererra was grinning ear to ear as he looked over at McCoy. “Come on, Doc. This is gonna be fun.”

Leonard had to admit, he was inclined to agree.

 Almost four hours later, Leonard had been thoroughly impressed, and had decided that if he couldn’t retire on Earth, he wanted to live on Araxis someday. In the very least, he’d take a sabbatical from Starfleet there to do some research. Their dedication and enthusiasm for science, and just the general feel he was getting from their society... it was wonderful. Who wouldn’t like that?

Still, as they toured the campus, Leonard got the impression that there should be more people in a facility of that size. The buildings felt oddly vacant, despite the number of researchers present. It just added to Leonard’s sense that the city was more empty than it should be.

Rhexen decided to break for a mid-day meal, and the three of them settled on a pair of benches in the quad with some sort of vegetable and dumpling dish they’d picked up at a local vendor. Damn, even the food was good. Still, Leonard had something that had been gnawing at him.

“Rhexen... what was it like for researchers back on Axanar?”

The Araxian’s two-tined fork stopped halfway to his mouth. Slowly, he set the utensil back down. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Leonard said, knowing he needed to tread carefully, “you left Axanar. And the way you talk about the research around here, and how the pursuit of knowledge is open to everyone, I’m guessing it was different back on Axanar.”

Rhexen sighed and put down his food container. “Yes, it was different. Very different. On Axanar, researchers needed protection. We supplied technology, but the pursuit of knowledge itself wasn’t
considered an art of protection. Therefore, we fell under the umbrella of servitude to the
government if we wanted to be part of the research community.” He shook his head. “As a result,
the best and the brightest seldom wanted to become scientists. Research suffered for this.”

“Were a lot of the founders in the field of science?”

He smiled wistfully. “Yes. We were.” Then he gave Leonard a searching look. “How did you really
know I was one of the founders?”

Perceptive sonofabitch, Leonard thought with admiration. “Honestly? Your skin tone... it’s
different from the other Araxians. It’s the Axanar skin tone.”

Rhexen blinked. “Ah, so you know about that, do you?”

“Know about what?” Hererra cut in.

Rhexen started to answer, but Bones cut him off. “The younger generations of Araxians have a
quirky mutation. Causes a slightly different skin tone.”

No point in telling the kid about something that was probably being debated at the highest levels
over in the Parliament building at that very moment. When he’d reported the information about the
genetic engineering, it had caused an immediate reaction amongst the people in the briefing room
back on the ship. He was pretty damned sure it was part of what they were hashing out right now,
behind the closed doors or Parliament.

Rhexen’s expression made it clear that he knew Leonard probably had more of the story, but he
said nothing.

“ Weird,” Hererra said. “I’m not much of a geneticist, but... isn’t it strange for a mutation to become
so widespread in such a short period of time? Or is it a response to the new environment?”

Dammit, Leonard hated to lie, especially to another scientist. “Something like that,” he said with an
awkward shrug.

“I must ask, young Terran, where did you discover this?”

No point in lying there. “I spent yesterday with Medic Jethan. Do you know him?”

Rhexen took a moment to respond. “Aaah, yes, I know Jethan. I’ve known him for a long time.
One of the finest amongst us. We’ve been good friends for two-hundred and twenty-nine years.”
He smiled. “Before you ask, I am far older. Three-hundred and thirty of our years. I believe that is
slightly over four-hundred-and-five of your years. I’ve lived a good, long life. Yes... a good long
life.”

Hererra’s mouth was hanging open, ever so slightly. Leonard elbowed him before asking, “How
did you meet Jethan?”

Rhexen’s smile became wistful. “Back on Axanar. He was a student of mine - a biochemist before
he chose to pursue the study of medicine.”

“But medics were highly respected on Axanar,” Leonard said, leading the conversation. “Is that
why Jethan switched careers?”

“Ah, no. Not at all,” Rhexen said proudly. “He was a medic who wanted to serve, not to be served.
Not in a manner of... well... not in a position of forced servitude, but because he wanted to take
care of his fellow beings. He had no desire for his patients to be indebted to him. I taught him well.”

Leonard nodded slowly. “And that’s why he left Axanar and became an Araxian founder, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Something was telling Leonard that if he was ever going to ask this question, this was the time to do it. “Do the Araxians want to rejoin the Axanar?”

Rhexen’s expression closed off. “We do what we must, McCoy. Our charter, our philosophy, our way of life... we’ve sworn to it.” He looked up at a local chronometer on a post in the center of the square. Leonard couldn’t read the symbols, but Rhexen must have liked what he saw, because he looked pleased and nodded. “Ah, yes, we’ve sworn to it. And... I must apologize... you must understand... there is no animosity against the Federation. It is... unfortunate. Highly unfortunate. I liked the Terrans I met yesterday on their tour. I like you, cadets. I wish for minimal incidental damage to you and your colleagues, but we must reclaim control of our planet.”

Leonard’s blood suddenly ran ice cold. His face felt numb. Everything he’d seen and learned in the past few days swirled around in his head, congealing into the only possible answer. “The Araxians don’t want to rejoin the Axanar.”

“No, young Terran. We do not.”

“But your leaders! They offered the dilithium! I thought this has been in the works for ten years...” Leonard’s voice trailed off as Rhexen shook his head.

“Not ten years. Fifty years. They started coming fifty years ago. We should have known at the time. Yes, we should have known, and stopped it when it first began... but we never expected... never anticipated what they would do.” His face hardened. “But we shall fix it now. We did it once, and we shall do it again.”

“Do what?” Leonard asked, feeling his heart pounding just a bit too hard.


And then, the sky exploded.

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Chapter 14

The morning had been dry and dull until Jim and the other cadets reached the power plant. Their trip through the city had been a simple sightseeing tour of the local architecture, but Jim had to admit that he was enjoying the time outdoors with sunlight on his face. There was mild weather, a light breeze, fresh air, and open sky. The city was dotted with gardens and recreational areas. Pleasant enough, but it wasn’t particularly exciting.

They hadn’t encountered many Araxians on their tour, which matched how quiet the streets had been during his security duty. He’d been on duty in the center of town, so it made enough sense for it to be even more quiet here. Perhaps Araxians didn’t loiter during the work day. To be honest, the tranquility was nice. He could almost let himself forget about the crazy politics and the mystery simmering back on the ship and in Parliament.

At any rate, Pike was right. There was nothing he could do, so maybe he should just enjoy the fact that he was here, exploring a new planet. Only two years in Starfleet as a cadet, and he was already strolling around on a world that very few human beings had ever seen before. That was pleasant enough, in its own way. Besides, they were almost to the power plant, and Jim actually felt a bit eager to see it.

The power plant itself was an impressive structure; massive and beautiful at once, as if mere function wasn’t enough, and form was critical to its existence. The enormous power transmitters towered above the landscape, but were so artfully built they almost seemed like sculptures. It wasn’t exactly outside the city, but it was on the edge of the urban area, adjacent to a neighborhood on one side, and a set of larger buildings that Jim guessed were factories or office buildings on the other side. The whole view was distinctly alien, but a familiar sight caught Jim’s attention as a group of people came around the corner from the main power plant.

“Lieutenant Kim!” Jim said happily. “What are you and your team doing down here?”

Lieutenant Kim walked up to their group, grinning, with the rest of her team in tow. “The Araxian Minister of Energy sent an invite to show our engineers their power grid, and Captain Porter gave us clearance. We just finished a tour of the power plant,” she said. “They’re using dilithium to amplify their power generation, and we’re doing a technology exchange.”

“And,” Chief Petty Officer Johan cut in, “we’re apparently going to be babysitting a bunch of cadets. Isn’t that right, Blues?”

“Plato,” Jim said as he extended a hand for a firm handshake, “Good to see you, too.”

“We’re the power grid team for the Athena,” Kim explained, addressing the whole group, including the tour guide, “so this is our chance to play around with a power grid that covers an entire city and over a thousand square kilometers.”

“If it would please you,” Nraxhan said neutrally, “our groups can combine, as you appear to be colleagues.”

“I think that would be fine,” Finney said.

“Sounds good to me,” Kim said. “We’re about to head over to the main substation outside the plant. It controls power flow and boost to the center of the city, if you’d like to join us.”

The Araxian who was escorting the engineering group gave a polite bow. “I would be honored to
show your cadets the power sub-station. Our engineers have created dilithium power boosters that amplify electrical current by feeding it through what you would call a warp field.”

Hodges elbowed Jim lightly, grinning. “If you didn’t study the math behind it, it almost looks like magic... creating an efficiency ratio over one by bending the space it travels through.”

The Araxian bowed again. “Our engineers have done their job well. We will gladly to provide this technology to the Federation in our gratitude for this alliance.”

Everyone was smiling and nodding as the two Araxian guides began leading them towards the sub-station, but Jim could barely hide his scowl as he walked at the back of the group. That wasn’t Araxian behavior. It was Axanar behavior. After everything he and Bones had discussed, he was sure of it. He looked at Finney for any sign that the Lieutenant recognized it, but Finney was talking to Kim, and hadn’t seemed to notice anything amiss.

“What’s eatin’ you, Blues?” Johan asked, falling into step next to Jim.

Jim gave him a sideways look. “Honestly? I don’t know if I can say.” He lowered his voice to an undertone. “There’s something weird going on here. Our tour guides... they’re not acting like Araxians. They’re acting like Axanar.”

“Aren’t they the same?”

“I don’t think so,” Jim answered. “But I’ve told everyone I can think to tell, and that’s all I can do. I’m a just cadet... it’s not my job to investigate, call the shots, make decisions, or... hell, I’m just along for the ride.”

Johan gave him an odd look. “You don’t seem like someone who just goes along for the ride. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be eatin’ you like this, would it?”

Jim forced a chagrined smile. “I’d almost think you know me.”

“Of course we know you. We gave you a name here. In our little corner of Starfleet, that means something.”

“A name...” Jim had always been Kirk. George Kirk’s son. He’d just wanted to make a name for himself, and someone had just informed him that he’d succeeded, even if only in a small way. For some reason, this struck him, and he stared at Johan, feeling an odd sort of humility. “I... thanks, man. But... all that stuff with the Axanar? I’ve got to leave that to the real crew. I’m just a cadet.”

Johan actually snorted. “Blues, you’re a junior officer out here. That’s the briefing we got about the internship program. I don’t know much about the way they run things at the Academy, but I know that they don’t give internship postings to every cadet. Just the ones who are ready for it.”

Jim felt his mouth going dry. “Still doesn’t mean the senior officers care much about my opinions,” he said tightly.

“Maybe they should.” Johan gave him a sharp look. “Nobody’s perfect, and even senior officers miss stuff. If you think there’s something fishy going on, and you don’t think they’re dealing with it, you should push the issue.”

Jim’s breath caught, because that’s exactly what he wanted to do, but instead, he forced himself to let out the breath. “Not my job. I’m just here to learn.”

Johan shook his head in patronizing surrender. “Whatever you say, Blues. Whatever you say.”
Jim turned his attention back to his path along the road. He’d been walking too slowly, talking to Johan, and the rest of the group had gotten ahead of them. Even from a couple hundred meters away, the sub-station was an impressive sight, with the towering transmitter standing tall, like a monument to civilization and ingenuity, and -

Then the sub-station exploded.

A shock wave rippled across the ground as a hot rush of gas and smoke blew out in every direction. Jim saw the rest of his group get bowled over like so much debris only a fraction of a heartbeat before the blast sent him flying backwards, stealing the breath from his lungs. He hit the ground hard, skidding briefly as he watched a black and red fireball lift into the sky.

As he lay there, stunned from being slammed backwards, he felt the ground rumble beneath his back, once. Twice. Three, four, seven, a dozen times. There were explosions all over the city, he realized numbly.

He grit his teeth against the aches as he forced himself to roll over and get to his knees. “Johan,” he said with a grunt, then a cough. “You okay?”

Johan was rolling onto his side and getting up. “Yeah. Check the others. What the hell just happened?”

Jim shook his head. He didn’t have answers... just suspicions, and fuck, he hoped he was wrong. “Lieutenant Finney! Wilcox! Nadeau! Everyone, are you okay?” He stumbled, then ran over to where the rest of the team had landed. They were all starting to move, and a quick check showed that everyone was alive and conscious, although they were a bit of a mess.

Lieutenant Kim was holding a hand to her forehead as she staggered to her feet. “Goldberg? Hodges?”

Johan caught her as she teetered slightly. “Gotcha, sir.”

“We’re here,” Hodges said as she helped Goldberg to his feet. Goldberg had a gash across his arm, but he seemed okay otherwise.

“I’m good,” Finney croaked. “Cadets! Report!”

Wilcox was on her knees, holding her head with her hands. “I think I’m okay, sir. Head’s ringing.”

“I’m fine,” Nadeau and Buhari said simultaneously. They had an assortment of scratches, but otherwise didn’t seem injured.

Liu, ever the Security cadet, was already on his feet, phaser out, scanning the area. “Sir, I assess that we’re under attack. Recommend we take immediate shelter.”

“Stand fast, Liu.” Finney had already pulled out his communicator.

Nraxhan stepped forward, holding out a hand. “I believe your cadet with the weapon is correct. We must take shelter immediately.”

“I’m contacting my ship,” Finney said firmly as he flipped open the communicator. “Finney to Athena! We have a situation down here.”

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Reports are coming in from all landing parties. Are you presently under attack?”
“Negative, but we’re just a couple hundred meters from the power sub-station. The station just blew up in front of us. We’ve got injuries.” His eyes settled briefly on Jim. “Two crewmen and two cadets. Requesting immediate evacuation!”

Two injured cadets? Jim looked around until he realized several people were staring at him. With a sinking feeling, he looked down and saw a small blood stain slowly spreading across his shirt. There was a rip in the fabric, and as he pulled back the shirt, he saw a small laceration on the lower side of his abdomen. He hadn’t even felt it. “Sir, it’s just a scratch. I didn’t even feel it. We need to figure out -”

“Shut up, Kirk,” Finney said, obviously not having the time or tolerance for contrary cadets. “Athena, do you read me?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. Are any of the injuries critical? Sickbay is taking in dozens of emergency requests, and we need to triage.”

A grimace twisted Finney’s face. “Nothing critical. A couple of lacerations. We’ve also got a couple of possible concussions from the impact of the explosion.”

“Then we need to take critical injuries first. Stand by, and we’ll be able to take you shortly. Athena out.”

Finney looked like he was ready to protest the delay, but his expression quickly changed to annoyed acceptance. He flipped the communicator shut.

“Sir, I really recommend we take cover,” Liu said again, still scanning the area with his eyes, phaser sweeping in arcs as he watched.

“The cadet is right,” Nraxhan said, more urgently now. He was looking around as he spoke nervously. “There have been explosions all over the city. Smoke is rising. This is an attack on a grand scale. We must find protection!”

Finney was pulling out his own phaser even as he tucked his comm unit back onto his belt. “Yeah, I think you might be right. Goldberg, you’re okay to walk?”

“It’s just my arm, sir.”

“Kirk?”

It was all Jim could do to keep from rolling his eyes. “I told you, sir... it’s just a scratch.”

Finney nodded at him skeptically before looking around at the rest of the group. “Kim? Wilcox? How are you two?”

Lieutenant Kim was still leaning slightly against Johan. “A bit dazed, but I’m upright.”

“Just a headache,” Wilcox said.

“Okay.” Finney turned back to Nraxhan. “Where can we find shelter?”

Nraxhan was positively quivering as he replied, “We are in a warehouse and storage district. There is no good protection here. We must get back to the center of the city where there will be others -”

“No, we’re beaming out as soon as the ship clears us, and we’ve got injuries. We need the closest building that will provide cover, not a hike through the city in the open.”
“But we...” Nraxhan’s voice trailed off nervously as Finney glared at him. “Right this way, sir.”

They started to walk quickly after Nraxhan, but Jim quickly caught up with Finney. “Sir... did you hear what Nraxhan said?” he asked in an undertone.

Finney gave him an odd look. “What about it?”

“Well... remember what I said about the Araxians looking and acting like the Axanar?” He swallowed tightly. “I think our guides are both Axanar.”

“What do you mean by...”

He was cut off as a round of weapons fire ripped through the air. The tour guide from the power plant went down with a smoking hole in the center of his chest. They heard a very human cry of pain that pierced through the chaos. Jim recognized the sound of both of energy and projectile weapons. Despite the chaos, his training kicked in as Finney started yelling.

“Everyone take cover! Take cover!” Finney was running, leading, and everyone followed, feet pounding and voices yelling.

Ducking and dodging, Jim’s breath was rushing in his chest, heart pounding in his ears as the sounds of screaming and weapons fire wove the deafening cacophony of battle. An energy weapon blast passed so close to his cheek that he felt the heat on his skin.

Buhari was running ahead of him and she stumbled as a blast hit a rock and sent dirt and shrapnel flying at her. Jim caught her under the arm before she hit the ground and kept running, half-carrying her.

Nearby, something else blew up, and Jim couldn’t be bothered to see what. There was a building ahead. Shelter. Cover. Out of the line of fire. Fifty meters away. Twenty.

“Everybody inside!” Finney was yelling at the top of his lungs. He blasted a larger hole in a partially-shattered plate window and stood aside as he waved everyone into the building. “Come on, get in here! Where’s Liu?”

Jim spun around and looked back out through the broken window. Liu had fallen behind, limping as he walked backwards, but holding up his phaser and keeping up a steady stream of fire at the location of their attackers.

“Liu! Stop shooting and run!” Finney yelled, even though it was obvious the guy probably couldn’t run.

Jim pushed Buhari at Finney. “Take her! I’ll get Liu!”

“Kirk! Get back here!”

Jim half-heard Finney but ignored him as dirt flew and weapons fire scorched the air. He hoped the smoke from the power station would conceal him enough.

“Liu! What the - shit.”

“What the hell are you doing, Kirk?” Liu spit out as he continued to hobble backwards on a leg that was pouring blood from somewhere above his left knee.

“Coming back to get you, moron!” Jim reached for Liu’s arm, but was swatted away as Liu
continued to fire.

“No, Kirk. They hit my leg. I can’t run. Get back there! I’ll cover you.”

“Like hell I will!” Before Liu could argue, Jim grabbed him, hoisted him over his shoulder, and made an adrenaline-driven dash back towards the building.

Liu was shouting at him, something hot grazed his arm, but the smoke was thick enough that there was no clear shot. A few crazed, desperate seconds, and Jim crashed through the remnants of a blown-out window into the building.

It was dark and dusty, and there were hands grabbing and people shouting. Someone pulled Liu off his back, and someone else grabbed Jim by the arm and pulled him further into the building.

“Away from the walls and windows.” That was Finney. Jim could barely see features through the shadows in the building. “Come on, this way.”

Shuffling footsteps were muted by the sounds of weapons fire outside. Somewhere in the distance, the rumble of another explosion shook the ground. It was all quieter than the sound of Jim’s own breathing as he gasped for breath. The smoke had burned in his lungs, and the dirt and dust and...

“Is everyone here?” Finney again. He was shuffling through his shoulder sack, and a second later, he activated a light stick. The room lit up, revealing a long space with a low ceiling, full of what appeared to be manufacturing equipment of some sort. “Come on, who do we have? Report.”

“Nadeau, Wilcox, Kirk, Liu, and Buhari, all present and accounted for,” Nadeau said, gasping for breath himself.

“Who else do we have?”

Jim recognized Goldberg, leaning over a prone form. “My team’s all here, sir, but Lieutenant Kim was hit.” He was pressing his hands against a wound on Kim’s shoulder, near her neck. “She’s breathing and she’s got a pulse, but she’s out. We need to get her out of here.”

“We’ve got to evacuate Liu,” Jim spoke up. “Look at his leg.”

Liu was already on the ground, applying pressure to his own wound. Quickly, Jim knelt down and began applying pressure himself. “Let me do it, tough guy.”

“Tough guy, nothing,” Liu said, panting, but he still shoved Jim’s hands away. “After that stunt you pulled?”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Jim hissed.

“You were already injured, asshole,” Liu snapped back, even as he grimaced in pain.

“It’s your blood on my shirt, not mine,” Jim snapped, and even though he knew some of it was his own, he was pretty sure his own small cut had stopped bleeding, and it had been the gaping wound in Liu’s leg that had oozed all over his shirt. He wasn’t going to consider other possibilities. Not now.

“We all need to evacuate,” Finney said firmly. “And... where are our guides?”

“One of them is dead,” Johan said solemnly as he stepped aside, pointing down at Nraxhan, who was sitting on the floor, holding his arm as though it was injured. “I grabbed this one. Whoever
was aiming at us, they were far more interested in hitting our guides than us. Lieutenant Kim was
next to him when she got hit.”


“I’m not injured, sir.” It was out of his mouth before he realized he’d said anything.

“I don’t want to hear it, Kirk. And I told you not to run back.”

“And Liu would be dead.” Adrenaline wasn’t helping his self control.

Finney gave him a sharp look. There was a graze of blood across his cheek, and his face was a
mess of dirt and ash. Jim guessed they all looked like that. “You’re right,” he said harshly. “Liu
would probably be dead, but it could have ended with both of you getting killed. This isn’t a
training exercise, cadet. It worked out this time because you got lucky, nothing more. Right now,
the only thing we can do is to get as many of us out of here alive as possible. So sit down and
follow orders.”

Jim clamped his mouth shut. Finney had been ready to sacrifice Liu. The idea of it burned in Jim’s
head, but... Finney’s call would have been the right one. They could have both been gunned down
out there. Jim had been taught, over and over, that the goal was to save as many lives as possible...
and sometimes, in the heat of battle, you had to cut your losses.

*I wonder what Toland would say now,* he thought bitterly.

It didn’t matter. Toland wasn’t there. Finney was, and if Jim had been shot down while carrying
Liu back, Finney would have had two death certificates to fill out instead of one. It was nothing
more than sheer dumb luck that he hadn’t been shot.

He thought he should have felt good about saving Liu’s life, but instead, he felt guilty. He’d acted
alone, against orders, sticking his neck out, playing the goddamned hero, and could have gotten
two people killed instead of just one. His first real mission, his first real emergency, and he was
already fucking it up.

If ever there was a time to play his part, this was it. Pike had just warned him about his role as a
cadet, and now lives were at stake. He had to lock it up and get in line. “Yes, sir.”

Finney nodded warily, then looked back around. “We’ll send up our guide here in the first group.
Then the rest of us.” He reached for his belt and pulled up his communicator. “Lieutenant Finney
to Athena.”

It was several tense moments before they received a reply.

“Athena to Lieutenant Finney. Status report - what happened down there? We lost you, but we’re
still taking reports from landing parties all over the city.”

“We took direct fire from unidentified shooters. One of the Araxians with us was killed, but
everyone from our party is alive for the moment. We’ve got two critical injuries and three minor
ones.”

“The Parliament building was hit. We’re bringing up critical injuries first. Sickbay can only
receive two at a time. Have your two most critical injuries tagged with activated comm units and
we’ll beam them directly to Sickbay.”

“We’ve got one person applying pressure to our worst casualty. Can we beam up three at once?”
“Just two at a time. That’s all we can handle. Send that individual with the person applying pressure. Sickbay is on standby.”

Finney growled to himself, then spoke to Goldberg. “Where’s your comm unit?”

“On my belt.”

Without another word, Finney grabbed the comm, activated it, hit the homing signal for beam-up, and placed it on Lieutenant Kim’s torso. “Finney to Athena. Energize.”

A moment later, the room lit up as the transporter beam took them.

“Okay, Liu and Buhari next.”

They waited through an infuriating delay as the sickbay crew told them to standby. Too many injuries, too few beds. But soon enough, the transporter activated again, followed by a comm from the ship.

“Athena to Finney. You’ll need to stand by for further medical transport. There are too many critical injuries from other areas.”

“What about normal transport?” Finney all but yelled back into the communicator.

“We’re using the transporters to pull people out of building wreckage. Is your situation stable?”

“For the moment,” Finney snapped.

“Standby.”

The signal cut, and Finney glared furiously at the communicator in his hand before snapping it shut. In an instant, he rounded on Nraxhan. “With all due respect... what the hell is going on here?”

Nraxhan looked up from his spot on the floor as he wrung his hands. “How am I to know? We are a peaceful society! This is -”

“That’s odd,” Finney interrupted him. “I don’t believe you. So let’s try this again.”

“I... there are...” Nraxhan’s shoulders slumped. “There are Araxians who do not wish to come under the protection of the Federation. The isolationists. We have... we have been negotiating with them for many years. It was settled, though! There were very few that opposed the alliance! We had settled this. There should have been no dissidence. This should not be happening!”

As Jim listened, it felt like he was being handed puzzle pieces, and suddenly the picture was making far more sense. And somehow, Jim was suspecting that more than just a very few Araxians opposed the alliance. And also...

“Wait a minute,” Jim cut in, feeling a flash of victory. “You just said we have been negotiating with them. You’re not Araxian. You’re an Axanar.”

Nraxhan’s eyes went wide, and Jim knew he caught the bastard red-handed.

“You talk like an Axanar,” he pressed on. “And... you’re too young to be a founder, but you’ve got the skin tone of an Araxian elder, or a native Axanar. You weren’t born here.”

Jim felt all eyes on him as surely as he felt his heart thudding in an adrenaline-driven rhythm in his chest. His claim about the skin tone was a bluff - he couldn’t really tell without directly comparing
one to the other. But as he stared down at the Axanar on the floor in front of him, whose face was frozen in an expression of shock, and he knew he was right.

“I... I have lived here for many years,” Nraxhan said weakly. “We have been trying to re-forg[e the natural ties between our people. We never meant -”

“We’ll have time to discuss this later,” Finney said, and there was a dangerous edge to his voice. “And you’ll tell whole story to Captain Porter and the rest of the diplomats, Nraxhan. But first, we need to get out of here.” He flipped open his communicator again. “Lieutenant Finney to Athena.”

“Athena here, Lieutenant. We’re almost ready to take you. Please stand by.”

Jim could see the internal struggle playing out on Finney’s face, and how much the guy wanted to yell into the comm and demand immediate beam-up. He was a very young Lieutenant, Jim remembered. They were almost the same age, only Finney had started at the academy when he was eighteen. But he was a Starfleet officer, fully trained and in a position of responsibility, and he knew how to follow orders. Slowly, he lowered the communicator.

Control. Something Jim knew he needed to learn. Patience. Command presence.

“How are you holding up, Kirk?” Finney asked.

“Fine, sir,” he replied, trying to hide his annoyance. “It doesn’t hurt. I told you... this is all Liu’s blood.” But even as he said it, a sharp pain was beginning to throb around the laceration and inside his gut. The adrenaline was wearing off. Didn’t matter. They’d be aboard the ship soon. And Bones would be in sickbay, berating Jim for getting himself in the way of flying shrapnel...

Bones.

Like a hand clenching around Jim’s chest, he was gripped by the realization that Bones was somewhere else in the city, surrounded by explosions. He could be lying somewhere, bleeding out. He could be buried in rubble with crushed limbs, slowly dying in agony. He could already be dead.

Jim felt the blood drain from his face.

A hand on his elbow caught his attention.

“Blues... you all right in there?” came the quiet question.

Jim blinked and looked up at Johan, who was peering down at him with palpable concern. “Yeah,” Jim said in a low tone that was rougher than he’d intended. “I... I just remembered that McCoy and Hererra are somewhere else in the city. I hope they’re okay.” Jim hated himself just then. He hadn’t thought of Hererra at all.

“McCoy’s your doctor buddy, right?” Jim felt a hot flush of shame that Johan seemed to know that Jim’s fears focused on only one of the missing cadets.

“Yeah,” Jim said weakly.

“He’ll be okay,” Johan reassured.

“I hope you’re right.”

“Okay,” Finney said loudly, cutting across everything else. “Prepare to transport. I don’t know how much longer it will be, but I want to be ready the instant we’ve got clearance. Everyone form up,”
Jim stepped away from Johan, giving himself about a meter of space in all directions. The movement made his abdomen ache a bit, but it wasn’t bad. Really, all Jim could think right then was that Bones could be anywhere, and anything could have happened.

An explosion blasted through the front wall of the building. Hot air and dust and smoke rushed inwards, and Jim felt the building shift.

“Move it, people!” Finney yelled through the noise.

Through the dust, Jim thought he heard voices, muffled and distant. He ran, keeping his eyes on the dim beacon of the light stick Finney was carrying. They made their way past rows of machinery in silence, save for the heavy thud of boots against the hard floor. A door arch at the back of the room led to a smaller room, and what looked like an exit door.

“Everybody on me,” Finney commanded, and there was nothing else to do but listen. The group clustered up against the wall. “I’ve got no idea what we’re going to encounter on this side of the building. We can’t stay here. Whoever just blew the building is going to find us if we don’t move.”

Cautiously, Finney pushed the door open a crack, then closed it again. “It’s an alley. Good cover. Everyone follow me.”

In single file, they slipped through the door. The gray stone-like buildings were high on either side of them, but the opening at the end of the alley showed bright daylight.

Finney glanced around the corner of the wall. “There’s a row of buildings across an open area. We’ll have a bit of cover and concealment, but not much. We’re making a dash for the large building about three hundred meters down the street. It’s the only one that looks solid enough to repel weapons fire. Be ready to clear potential hostiles as we enter. Ready?”

He didn’t give anyone time to answer. He ducked around the corner of the building, and that was the team’s cue. Just as they’d done in training, dozens of times, Finney took point with the only phaser they had left, and they burst out of the shadows of the building and into daylight.

The smoke from the burning sub-station wasn’t quite as thick back there, but it still stung Jim’s lungs as he ran. Feet pounding, chest heaving. No time to think, just react. He waited for the weapons to start firing as the distance stretched between the buildings. He was on Johan’s heels as he ran. He could feel the ache in his gut, but adrenaline made the pain dull and distant.

There was no real cover, but they were getting closer to the building. Almost there. There was a small shed-like structure by the side of the road, maybe a hundred meters from their destination. Finney pressed his back up against it and waved everyone else on. “Keep going! Don’t stop!”

Jim rushed past, squashing an instinct to hole up with Finney and fight alongside him. Without a weapon, it would have been a pointless effort, so he kept moving. Nadeau was in the lead, followed Wilcox, the Axanar, then Johan, Jim, and Hodges. Finney would follow, covering their rear. The building was looming. The only noise was the sound of footsteps on gravel, and rough, strained breathing, ragged in Jim’s ears.

It couldn’t last.

An energy weapon blast cut through the air, followed by a full barrage. Johan looked back at him, but Jim shouted, “Keep running!” Weapons fire kicked up dirt all around them. The firepower was centered just ahead of them, on the Axanar. A blast caught the Axanar’s leg, but before he fell, another hit struck him clean at the base of his skull, and he dropped like a stone. It didn’t take a
doctor to know the guy was gone.

Jim couldn’t stop to check anyway. If he slowed down, he was a dead man. Shelter was just ahead. More weapon fire rang in his ears, but he couldn’t stop. Wouldn’t stop.

The recognizable zing of a phaser blast put a gaping hole in the door of the building, and Jim knew it was Finney, shooting them a clear path. Ahead of them, Nadeau made it to the door, followed by Wilcox. With an extra surge of speed, Jim caught up with Johan and practically bowled him into the building.

He cleared the way in time for Hodges to barrel through. They all turned, expecting Finney any second.

The chaos of weapons fire slowed, but didn’t stop, and Jim could still hear the phaser, battling away. Worried, he took a tentative look at everyone, then ventured towards the opening in the door.

“Kirk, stay back!” Nadeau warned.

“What if Finney got hit?” Jim shot back. He was about to sneak a glance around the corner of the door when Finney burst through, stumbling clumsily into Jim’s arms.

“Help,” Finney gasped, and it was pretty obvious he’d been hit.

“Shit,” Jim hissed, and in a heartbeat, Hodges was there, helping carry Finney towards a bench at the back of the room.

“Not here,” Finney croaked. “Deeper into the building. Far enough... to buy time... for beam-out.”

There was a door at the back of the room, and Jim motioned for Nadeau and Wilcox to move ahead and check that it was clear.

Outside, the weapons fire had stopped. Inside, it was dark. They stumbled through the inner door, heading deeper into the building. Down a hallway, and through another door into an open room. Even in the dark, Jim could tell that the room was huge - a storehouse of some sort.

“Here,” Jim said as he found a table and some chairs. He indicated for Hodges to lower Finney into a chair. “Sit down here.”

“No,” Finney gasped. “Floor.”

“Sir?” Jim said, suddenly far more worried.

Carefully, they stretched Finney out on the floor. “Who’s got the pack with the light sticks?” Jim said.

Off to the side, a light stick activated, and Hodges handed it over to him. Jim held the stick up, letting it illuminate the whole space, and also the scorched and bleeding hole in Finney’s chest.

Jim felt his eyes go wide. “Nadeau, get some pressure on that!” he barked out as he grabbed his own communicator. “Athena, this is Cadet Kirk! Athena, respond!”

The few seconds it took for a reply stretched out impossibly long, punctuated by the heavy thud of heartbeats in Jim’s chest.

“... Kirk... is the Athena. Where did... ready for beam-out... who... command?”
“Athena, you’re breaking up. Lieutenant Finney has been seriously injured. Requesting immediate beam-up!” He looked around the room at the four pairs of eyes staring at him, and then down at Finney, whose eyes were closed, before holding his communicator up to his mouth again. “And we can’t wait.”

“... Kirk... signal... cleared to trans... activate comms... prepare... up.”

“You heard them,” Jim said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. “Nadeau, don’t move. Everyone else, form up.” He spoke into the comm again. “We’re ready. Energize.”

Jim waited for the familiar tingle of the transporter beam, but nothing happened. He might have heard a faint whine, and maybe there was a vague shimmer of light, but...

“Kirk to Athena,” he said into the comm, his voice barely hiding nerves and irritation at once. “What just happened?”

“... trouble ... a lock. Sensors ... energy fluctua-... in the structure ... building. What... in your area?”

“It looks like a warehouse or storage building,” Jim said, looking around.

And for the first time, he really took stock of his surroundings. Although the main lights were out, the light stick cast the room in dim shadows that allowed shapes to stand out in contrast. The room was cavernous. Large packing containers were stacked to the ceiling; looming towers forming neat rows through the room, with walkways between them.

“Wait a minute,” Hodges said, before running over to one of the containers. “Blues, toss me the light stick.”

Jim tossed it over, and she caught it neatly before holding it up to one of the crates. “It’s got markings on it that must be Araxian or Axanar... but also Standard.” She looked back over, and her expression spoke volumes. Mostly defeat. “Dilithium. The crates all contain dilithium. The interference field from this much of the stuff must extend at least a hundred meters beyond the exterior walls, if not further. They’ll never beam us out of here.”

“Don’t say never,” Jim shot back. “Kirk to Athena. We’re in a building full of dilithium. Is there any way to modify the transporter? Can you boost the signal?”

It took a long moment before a scratchy reply came through. “Sensors... dilith... interfere... can’t... lock... move... from the building.”

“No,” came a weak groan from the floor. Finney’s eyes were open. “If you guys leave this building, you’re sitting ducks for snipers. You’ll never get out alive.”

“But sir,” Jim said hesitantly, not wanting to argue with either a dying man or a superior officer. “We can’t beam out from here. We’ve got to move.”

“Wait for rescue, Kirk,” Finney choked out, and it sounded like he was choking. Or drowning. Or maybe both.

“But -”

“That’s an order,” Finney said with far more force than should have been possible. Then he looked like he sagged back down against the floor. When he spoke again, his voice was weaker. “Call for a rescue party to beam down. Stay in this building. Hole up. They know... they know where you
are. Just... wait. They should be... should be here quickly.”

Finney’s eyes fell shut, but Jim’s only widened. He adjusted the power level on the communicator, hoping to boost the signal, and spoke again. “Athena, this is Cadet Kirk requesting a rescue party. We are unarmed and there are snipers in the area. We can’t leave this building.”

“Kirk... send... party... able... transport...” The communicator crackled slightly and the message dissolved into an unintelligible mess of static.

“Athena?” Jim ventured nervously, then again, “Athena?”

“Forget it, Blues,” Hodges said, walking over. “With this much dilithium, it’s incredible that we got a message through at all. The longer you used the comm, the more you fried the transmitter.”

“So are they coming?” Nadeau asked, not taking his hands off Finney’s wound.

“You heard what I heard,” Jim replied. “I have no idea.” He knelt down and felt along Finney’s neck for a pulse. It was there, but it was too fast and not very strong. He thought bleakly of the one med kit that had come down with the landing party... slung over Bones’ shoulder. They hadn’t anticipated being split up. Of course, the reminder of Bones only twisted a thick knot of worry in his stomach, but Jim couldn’t let himself get distracted. He couldn’t help Bones, but Finney was right here.

“Sir? Lieutenant Finney, you need to keep your eyes open.”

Bleary eyes opened part way. “Tha’s rich, com’n from you,” Finney slurred. “‘sleep during th’ briefing this morning.”

Jim almost let himself smile at the attempted humor. “Come on, sir. We need a decision. We can’t stay here. What are your orders?”

“Told you already.” He sounded slightly breathless. “We wait for rescue. Use my phaser to defend... defend the entry. They... they’re not after you. Just the Axanar. They’re dead.” His eyes opened just a bit wider. “You... were right, Kirk. They were Axanar. We need to tell the ship... let them know... what’s going on.”

“We’ll try to get a message through,” Hodges spoke up from behind Jim. “Maybe we can boost the comm signal.”

Finney gave a weak nod. “Good. Do that.”

“I’m on it, sir,” Hodges said, and she promptly hunkered down with a communicator and her small pack of tools.

Jim shot her a grateful look, although she didn’t seem to notice it. He looked back at Finney, and at the blood oozing up around Nadeau’s hands. “Here...” He pulled his gray tunic off over his head. The movement caused a sudden jab of pain to his own gut, but he forced himself to ignore it, and quickly began ripping the shirt into strips. “The shirt was already shredded anyway. Use these to help staunch the bleeding.” He handed several strips to Nadeau, who quickly pressed them against the wound.

“We can’t wait like this, Kirk,” Nadeau said. “He can’t.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He looked down at Finney. “Keep breathing steady, sir.” Then he shot Nadeau a look. “Don’t let him drift off.”
Nadeau only nodded. The guy looked absolutely terrified, but there wasn’t much else Jim could do to reassure him at the moment. Besides, he needed to check something.

He walked through the room, and asked Wilcox how her head was doing as he passed by. She said she was fine, and everything else seemed quiet for the moment, so Jim took the excuse to grab a spare light stick and shuffle around to the back side of the table. Feeling nervous, he pulled back the hem of his black undershirt.

It was sticky and thick with dried blood, but he’d assumed that almost all of it was from Liu. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

The laceration wasn’t too long, but it seemed pretty deep. Grotesque even. It was starting to ache beyond just an annoyance. It had barely hurt at first, but adrenaline and the emergency situation could explain that. He couldn’t be sure how much blood of his own blood he’d actually lost, but it couldn’t be *that* much. Besides, this was no time to fixate, and he couldn’t let himself be weak right now. His commanding officer was injured, possibly dying, and they were trapped.

Settling on a course of action, he quickly wadded up a piece of his shredded uniform shirt and pressed it against the gash. Then, he took the longest strip he had and tied it all the way around his waist, holding the first piece like a thick wad of gauze against it. It wasn’t pretty, but it would have to do. Satisfied with his handiwork, he put his shirt back down and turned back to the group to find that his movement hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Johan was staring, eyes fixed on him, first his stomach, and then his face. “Blues, you said it was just a scratch.”

Jim almost missed a beat, but quickly flashed his best reassuring grin. “It is. I just keep tugging on it when I move, so I wanted to put some pressure on it. Keep it from bleeding so much.”

“If you’re sure -”

“I’m sure. It’s fine. We’ve got bigger problems anyway,” Jim said in a rush. “Would you be able to help Gadget with the communicator?”

He gave a humorless laugh. “Why do you think we call her Gadget? I’d just get in the way.” Then his expression changed. “But yeah, I’ll help.”

Jim nodded gratefully and turned around. “Hey Gadget? How’s the communicator coming?”

“I’m trying to combine the power supplies from two communicators into one, but I don’t have the right tools, and it might not be enough power anyway.”

Jim only nodded. “Keep at it.”

Hodges gave him a skeptical look, but Johan grabbed the light stick and held it up over the project, improving the lighting. She gave him a nod, then bent back down over the equipment, tinkering away to the dim glow of the light stick.

Jim stepped back and looked around at the high ceilings and the towering stacks of dilithium crates. Sure, he knew the planet had dilithium, but so much of it in one place? What the hell were they planning to do with it? That led him to the next unnerving question.

*Who controls this dilithium?*

It was dead silent in the building, aside from soft murmurings from the rest of the group. Jim was
sure the silence wouldn’t last long. “I’ll be right back,” he said, then walked deeper into the shadows.

The rows of crates went all the way to the back wall. He found a computer terminal, but without power, there was no way to activate it. Besides, he was certain that all the functions were in the Araxian language. Or Axanar. Whatever.

There were no windows, but there was a door. It had to lead outside because there was daylight filtering around the cracks, and a puff of moving air when he held his hand over the doorjamb. He wanted to open the door and check to see if the back of the building was clear for an escape... but if it wasn’t clear, it would only draw more attention. Still, he filed the option away as a last resort.

Other than that, the only thing of interest was a set of stairs heading upwards. Jim was just about to see where they led when a shout pulled his attention.

“Kirk! Get over here!” Nadeau’s voice was strained with panic.

Jim spun around and hurried over, crouching down next to Finney’s prone form. “What’s going on?”

“He’s unresponsive. I can’t get anything out of him.”

Trying to ignore the ice flooding his veins, Jim pressed his fingers to Finney’s neck. He still had a faint pulse, but he’d stopped breathing. Then, under his fingers, Jim felt Finney’s pulse falter and stop. “Shit,” Jim barked out. With no med kit, they had to do this the old fashioned way. He pushed in and immediately started chest compressions. “Start rescue breathing, Nadeau,” he bit out, then shouted, “Hodges? The comm unit?”

“Just one second... there.” She snapped the cover shut. “It’s not great, but it’s the best I can do.”

“It’ll have to be good enough. Comm the ship.”

She flipped open the comm. “Petty Officer Hodges to Athena. Please respond immediately. Situation critical. Over.”

The comm unit crackled in response. Jim watched as she fiddled with the controls to boost the gain. “Hodges to Athena - “

She was cut off as the comm unit sparked in her hand with a snap of electricity, and she dropped it. It fell to the floor, sputtering and smoking.

Jim’s chest clenched. “Hodges?”

She looked at him and shook her head bleakly. “I was afraid of that. The field created by the dilithium can make electronics short out if they’re not made for these conditions. It was a chance... but... I’m sorry, Blues.”

“Sorry’s not good enough,” Jim snarled, redoubling his efforts to revive the Lieutenant. “Damn it, Finney. Don’t you fucking do this to me! The rescue party is coming. You need to reprimand me for cussing at a superior officer! Come on!”

Everything else in the room zoned out as Jim did compressions, checked for a pulse, and started compressions again. He’d pause every so often for Nadeau to give two breaths, then start right back in with a desperation he’d never felt before. In the back of his mind, he heard Bones yelling about old-fashioned, barbaric techniques and broken ribs and telling him he was doing it wrong,
which only drove him to greater desperation. Finney was dying, and Bones might already be dead, and how did everything go so wrong, so fast?

“Blues. Hey, Blues! Blues!”

Hands were on his shoulders, pulling him back. It was Hodges. “You need to give it up. You’ve been at it for too long.”

“No! We can’t stop until we get him to sickbay!” He struggled, but Nadeau was also pulling him back, his hands now free of their burden.

“He’s lost too much blood, Kirk. I’m sorry.”

Jim was breathing fast, still straining against the hands on his shoulders, staring at Finney. Even in the shadows, the dark stain of blood was visible across the man’s gold shirt, forming a puddle underneath his body. The chest compressions had probably made him bleed faster. Jim realized, with a sickening note of finality, that he was gone. He looked back and forth between Hodges and Nadeau, and finally, he slumped in their grasps. “Yeah, so am I,” Jim said roughly.

Everyone fell silent, which was fine, because the buzzing in Jim’s ears had overtaken everything. His commanding officer was dead. They were three cadets and two crewmen in the middle of a civil uprising on an alien planet. They couldn’t contact the ship, and they couldn’t beam out.

Forcing himself to move, Jim reached over to where he’d dropped the last pieces of his shredded uniform shirt. The piece with his insignia patch was lying on top. Feeling numb, he placed the piece of cloth across Finney’s eyes, with the insignia centered.

The silence persisted.

Finally, Johan spoke up. “So, what’s the plan?”

Jim felt a jolt at the question, and shook his head to clear it. There would be time to mourn later. Right now, there were five living people in the room, and he needed to focus on them. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Johan replied calmly - at least, calmly for a person who was in the middle of a battle and had just watched a man die, “what are we going to do?”

Jim frowned. “We’ve got our orders. We wait for rescue. The Athena has got to have already sent people down. Finney told us to wait.”

“Lieutenant Finney’s not in charge anymore,” Hodges said gently.

Jim’s eyes widened as he looked around at the other four pairs of eyes fixed on him. “Johan,” he said tentatively, “you’ve got seniority here.”

“No, Blues. I’m a crewman. So’s Gadget.”

“Then...”

“You three are officer interns,” Johan said flatly. “You’re all acting as Ensigns. So who’s in charge?”

Wilcox stood up slowly. “Kirk... I think it’s you.”

“What?”
Nadeau spoke up. “The squad leader rotation roster. This week, it's you, Kirk.”

Jim felt his world reeling. “That’s just a training roster,” he said in a rush. “I don’t think they intended it for something like this. Besides, even though you two are crewmen, you’ve got more real experience.”

“Experience with energy conduits,” Hodges said. “We’re engineering techs. We didn’t go to the Academy. We don’t have the tactical experience to fight our way out of a paper bag. You’re trained for this. You’re in charge.”

“I switched to piloting because tactics wasn’t my thing,” Wilcox said.

“And you’ve outscored me in... well... let’s be honest... everything,” Nadeau admitted.

Four pairs of eyes were locked on him. Hodges took a step forward. “What do we do, sir?”

There were a dozen plans spinning in Jim’s head. They could try to exit the rear of the building, get beyond the interference of the dilithium, and call for beam-out. They could climb further up in the building and use the vantage point for defense. They could go out the front and collectively offer surrender. Or... he could follow his gut instinct. He could go out the front, distracting the enemy while everyone else escaped... playing the lone wolf... just as he’d been told not to do.

So many options, but only one choice.

Pike had told him to trust his instincts, and his instincts were telling him to stick his neck out while having everyone get the hell out of there immediately... but he’d also told him not to act on his own, and reminded him quite strictly of his place. He was Cadet James T. Kirk, and he had his orders.

“We stay,” Jim said, hating the finality in his own voice. “But that doesn’t mean we do nothing. Wilcox, how’s your head?”

“A bit achy.”

“Think you’re still good with a phaser?”

“Good enough.”

Jim grabbed Finney’s phaser and tossed it to her. “You’ll guard the front of the building. Gadget?”

“Yes, sir?”

The title sir didn’t sit right, but Jim plowed on. “You and Nadeau look for anything on this level that might be useful. Wires, transmitters, equipment, weapons... but mostly, see if you can find a secondary power supply. The sub-station is shot, but there might be a generator in a place like this. Maybe we can use the power boost to get a signal out.”

“You got it.”

“Johan...there’s a set of stairs at the back of the room. Go up there and see what you can find. Might be an office or control room with a computer or communication equipment. If this is a dilithium storage facility, they’d have to have equipment that could transmit through the field.” He looked questioningly at Johan, not really sure what he was asking until the man gave a solemn nod of approval.
It was exactly what he needed. Jim nodded back. “Everyone, keep your eyes open for weapons we can use. And... stay clear of any windows.” Then he cast a glance down at Finney’s body. “I’m staying here. Honor guard, as long as possible.”

“Absolutely. Sounds like a good plan,” Wilcox said, and the rest of the team seconded her.

The easy agreement seemed both familiar and foreign. He’d led enough missions in training simulations, but this was real. Too fucking real. Finney’s body was real. The burning power station was real. Every decision Jim made was going to be cold hard reality for all five of them. “And...” Jim swallowed tightly. “If all else fails, and we get raided before a rescue party arrives... there’s a back door to this room. It leads out of the building. If the attackers enter the building, make for the back door, get far enough away from the building, and comm for beam-up.”

“What about you and... Finney?” Nadeau asked.

“I...” Jim realized his tone must have given him away. He’d planned on staying with Finney’s body. With a sigh, he gave up that idea. “We’ll have to leave him.”

“He would have ordered you to,” Wilcox said.

“I know.” It wasn’t good enough, but that was exactly what Finney would have ordered. Finney had experience. Finney’s dying orders were to stay there, but he never would have told them to risk their lives just to bring back a body. “For now, we follow his orders to stay here. We’re out of the line of fire. Every time we expose ourselves, more people get shot.”

Even as he said it, it sounded wrong. Staying wasn’t right. The rest of them could slip out the back while Jim distracted the shooters at the front of the building. Or hell, maybe they could all make a run for it. They shouldn’t stay... but they would. There could be shooters at the back of the building. They might run directly into more trouble before they could get far enough from the dilithium to beam up. And... he had Finney’s orders. Steeling himself, Jim gave a decisive nod. “Okay, everyone, get to it.”

But as everyone walked away on their respective assignments, and Jim crouched down next to the body of his commanding officer, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was completely fucking this up.

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“What the hell just happened?” Leonard demanded as soon as he found his voice again. He’d been frozen in place as he stared at the smoke billowing upwards from all over the city, just standing in the middle of the quad as the aftermath of well over a dozen explosions darkened the sky. The science facility was untouched, but beyond the research campus, the devastation had to be immense. “Rhexen, what just happened?”

The Araxian folded his hands solemnly in front of him. “We are speaking with one voice, McCoy. We have been held out of the talks, and barred from our own halls of Parliament. Democratic elections have been sabotaged. Our leaders are not our own people. Our Department of Peacekeepers has become a tool of oppression. Even our way of life is being taken from us, all in the name of rejoining the Araxians with the Axanar. We could not stand idly by and allow this to continue.”

Leonard could only stare at him in disbelief. Revolution. A political coup. A civil war. People were dying all around him, and underneath his complete sense of shock, one thought solidified, hot and heavy in Leonard’s mind: Jim was right. “It’s an illegal government... and you... you’re trying to overthrow them,” he stammered.

Rhexen nodded, then turned and looked up at the closest column of smoke, and spoke with an odd mix of both remorse and satisfaction. “And that would be the remains of the Department of Peacekeepers.”

Leonard shook his head, still not quite able to accept what was happening. This was too much to swallow. “There has to have been another way!”

“Do you think we have not tried other ways, Terran?” Rhexen’s voice was heavy with regret.

“Then you should have tried them again! How many innocent people were just killed, huh?” Leonard was snarling - almost yelling - at Rhexen, but diplomacy be damned. They were in the middle of a battle. Diplomacy was the last thing on his mind, far behind the hundreds or thousands of lives that had just been destroyed. “How many?”

Rhexen, to his credit, actually managed to look slightly apologetic, but his response was contrary. “Very few Araxians, and their loss pains us all. We took great care to evacuate our people from our target zones. But if some were lost, they were Araxian, and would have wanted it this way.”

“What way? Killing innocent bystanders? Destroying your city?” Leonard was beside himself with fury. There were hundreds of ways to solve conflict. Hell, there was an entourage of diplomats from all over the Federation just down the goddamned street! Someone should have come forward. Looking at the smoke and hearing the distant screams, he knew that those options had been destroyed in a blast of fire.

“Not the whole city. Not our research facilities, our medical clinics, our homes, our schools... they are safe. We targeted only those locations which were held by the Axanar. Bastions of their power over our population.”

Leonard felt his eyes go wide. “Parliament.”

Rhexen nodded. “I regret deeply any Federation losses.”

“Goddammit! Hererra, come with me!” Without the slightest hesitation, Leonard turned towards
“Stop!” Rhexen’s shout made him freeze. “Do not interfere! It is too dangerous!”

Leonard spun back around. “Dangerous, my ass! I’m not the one who just blew up half a city. I’m a doctor, dammit! You said Jethan wanted to help people. What do you think I do, huh?”

Rhexen looked at him with palpable sadness. “I respect you, young Terran. Do what you must, but be cautious. Those who interfere are at risk.”

Leonard nodded uneasily. “Yeah. I kinda figured that.” With that, he turned and started running towards the edge of the research campus, clutching his medkit like a security blanket. Hererra was right on his heels. When they reached the main gate, the contrast between the unblemished campus and the main street was painful to see.

The building across the street was decimated, reduced to crumbling vestiges of walls and rafters, spewing smoke like an oversized chimney. Windows were blown out, debris was strewn everywhere. Leonard could scarcely take it all in.

The building was a total loss, but Leonard quickly focused on what might still be saved.

“Hererra, over there. We’ve got casualties.” On their own side of the street, debris had hit pedestrians. A vehicle had rolled on its side, and it looked like people were trapped inside. “Did you take the First Responder course?”

“Yes, but I... I don’t remember... I’m not -”

“It’ll have to be good enough. Start triaging.” Without another look at Hererra, Leonard ran over to the closest casualty and pulled out his tricorder.

The Araxian was lying on his back, half in the road, half on the sidewalk. His arm was bent at an angle that couldn’t be natural, and his eyes were closed, but he was breathing. “Hey, can you hear me?” Leonard asked as he scanned.

Two bleary eyes opened. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

“I’m a doctor... a medic. I’m here to help.” He had no idea where to manually find pulses or other telltale biosigns on an Araxian, but he’d saved several sets of baselines in his tricorder when he’d shadowed Jethan for the day. The tricorder was telling him that this guy was in bad shape.

Just like hundreds of other Araxians all over the city. Axanar. Araxians. Did it matter?

Leonard pulled out his comm unit and flipped it open, hoping to whatever powers might take pity that he’d be able to get through to the ship. “Doctor McCoy to the Athena.”

He waited for a reply. Too long. Just when he was about to hail again, a response came through.

“Athena to Doctor McCoy. Reports have come in from every main landing party, and we’re evacuating people now. Why aren’t you with the rest of the cadet group?”

“That doesn’t matter!” Leonard snapped. “Hererra and I are near the biosciences research campus and Peacekeepers building. They’ve blown up the Peacekeepers’ building and we’ve got casualties! Requesting emergency transport for patients only.”

“Denied. We’re evacuating crew members and Federation diplomats. We don’t have the facilities
“to take local casualties aboard the ship.”

“What? Good God, man, these people are dying!”

“Araxian medical services have been activated city-wide. We’re coordinating with them, but the situation is still unstable. You and Cadet Hererra are to activate your comm signals for transport and standby to beam up.”

“But there are casualties here, and -” He looked around. Other than the dead and dying, the street was deserted. “- and there’s not a damned medic in sight. I’m staying until medical personnel arrive.”

“Request denied. We will open a transport window for you shortly. Prepare to beam up.”

Leonard flipped his comm unit closed and grumbled under his breath, “Like hell I will.” How could they evacuate him, but not an injured soul? Bastards. Reaching into his med-kit, he pulled out a neurovascular regen unit - his own design, finally permitted for limited field use - and fixed it to the Araxian’s head. A minute later, a bone was set, and a stabilizer unit was fixed in place. It was a pathetic treatment, but it was better than nothing.

He moved on to the next. Dead. Then the ones in the vehicle. One dead, one unconscious.

His comm buzzed, but he ignored it. He wasn’t beaming up. Not until medical help arrived for these people.

“Hererra, how’s it coming?” Leonard called out.

“I put a tourniquet on one,” came the hollered reply from about fifty or sixty meters down the street. “His leg was gone below the knee. The last two were already dead, sir.”

The kid looked pale and terrified, and Leonard didn’t miss the fact that a fellow cadet had just called him sir. Rank or not, he was the doctor on the scene; he was in charge. He’d been responsible for lives before... but that had been in surgical wards. This was completely different. He was a leader in a battlefield, and the only doctor at a mass casualty disaster. They couldn’t stop. Not when lives could still be saved.

“Come over and help me get this guy out of the car.”

Carefully, they managed to pull the unconscious Araxian out of the vehicle and lay him out on the ground. He was a mess of internal injuries, and Leonard only had three vascular stabilizers left. Applying two, he was able to stop the worst of the bleeding, but without surgical intervention soon, the guy wasn’t going to make it. There wasn’t much Leonard could do for him in the field. He stood and surveyed the disaster scene that surrounded them, then looked at Hererra.

“Have you checked the people on the side of the street closer to the Peacekeeper building?”

Hererra shook his head. “I haven’t gotten to that side yet. I figured the ones who were most likely still alive were on this side of the street.”

“Makes sense, but we need to check all of them. I’ll work on this guy, and you run over there and see what you can find.”

Hererra nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“I’m a doctor, not a sir,” Leonard grumbled to himself as the cadet took off. Really, he couldn’t
expect too much from the kid. Hererra was a bioscience specialist. He worked with tissue samples in tidy little capsules and microbes under imaging scanners... not flesh and blood and bone, broken under his hands. Not like this. And this? This was a mess.

He leaned over to begin setting the first stabilizer when a sharp crack ripped through the air, echoing off building walls and freezing Leonard’s blood in his veins. He looked up just in time to see Cadet Hererra, almost all the way to the other side of the street, clasp his hands over his chest. He spun around on wobbly legs, giving Leonard a brief, too-clear view of the vivid red oozing down his gray shirt. The man took one haunted look at Leonard before keeling forward.

“Hererra!” Leonard jumped to his feet, but as he started towards the cadet’s prone body, another shot rang out, slicing the air between them and kicking up dust where the projectile struck the street. A warning shot.

Leonard looked around desperately. He had no idea who was shooting, or from where, but he couldn’t let himself be scared off. “Goddammit, I need to go help him!” he yelled, before taking a tentative step forward.

Another weapon burst, this time an energy weapon, shot down and struck Hererra’s body. A wisp of smoke rose from Hererra’s back, and Leonard didn’t have to be told that the weapon had been set to kill.

Between the stillness of the street, the blood rushing in his ears, and the far distant sound of sirens and screaming, something inside Leonard shut down. Smoke continued to pour from the building, choking the air around him, but it didn’t matter because he couldn’t breathe anyway. He stood frozen, staring at the lifeless body in the street that had been Cadet Hererra only seconds ago, and let the cold facts wash through his veins like ice.

He’d ordered Hererra towards the building.

That’s why Hererra was dead.

There was nothing he could do. With the shame of abandoning the dying people in the street and leaving his fellow cadet’s body clashing with the rapidly growing fear for his life, Leonard pulled out his comm unit and activated it.

“Leonard McCoy to Athena. One to beam up.”

*********

He materialized on the transporter platform aboard the Athena.

One of the medics that he vaguely knew from Sickbay ran up to him, tricorder out, but he waved the guy off as he walked down the stairs. Or maybe walked was the wrong word, because his feet felt like lead and his legs were clumsy and unsteady. His ears were buzzing strangely.

A Lieutenant was directly in front of him, and Leonard finally realized the guy was all but shouting at him. He could only hear one word.

Hererra.

It was hard to speak, and all Leonard had was a one-word answer.

“Dead.”
The Lieutenant was saying something else, but Leonard kept walking. Out of the transporter room and into the corridor. The medic was hovering at his elbow, but didn’t touch him. He moved on autopilot, letting his feet take him to the familiar doors of sickbay.

Then the doors slid open, and there was chaos. Groaning and crying patients created a discordant but familiar maelstrom of sound with the strained voices of doctors and nurses and the beeping of equipment. The stench of smoke and dust and blood mingled in the air, thick and vulgar. Instinct took over.

“Doctor Brex!” Leonard called out, storming into sickbay. “Where do you need me?”

A familiar head of brown hair popped up over a treatment bed in the main bay. “McCoy! Thank the fates you’re alright. Treatment bay three. Projectile weapon wound to the upper leg. It’s under stabilizers but it needs repair.”

“I’m on it.”

Leonard ran over to the scrubs locker and pulled off his filthy gray uniform shirt, tossed it aside, and tugged on a standard scrub top. He almost faltered at the sight of his crumpled uniform on the floor, struck by a sudden vision of Hererra’s body crumpled on the ground, but forced himself to shrug it off. This was a crisis. There were lives to be saved.

A quick run through the sonic sterilizer blasted the grime and contamination from his body, but his mind painted images of alien blood, oozing from dying bodies on the street. He couldn’t do anything to help them now. He shuddered, grit his teeth, and hurried over to treatment bay three, where a living man was lying on the biobed. Someone who could be saved.

It was one of the cadets - that security cadet Jim had introduced him to, and Leonard felt guilty at the fact that he couldn’t remember the kid’s name. At the same time, another thought slammed him.

Jim.

If this guy was onboard, that probably meant Jim was onboard. But if this cadet - Liu, his brain finally supplied - was injured, that meant Jim’s group had taken fire.

Leonard pushed that thought to the back of his mind. He had an injured patient. “Cadet Liu?”

The kid’s head popped up weakly, and despite his injured state, his gaze was lucid. “Doctor McCoy!”

“Hey, relax there, kid. Rest your head. How bad is the pain?” Leonard was already grabbing the tricorder from the bedside and getting a closer scan.

“Forget the pain,” Liu bit out. “Did the rest of the team get back? Nobody will tell me anything.”

Leonard swore his own heart stopped for a second. “They didn’t all beam up at once?”

Liu shook his head. “They evacuated the worst injuries directly to sickbay first. They were going to beam up the rest of them after that. Regular transport. But I can’t say for sure.” He looked down towards his own leg. “For some reason, they thought they should send me up with the injured folks.”

“Couldn’t imagine why,” Leonard said, giving in to sarcasm. Then, before he could stop himself, he asked, “Who else was injured?”
Liu nodded in understanding. “Lieutenant Kim, energy weapon. They got her out first. Goldberg had a cut on his arm, but he wasn’t too bad. Buhari got hit with some shrapnel, but it didn’t look too deep. And I know you want to know... Kirk just had a scratch, so they beamed me up before him.”

Leonard nodded. That meant Jim might still be down there, but he was probably already aboard the ship.

“Actually...” Liu continued, “I got shot out in the open. Kirk had already made it to cover but... he came back for me. Carried me to the building. While they were shooting at him.” A pained look took over his expression, and Leonard figured it wasn’t from the injury. “McCoy, I’d be dead if it weren’t for Kirk.”

Leonard’s mouth went absolutely dry. “That’s Jim for ya.” Goddamnit, Jim, you’d better be okay! But he didn’t have time to fixate on that. Jim could take care of himself. He was good at that. Hell, he was probably already down in the rec room with the other cadets, telling war stories. In the meantime, Leonard had a job to do. He grabbed a hypospray from the tray, snapped a vial of sedative into it, and calibrated it to put Liu out long enough to repair the damage.

“He’s a good man,” Liu said softly.

A strange sensation jolted up Leonard’s spine. “Yeah. He is.” No time for sentiment. Injuries to repair. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a large artery and several major muscle groups to patch up, so you’re taking a nap.” He reached over and pressed the hypospray to Liu’s arm, then turned around and began gathering up equipment.

“Doctor McCoy?”

Leonard looked back, vascular fusion tool and laser guide in hand. “Yes?”

“Where’s Hererra?”

Leonard hoped to whatever gods were listening that his expression didn’t waver. “Resting,” was all he could come up with.

Liu nodded and blinked. Yawned. Then said, “Good. Y’know... his brother was security. Said he didn’t want t’be a redshirt, like his brother. Promised his mom he’d come back.” Liu blinked again, then his eyes flickered shut.

Leonard stared at him. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he knew he was going to have to file a full report on Hererra’s death. He also knew he wouldn’t be blamed, not really. He was going to get enough blame from himself. Still, as long as there was a living man to be healed, Leonard couldn’t let himself be caught up in those who were dead and gone. They could mourn later.

And find Jim.

He growled to himself and set to work.

**********

Jim was living on borrowed time, but that was nothing new. He’d been doing that since the day he was born. What really had him on edge was that he knew his whole team was living on borrowed time.

He’d checked the chrono on his comm with a compulsion bordering on neurotic, and less than ten
minutes had ticked away. There had been no more heart-stopping rounds of weapons fire, no more explosions. In fact, it had been eerily quiet.

Jim had kept an honor guard near Finney’s body. His gut ached, but it wasn’t bad. Adrenaline was keeping him going. It was only a matter of time before somebody showed up. He just had no idea whether it would be a rescue party or a group of hostile locals. Waiting was a gamble. A horrible gamble. Jim had played enough poker in his life to know when to fold. They needed to get out of there. The problem was that he wasn’t just gambling with his own cards this time. Besides that, he had his orders.

“Hey Blues!” Johan’s voice echoed from somewhere above him.

“Plato?” Jim stood and craned his neck, squinting and searching the shadows above him. “What did you find?”

“Something that looks like bad news. There’s a room up here, off the catwalk. It’s some sort of control room, and... the Araxian technology is a bit different, but I think these are transmitter devices.”

An odd feeling began churning in his stomach. “What sort of transmitters? Is it anything we can use to boost a signal to the ship?”

“Maybe. But... I think these are designed for explosives.”

Jim felt his eyes go wide. “Stay there!” he called out. “I’m coming up to take a look.” Not that he had any chance of doing more than Johan. Maybe they should ask Hodges. Johan had been absolutely right - there was a damned good reason they called her Gadget. She could figure out anything made of wires, conduits, and energy matrices. Still, he had to look first. He was in charge.

He looked down at Finney’s body and said sadly, “I’m sorry, sir,” but he’d only taken three steps when a distant sound froze him on the spot.

Gunfire. And then, much closer, the familiar sound of phaser fire.

“Wilcox! What are you seeing up there?” Jim yelled.

“We’ve got incoming hostiles, Kirk!” she yelled back, her voice echoing and muffled from the front of the building.

Without even thinking, his feet were carrying him towards her. “Can you hold them off?” he asked as he entered the front room.

Wilcox was ducked behind the wall, popping up and firing out into the daylight before ducking down again. “I don’t know. They were approaching, and must have seen me watching them. They fired first,” she said before jumping up and shooting again. “They’re coming closer.”

“Fuck,” Jim hissed.

It was a final decision: stand and fight, or get the hell out of there.

It was a decision he should have made before, but now he had no choice. He’d known what he should have done all along. They should have gotten out of there when they’d had a clear chance at it. Now, they’d be lucky to escape with their lives. At least now he knew what to do, and he only had one word.
“Evacuate!” Jim yelled, knowing that the rest of the team, deeper inside the building, would hear him. “Wilcox, give me the phaser! Go!”

Without hesitating, Wilcox slapped the phaser into his hand and darted into the depths of the building. Jim quickly popped up into the open window to let loose a round of phaser fire, and it gave him a good look at the three Araxians running towards the building, all with weapons trained on him. Damn, they were getting close. One of them squeezed off a shot that hit the wall just below him, sending out a burst of concrete and dust, and Jim barely managed to duck back down as a hail of weapons fire struck the wall.

There was no way he could fight off three of them. With the desperation of a man being chased by death itself, Jim ran after Wilcox.

“Everyone evacuate!” he yelled into the shadows of the building. “Out the back door! Everyone go! Move, move, move!” He was breathing hard, ducking around stacks of shipping crates. “Don’t wait for anyone! Get to the back door, activate your homing signals, and get far enough from the building for beam-up!”

Behind him, Jim heard the sounds of the hostiles entering the front of the building.

In the dim light of the storehouse, Jim could see Johan moving down the stairs. Ahead, a flash of daylight temporarily blinded him as the back door opened and shut, and Hodges was gone. Wilcox followed her a second later.

Nadeau stopped just inside the back door. “Where do we rendezvous, Kirk?” he shouted.

“On the fucking ship, Nadeau!” Jim yelled back as he ran.

Nadeau was gone, and Jim watched as Johan emerged from behind a tower of crates. “Hurry, Blues!” he yelled, hesitating instead of running.

“Don’t wait!” Jim ordered. “Go, go, go!”

Behind him, the voices were louder. Johan was turning on his heel and making a break for the back door. Jim was hot on his tail. Everything felt too slow and too fast all at once as Jim’s breath wheezed in his chest and his whole world narrowed to that doorway.

Escape. So close.

A bolt of light - an energy weapon blast - ripped past him through the air and struck Johan squarely in the lower back.

Jim’s momentum carried him forward, and he caught Johan, rolling with him and cushioning his fall. The impact of landing on the hard floor knocked the wind out of Jim, and he lay there for a moment, unable to move. The pain in his gut had redoubled. Johan was lying half on top of him.

There were three weapons aimed at his head.

Out of pure reflex, Jim twisted as much as he could to shield Johan with his body, although he had no illusions that he could do anything to protect Johan, or himself, from three armed assailants.

He braced himself for the inevitable, but then, to his surprise, one of the weapons lowered slightly. Jim saw the face of one of his attackers staring down at him. Then, with an unexpected tone of regret, the Araxian said, “I apologize that you have become involved in our revolution, Federation Terrans, but it appears that we must now take you hostage.”
Leonard finished working on Liu’s leg in short order. It had been an ugly wound, but a simple repair. The guy would sleep off the anesthetic while he received a dose of blood replenishers. He’d be fine.

Really, all Leonard wanted to do was to go find Jim and make sure he was okay, but there were other injured people to tend to. By now, they should have evacuated most Starfleet personnel from the planet, starting with the gaggle of cadets. That meant if Jim wasn’t in sickbay, then he hadn’t been severely injured. Even though it was morbid, Leonard had already checked the ship’s record of those killed in action. Jim wasn’t on the list.

On the other hand, two security officers, including Lieutenant Vooohrs, were already listed amongst the dead, along with the Rigellian Ambassador, a science tech, and one cadet whose face Leonard couldn’t push out of his mind. It was sobering to see how quickly a simple diplomatic mission had turned into a nightmare. Even though he knew shit-all nothing about diplomacy, Leonard knew the fallout was going to be awful.

What he didn’t know was how it had all gone so wrong.

Hadn’t he given his superior officers enough warnings and clues? Hadn’t Jim tried to get them to listen? For that matter, what the hell was the captain thinking anyway? Dammit, he didn’t even know what to think himself anymore.

Hadn’t all the problems been related? What about the unexplained injuries to Brex and T’Val? The odd behavior of different groups of Araxians? Were they really Araxians, or were they Axanar? What Jethan and Rhexen had told him made so much sense, but who was wrong and who was right? What would the Axanar say if they told their side of the story? And... goddammit, what the hell was really happening down there?

Leonard’s mind was churning furiously as he blew through Sickbay, looking for the next patient who needed his help. He hurried over to treatment bay one where Doctor Brex seemed to be finishing placing osteo-stabilizers on a human’s leg to prep for an osteostim session. Brex was instructing a medic, “Okay, take him to osteostim for a 20-minute session, level seven. He needs longer, but we’ve got too many patients to do full treatments for everyone right now.”

“Yes, Doctor,” the medic replied as they transferred the patient quickly to a gurney, and the medic pushed him away.

Brex turned his attention to Leonard and spoke without ceremony. “McCoy, I can’t tell you how good it is to see you. When I heard what was happening, and I knew you were down there, and there was no way for me to know if you were okay, I... well, I’m glad you made it.”

“So am I.” He looked at Brex’s tense expression and had to ask. “How are you holding up?”

Brex looked around Sickbay, then gave Leonard a plaintive look. “My patients are in pain, my staff is frantic, and I can’t sense any of it from them.” He clenched his jaw and squared his shoulders. “But... I’m a doctor, and a Starfleet Officer. I’ve run a Sickbay through more than a few major disasters. I don’t have to feel my patients’ anguish to know they’re hurting, and I still have the skills to treat them. They need us.” He glanced back over his shoulder, and when he looked back at Leonard, his expression was calm again. “What about you?”
“I…” Leonard hesitated. He didn’t want to talk about it. They were in a crisis, and there were patients who needed him, but...

“Leonard?” Brex was frowning in concern, and Leonard knew he couldn’t - shouldn’t - hide information. Not from Brex.

“Down on the planet,” he began uneasily, “I was touring the science facilities when the bombing began. And...” He looked back over his shoulder, then back at Brex, and finally gave in. “And we lost Cadet Hererra.” Then he shook his head angrily. “No, dammit, I lost Cadet Hererra. I’d taken charge of the scene, and I sent him towards the building to triage victims... and they... they shot him, sir. Right in front of me. There was nothing I could do.” He forced himself to take a couple of deep breaths. He had to hold it together.

For a split second, Brex’s eyes widened, but he quickly schooled his expression back into its professional neutrality. “I understand. Can you still focus on your job?”

Leonard nodded. “Don’t much have a choice. I’ve already let one too many people die today.”

“Good man,” Brex said. “We’ll talk when the dust settles. Right now, we’ve got bigger problems to...” Brex’s voice trailed off, then he flinched and quickly pressed his right hand to his temple.

“Doctor Brex!” Leonard grabbed Brex’s elbow as the Betazoid teetered slightly on his feet. “Are you okay? Need to sit down?”

“No... I’m fine. Just a headache.” He looked up at Leonard with a wan grin, but his face was still slightly pinched with discomfort. “Been a stressful day.”

“You’re telling me. But if you’re having trouble, maybe you should sit down for a little while before -”

Brex shook his head, cutting him off. “It’s annoying, but I can manage it. We’ve got patients who need us.” He stood a bit straighter, even though the motion looked forced. “You ready to work?”

“Always.”

“Good.” Without any further hesitation, Brex hurried out of the office with Leonard on his heels.

Sickbay was chaos, and Leonard was glad to descend into the madness again as Brex rattled off instructions. “We’re setting up a head and neck trauma case for surgery in bay one, and I’m taking that one. Singh and Ankewicz are working on a complex trauma in bay three. There’s a security crewman in bay two. Broken ribs, punctured lung, broken clavicle. He’s already been sedated for his comfort, and the injuries are under stabilizers. I need you to take over his care. Have nurse Stewart assist. When you’re done, check in with me and we’ll see where you’re needed next.”

“I’m on it,” Leonard said.

A few minutes later, he was just about to begin repairing broken ribs on the crewman in bay three when the intercom sounded an alert.

“Bridge to Medical. The Parliament building has taken another hit. One additional Federation casualty. Critical injuries. Please standby for emergency transport.”

Leonard heard Brex’s voice call out, “This is Medical! We’re standing by!” Then, “I need a team of medics ready to receive the casualty. Singh, let Ankewicz handle your patient. I need you to evaluate our incoming.”
Outside of the treatment bay, Leonard watched two young medics hurry by. He tried to ignore it and focus on the patient in front of him as he prepared to open, but something about the report was bothering him slightly. *I thought all the Federation and Starfleet personnel would have been brought up to the ship already.* He was about to call out his question to Brex, but before he could, the familiar hum of a transporter beam filled the room, followed by a flurry of voices.

Leonard’s professional focus was on repositioning a broken rib, but he couldn’t completely ignore the buzz from the center of the room.

“This is... this is a Kazarite.” She cleared her throat. “Doctor Brex, have you ever worked on a Kazarite?”

“No,” came the reply. Then after a pause, “I’ve never met one.”

There were sounds of people shuffling around and a tricorder whirring. “Patient is conscious with crush injuries to both upper and lower extremities, head trauma, some internal bleeding. Connor, go grab a stretcher. Nguyen, get his robes off.” There were more shuffling noises, then Singh’s hesitant voice.

“Doctor Brex?”

Something in her tone caught Leonard’s attention, and he whispered to Nurse Stewart, “Hold this stabilizer here.”

Stewart gave a questioning look, but then he nodded and smoothly took over the osteostabilizers.

Feeling a bit guilty for walking away from a procedure, but knowing that the patient was perfectly stable for the moment, Leonard let his curiosity get the better of him. He went to the end of the treatment bay and looked into the center of the room.

On the floor was an alien of a species Leonard didn’t recognise. Humanoid with heavy features, dark, gray-brown skin, and darker hair. He wore long layered robes, which the medic was in the process of cutting away. He appeared to be semi-conscious... and babbling to himself.

Off to the side, Doctor Brex was standing there, staring at him, with a startled expression on his face.

Leonard took in all of this in just a couple of seconds before springing into action. He positioned himself at the patient’s head, opening the airway and holding the neck steady, and nodded at Doctor Singh. “Let me help you get him moved.”

Singh looked up from her tricorder. “Thanks. Let him get these robes off first.”

Leonard looked down at the being’s face. He was smeared with dirt and ash, and an ooze of blue-purple liquid, which Leonard figured was normal for this species’ blood, trickled across his brow. His eyes were open, but glassy and distant. Leonard didn’t know the baselines for this species, but if they were anything recognizable, he was in shock and teetering on the edge of consciousness.

He was also mumbling.

In *Standard.*

“...it was my mistake... they convinced me... had no choice... should have known... should have known...”
Leonard leaned down closer. “What should you have known?”

For a fraction of a second, Leonard swore the alien’s eyes focused on him, then they closed again, and the mumbling continued. “My fault. My fault... so sorry... I never meant... by the time I realized... it was too late. So sorry...”

“McCoy, we’re ready to move him,” Singh barked out.

Leonard started, but quickly responded, helping to move the patient onto the lev-stretcher. The Kazarite groaned slightly, but then kept babbling to himself. Leonard wanted to listen, but the stretcher was being pushed away with Doctor Singh leading two medics and the last available nurse.

For a moment, Leonard stared after them as they rounded the corner to the last treatment area, usually reserved for isolation cases, but they had run out of regular spaces to put patients. Then, he realized he wasn’t the only one standing there, staring. He cast a glance sideways.

“Doctor Brex?”

Brex was standing still as a statue, his expression half-stunned, half-confused. Finally, he spoke. “He’s familiar.”

Leonard frowned. “If he’s a Federation Ambassador, that means he was on the ship, right? Did you do his physical?”

“No,” Brex said, shaking his head slowly. “On one level, I think I’ve never seen him before. But at the same time... I am completely convinced that not only have I seen him before... but it’s really important that I did.”

Leonard rounded on Brex. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure.” Brex shook his head. “Did you hear what he said? When he was mumbling there?”

“I...” Leonard cast a quick glance back towards where they had brought the strange alien. He couldn’t see them around the corner in the treatment area at the back of the room, but he could hear Doctor Singh barking orders. He turned back to Brex. “Something about... something being his fault. That he should have known, and that he was sorry. Brex... where do you think you saw him?”

For a moment, Brex was silent, then his eyes went wide. “Leonard... I think he’s what I was supposed to forget.” But before Leonard could ask what that was supposed to mean, Brex’s eyes squeezed shut and he grabbed at his temples with his hands, teetering slightly on his feet.

“Doctor Brex!” This time, Leonard didn’t even hesitate as he took Brex by the arm and started pulling him towards a chair. “That’s it, you need to sit down and let me scan you before you go anywhere near another patient. You’re going to -”

“Stop, McCoy. I need to -”

“Not until I scan you and figure out what the hell is going on. Now sit.” He lowered Brex into a chair, but when he turned back around with a tricorder, Brex’s eyes were clear and he didn’t look like he was in pain any more. “Doctor Brex?”

He blinked a couple of times, and his eyes refocused on Leonard’s face. “My telepathy is back.” He blinked again. “Completely.”
Leonard startled slightly, flipping open the tricorder and activating the scanner automatically. “What? How? I mean, that’s great but - ”

“But why now?” Brex finished smoothly for him. “And why all at once? I have no explanation... and...” Completely steady, Brex stood and walked quickly across the medical bay towards the back treatment area. “Doctor Singh!”

Singh was already picking up a laser scalpel, and the sterile field was humming expectantly, but she looked up. “Yes, Doctor?”

“The Kazarite... can we still communicate with him before you start?”

She shook her head. “He was losing consciousness anyway, but we just placed him under heavy sedation so we could begin treatment. We need to start on the bleeding here. Why?”

Brex shook his head. “Nothing. My apologies. Please continue.” He turned and started walking back towards bay one, where he’d been working on his own patient.


Brex stopped and looked back over his shoulder without turning around. His expression was oddly neutral and guarded - something Leonard had never seen on him. “I don’t know, McCoy. Doesn’t matter. He’s sedated and will probably be out for hours, and we’ve got patients who need us. We’ve stepped away from them for too long. Come on... we’ve got a job to do.” Without another word, he hurried off to the patient who was waiting for him.

Leonard looked back and forth between the treatment area with the Kazarite, and at Brex, who was already picking up his equipment again and re-entering the sterile field. “Well ain’t this just grand,” he growled under his breath. He’d figure it out later. Besides, Brex was right. He had a job to do. Nobody else was going to die on his watch today.

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They weren’t going to kill him, Jim had learned. At least, they didn’t want to. Not unless they had to. In fact, for people who were aiming high-powered weapons at his head, their captors were being bizarrely polite.

But that didn’t mean they would be released either.

The Araxians had immediately asked them who knew about the bomb, and Jim had been too stunned to keep a poker face and pretend he knew nothing. In the very least, he’d convinced them that the people who had escaped didn’t know, and they hadn’t pursued. With any luck, Hodges, Nadeau, and Wilcox were safely on the *Athena* already. However, Jim knew about the bomb, and there was no way his captors were letting that bit of intelligence slip out the door. Jim had no illusions that these people wouldn’t kill him if they decided that it was necessary for some reason.

With two of the Araxians training weapons on him, the third had helped him carry Johan up the stairs, across a catwalk, and to a room that had to be some sort of control room. His gut was aching more now, but he couldn’t let them see that he was injured. Besides, it wasn’t that bad. He hadn’t taken a closer look at it, but he figured it was fairly superficial. Some surface-level muscles at the worst. He could still function, and that was all that mattered.

“Put him down there, Terran,” the guy who seemed to be their leader said, pointing to a spot on the floor. His tone was neither cruel nor harsh, but it didn’t leave room for disobedience.
“Okay,” Jim replied, trying not to create problems until he knew more. No point in being disagreeable when, for the moment, there didn’t seem to be a direct threat of further violence.

With help, Jim lowered Johan to the floor, and sat down beside him at the insistence of the Araxians. He didn’t like the faint moaning sounds the other man was making. He needed a damned med kit. Fuck that, he needed to get them the hell out of there. The only thing he was hinging his hopes on was the fact that the rest of the team had gotten away. He hadn’t heard any weapons fire outside. With any luck at all, everyone else was back on the ship and alive.

Now, he just needed to get himself and Johan out of there.

Right.

He should have gotten them all out of there sooner. He should have trusted his instincts. Fuck, Pike had told him to trust his instincts! If he had, maybe they’d all be back aboard the ship right now. If they’d made a push for it, maybe they’d have gotten Finney out fast enough and he’d be alive in sickbay getting patched up right now. Maybe Johan wouldn’t have been shot. And maybe Jim wouldn’t be a damned hostage for the second time in his short Starfleet career.

But no. He’d told himself that he had to listen to his superiors, trust their decisions, and not stick his neck out. He’d convinced himself that if he went with his gut, he’d get everyone killed. So... he’d held back. He wasn’t about to be the martyr. He was a cadet, and that was the role he was supposed to play.

Fuck that shit.

A hot, sharp anger was slowly building, and its only target was himself.

He had known better. It wouldn’t have been reckless, crazy, heroic, or self-sacrificing. It wouldn’t have been sticking his neck out. It was that in the havoc and chaos, he’d been able to see the important facts and had come to the conclusion that they’d needed to get the hell out of there. He could have prevented all of this. Well, maybe not all of it, but some of it. Instead, he’d squashed his instincts, did what he was told, and...

Look at where it got me. He glanced down at Johan, who wasn’t looking good at all. Us.

Jim forced himself to take a deep breath. What was done was done, and they were stuck there now. He could hash over his mistakes later. For now, he had to keep himself and Johan alive, and maybe they’d have a chance to get out of there.

The Araxians were talking amongst themselves in their own language, and Jim regretted that he hadn’t learned more than just the basic greetings. Vaguely, he wished Uhura was there to help him figure out what they were saying, but she’d just blame him for getting them into this mess. Besides, he wouldn’t actually wish this on anyone.

Even if he couldn’t understand the Araxians, he could at least try to assess his situation.

The room was somewhat long and narrow. A bank of broad windows on the inner wall overlooked the huge storage bay with the dilithium, but the storage area was dark and he couldn’t see much through those windows. On the other side of the room, a few small, high windows let in daylight, but they were too high to let him see anything, even if he was standing. Beneath the outer windows were a line of storage cabinets. Beneath the inner windows was a set of computer control banks. On a worktable at one end of the room was precisely what Johan had reported to him: transmitting devices.
Sure, he wasn’t familiar with Araxian technology, but he knew transmitters when he saw them. Now that he saw the rest of the gear they were unpacking, he knew Johan had been right about the rest of it. This equipment was for explosives.

The fact that all of this equipment was already in the control room when they arrived told Jim something else: this was precisely where the Araxians had planned to be.

Somehow, in the middle of all this chaos, their little tour group of cadets and engineers had ended up in a building full of dilithium. That building had already been targeted and set up by the Araxians for something big. Judging by the way they were checking their transmitters, the explosives had already been rigged throughout the building. In fact, if Jim’s guess was right - and he figured he was unlucky enough that it probably would be - the explosives had probably been fixed to the crates of dilithium.

Push a button, and the city turns into a crater. Hell, a blast that big might shake the _Athena_ out of orbit.

_We’re the trump-card_, Jim realized with sobering clarity. Whatever other damage was taking place around the city, this building would eventually become the epicenter in the power struggle that was developing. If these people were determined enough that they’d sacrifice everything for their goals, then yes, they could quite possibly destroy the whole city. One question remained unanswered.

What could have possibly driven them to this?

He had his theories, of course. Between what Bones had reported, what the Zhitoran had said, and what he’d seen himself, a vague picture was starting to resolve in his mind, but it was still just a guess. What the hell had actually happened? Jim hoped he’d find out.

It wasn’t as though there was much else he could do just then. He and Johan had been placed at the farthest corner from the door. Escape wasn’t even a possibility. He’d never get to the door before they’d shoot him, and even if he could, there was no way he’d be able to bring Johan. He was absolutely trapped.

Johan groaned again.

Jim cast a sideways glance at the guy. He looked worse than before, and Jim knew he couldn’t afford to wait. Hiding his nerves, he cleared his throat to get the Araxians’ attention.

“Yes, Terran?” the ringleader asked evenly.

“Uh... my name is Jim,” he said, trying to appear friendly and unthreatening. Simple was best. “And this is my friend, Johan. He’s injured, and I need to check on him. I’m not going to run off, and I don’t have any tools or weapons. Just... let me look him over, okay?”

The Araxian took a slow step towards him and gave him an appraising look. “You may call me Ghzeth. We would prefer you both alive. Please do check on your friend.”

_Because this isn’t awkward at all_, Jim thought bitterly to himself. But he gave a nod and said, “Thanks,” in an undertone as he turned and hunched down in front of Johan. “Come on, Plato. Talk to me here.”

He knew standard assessment protocol for an injured person, and had been trained to check every single part of the body for injury, but he’d seen exactly where the energy weapon had struck Johan. Carefully, Jim pulled back Johan’s shirt and pushed him slightly onto his side. He barely stopped himself from gasping.
There was a brutal scorch mark across Johan’s lower back. Blistering and angry, it was obvious that the damage went far below the surface. It looked like the weapon had done some serious internal damage, but Jim couldn’t even begin to guess what. It was close enough to his spine that the shock of it could have hit his nervous system. There could be internal organ damage - burns to kidneys, intestines, and who knew what else. Hell, the energy could have even caused lung damage. There was no way to know without a tricorder, but even if Jim had that, it wouldn’t actually be able to fix the damage. They needed to get Johan back to the ship. Immediately.

Jim settled him back down, cringing slightly at Johan’s moan of pain. “It’s okay, buddy. We’ll get you out of here.”

“I’m afraid we cannot do that, Terran.”

“It’s Jim,” he snapped back, instantly regretting his tone, but pushing forward anyway. “I’m sorry, but you’re the ones who shot him. He wasn’t doing anything to you, and if he doesn’t get help, he’s going to die.”

Ghzeth actually looked sympathetic. “That would be regrettable, and we do apologize for the injury to your colleague. As you had been in this building for a significant amount of time, we feared that you had gathered information which could have undermined our efforts if you had shared it with the wrong people. We could not let you escape. That is why we fired. It is not our wish to harm Federation members. We are, however, fighting for our freedom. Your own Terran history would indicate that you should be sympathetic to our struggle.”

Jim opened his mouth to protest, but hell, the guy was right. Human history was packed with body-counts in the name of freedom, revolution, and liberty. As much as it made him sick to think of it, his study of history showed that without those sacrifices, the course of events on Earth could have gone much differently.

That still didn’t change the fact that he was caught up in the middle of someone else’s revolution - a fight that he didn’t fully understand - with a colleague who was dying in front of him. He cast a glance at Johan, who seemed to be almost on the cusp of regaining consciousness, and something clicked in his head.

Years ago, Johan’s father, Chief Petty Officer Theodore Johan, had died aboard the USS Kelvin. Now, as though history were playing a sick joke on him, a Kirk and a Johan, one generation removed, were in a fight for their lives once again. Jim swore to himself and to whatever powers might be listening, that he wasn’t going to let history play him the way it had played their fathers. He was going to get Johan out alive, no matter what it took. Hell, they were both going to get out alive. History was not about to repeat itself. Not on his watch.

Swallowing thickly, Jim turned back towards Ghzeth. “I’d be more sympathetic if I understood why you needed to blow up half of your city to prove your point. I thought you and the Axanar had decided to reunite! What happened?” Sure, Jim had his suspicions. Hints had been building up since they’d arrived on Araxis. Maybe now he’d get the real story. And once he had that, maybe he could do something to get them to release Johan, in the very least, if not both of them. Show sympathy, and maybe use that to create an understanding. Diplomacy 101.

“Young Terran... Jim...” Ghzeth gave him a somewhat flustered look, then quickly said something to one of his two associates in their own language. That Araxian nodded and left quickly, leaving Jim alone in the room with just two of them. Ghzeth looked back at Jim and shifted his rifle on his hip. “Our equipment is ready, and our contacts are in negotiations with the Axanar. We have the time, and I wish to explain this... just so that it may be heard. You deserve to know.”
“Know what?” Jim asked vaguely.

“It began almost 50 years ago,” Ghzeth began, as if he was telling a tale to a small child. It was so incongruous with their situation that Jim almost wanted to laugh at the ludicrous impression it made. Ghzeth didn’t seem to notice, and continued. “Some Axanar began traveling to our world, claiming they wished to join us, to be part of our society, to learn our ways and our philosophy. It was completely foreign to them. The very thought of an egalitarian democracy was something most Axanar couldn’t comprehend. But these few who arrived in small ships... they claimed that they wished to leave behind the oppressive system of servitude of the Axanar. How could we deny them?”

Jim frowned. “I thought you wanted nothing to do with them. Isolate yourselves.”

Ghzeth scowled. “Understand this... we are not isolationists. We merely desire not to live under the control of others. And as we accept all as equals... so we accepted these Axanar as brothers.

“Over time, we discovered that many of them had taken on roles of public service - the Peacekeepers, elected officials, Ministry of Energy. Some of us suspected their intentions, but could not convince the majority of our people that they had underhanded motives.”

Jim felt his eyes slowly growing wider. “They took over your society from the inside.”

“Precisely.” A dark expression twisted his features. “They were so absolutely convinced of our need to return to the Axanar way that they lived amongst us, as Araxians, lying to us and manipulating our society. It was insidious, Terran. Most did not wish to believe the threat until it was too late, and our world was taken as a trading token in this peace deal.”

Jim was slowly shaking his head in disbelief. He had suspected something like this, and had tried to tell his superiors, but to hear it like this, so plainly... it was unbelievable. It explained so much.

“How... your colony looks so peaceful. I mean, everything seemed orderly and... well... perfect.” He blinked as a thought occurred to him. “Are you telling me that this is a police state?”

Ghzeth smiled, but it was dark with irony. “I have read your Terran history in my studies of the Federation. Have your police states not appeared the most orderly and peaceful at first glance? Is it not the same in police states throughout the quadrant?”

Jim could only nod. He thought of the deserted terrace at Parliament Square when the landing party had first arrived, the streets that seemed just a bit too empty, and the ridiculous security presence Starfleet had provided.

It was true. God damn it all, it was true.

A small device on Ghzeth’s belt chirped, and he quickly looked at it, cast a glance at his remaining colleague, and nodded. The other Araxian quickly went over to a pile of equipment on one of the far tables and began working with some of the devices. Ghzeth shifted his rifle again, making it clear to Jim that he was still perfectly in control, despite his cordial manner.

“Ten years ago, our cousins on Axanar reached their own crisis with the harvesting attacks, proof that their ways were unsustainable. Yet the Federation rescued them, which only solidified their belief that their ways were proper. As such, they sent an envoy to initiate the coup on our people. We had not realized how truly entrenched the Axanar were in our power structure until the envoy arrived, and our planet was already theirs. In the years since, we have tried desperately to negotiate and regain balance in our society through peaceful means, but we have failed.”
Jim frowned. “Why would your people have allowed so many... well... so many Axanar to gain so much power on your planet?

“Allowed? Jim, we voted for them! We are a democracy! And... most Araxians would prefer to pursue the sciences, arts, and other fields of academia, rather than to work the drudgery of politics and peacekeeping.”

Jim considered this. “So... when you’re not staging a war, what do you do? I mean you, personally?”

Ghzeth laughed bitterly. “Dear Terran, I am a historian. I have spent much of my life in our Halls of Records, the Archive and the Museum, preserving our story for all time, and sharing the past with those who will become our future. However, I study not only our people’s own story. I have studied the records of all space-faring races in our quadrant. History repeats itself. It is the nature of sentient life. The tight fist of tyranny, often under the guise of idealism, creates the veneer of order... until it can no longer contain the anger that boils beneath. Often, a single event brings the situation to a critical point, and violence becomes the only solution.”

Jim froze. Or maybe it just felt as though his veins were running with ice instead of blood. “The arrival of the Federation was the last straw.”

“It was,” Ghzeth confirmed. “We have pleaded with our leaders, but we have been barred from the Federation talks. Our concerns have not been addressed. Our lands are being stripped of dilithium, destroying natural beauty and polluting our rivers. The vestiges of our culture will be summarily destroyed if the Axanar system of subservience and ownership is imposed on our society.” His eyes took on a look of desperation. “They would destroy us, Jim. All that we are, and all that we stand for. It would be genocide without physical destruction. Given that as a possible future... the people of Araxis would prefer to die. I believe one of your planet’s minor states had such a motto: Live free or die.”

Jim searched his memory. “New Hampshire. One of the states on our North American continent.”

Ghzeth gave a sharp nod of approval. “A wise people. And our people believe likewise. Our active resistance force is not so large, and we have warned our people away from the target areas. Many have taken shelter or fled the city. We planned for a precision strike with minimal casualties, and nearly our entire population supports this action. We will not live under Axanar control. So now, you understand why we must do this. With the two of you, we have a greater chance of negotiating. The Federation must hear us, even if the Axanar try to silence us. We shall not be ignored.”

“You don’t want to detonate the dilithium, do you?” Jim asked, almost softly.

“No. We do not. Nor do we wish your deaths. We keep you here to give weight to our negotiations, yes, but also because you know of our plans.”

Jim looked at Ghzeth for a long moment, then down at Johan. His friend’s complexion was becoming ashen, and the clammy sweat on his skin didn’t look good. He was still moaning faintly. Jim reached over and rested his hand against Johan’s neck, and found that it was startlingly cool to the touch. In his non-expert opinion, it looked like severe shock. Johan needed a doctor, and Jim needed to make his move.

He looked back at Ghzeth and steeled himself. “Well... as a free being to another free being... I have a proposal. This man needs a doctor or he’s going to die. I swore that I’d get him back alive. If you let me call for help... I’ll cooperate. Anything you ask. Just let me call for help. Give him a chance to live.”
Ghzeth regarded him solemnly for a moment, and Jim was sure the guy would make a damned good poker shark. Then, without flinching, he reached to his belt and removed a small device - a communicator, Jim guessed. Ghzeth pressed a couple of buttons, and said to his colleague, “Detonations Team Primary to the Negotiations team.”


To his surprise, Ghzeth interrupted him “In Federation Standard, my friend.”

A pause. Then...

“Negotiations Team Secondary here. Primary is currently in talks with Parliament. Status report?”

“One of our Terran captives is severely injured and may be dying. If we are to negotiate with the Federation, it would be best to ensure his health. The uninjured captive is being very cooperative, and...” He looked down at Jim. “And I think we should comply with his request for a Federation medic to be allowed through safely.”

“You’re not authorized to relinquish the captive. The security risk is too great.”

“We do not intend to release him. We wish simply to allow a Federation medic to safely come through, treat the injured Terran, and leave unharmed. It would be a show of good faith. The Federation’s history indicates that they would respect this.”

“We would,” Jim said earnestly.

“And what if they send down a highly trained security operative, not a medic?”

Ghzeth opened his mouth, then hesitated, but before he could speak, the communicator clicked and another voice spoke.

“Detonation Team Primary, this is Control Team Secondary. I’m monitoring communications. I met with a Federation medic, and I would trust that if we allow him access to the patient, he will honor the agreement. For our security, I advise that we allow only that specific medic to enter the building.”

Ghzeth nodded slowly. “A wise decision. Will you make the contact?”

“Yes, I’ll handle it. But promise me one thing.”

“Yes?” Ghzeth’s voice wavered slightly.

“If they send him, do not harm this Terran. I respect him as I would respect a fellow Araxian. And as a fellow medic.”

“You have my word. Detonation Team Primary out.” Ghzeth pressed a button on his communicator, then nodded gravely at Jim. “That was one of our resistance leaders. He was a medic who left Axanar with the original colonists. I trust his judgement. Your friend will have medical aid soon.”

Jim nodded warily. “I hope so.” In the back of his mind, he was wondering which Federation doctor the guy was talking about. He hoped it wasn’t Bones.

A tight moan from Johan pushed that thought from Jim’s mind. A quick check showed Jim that Johan’s status hadn’t changed much, but that couldn’t last long. “Come on, Plato. Hang in there,
buddy. We’ve got someone on the way.”

Off to the side, Gzheth was speaking in Araxian to the other person in the room. His rifle was still at the ready, and Jim wasn’t about to forget that. There was no way to make a break for it, and Gzheth was well aware of that. For now, he was at an impasse.

Carefully, gently, ignoring the ache in his own gut, Jim shifted himself around and rested Johan’s head on his lap. The floor was hard, and there was nothing else he could possibly do to give the guy any comfort.

Absently, he thought about the few days he’d spent with the Engineering team. Plato’s easy manner and thoughtful comments. Gadget’s uncanny affinity for all things mechanical, and quirky ability to make any small piece of equipment work like magic. Parker’s bizarre mix of idealism and cynicism. He hoped Hodges and Goldberg had gotten out okay, along with everyone else, but that was beyond his ability to help now. Instead, he had one man he could save, and he’d be damned if he couldn’t do what his own father had failed to do for the Johan family.

Jim rested a hand across Johan’s forehead, flinching slightly at how cold and clammy he felt. They had to get a doctor soon. “It’s okay. I told you... I’m getting you out of here alive.”

Johan groaned again.

“Easy there. Relax. Just keep breathing.” Jim was speaking automatically. Anything to fill the void. He kept glancing between Johan and the Araxians at the other end of the room. Gzheth was still speaking with the other Araxian, but he never took eyes off Jim and Johan.

In some twisted way, Jim almost felt like Gzheth was testing him. He couldn’t let that make him nervous. Instead, Jim focused, and let his world narrow to the life of the man he’d promised to protect and the room where he was trapped. “Hang in there, Plato. Just a little bit longer,” he said as he continued to scan the room with his eyes.

“Blues?”

Jim startled and looked down. Johan’s eyes were barely opened, but he was there. “Plato! Talk to me. No, don’t try to move. We’ve got a doctor on the way.”

“What... the hell happened?” Johan’s voice was rough and weak, but he was coherent.

“You decided to play dodge-ball with an energy rifle.”

“Funny.” He blinked a few times. “Where are we?”

Jim couldn’t hold back the frown. “Same building. Upper room. Hodges, Nadeau, and Wilcox made it out.”

“We didn’t.”

Jim shook his head. “But we will. The Araxians captured us, but... they don’t want us dead. And... I actually... I understand why they’re doing this. I don’t think they’re wrong. But anyway, I’ve negotiated for a doctor to come down. We’ll get you fixed up and you’ll be fine.”

For a moment, Johan’s gaze sharpened. “What’s the damage?”

Jim forced a neutral look. “They hit you in the lower back. It’s an ugly burn, but it doesn’t look like anything they can’t fix.”
"How long... have I been out?"

"Not sure. More than a half hour."

Johan nodded, then flinched. Then cringed harder. "Wish I was... still out."

"I know... just relax... keep breathing. They'll have someone here soon."

Johan grunted in reply. His eyes blinked a few times, breathing too fast and shallow for a minute, and then his body went slack again.

Trying not to panic, Jim pressed his fingers against Johan’s neck to check for a pulse. It was still there, but in his unprofessional perception, it felt much too fast and weak. Jim wasn’t sure what else he could do, but then Ghzeth abruptly walked up to them.

"Stand."

Carefully, apologizing to Johan for jostling him, Jim slid out from underneath the man’s head and stood in front of Ghzeth.

"Terran," Ghzeth said formally, "the Control Team has contacted your ship, and they have agreed to send one of your medics... doctors... if we prove to them that the information we have provided them is true, and that you are still alive. Convince them that we will not fire if they transport your doctor to the designated location, but do not reveal anything else. This will be beneficial to both of us."

Jim’s heart was in his throat as he the Araxian slowly handed him the communicator. He wasn’t being given the chance to contact the *Athena* out of the goodness of this guy’s heart. No, it was because the Ghzeth had calculated that it would be to his advantage to let this happen. Jim had to remember that. As polite as their captors had been, they were absolutely dedicated to their cause, and nothing would come between them and their goal of regaining their freedom.

Jim could understand that. He really could. He could almost sympathize, but right now, he had his own bigger concern. He had been placed as the leader of a unit, however small, however unexpected, and his absolute duty was to get everyone out alive. Swallowing to ease the tightness in his throat, Jim held the communicator up to his mouth and spoke.

"This is Cadet..." For a split second, he hesitated. Ghzeth was a historian, and could possibly recognize his name. He wondered briefly if it would cause him even bigger problems if he revealed it, but then he realized that he couldn’t hide from his name, or from himself. Squaring his shoulders, he spoke clearly into the communicator.

"This is Cadet James Kirk."

**********
“Cadet McCoy, please report to Conference Room One.”

Leonard was so mentally entrenched in finishing his patch job on the hole in his patient’s lung that he almost didn’t notice his name over the comm. He did, however, notice Nurse Stewart startle.

“Doctor McCoy?”

“Focus, Nurse. The patient is more important,” Leonard said flatly. Through his scope, he watched the delicate, spongy lung tissue fuse and knit together.

“Cadet McCoy, acknowledge.”

“Doctor?”

“Ignore it, Stewart,” Leonard growled. The hole was gone, and Leonard pulled the pleural membrane over the lung and sealed it into a smooth, cohesive sac, completing the repair. Letting out a breath of satisfaction, he started closing procedures. The holes used for the surgery were tiny and easy to mend. Almost nothing in the world satisfied him more than starting with a person whose body was damaged and broken, snatching him away from death’s door, putting that body back together, and watching that person walk away to continue the simple act of living. Right now, with his full attention on the surgery, he couldn’t fixate on anything else, and it was helping to save his sanity.

“Cadet Leonard McCoy, report to Conference Room One. Acknowledge immediately.”

Gritting his teeth, Leonard handed the tissue fusion tools to Stewart. He could finish closing. Leonard pulled off his gloves, reached over, and slapped the comm unit.

“Doctor McCoy acknowledging. I was in the middle of somebody’s lung when you called. Couldn’t exactly step away. I’ll report to Conference Room One in a moment.”

“You will report immediately, Cadet.”

Leonard wished he knew who was speaking to him, and wondered if he could get that person on his roster for a physical at some point. Holding back an eyeroll, he acknowledged, “Yes, sir. On my way.” He looked at Nurse Stewart. “You good to close up the procedure?”

Stewart nodded, not looking away from the patient. “I’ve done it a hundred times, Doctor.”

Leonard felt a flash of gratitude. Over the past two weeks, he’d learned just how much training the nurses on starships had beyond normal nursing skills. They had to be able to step up if the doctors were incapacitated, and Leonard had come to realize that yes, they could handle it. He gave Stewart a nod. “Good. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He stopped by treatment bay one and stuck his head around the corner.

Brex was fully focused on the patient in front of him, but he obviously knew Leonard was there, and he must have heard the intercom. “Go ahead, McCoy. I think we’ve got it covered for now.” Then, for a brief moment, he looked up. “Good luck.”

Leonard nodded. “Thank you.”
Feeling really uneasy, Leonard stepped out of Sickbay, but as the doors hissed shut, he realized that he had no idea how to find Conference Room One. Grumbling in irritation, he found a hallway computer terminal and pulled up a map. A moment later, he was on his way, hoping that when he arrived, he’d be able to hold back his instinctive tirade about how inappropriate it was to pull a doctor away from sickbay during a medical catastrophe with multiple casualties. If he knew Brex at all, he suspected that topic would be reviewed much more diplomatically after the crisis was over. That was fine and dandy, but in the meantime, he’d have to bite his own tongue and deal with whatever steaming pile of shit was about to be dropped in his lap.

It hit him with a jolt, startling him enough to make him stumble to a stop in the middle of the hallway. Hererra. He’d let himself become so absorbed by his work that he’d almost pushed it out of his mind. Almost, but not completely. They were calling him up to interrogate him about what had happened to Hererra. That had to be it.

Leonard swallowed back a surge of nausea and forced himself to start walking again. It couldn’t be avoided. He’d almost hoped it could wait until the crisis was over, but as Doctor Ankewicz had said, medical takes second priority to everything else on a starship. The rest of the staff in sickbay would have to handle it without him. He’d just have to grow a damned backbone and tell them exactly what had happened.

Then another thought hit him. Of course he could tell them what had happened. All of it. Not just what had happened to Hererra. He had information -- everything Rhexen had told him how the Axanar had taken over the government and kept the Araxians themselves out of the negotiations. People needed to know that this had started 50 years ago, and that the Peace Mission had brought it to a boiling point because the Araxians and their planet were being used as little more than a poker chip.

He had to tell them that they had it all wrong. Maybe the information could even stop the violence. Vaguely, he wondered what Jim would say now.

The conference room was on Deck Two, just below and aft of the main bridge. Leonard had already assumed it was where the command crew usually had their briefings, but he still found himself surprised to walk in and find the captain, first officer, one Axanar (or Araxian?) delegate, and what he assumed was half of the bridge crew waiting for him.

Captain Porter took a step towards him, arms folded across his chest. “Cadet, when you’re ordered to report immediately, I don’t expect delays.”

Leonard couldn’t quite keep his eyes from widening at the realization that it was probably the captain who had paged him directly. “I... I’m sorry, sir, but I really was in the middle of a patient’s lung when you called. I couldn’t step away without causing serious damage.”

Porter’s mouth twisted slightly. “I heard you have an extremely strong dedication to your duty as a doctor.” He gave a grudging nod. “I respect that.”

“Thank you, sir, and I’m sorry I didn’t report on Cadet Hererra sooner. There was so much happening, and patients who needed me, but I need to tell you --”

Porter cut him off with a raised hand. “At ease, Cadet!”

“-- I need to explain what I heard from --”

“I said at ease!”
Leonard closed his mouth so fast he heard it snap.

Porter nodded irritably. “We don’t have time right now. I know about Hererra, and we’ll review that later, but we’ve got to worry about the living while we can. What I couldn’t announce over the intercom is that you have another patient who needs you, and you might be the only person who can get to him.”

Leonard had already been nervous, but now he was on-edge for a whole new reason. “What do you mean, Captain?”

With a grim tilt of his head, Porter indicated the viewscreen at the back of the room.

Slowly, Leonard walked around the table and got a good look at the surprisingly familiar face on the viewscreen. He looked different than he had a few days ago, as he was currently streaked in dust and soot, wearing a dark brown tunic instead of his medic’s uniform. He was in a fairly dark room surrounded by heavy equipment, instead of in a bright clinic. Leonard couldn’t hold back his exclamation. “Jethan!”

The Araxian medic nodded and gave him a strained smile. “Doctor McCoy. It is good to see you, although I regret the circumstances.”

Porter stepped up and stood by Leonard’s shoulder. “So you do know the insurgent.”

“Insurgent?” Leonard blurted out in disbelief. He’d worked with Jethan for an entire day. Sure, a day wasn’t really enough time to get to know someone, but he couldn’t imagine a person of Jethan’s stated ethics supporting the wrong side of a war. Or any side of a war, for that matter. He certainly couldn’t be supporting the people who had started the violence. All of Leonard’s instincts had told him that Jethan was a good person. He’d liked the guy. Doubts about who was right and who was wrong in this little war were spinning in his head, making him dizzy. He stared at Captain Porter. “Sir, this is the medic who escorted me around the Araxian medical facilities. There’s no way he could be behind -”

“But I am, Doctor McCoy,” Jethan said, cutting him off. “Your captain is correct, although it was my hope that it would not come to this. Life is precious to me, McCoy, but other things are worth the sacrifice. We have been attempting to negotiate with those in power - the Axanar who have taken over our planet - but they would not hear us. It became clear that words would not help. I regret that the Federation has become entangled in this situation.”

“Regret...” Leonard shook his head incredulously. “Jethan, people have died! You’re a medic, for God’s sake!”

“I know. Which is why I offer you the chance to save one of your colleagues.”

Jethan was looking at him with something so apologetic and honest that - dammit - Leonard believed him.

“Audio off,” Porter said suddenly, then turned to face Leonard. “Listen Cadet, for now, this is classified, but if we’re potentially sending you in, you need to understand the situation. A small group of Araxian isolationists have chosen to attack the negotiations. They seem well-organized, but they’re grossly outnumbered. We’re working with proper Araxian authorities, including Councilor Rhozhin -” He indicated the Araxian in the room with a gesture. “- to bring this fringe group under control before they can destroy any more of the city. Starfleet’s official policy is that we do not negotiate with terrorists. Additionally, this is technically a domestic dispute amongst the Araxians. All we can do is assist.”
He hesitated, then pressed his lips tightly together for a moment before continuing. “But we may be able to take care of this small situation without violating those policies. The isolationists have taken two of our crew members hostage, and according to the report, one of them is seriously injured. They’re in a building used for dilithium storage, and our transporters can’t penetrate the distortions caused by the dilithium.”

“Dilithium?” Leonard asked skeptically. “As in, the dilithium that the Araxians were using to negotiate their arrangement with the Federation?”

“We assume so,” Porter said with a measure of annoyance. “If it weren’t for the fact that our people are in there, the location would be irrelevant. We think they’re making a symbolic stance there, intending to prevent access to the building, but almost all of their activity is in locations of political power and infrastructure. We know they took the hostages by chance, and decided to use them as a diversion from their main efforts in the center of the city. The Peacekeepers would send a squad to secure the building, but that might lead to the deaths of the hostages. While the situation is stable, we won’t raid the building unless the hostages have been released. Not while there’s still a chance of surrender.”

The Captain’s eyes flicked to the side, and Leonard followed the glance across the room to the Araxian delegate. The Araxian folded his arms across his chest but said nothing.

The Captain cleared his throat and continued. “In the meantime, the terrorists have agreed to allow one doctor safe passage from a beam-down point into the building in order to treat the injured hostage. A show of ‘good faith,’ they claim. And...” Porter’s expression puckered unpleasantly. “And they’ve decided that you’re the only doctor they’ll allow through.”

Leonard’s mouth had gone dry. “Why me?”

Porter tilted his head towards the viewscreen. “This Araxian says he met you during one of your tours on the planet. He knows you’re a doctor, and because he’d recognize you, we wouldn’t be able to send down a security operative instead. Also... in his own words... he trusts you.”

Leonard didn’t like any of this. “Well, sir... he gave me a guided tour of the medical facility. He’s one of their top medics, and I shadowed him all day. So... yes, he knows me. But...” He glanced uneasily at Rhozhin. “Jethan was one of the colony’s founders. At least, that’s what he told me. He’s one of their top medics. I watched him with patients all day. That’s not the sort of guy who blows up his own city without a damned good cause!”

To the side, Leonard could tell Rhozhin was rapidly becoming agitated, but the captain seemed far more so.

“Cadet,” Porter said sharply, “we did not bring you here to debate the politics of this uprising.”

Leonard opened his mouth to protest - this was important, goddammit - but he forced himself to back down. Debating whether or not one of the Araxian rebels trusted him or not wasn’t going to help save a dying man. “Okay. Okay. Jethan said that one of their two captives is seriously injured? Who is it?”

“We’re not sure which one is injured. The report is that he’ll die without medical attention very soon. The Araxian said they don’t know enough about human medical needs to treat him themselves.”

There was no doubt in Leonard’s mind that he’d accept the assignment, and bizarrely, he did believe Jethan, but... “After they’ve already killed so many people, why are they worried about just
one human? What if it’s a trap to bring in more hostages? What if the crewman is already dead?”

Porter grimaced. “We thought of that, and in truth, we can’t really be sure. That’s why I’m asking you to volunteer. I’m not ordering you to go.”

Leonard swallowed tightly against the dryness in his throat. “Let me talk to him first.”

Porter nodded, then said, “Audio on.”

Hoping his nerves weren’t as obvious as they seemed, Leonard took a step closer to the screen. “Jethan... I’ll take your word that it’s not a trap... if you can prove to me that our people still alive.”

Jethan nodded gravely. “This can be done.” He turned to the side and flipped a couple of switches on one of the pieces of equipment. “Control Team Secondary to... Ghzeth.” His hesitation was obvious, and Leonard wondered what he’d originally meant to say.

Over an audio comm channel, Leonard could hear the reply. “This is Ghzeth. Will the Federation send one of their medics?”

“Only if we prove to them that their people are alive. Have the uninjured Terran speak to them. Route through my transmitter. I’m restricting them to one-way communication only for security.”

“I’ll have him speak. One moment.”

Leonard stood silently, glancing from one person in the room to the next. The tension was palpable. He looked over at Rhozhin and frowned. It was hard to be sure, but it looked like he had the Axanar skin tone. Not for the first time, Leonard wondered if anyone had taken his report about the Araxian genetics seriously.

Of course, Jethan also had the Axanar skin tone. He’d said he was one of the founders. Again, Leonard wondered why they were so different that they’d need to come to blows like this... a thought he quickly dismissed when he remembered Jethan’s tale of why he’d left Axanar. He remembered Rhexen’s passion for science. He thought about the scorn he’d heard from both of them for the Axanar system of subservience, and their similar passion for academics, democracy, and individual achievement.

He wondered why the hell the captain couldn’t see what Leonard thought was so blatantly obvious.

He could try to convince Captain Porter that they were making a mistake, collaborating with the wrong side, but without more evidence, he was just a cadet with an opinion. That didn’t stop him from believing, with absolute certainty, that he would side with the Araxians... as long as that crewman was still alive.

Then he heard a distant and slightly tinny voice over the viewscreen transmission. “This is Cadet...” The voice hesitated, and Leonard’s stomach clenched. Even through the distortion caused by the piggybacked transmission, he knew that voice.

On the viewscreen, Jethan adjusted a knob on his equipment, and the human voice spoke again, louder and a bit more clearly this time.

“This is Cadet James Kirk.”

No. In a heartbeat, something in Leonard’s chest froze, and he swore he could feel the blood draining from his face.
Jethan hit another button and spoke. “Terran, thank you for cooperating. The crew of your ship is listening. I must warn you that if you attempt to reveal any strategic details, we will cut transmission and will not permit your ship’s doctor to transport down safely. Your words will determine whether they decide to send a doctor for your injured colleague.”

“They’re listening... can they reply?” Jim asked.

“I’m afraid I can’t allow that,” Jethan said without malice.

“Right.” Jim cleared his throat. “Cadet James Kirk reporting. Crewman Timothy Johan and I have been taken hostage by an Araxian resistance group. Lieutenant Finney is dead. The rest of the team got out of the building, and I hope everyone made it back to the ship. Johan and I haven’t been mistreated, but Johan was shot as we tried to escape. It’s a severe energy weapon injury to his lower back. It looks like the damage is deep. He’s been mostly unconscious, but he came around once. It’s serious, though, and I don’t think he’s going to last much longer without real medical help.” There was a brief pause, then Jim continued. “Whoever is listening... I think these people are good on their word. If they promise to let a doctor through safely, they won’t shoot. In fact, that’s one thing I’m pretty sure that both the Araxians and the Axanar have in common - they respect doctors. But... if we’re going to get Johan out of here alive, someone needs to come soon."

“Thank you, Terran,” Jethan said into the commo equipment, then he faced the screen again. “As you can see, they are alive. We do not wish harm to them. Perhaps you will believe us not only about your crewmen, but also about our claims regarding the takeover of our planet by the Axanar.”

Leonard felt too cold and too hot all at once. That was Jim. Jim was on Araxis. Jim was a goddamned hostage in the middle of a civil war.

Off to the side, Captain Porter spoke. “We will not discuss matters until you cease paramilitary operations and release our hostages.”

“We can not do that until the Axanar leadership listens to us, and you recognize us as the true Araxian leadership,” Jethan said.

Porter stiffened. “Will you guarantee the safe release of the doctor we send down once he has treated our injured crewman?”

“Your doctor will not be harmed, and he will be free to go,” Jethan replied evenly. “You have my word.” He looked straight at Leonard from the viewscreen. “Doctor McCoy has my word.”

Suddenly, all eyes in the room were on Leonard, and it was all he could do to remember to breathe. He was about to agree to beam down into the middle of a battlefield, to save a dying man, with nothing to protect him but the word of a person who had been labeled a terrorist by the Federation... and all he could think was that it was okay because he needed to get to Jim.

“Let me talk to Kirk,” Leonard said.

“Why?” Jethan asked.

It was a simple question, but one that Leonard couldn’t really answer. The truth was that he wanted to know if Jim was seeing the same thing he was - that the “terrorists” were a group of freedom fighters, and that the Federation was taking the wrong side. However, with the Axanar in the room, posed as an Araxian official, and the Captain firmly taking the stance that these rebels were a rogue group of terrorists, he knew it would be pointless to argue. He was a cadet with an opinion, and
nothing more. He swallowed tightly. “Just want to make sure he’s okay, too.”

“He has stated that he is uninjured.”

*I’ll believe that when I see it.* “Okay.” Trying not to shake from the adrenaline and fear, Leonard turned to Captain Porter. “I’ll go.”

Porter nodded, then turned back towards the screen. “Have your people transmit coordinates for beam-down. And...” His expression darkened. “If you break your word, and McCoy is not returned to us unharmed, we will take it as an open declaration of war on the Federation, and this will no longer be a domestic dispute.”

Jethan gave Porter a level look. “McCoy will not be harmed. But remember, all we require to cease hostilities is for you to believe us, and for the Axanar in control of our planet to step down and recognize us as the real Araxian leadership.”

With that, the transmission went dead, and Leonard found himself staring at the blank screen. This was bad. Really, really goddamned awful.

“McCoy, if you’re sure -”

“I’m sure, Captain,” Leonard said, not liking how rough his voice sounded. “I’m not leaving a wounded man down there to die.” He finally met Porter’s eyes uneasily. “I already let one man die today, and that’s one too many.”

Porter gave a nod of understanding. “I respect that.”

“Did the rest of the team make it back to the ship?”

Porter’s jaw clenched. “Everyone except Finney, Johan, and Kirk. We already knew about Finney.”

Leonard grimaced, then realized he had one last chance to say something, and it needed to be said. Jim would want him to say it, even if it didn’t help. “Sir... you need to know... when I was on the planet earlier today, I met with one of their lead scientists. He said the Axanar came fifty years ago, and slowly took over the Araxian government. The way he was talking, he supports the goals of... uh... rebels. He and Jethan are both leaders in the community. I just think...”

Councilor Rhozhin interrupted. “Cadet, I understand why you would be swayed by their words, but I would caution you not to trust these people. They will say almost anything to convince you of their narrative. This small rogue group is risking the safety of their entire world, against the wishes of their own people, for an ideology that failed them. They are dissatisfied with our elected leadership, and have attacked without provocation. They contradict the natural order!”

Leonard narrowed his eyes slightly. Knowing he was about to put himself in a politically precarious position, and not really caring, he took a small step towards the Axanar. “The natural order... of Axanar, not Araxis. You weren’t born on Araxis, were you?”

Rhozhin twitched, but before he could say a word, Captain Porter cut in.

“Cadet, what are you talking about?”

Leonard looked at the Captain warily. “Sir... you already have my report on Araxian genetics. As you said, it’s not my place. I’m just a cadet. But... I wonder what would happen if you looked at the birth records of everyone in positions of political leadership and power on Araxis. I’d bet most
of them were born on Axanar.”

Porter blinked, but didn’t say a word. Rhozhin looked as though he wanted to protest, but had nothing he could say. Leonard knew, with absolute certainty, that he was right. He just hoped the Captain would figure it out before things got worse.

Leonard huffed a sigh. “I have a patient to try to save. I’ll gather my equipment now.”

Porter nodded slowly. “Report to the Transporter Room as soon as you’re ready.”

Leonard took that as a dismissal and left as fast as he could. That was one mess he couldn’t deal with at the moment. He didn’t even want to try wrapping his head around the mess he was about to beam himself into. At the moment, he had a mission - save Crewman Johan’s life if possible, and get Jim out of there. If he kept it that simple in his head, he might survive this.

Through the corridor, to the turbolift, and into Sickbay, Leonard’s feet moved him automatically. His ears were buzzing and his heart was pounding as he walked into the supply closet. He grabbed a standard medical kit and tricorder. Then he found a satchel in a cabinet and started loading supplies for field surgery, hoping that he was selecting the right equipment. He added the medkit and tricorder to the bag, sealed it, and turned around to find Doctor Brex standing there, looking at him sadly.

“Jim’s down there,” Leonard heard himself say.

“I know.”

“There’s an injured crewman.”

“You’ll be able to save him.”

Leonard shrugged. “I hope so.”

Brex hesitated for the briefest of moments, then said, “I believe you about the Axanar taking over Araxis. I think the Captain wants to believe you, but for some reason, he can’t.”

Leonard gave a weak smile. “At least that’s something. I needed to know that.”

“I understand.” Brex nodded to him, then said, “There’s something about that Kazarite. I’ll need to wait for him to wake up before I can get through to him, but I think it’s important.”

Leonard nodded. “I know. I hope you figure it out.”


They shook hands quickly, and without another word, Leonard looped the strap of the satchel over his shoulder and hurried out the door.

His heart pounded in his ears as he rushed down the corridor to the transporter room. Before he could say anything to the operator, the woman said, “We’ve already got your coordinates, doctor. Please step onto the transporter pad.”

Leonard was so nervous about the whole situation that the idea of being scared of the transporter barely crossed his mind, even as the world dissolved around him. Seconds later, the transporter beam had faded away, and he found himself alone, squinting into the bright light of an afternoon
He was in the middle of a wide road. There was the acrid smell of smoke in the air, and the wail of sirens in the distance. Not a soul in sight, although he was sure he was being watched. It was only then that he realized he had no idea where he was going. He knew that they couldn’t beam him down directly into the building, but he’d been so distracted that he’d forgotten to ask how to find it.

Moving slowly, he raised his hands so anyone watching could see that he wasn’t holding a weapon, and yelled, “Okay, so now what?”

At the corner of Leonard’s eye, he caught movement, and an Araxian in dark brown clothes was walking towards him, holding a large rifle. To Leonard’s narrow relief, the rifle was aimed at the ground, not at him. Still, Leonard kept his hands up until the Araxian stopped in front of him.

“Jethan has confirmed your identity, and our scans indicate that you are unarmed. We appreciate your honesty and cooperation.”

Leonard let out a shaky breath. “I’m a doctor, not a combatant. I’m just here to help an injured man.”

“We respect that. However... we must take your communication device.”

Slowly, he unclipped his communicator from his belt and held it out. “Are you going to destroy it? I need that to get back to my ship.

The Araxian shook his head. “We have no need to destroy the device. We shall return it when you are done treating the injured Terran.”

Well, at least they intend for me to come back here to return to the ship... if he’s telling the truth. Not that Leonard really had a choice at this point. “Good enough. Just lead me to the patient.”

Without another word, the Araxian began walking, and Leonard followed. For a moment, he wondered why he wasn’t being directed at gunpoint, and then he realized how unnecessary that must be. What was he going to do anyway? Run? No... he was here for one purpose, and running wasn’t part of the plan. He needed to follow right now.

On one hand, Leonard wanted to trust that he’d be okay. The Araxian wasn’t actually being hostile in any overt way. In fact, the guy was being shockingly polite, and Leonard was quite sure that he had no desire to harm him. At the same time, the reality of the situation was sinking in. He had no communicator. No weapon. He was in the middle of a battle, and completely at the mercy of these people. For the second time in his life, he was a hostage.

This time, he’d walked into it willingly.

Along the street, Leonard saw shattered windows and the occasional scorch mark of an energy weapon on the ground or the side of a building. There wasn’t a trace of sentient life aside from himself and his guide, but Leonard wasn’t going to let himself believe for a moment that he wasn’t being watched from a dozen directions. Jethan had somehow confirmed his identity, which meant at least he was watching.

They turned a corner down another wide, abandoned street. The smell of burning polymers was thicker here, and over the buildings, Leonard could see a dark column of smoke rising from a source maybe a kilometer away. Immediately, he could see where they were going - a large, graphite-gray building, looming over the whole street. It had few windows and fewer distinguishing features, and looked like little more than an enormous cube.
Dilithium storage, he thought. Makes sense.

Another armed Araxian emerged from the building and quickly ushered them inside. “This way.”

As Leonard stepped into the darkness of the building, despite the reassurances he’d been given, he couldn’t suppress the thought that he might never come out again.

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Chapter 18

Johan was still out cold, and considering how much pain the guy had to be in, it was probably better that way. Afraid to move him at all, Jim sat next to him, randomly squeezing his hand in hopes of getting a reaction. All he got were faint moans, but no signs of real consciousness. He’d asked if the Araxians had a blanket or anything he could use to keep Johan warm, but they didn’t. Of course they didn’t. They weren’t planning to take care of injured hostages, and they didn’t have any medical supplies whatsoever. Who knew how long it would be until the ship sent someone?

It bothered him that they hadn’t allowed him any two-way communication, but what would he have said?

Actually, he knew exactly what he’d have said. He would have told whoever was listening what had really happened to the Araxian government. He would have advised the Captain to agree to open talks with the rebels.

Of course, that would have gone nowhere. He was a cadet and a hostage, so naturally, his observations would be deemed unreliable. Starfleet protocols forbade negotiations with terrorists, and that was a rule that had never been bent. In fact, if his knowledge of Starfleet protocols gave him any clue, he’d guess that Captain Porter was cooperating wholeheartedly with the official Araxian authorities, and Starfleet security and tactical officers were already supporting the local government to bring down the terrorists. The military might of a Federation starship and her crew, all on the wrong side of the fight.

At this point, all he could hope was that nobody else would have to die today, and that hope started with Johan.

And himself.

Now that raw adrenaline had worn off again, Jim was starting to realize that his own injury might have been worse than he’d thought. The ache was sharp, and the pain was spreading. He hadn’t removed the bandaging he’d wrapped around it, and he knew that he shouldn’t touch the dressing until he could actually get the injury treated, but he suspected it might still be bleeding under there.

Still, it was nothing compared to Johan’s injury. Besides, he couldn’t let his captors know he was injured in the slightest. It was a vital rule of tactics - never show weakness when vulnerable. It was too risky. He needed to maintain the appearance of being capable.

He squeezed Johan’s hand again. Still no response.

The sound of heavy footsteps on the metal catwalk startled him, and he turned his head towards the door. Ghzeth’s rifle twitched slightly. The door opened and another Araxian walked in, and then -

“Bones?” Jim stared up at his best friend. Shock, dismay, and disbelief vied for dominance. No. No, no, no... not Bones. They should have sent someone more experienced. A real officer. One of the other doctors. Not Bones...

Bones stopped just inside the door and looked down at him. He must have been able to see every emotion running through Jim’s head, because Bones’ expression morphed into something familiar and perversely reassuring as he shook his head and grumbled, “Dammit, Jim.”

For the barest fraction of a second, Jim almost let himself laugh at the absurdity of it all. Instinctively, he wanted to be able to let himself feel relieved that his best friend was there. It
would have been so easy, but this was the last place in the quadrant Jim wanted to see Bones.

The moment was quickly broken, and Bones’ eyes flicked past Jim to Johan’s prone form, and he was in motion again.

“Let me see the patient,” he said, not even flinching as Ghzeth’s rifle swung towards him as he pushed past the Araxian into the room. He dropped his bag on the floor next to Johan and unfastened it. “Move over, Jim,” he said as he grabbed his tricorder from the bag and quickly began scanning. “I heard your report. Energy weapon blast to the lower back. Has he been able to move his lower body?”

Jim was having a hard time getting his brain to keep up after the shock of seeing Bones walk into the room, but he made himself focus. Bones was here to save Johan, and that was the first priority. “He wasn’t conscious for long, and when he was, I didn’t ask him to move anything. I just told him to keep breathing, and that help was coming.” He blinked. Hard. “Wait a minute. You heard my report? You knew I was down here?”

Bones turned away from his tricorder and gave Jim an almost-level gaze that had a few too many cracks in it. “Yeah, kid. I thought you were on the ship until the moment I heard your voice on the transmission, but yeah.” Then he looked down at Jim’s abdomen, and his eyes widened. “Jim... you’ve got blood all over your shirt! You said you weren’t injured. What the hell happened?”

Jim quickly shook his head. “Liu got shot and I helped him.” It wasn’t the full story, but it wasn’t a lie either, and it was all he had time to say without getting into an argument. Besides, the blood was mostly Liu’s.

Bones furrowed his eyebrows skeptically, then nodded. “Yeah, I heard about your little stunt.” Then he looked back at his tricorder readout as he passed his scanner probe over Johan’s abdomen once more. “No time for that now. You were right. He’s dying.” He grabbed the basic medkit out of the bag and quickly extracted a hypospray and two small vials, and administered the medications with the deft hands and desperation of a surgeon in a crisis.

Jim was torn between looking closer and inching away. “Can you help him?”

Bones didn’t reply. He was already digging deeper into his bag, pulling out equipment. He neatly sliced off Johan’s shirt with the laser cutter, revealing the weapon burn in its grotesque detail. It looked even worse now than it had before. “Help me with equipment, Jim. There are four stasis devices. Hand me one.”

“Stasis... stasis - these.” Bones had taught him about this stuff. He quickly handed over the devices. Bones carefully positioned one on Johan’s abdomen, straight through from where the weapon blast had struck. He checked something with his tricorder, and activated the device. “Another one,” he said, not even looking in Jim’s direction.

Jim placed the unit in Bones’ outstretched hand, which Bones rapidly began positioning on Johan’s side. Another quick check with the tricorder, and Bones asked for a third. Then two regen units.

Then, Bones stopped, sat back on his heels, and looked up at Ghzeth.

“I’ve stabilized the injuries enough to transport him, but he’ll die unless I can get him to a real operating room. These aren’t injuries that I can even begin to treat here. Even with all possible resources, he still might not make it.”

Ghzeth frowned. “Then that is... unfortunate.”
“Wait, what? Unfortunate?” Bones jumped up and was suddenly face to face with an armed terrorist.

“Bones!” Jim was on his feet less than a second later, only to stumble back against the wall as the pain in his gut redoubled. It was okay, because nobody was paying attention to him as Bones began ranting.

“What’s that supposed to mean - unfortunate? I came down here to save a man, not to declare him dead and walk away!”

“I apologize, Terran, but your crewman has been declared a hostage. We have need of him, and cannot release him.”

“Bones, back down!” Jim hissed. There was a reason the guy had almost failed Basic Diplomacy. But Bones ignored him, bordering on apoplectic, and continued raving. “Need? Need? Good God, man, he’s going to die! And then, what good will he be to you?”

“We had agreed that you would be allowed to treat the patient here,” Ghzeth replied with surprising calmness, but off to the side, the other two colleagues were beginning to raise their rifles.

“I can’t treat him here! This man needs massive reconstructive surgery. The blast destroyed one of his kidneys and perforated his bowels. There’s burn tissue throughout his entire abdomen. That’s not something that can be fixed without a full surgical suite. I’ve got him under a partial stasis field, but that won’t hold him forever. Don’t you people have a goddamned stun setting on your rifles? With the damage your barbaric weapons did, it’s amazing he lived this long!”

Ghzeth looked to the side, at the other two Araxians, and motioned for them to lower their weapons. Then he looked back at Bones. “Terran, this entire event has been most regrettable, but it is what it is. I had hoped that our leaders would have listened to us sooner, and that we would have been allowed into the negotiations. I had hoped that the Federation would not become entangled in the hostilities, but events have unfolded in this manner, and we must continue from here. We have given our word - you will be allowed to return to your ship unharmed, but you may not remove one who has been declared a hostage. He has information which cannot be revealed to your leaders.”

“Unbelievable.” Bones was shaking his head in disbelief. “I trusted you people. I believed Jethan. Hell, for what it’s worth, I believe your side of this whole political mess. After what Jethan and Rhexen both told me, I would have supported you, but not if you let this man die here!”

“You believe the truth behind our rebellion?” Ghzeth asked slowly.

Bones tilted his head forward, not taking his eyes off Ghzeth. “Yes, I do. I might not know all the details, but from what I’ve seen and heard... your side of the story makes too much sense. So yeah, I believe you. But your revolution can be damned as far as I’m concerned if you don’t let me do my job and try to save a dying man - who, by the way, has nothing to do with the Axanar and had no idea about what they were doing here. Even if he knows some of your plans, I doubt he’s going to be conscious for at least a day, with this much damage. He’ll be in surgery for hours, and then they’ll probably keep him sedated for at least twenty-four hours after that. He won’t be able to tell anyone anything. He’s innocent in this. Don’t let him die.”

Ghzeth leaned back against one of the computer consoles and gave Bones an appraising look. “Then what do you propose?”
The room went dead silent for a moment as the two of them faced off. Jim looked back and forth between Bones and Ghzeth, then down at Johan, and suddenly, with perfect clarity, Jim knew exactly what Bones was about to say.

“A trade.”

“No!” It was out of Jim’s mouth before he could stop himself, and when Bones turned around, startled at the outburst, Jim had no choice but to push his point. “Bones, you can’t stay here! They’re going to let you leave, but if you stay...” He gritted his teeth. They were sitting on top of one of the largest bombs in the quadrant, and Bones didn’t even know it. If Jim gave him that piece of intelligence, there was no way they’d let him leave. Johan knew, but it didn’t look like he’d be able to spill the beans anytime soon, and the Araxians probably knew that. Jim didn’t care how noble his friend wanted to be - he couldn’t let Bones stay. “If you stay, anything could happen.”

An ironic smile quirked the corner of Bones’ mouth. “Funny, coming from a man in your position.”

“I don’t have a choice, Bones. You do.”

At that, Bones nodded. “Exactly.”

He turned back to Ghzeth. “Send our injured crewman back to our ship. Let the doctors there save him. In trade, you’ve got a hostage who is uninjured, unarmed, and... willing.”

Jim’s mind was all but screaming in hope that Ghzeth wouldn’t accept - that Johan had intelligence about the bomb, that it wasn’t the agreement, or any reason in the quadrant - but he knew the answer before it even came.

“Accepted.”

Jim felt himself sag against the wall slightly in defeat. He wanted to argue, but that wouldn’t do any good. Bones was already pulling extendable stretcher poles out of his bag, and he handed Jim one of the poles without a word. Numbly, Jim accepted it and pulled the end, extending it and locking it in place. He held it steady as Bones attached the netting between the poles. They placed it on the floor next to Johan, and at Bones’ nod, they carefully slid the man onto the stretcher.

Bones gave him a nod. “Thanks, Jim,” he said softly, then turned towards Ghzeth. “He’s ready to move. I’ll need someone to help me carry him.”

Ghzeth shook his head. “You must stay here now. My people will take him to the transport site. He will not be harmed.”

Bones scowled for a moment, then gave a begrudging nod. “Yeah, well... don’t jostle him, okay? Those stabilizers are barely holding him together as it is.”

Ghzeth shot a look at the two other Araxians in the room. “Treat this Terran as you would treat a family member, and bring him safely to the transport site.” Then he pulled out his communication device. “Detonation Team Primary to Control Team.”

“Control Team Secondary.”

“The Starfleet medic can not save the patient here, and has traded himself as a hostage so that the injured Terran can be sent back to the ship for treatment. There is no risk that this Terran could reveal our plans. He is too gravely injured. Rhoth and Jenhz will be carrying him to the transport site. Have your people hold fire and protect them as needed.”
For a moment, there was silence, and then Jethan spoke again. “We will protect the patient. But... allow me to speak to Doctor McCoy.”

Jim felt his eyes widen at the fact that the Araxian had just called Bones by name. “Bones? You know this guy?”

Bones only spared a quick glance at Jim before holding out his hand, accepting the communicator unit, and saying, with too much familiarity, “McCoy here. Hello Jethan.”

“Do you understand that your choice places you in serious danger? I do not wish for you to be harmed.”

Bones grimaced. “Yeah, I know. I don’t particularly like being in the middle of this mess either. But... I’m a doctor. You should understand.”

“A doctor... willing to sacrifice himself to protect a patient.” There was a soft, ironic laugh. “That is something I understand fully, and respect deeply. An Axanar would never understand that. I told you... you would make a fine Araxian.”

“Well, thanks for that... but if you respect me so much... for God’s sake, Jethan, end this battle! You’re second in command of the Control Team - I heard that much on the transmissions. Do something about this. Nobody else needs to die today!”

There was a significant pause. “McCoy... if we do nothing, our civilization dies. We would lose all there is in being Araxian. Our nature is to resist subservience, and to stand on our own. But then, even in our culture, which is built on the innate independence and sovereign will of the individual, we recognize that we are nothing if our society is destroyed. The continuation of our people is more important than the lives of individuals.”

“So which individuals are forced to risk their lives for this?” Bones asked, not even trying to hide the bitterness in his voice.

“None are forced. Those who have put themselves in harm’s way have volunteered. We have decided, individually, that our culture’s continued existence is worth the possible cost of our lives, and we are willing to pay it. Araxis is worth this to us. This is why we are willing to fight.”

Bones pressed his lips together stubbornly, and for a moment, Jim was sure he was going to have another outburst, but then he nodded. “I understand that. I hope you can get people to listen.”

“So do I, McCoy. So do I. Control Team out.”

The communication line went silent, and Bones handed the communicator back to Ghzeth. Then, slowly, looking like a man who was feeling far older than his years, he walked the few steps over to the corner where Jim was standing, turned, pressed his back against the wall, and slid to the floor. He looked up at Jim expectantly, and almost comically, patted the floor next to him.

Completely taken aback with all the unexpected twists that had just bombarded him, Jim didn’t have the mental energy to resist, and quickly mirrored Bones’ actions, doing his best to hide the fact that he was in pain. He slid down next to Bones, shoulder to shoulder, arms pressed together.

The warmth of Bones’ arm seeped through his sleeve, and Jim didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry just then. He’d always known that Bones was a strong man, but what he’d just witnessed? The self-described quiet country doctor going head-to-head with armed terrorists, lecturing one of their leaders, and finally offering himself as a willing captive? Jim didn’t know if he’d ever be able to look at Bones the same way again.
The floor was hard and cold beneath him, and the room smelled dusty and stale. It felt alien and perversely familiar at once. Sunlight was slanting into the room through the high windows, illuminating dust motes in the air. The faint smell of smoke wafted through the room. Ghzeth had taken a few steps away, and was leaning against a control panel at the far end of the room, near the door. Beyond the distant wail of sirens, it was quiet. The illusion of calmness in the room was a perverse contrast to the chaotic whirl of thoughts spinning in Jim’s mind. He tried desperately to focus his thoughts and get a grip on himself.

Finally, Jim found his voice. “Why you, Bones? Why did they send you?”

“Because, Jim,” came the soft reply, “the Araxian I just spoke to on the comm unit is the medic who showed me around the other day. He’s the one who told me about the Araxian genetic engineering. He could identify me as a doctor, not a security agent... and for some reason, he seems to trust me... so they decided that they’d only allow me down here to treat Crewman Johan.”

Jim wasn’t looking at Bones. He was just staring blankly at the floor in front of him. “But... you’re a cadet. They wouldn’t have ordered you to come down here.”

“They didn’t. They asked me to volunteer.”

Jim clenched his hands into fists in front of him. “Then why did you agree to it? Why?” He had wanted to save Johan’s life, but he hadn’t let himself consider the possibility that they’d send Bones. The thought had crossed his mind, and he’d dismissed it. Now, Bones was here, and his life was in danger, and there was nothing Jim could do to help him.

“Jim.”

There was a pause, and Jim finally looked back to see Bones’ strained eyes staring back at his.

“I heard your voice on the transmission.”

Jim swallowed back a surge of nausea as he realized what that meant. “No, you shouldn’t have... not because...”

“Jim.” Something in Bones’ gaze cracked slightly, and his mouth quivered. “A man died today because of me. I was not about to let that happen to anyone else. Not when I had a chance to save him. I came down here to see if I could save Johan. And maybe... to see if you needed some saving yourself.”

“I don’t need to be saved,” Jim bit out harshly. “I didn’t want anyone else getting hurt on my account. That includes you.”

“I came to save Johan, and I would have done it even if you weren’t here. So stop thinking like that right now. It was my choice to make.” His mouth twisted into a bemused smile. “Just like you made the choice to run back to get Liu after he’d been shot.”

Jim felt his eyes go wide. “Wait, you mentioned... is Liu okay? Did you hear --”

Bones gave him a smile - an honest one this time, with more than just a hint of pride behind it. “He’s fine, Jim. I patched up his leg myself. He told me that he’s alive because you ran back for him through a goddamned hail of gunfire. You’re a reckless space-cowboy with a hero complex.”

Jim forced himself to swallow back the relief and satisfaction at knowing Liu had made it, and focused on Bones. “It wasn’t hero shit, Bones. I just saw him there, and I couldn’t leave him behind. Besides, you can call me reckless, but you volunteered to beam you down into the middle
of a war zone,” he said critically.

“Yeah, I did. And Jim? I’d do it again.”

Jim wanted to say something. He really did. He wanted to argue that Bones should have kept himself safe, but... he was right. Bones was the kind of man who would put everything on the line for someone else, whether it was for a patient or a friend. As much as he wanted to, Jim couldn’t argue at all because he knew he’d do the same thing for Bones... or anyone. He let his shoulders slump and looked down at the floor again.

“See, Terran?” Ghzeth asked from across the room. “Even you are willing to risk your life for others, when given the free choice.”

Jim glanced up to see Ghzeth looking at Bones.

Next to him, Bones shifted slightly. “While I’m stuck here, the name’s McCoy. Seeing as we’re being civil and all.” Then, he tilted his head and gave their Araxian captor a long look. “So... you chose to do this? To fight?”

Ghzeth nodded. “Indeed I did. I am not a violent person, McCoy. I abhor the nature of violence. I am a historian, and would prefer to be spending this afternoon amongst the archives, teaching lessons to young scholars. However, as a historian, I know far too well that at certain critical junctures throughout history, violence has been the only means left of achieving a noble goal. My children deserve a future as Araxians, not mired in the servile life of the Axanar. I am willing to sacrifice myself for them, if needed, although I would much prefer to grow old and watch my children enjoy their lives.” He frowned. “Do you not have offspring?”

Jim could see Bones’ back go ramrod straight. “I do, actually.”

“Are your children not the center of your universe? Are they not worth the cost of your own life?” Bones actually squirmed in place. “I’ve only got one. And...” He swallowed tightly, and Jim could see his Adam’s apple bob in place. “She should be the center of my universe. I keep saying she is. I know I’d give my life and everything I have to make her happy. But I messed it up.” He turned and faced Jim, and his face was wrenched with guilt and desperation. “Goddammit, Jim, the last thing I did was mess up our week together. I was supposed to see her. I’m a father, and I have a daughter who needs me, and... what if I never see Joanna again?”

“You will, Bones,” Jim said, trying to project confidence he didn’t feel.

“There’s no way to know that.”

Watching Bones’ strength crumble was almost painful. Only minutes ago, this was a man arguing down an armed terrorist. Now, in a matter of seconds, he was almost ready to fall apart at the idea that he’d messed up his last chance to see his daughter. Given the tenuous situation they were in, it made sense. Jim realized he might need to be the strong one again. “We’re getting out of here,” he said firmly. “This will work out. You said that you agreed with these people, and that you trusted them.”

“I know, but...” Bones shook his head. “Jim... the right side doesn’t always win.”

It was such a simple yet obvious truth that it took Jim completely by surprise, “Captain Porter will figure this out. He has to. I mean...” Jim looked up and around the room at the transmitter equipment, at Ghzeth, and at the narrow windows that were too high to see through. He swallowed tightly. “Porter is a Starfleet captain. He’s seen it all, right? He’s got to be able to put together the
pieces. Hell, if we could see this, then he’s got to be able to see it.”

Bones sighed, and sagged a bit deeper against the wall. “Maybe. I don’t know. I tried to tell him before I beamed down, but he didn’t seem to want to listen. They’re pretty convinced that these folks -” he waved his hand to indicate Ghzeth and the other Araxians who had left with Johan, “- are a fringe group of insurgents trying to destroy the legitimate government. Hell, when I got to the conference room for them to ask me to take this mission down here, and I spoke to Jethan, Porter was surprised that I knew the ‘insurgent.’ His word, not mine. And... they’ve got an Axanar up there, claiming to be an Araxian, representing the Araxian leadership.”

Across the room, Ghzeth shifted his stance. “McCoy, how do you know it was an Axanar?”

Bones pursed his lips. “Easy. His skin color matches a native Axanar, and he’s too young to be an Araxian founder.”

“So you know of our genetic modifications.”

Bones nodded. “Jethan told me.”

“Then you know why we did this,” Ghzeth said neutrally.

“To adapt to a whole new planet. To get rid of the methane metabolic pathway, and stabilize your oxygen metabolism. To get rid of the triglobulin compound.” Bones took a heavy breath. “To isolate yourselves from the Axanar.”

At that, Ghzeth actually smiled, and it was the patronizing, gentle smile of a teacher or professor. “Such a simple view. Accurate, to a point, but you miss the core of why we did this... of who we are.”

Jim spoke up. “Then... who are you?”

Ghzeth’s smile broadened. “Free, my friend. We are free.”

Before Jim could ask more about his cryptic and yet plain statement, the two Araxians who had carried Johan to the beam-up site returned with a third. The new one began speaking rapidly in Araxian. Ghzeth didn’t tell this one to speak in Standard, so Jim tuned out the conversation. It was beyond his control. Everything was beyond his control.

Jim took the lull and let himself sag against the wall. He was exhausted, and his gut still ached. He had no idea what would happen, but he almost hoped they’d just get on with it. For the moment, he was trapped and useless. Under surveillance of armed guards, with no chance of communication with the ship or escape.

Whatever they were planning, he just hoped he could keep Bones out of it. Bones knew they were in a building full of dilithium, but he was pretty sure Bones didn’t know they were sitting inside an enormous bomb. As far as Jim was concerned, he wasn’t going to tell him. Hopefully, the situation wouldn’t escalate, and it wouldn’t matter anyway.

Fuck, he was so tired. He closed his eyes, and only a second later, he startled as he felt Bones pressing a hand against his forehead.

“Bones? What the hell?”

“Are you sure you’re okay, kid? You’re looking a bit pale.”
Jim stared at him incredulously. “We’re hostages in an urban warfare battle, and you’re worried that I look a bit pale?”

“I can’t stop being what I am, Jim. You okay?”

Jim couldn’t lie outright - not to Bones. So he grabbed the discussion and turned it in another direction. “No, Bones, I’m not. You’re in danger, which is bad enough, but... this is just impossible to wrap my head around. I don’t understand how Captain Porter isn’t seeing through this mess. I mean, the clues are right there!”

“I don’t know either,” Bones said.

Jim growled. “These people seem so... rational. Intelligent. Peaceful. And now I see exactly what you meant when you described the real Araxians. They’re nothing like the Axanar. I’m starting to think these are the first real ones I’ve met since we got here. But then... look at what they did. I watched people die today.”

Bones grimaced. “So did I... but a lot of people lived. Johan has a fighting chance now because of you.”

Jim nodded grimly. “It’s something, I guess. I promised Johan I’d get him out alive. I had to get him out. I didn’t tell you - his father was the one who died with mine on the Kelvin.”

Bones’ eyebrow went up slightly. “That’s a heavy load to carry, kid.”

“Yeah, well... I swore history wouldn’t repeat itself.”

Bones reached over and patted him on the knee. “Well, it didn’t. You kept your promise, kid. You got him out. You got the whole team out.”

“Not the whole team.” Before Bones could say anything, Jim covered his eyes with the heels of his hands and pushed forward. “Finney got shot. While we were running between the other building and here. We got him under cover here, but Finney didn’t make it, Bones. He died in front of me.”

There was a moment of silence, and Bones said quietly, “I know, Jim. You said so in your transmission.”

Jim nodded without removing his hands from over his eyes. “I was left in charge, Bones. Dumb luck, nothing more. It was three cadets and two crewmen. The regular cadets have a leadership rotation. It was my week this week, so I was in charge. That made it my call. Finney’s last order to me was to stay here and wait for backup... so I followed it.”

“Oh no.” There was no sarcasm in Bones’ voice.

“Yeah. He ordered us not to leave until a rescue party came. It almost made sense. There were snipers, and we’d taken direct fire every time we went out in the open. I told myself to listen to Finney’s order, but I shouldn’t have. We shouldn’t have waited. I wanted to make a break for it. Take the whole team, leave immediately. We needed to get out of here, and get to a location where we could beam up. I should have made the call.”

“Why didn’t you?” Bones asked softly. “You’ve never had a problem bucking orders before if they didn’t make sense.”

Jim let his hands drop, and he stared blankly across the room. “I’ve never been in a situation like this before, Bones. Lives were at stake, I was in charge, and I had orders. Finney’s last orders! I
can’t believe I’m thinking about the fucking Survival Training now, but that’s the one piece of feedback I’ve been getting, over and over. Follow orders. Don’t stick your neck out. Trust your superiors. Don’t act alone. Just be a cadet. Pike told me the same thing just a couple of days ago.”

“Pike?” Bones didn’t even bother to keep the surprise out of his voice.

“Yeah, I contacted Pike again. With everything getting messy, and with what happened with Brex and T’Val, and all the stuff we observed, I wanted his advice. He told me to…” Jim’s voice trailed off.

“What, Jim?”

“He told me to use my instincts... but not to act on my own.” Jim shook his head with a dry laugh. “How funny is that?”

“I don’t think it’s funny at all.” Bones nudged his shoulder against Jim’s lightly. “I know you can’t save everyone -”

“Don’t I know it,” Jim mumbled under his breath.

“- but you got everyone else out. They all made it back to the ship. So... what would Finney want you to do now?”

Jim squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t want to think about it, but he had to. “Doesn’t matter what Finney would want, Bones. He’s dead.” He opened his eyes and looked sideways at Bones. “We’re on our own.”

Bones considered him carefully for a moment, then said, “So... what does your instinct tell you to do?”

Jim caught his lower lip between his teeth, then let out a slow breath. “That I’ve got to do anything and everything I possibly can to make sure nobody else dies today.” He dropped his gaze to the floor for a moment, then looked back up. “I’ve got to get you out of here alive.”

“You mean you’ve got to get us out of here alive,” Bones said with a sharp edge in his voice.

Jim forced a smile that he was sure looked completely wrecked. “Yeah. You know what I meant.”

Bones nodded, not looking altogether convinced. “You’ve done it once. I’m sure you can do it again.”

Jim snorted. “Right. At least you’re not injured this time.” He shook his head in dark amusement. “I almost want to laugh at this mess. Seriously, who the hell gets themselves into a situation like this twice before graduating the Academy?”

“The reckless daredevil and the foolhardy doctor who goes along with him?”

Bones’ tone was actually light, and considering their situation, Jim almost felt okay for a moment. He elbowed Bones lightly in the ribs. “You’ve got no right to call me reckless today. You’re the one who had a nose-to-nose argument with an armed terrorist. Seriously, I’ve been taken hostage twice since I met you. Must be your fault somehow. How is it that I let you get me into these situations?”

“I get you into these situations?” Bones rolled his eyes dramatically. “Idiot.” With a casual sideways jab, Bones neatly landed an elbow to Jim’s gut.
The flash of pain was immediate, and Jim gasped, wrapping his arms protectively over his stomach. In the same instant, he realized the farce was up.

“Jim?” Bones was already up on his knees, trying to pull Jim’s arms away from his torso. “What the hell did you do to yourself?”

Jim gritted his teeth and tried to shake Bones off. “Nothing. I... pulled a muscle carrying Liu. He’s fucking heavy. Then you elbowed me in the gut.”

“I don’t think so, kid.” He started to reach for his medical supply bag, but in a desperate grab, Jim caught his arm.

“Bones,” he hissed, “Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Jim, if you -” His eyes flicked down at Jim’s torso, then back up to Jim’s face with a look of scathing accusation mixed with equal parts worry. “That’s not just Liu’s blood, is it?”

Bones said under his breath.

Jim looked to the side and noticed Ghzeth and his team had stopped talking and were looking over at them with intent. He looked back at Bones and said in a low tone, “No, it’s not. But most of it was his, Bones. It’s just a cut.”

Bones’ eyes narrowed. “Let me see it.”

“No.”

Bones sat back on his heels and glared at him. “Why the hell not?”

Jim’s mind scrambled for anything he could say that would actually get Bones to back off without tipping his hand completely to the Araxians. The truth was that he’d been trained to know that showing weakness in a hostage situation was an easy way to get yourself into even more trouble. Although he didn’t always agree with everything his instructors had told him, he agreed with this one. Situations like these could change suddenly, in disastrous ways, and as long as he was capable of toughing it out, he had to. What would happen if Bones was in the middle of patching him up when the building got raided and he needed to run? The bandage was holding well enough.. Hell, if nothing else, hadn’t his Survival Training taught him to tough it out? But somehow, even if he could say all of that within earshot of the Araxians, he didn’t think Bones would buy it.

He gave Bones a desperate look, hoping that the guy would just accept it. “Because it’s bandaged, it’s not deep, and there’s no need to mess with it until we’re somewhere safe.”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Now stop being such a damned infant and let me scan it.” He made another reach for his tricorder, but Jim held his wrist fast.

“Bones, no. Just leave it!”

“Now listen here a minute. I’m the doctor -”

“And I’m in charge!”

Bones’ eyes went wide, then narrowed almost instantantly. “Oh, so is that the game you’re playing?”

Jim took a deep breath and kept a level gaze. “It’s not a game.” Then he looked past Bones’ shoulder at Ghzeth, who was now standing almost directly behind Bones.
“Is there a problem, Terrans?”

Bones startled and spun around, still in a crouch, and looked up at Ghzeth. “No. No problem at all,” he said dryly. “Other than being in the middle of a war I didn’t start with the biggest idiot I’ve ever met.” He cast a harsh glance at Jim before turning and settling down against the wall again... a few feet away from Jim, with his arms folded across his chest in annoyance.

The body language was blatant, but Jim couldn’t let himself get wrapped up in that. Not right now. “Ghzeth, what’s going on?”

Ghzeth’s expression was dead center of neutral. “Nothing you need to know, Jim. Do either of you require anything? Water? Sustenance?”

Jim started to shake his head, but Bones spoke up. “Could we both have some water?” He shot Jim a glare that dared him to argue.

“Yeah, water would be good,” Jim admitted.

Ghzeth looked over his shoulder at the Araxian who had just arrived and gave him a nod.

The new guy pulled the large sack off his back and dug into it, retrieving two bottles. He walked over and handed them to Bones first, then Jim. “It’s fresh water. If you’d like, I also have food that should be compatible with your physiology.”

Jim took the bottle and twisted the cap off. “No, this will be fine, thank you.” Then he stopped and furrowed his eyes. “Do I know you?”

He stopped cold, then nodded. “We have met. At the Ambassadors’ Reception. I am Zhareth.”

“Zhareth...” Jim said slowly before realization dawned. “I remember you! You were waiting tables. You were talking to Skavrin, the Tellarite Ambassador.”

The young Araxian bobbed his head, almost as if he was bowing, then stopped himself and stood a bit taller. “Yes, I was.”

Jim cocked his head in confusion. “But... you were... I mean... acting differently at the reception. I mean, like an Axanar.”

“It was expected of me,” Zhareth replied, “in order for my loyalties to remain unknown. I did not expect to see you again.”

“Wait,” Bones said suddenly. “You’ve got the skin tone of an Axanar, and you’re too young to be a founder.” He looked rapidly between Zhareth and Ghzeth. “He’s an Axanar, isn’t he?”

But Ghzeth only shook his head proudly. “He was born on Araxis. He is of Axanar parentage, but he has adopted the Araxian way.”

Zhareth ducked his head again. “My parents came here almost forty years ago. They were amongst the people who wanted to bring the Araxians back under the Axanar tradition. They tried to teach me Axanar manners, and I have not rid myself of all the Axanar mannerisms, but I grew up with Araxian friends. I knew what was happening. I knew why my parents had come to this world, but I disagreed with them. I kept my loyalties secret, and when an internship opened in Parliament, I knew I could be valuable there with my parentage and training. I made my choice.”

Ghzeth clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Zhareth has been brave and noble. A true Araxian. He
knew he might die in the destruction of Parliament, but he remained there to provide us with information until the battle began.”

Jim leaned forward, ignoring the increased ache in his gut. “What sort of information?”

“Whispers between the Axanar and our so-called Araxian leadership, Jim. Information about one of the Ambassadors they are using to aid their deceptions.”

Jim exchanged a quick glance with Bones, whose mouth was twisted into a deep frown.

“How Ambassador?” Bones asked, and there was a curious tone to his voice.

Ghzeth just shook his head. “This is irrelevant to you. Please do not trouble yourselves over that which is out of your control. Our Negotiations Team is speaking with your Federation officials, and we hope that they will listen to us, rather than cause this situation to escalate.”

“If it escalates, I’d say it’s pretty relevant to us,” Jim said flatly. When Ghzeth didn’t respond, he pushed again. “What else, Ghzeth? Are they moving on our location? Is Captain Porter negotiating?”

Ghzeth gave him a look, then turned and spoke to his other two accomplices for a couple of minutes in Araxian. They nodded, and quickly left, leaving Ghzeth and Zhareth. Shifting his rifle, Ghzeth leaned heavily against the control console. “Your captain is a stubborn man,” he said, not bothering to hide his frustration. “While I can normally respect such steadfastness, it is... unfortunate.”

“What’s he doing?” Jim pushed. “Come on, it’s not going to change anything if you tell me. I can’t report back to my ship, and even if I could, telling them what they’re already doing changes nothing.” He glanced to the side at Bones, who had his arms folded across his chest in irritation, staring at the far wall. “Great. I sighed, licked his lips, and spoke in a low tone. “Besides... I’m a lot more cooperative when I’m not being kept in the dark.”

To Jim’s surprise, Zhareth spoke up. “I see no risk in telling him, Ghzeth. And also... I like this Terran. He was polite to me, even amongst the Ambassadors. He said that his people treat each other with respect, regardless of rank.”

“We do,” Jim reinforced. “Or, at least, we try to.”

Ghzeth glanced up at the high windows in the room before settling himself with a sigh. “Your ship’s security personnel have begun moving in units with the Peacekeepers, performing military operations in the center of the city. The Axanar have taken one of our teams into custody. While this may be fruitful, and that team may actually have a better chance of communicating our concerns to the Federation, we will not know until our Control team reports the next round of negotiations. Things are moving rapidly.”

Jim took a slow breath in an attempt to keep control of his nerves. “Do you think they’re on their way here?”

“No. They are unlikely to approach this location soon.” Ghzeth glanced up at the window above his head again, then back down at Jim.

Jim frowned, trying to picture what parts of the city would be critical from Captain Porter’s perspective. He’d studied the map of the city, but he didn’t have every location memorized. “So they’re ignoring us?”
“Unfortunately, no,” Ghzeth said flatly. “We had hoped for this location to go unnoticed as long as possible. Had your group not taken shelter here, they would have ignored this strategic site entirely. As it is, they are aware that we’re here, which is unfavorable. We can only hope that they do not yet realize our purpose in this building. We wish to reveal this information only if other methods have failed.”

“Your trump card,” Jim said in a low tone.

“Trump card?” Ghzeth asked.

“Old Terran games,” Bones grumbled. “We still play ’em, though. It’s the idea that you have something in reserve, hidden, that’s a sure winner.”

Ghzeth looked at Bones gravely. “McCoy... nobody shall be a winner if we use our... trump card, as you call it.”

Bones furrowed his eyebrows. “Wait a minute... this is just a storage building. How the hell is it a trump card?”

Jim’s breath caught in his throat. He hadn’t wanted Bones to know. Not unless he had to. But Ghzeth was giving Bones a curious look.

“While you were on your ship... did your captain speak of this building before you came down here?”

Bones gave Jim a quick, nervous glance before looking back at Ghzeth. “They said you folks were just wanting to keep the leaders away from the dilithium... because they were using the dilithium for negotiations with the Federation. Our people happened to run in here to take cover, so you took them hostage. I mean... you’re right, they weren’t worried about this, except for the fact that we’re here.”

“Bones...” Jim started, but before he could say anything else, the heavy rumble of an explosion shook the floor. Jim startled, instinctively moving to jump up to see what was happening, which sent a lance of pain through his gut. He sank back to the floor, breathing tightly, but everyone’s attention was on the window.

“That,” Ghzeth said sadly, “was the main power station.” He held his rifle in front of him and checked over a couple of the controls, then rested it at the ready. “And now, we should all be worried.”

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Chapter 19

The building shook again with the force of a smaller explosion, and then another, and Leonard pressed his back against the wall as he struggled to keep the horror he felt from showing on his face. It was getting harder and harder to keep it together as everything around him slowly fell apart.

He’d done what he had come down here to do: save the crewman. With a scrap of luck, Johan had arrived in sickbay alive, and the medical team up there would be able to fix the damage. Down here, buildings were exploding, the Federation was helping to fight a war they didn’t understand, and Jim - *goddamnit, Jim* - was injured (probably far worse than he was letting on) and wouldn’t even let Leonard scan him.

The kid looked too damned pale, even under the smears of dirt and soot, and Leonard hated himself for not noticing right away. On the black undershirt, the blood had been hard enough to see in the first place, and it had been too easy to dismiss it all as Liu’s. Now that Leonard had taken a better look, the shirt was bunched oddly in one spot, probably from Jim’s homemade bandage. Jim was moving awkwardly and guarding his abdomen. *Dammit*, he should have seen it!

Sure, there had been plenty of other things to distract him, including a dying man and the small matter of a city-wide battle, but Jim should have said something. He should at least allow Leonard to fix it. Jim’s behavior made no sense, but Leonard had come to understand that Jim Kirk did some stupid, self-sacrificing, reckless, hot-headed shit. Hell, sometimes he even had a reason for it. That didn’t mean Leonard had to like it.

He also didn’t like the fact that Jim seemed to know something about the building they were in that even Captain Porter didn’t know. Leonard swallowed past the lump in his throat and asked, “Jim, how is this building a trump card?”

Jim gave him a bleak look. “I didn’t want to tell you, Bones. I was hoping it wouldn’t matter.”

“We’re stuck in the middle of a goddamned battle, and you just *hoped* it wouldn’t matter? For the love of bourbon, kid, just tell me!”

Jim shook his head, not to say no, but more of a gesture of surrender. “It’s a bomb, Bones. The whole building. The dilithium. These Araxians... they’re not here to guard the building. They’ve rigged the whole stockpile to explode. This is the Detonation Team.”

“What?” Leonard blinked, shocked that he hadn’t realized this sooner. It seemed obvious now. So damned obvious. Dilithium was one of the most powerful compounds in the galaxy, stable until triggered, but then violently explosive. How had he not have realized it? How had Captain Porter not put it together?

Then he remembered the look that the Axanar in the briefing room had given Captain Porter, and a sick wave of bile rose in his throat. They were being played. He looked over at Ghzeth, who was nodding slowly.

“I deeply apologize, McCoy, that you have been brought into this situation. We still hope that we will not have to use this option,” he said simply, as if he hadn’t just said that he was going to blow up a building with all of them, including himself, inside. Leonard didn’t know enough about the physics to make more than a laughable estimate, but he’d guess there was enough dilithium to make a sizable dent in the city.
Hell, it might take out most of the city.

And all those people.

As if enough people hadn’t already died today.

“You hope you don’t need to use the option, huh?” Bones gave him a sour look. “Well, at least we agree on that much.”

“I believe,” Ghzeth said, with thinning patience, “that I have made our intentions clear to you.” It seemed as though he meant to continue speaking, but a tone sounded over the communication equipment, and he hurried over and quickly became engrossed in a conversation in rapid Araxian.

Leonard was at a loss. He’d come down here of his own free will, but this seemed like more than he’d bargained for. Sure, he knew that volunteering to be a hostage meant he’d given up anything remotely resembling bargaining, but this? This was unbelievable.

“Bones?” The question was hesitant, tentative, and just a bit worried.

Leonard had no patience for that shit at the moment. “What?” He flicked his eyes towards Jim just long enough to see the kid flinch at his harsh tone.

“Come on, Bones... don’t do this.”

“Do what?” he snapped, even though he knew exactly what Jim meant.

“Don’t... make this any harder than it needs to be!” Jim growled in frustration.

“You should have told me.”

Jim blew out a tight breath. “Yeah, well, I tried to tell you not to stay. If I’d told you what they were actually doing with this building, they wouldn’t have let you leave at all, so it would have been pointless.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, trying to keep his voice even.

“Then why the hell didn’t you listen? I told you not to stay!” It was the first time Jim had sounded desperate since he’d arrived. It was disconcerting.

“How the hell could I?” In a heartbeat, a thick knot tightened in his throat, and the echoes of a conversation he’d had a few weeks ago came back to the forefront of his mind. He cleared his throat. “Jim... I told you... that I’d messed up with my daughter because I’d taken her for granted. What I didn’t tell you... when I was avoiding you... is that I was afraid I was going to take you for granted. I was afraid that I’d walk away when you needed me.”

Jim’s mouth fell open. “Are you kidding me? Bones, that’s not what... no! You don’t need to prove anything to me. You’ve always been there when I needed you, and I know you’d never walk away from me or anyone who needed you, but this is... this is crazy! You had a choice here!”

Leonard took a deep breath. “Exactly, Jim. Even if I didn’t know what I was getting myself into, it was still my choice. I wasn’t about to walk out of here without you.” He risked another glance at Jim.

Jim’s eyes went wide and his mouth fell open, and for a couple of seconds, he stared at Leonard as if he’d never really seen him before. “Bones... you’re a better friend than I deserve.” Then, his
expression closed up. “That still doesn’t make it easier.”

“Maybe not, but we’re here now. So we’ll get out of here together,” Leonard said, trying to sound hopeful. “Come on, kid... aren’t you the one who keeps telling me about no win scenarios and something about writing your own rules?”

Jim held his breath, then sagged slightly against the wall, flinching as he did so. “The rules are just guidelines, Bones... but that doesn’t mean I get to rewrite them.”

“But you’re the one who finds the loophole, right?”

Jim didn’t even look at him. “Yeah. I guess I am.” His voice sounded too flat.

Leonard wanted to ask him what the hell that was supposed to mean, but a heavy thud caught his attention. Ghzeth had slammed his hand down on the table in front of him and was shaking his head in apparent dismay. His expression was grim. Before Leonard could ask what the sudden interruption had been, Jim spoke.

“I take it Captain Porter wasn’t impressed with the latest round of fireworks.”

Ghzeth got up and walked towards them. “No, I’m afraid not. The Axanar representatives have thoroughly convinced the Federation that we are a small fringe group. They will not accept negotiations with us.”

“All you’re asking them to do is to talk.” Jim was glowering furiously. “How can anyone think they know enough of the story to take sides when they’re only listening to one side? I don’t understand how a Federation captain wouldn’t be able to see what’s right in front of his face.”

“Because officers are politicians,” Leonard grumbled cynically. “They only see what they want to see.”

Jim’s glower became more of a frown. “Some of them, maybe, but... not like this, Bones. I mean... you said you’ve been in meetings with them about Brex, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Captain Porter has a mountain of suspicious evidence, and you said he’s never even made an indication that he’s been interested in investigating?”

Leonard grunted. “Not that I’ve seen.”

Jim’s jaw clenched. “That isn’t normal.”

“None of this is normal,” Leonard mumbled under his breath.

Jim shook his head. “A Starfleet captain is supposed to be observant. He should investigate everything... account for all possibilities. Porter isn’t, and that makes no sense. There’s got to be something here that I’m not seeing.”

“Well, if you’re not seeing it, Porter sure isn’t either,” Leonard said, not hiding his annoyance.

Ghzeth looked back and forth between them. “Is your captain typically an observant man?”

Leonard looked up at him and offered a helpless shrug. “How would I know? I started this assignment a couple of weeks ago, and I’ve only met the captain a couple of times. He seems like a man who is really determined not to see anything that contradicts the ideas he’s got stuck in his
head already. And that just seems to be par for the course with - what?"

Jim was frowning at him. Deeply. “When I applied for the Athena, I looked up the records of the senior staff. Captain Porter’s record shows that he’s open-minded and creative. I’ve only met him once, during our first week onboard. Before we got to Axanar. He seemed to fit his profile.”

Leonard stared at Jim. “Are you saying that Captain Porter has changed between the start of this mission and now?”

Jim blew out a tight breath. “I don’t know what I’m saying anymore, Bones. Fuck, I don’t know.”

“Very curious,” Ghzeth suddenly said. “I must continue to monitor communications.” With that, he turned back to his equipment.

Leonard watched him for a moment, then looked at Jim again. The kid was staring intently at the floor. If the deep furrows between his eyebrows were a clue, he seemed to be trying to wrap his head around the whole situation. Leonard hoped Jim would succeed, because he didn’t have a clue what to make of this mess.

He and Jim were trapped on the surface of an alien planet, in the middle of a battle, inside a bomb. There was a political standoff, and the people who could stop this whole mess didn’t seem interested in even listening to all the facts. If they didn’t listen, a lot of people were going to die.

Leonard knew he should be terrified for himself, but at the moment, all he could think about were the facts that Jim was in danger, and that his little girl was hundreds of light years away, waiting for her daddy. He felt angry about the former, and guilty about the latter. It took something like this to feel the sort of desperation to see his daughter that he should have felt all along. What sort of person did that make him? He’d never gotten a chance to at least come to a truce with Jocelyn, and now that he was here, with time to think... he wished he had. He never wanted to get back together with her, but he needed to make peace with the past and move on for the sake of Joanna. He couldn’t do any of that if he got vaporized in a massive explosion.

Leonard clenched his hands and tried to think about something else. He wondered if Starfleet was sending backup ships. He wondered if negotiation experts were already involved. He wondered how badly Jim was injured.

Mostly, he wondered how much time they had before something happened. It was only a matter of time before the conflict would be resolved, or the building would be raided and there would be a massive crater where the building had once been.

At least it will be quick, he thought. If you’re going to knife someone, go for the carotid artery. Yet his thoughts drifted back to his only real worries at the moment: Joanna and Jim. And of the two of them, Jim is the one who’s here. He’s the only one I can help.

Leonard looked to the side and saw Jim giving him a searching look, still too pale, and sitting awkwardly in the manner of a person hiding a significant amount of pain. He pondered the kid for a moment, then blew out an exasperated breath. “Jim, I know you said to leave it alone, but could you please let me take a look at whatever damage you did to yourself? You ain’t lookin’ too good there.”

“I always look good,” Jim said, but the joke lacked any of his usual energy.

“Jim -”

But Jim cut him off, speaking in an undertone. “I know what you’re going to say, Bones. And I
can’t. If something happens, I need to stay strong. I need to be ready to move. I don’t want to know the damage, because then I’ll let it slow me down.”

Leonard narrowed his eyes at Jim. “Okay, kid, I understand that you have your reasons, but what if the damage is bad enough that you can’t move when you need to? What if it’s something that I can fix? Have you considered the fact that sometimes, asking for help can make you stronger? Or that playing the hero and not asking for help can get you killed?”

Jim’s expression wavered for a moment, and Leonard knew he’d found a chip in the kid’s shields.

“If you’re incapacitated, you can’t help other people, either,” Leonard said gently. Jim’s eyes widened at that, and Leonard knew he had him. “Jim... let me see what you did to yourself.”

Jim blinked, then glanced up at Zhareth, who was looking at them curiously from across the room. Finally, he looked back at Bones and nodded. “Okay. Just... don’t let them know if it’s bad. Okay?”

The concession felt like a rush of relief, and Leonard nodded, “Okay. If I can, I will.” Then he cut a sideways glance at Zhareth. “Mind if I get something out of the medical kit I brought with me? I think Jim got himself a bit banged up while your buddies were taking pot-shots at him, and I’d like to check him over.”

Zhareth cocked his head, then shrugged. “I know there are no weapons in your bag. I don’t see a problem with you checking your friend.” He gestured towards the medical bag on the floor with his rifle.

Leonard grabbed the bag and quickly pulled out a tricorder and his basic kit. His first instinct was to peel back Jim’s shirt and look directly, but if Jim wanted to hide stuff from their captors, he’d leave that alone as long as possible. However, that possibility flew out the window as soon as he started scanning. “Shit, Jim, this is... you’ve got a -”

“Shut up, Jim. I’m not going to stop, Jim!” Leonard hissed. “You’ve already got enough damage - this needs surgery. Listen, I’ve got the tools in my kit for something like this. It would take twenty minutes, maybe a half-hour to stabilize it enough until we can get you back to the ship and finish the repair.” He started reaching for his bag. “I have to sedate you, but -”

Jim’s hand snaked out and caught his wrist. “Wait! Stop, Bones.”

“I’m not going to stop, Jim!” Leonard hissed. “You’ve got an internal injury that’s already bad enough, but it could go critical at any time if it shifts around in there.”

Jim’s eyes were pleading. “Bones, you can’t sedate me. Not here. Not now. What if the situation goes critical? I can’t take the chance that I’d be lying here unconscious while... while the
“everything falls apart and these people blow up half of the city.”

“I understand that, kid, but what if it kills you?”

Jim stared at him, jaw set firmly. “Is it stable enough for now?”

Leonard looked back at his tricorder. There was some internal bleeding, and it had definitely nicked his gut, but based on the readings, Jim wasn’t in danger yet. As long as nothing changed, he’d be okay for at least a couple of hours... but that was a huge gamble. With a growl, Leonard let his shoulders slump. “If nothing changes, it will hold for another few hours without irreversible damage. But I can’t promise that it will stay that way, and it is bleeding in there, and I need to fix it before -”

“I won’t let you knock me out.”

“I can’t fix this with you awake,” Leonard hissed.

“Then don’t.” Jim looked up at Zhareth, then over at Ghzeth, then back at Leonard. “Stabilize it as much as you can. Give me a painkiller or whatever else, but I will not let you sedate me.”

Despite the pallor and obvious pain, Jim seemed completely resolute. Sure, Leonard could tell him he was just using a painkiller and just knock him out without permission, but he wouldn’t. He couldn’t betray Jim’s trust like that. Besides, if it was him, he wouldn’t want to be unconscious in the middle of a crisis like this either. He couldn’t do that to Jim.

“Okay,” he said, nodding uneasily. “Just remember... this goes against my professional judgement as a doctor.”

Jim tossed him a sarcastic salute.

Leonard shot a scowl at him before digging into his kit. Hypospray. Analgesic. Broad-spectrum antibiotic. A stabilizer, disinfection unit, and basic cleansing wipes. When he turned back, snapped the analgesic into the hypospray and deftly pressed it against Jim’s arm. “I’m giving you an antibiotic and a painkiller.”

“Okay.” Then Jim frowned at him. “Hey, I thought you always aimed for the neck with those things.”

“Only for stuff that needs more rapid delivery.” He allowed himself a smirk. “Or when you’ve pissed me off.”

“How thoughtful - ow!” He slapped at his neck and rubbed the spot where Leonard had just delivered the antibiotic.

Leonard gave him a raised eyebrow to shut him up, then pulled up Jim’s shirt to expose the damage. “Hold still.” He removed Jim’s makeshift field dressing, noting that it was actually fairly well-bandaged, considering the circumstances, and he quickly began dabbing at the dried blood around the wound. There was no way to know how much of the blood was Liu’s, but Leonard guessed that more of it was Jim’s than the kid realized.

In the meantime, Zhareth had taken another step closer. “Are you certain that he is not seriously wounded?”

“It’s not bad,” Jim protested weakly, and Leonard scowled at him before answering Zhareth.
“It’s not good either.” He cast a glance up at Zhareth. “You folks and your explosives are what caused it, so I don’t see why you’re so worried. Especially if you’re planning on blowing up the whole place.”

“We do not want to harm anyone,” Zhareth said, regret and sorrow heavy in his words.

“Yeah, well, we don’t always get what we want, do we?” He sighed. “Jim will be just fine, as long as your buddies don’t blow up anything else.” At least, Leonard hoped Jim would be just fine. Really, they needed to get out of there, and Jim needed real medical treatment. For now, the best he could do was to keep the injury stable, and hope that someone calling the shots decided that talking was better than fighting.

He didn’t make eye contact with Jim as he finished cleaning the wound. He ran the sterilizer, pressed a sealant bandage over it, and attached and activated a small stabilizer unit.

“Good enough, Bones?” Jim asked, and Leonard finally looked up to see a painful mix of uncertainty and vulnerability in Jim’s expression.

“It’ll do... you crazy space cowboy. Just don’t mess with it too much.” Feeling excessively tired, Leonard put away his med-kit, and settled himself back down against the wall. This time, he sat closer to Jim - not quite shoulder-to-shoulder, but almost touching. He visually checked Jim and saw that some of the color was returning to his face, and his posture wasn’t quite so tense from discomfort, so at least it was something.

Still, the kid looked like he was already beginning to mentally retreat into himself. His face was screwed up in a look of intense concentration - the same sort of look he got when he was considering a particularly tricky chess game. Leonard couldn’t begin to guess the specifics of what he was thinking, but knowing Jim, it probably involved a way for them to get out of there. What else could he be thinking?

Other than Ghzeth still speaking in Araxian, and the tinny buzz of voices over the comm system, the room was perversely calm. There was a faint scent of smoke in the air, but it was barely noticeable. Occasionally, Leonard could hear the distant wail of a siren, or the muffled rumble of an explosion. Somehow, he didn’t think negotiations were going well.

A slightly closer rumble caused him to exchange a nervous glance with Jim, but they said nothing. What was there to say? They already knew they were up to their necks in trouble.

After several long minutes, Ghzeth seemed to finish his conversation. He toggled a switch and took a tired-looking step backwards from his commo equipment.

Without preamble, Jim spoke up. “It’s not going well, is it?”

“No,” Ghzeth said sadly. “We offered to release one of you in exchange for talks, but the Axanar will not negotiate.”

“You know the Federation would probably listen if you disarm,” Leonard said, not really sure if they would or not, but Jim was already shaking his head.

“It wouldn’t work. This will be classified as a domestic dispute, Bones. That’s part of the problem. It’s not a matter of the Federation listening. It’s about convincing the Axanar to listen. The rebels will be subject to the local laws. All Starfleet can do is to offer support to the Axanar leaders if they’re asked. Unless something were to cause Starfleet to recognize these people as the real authority on this planet, no... Starfleet won’t listen.”
Ghzeth was nodding slowly. “It is as I expected it would be... if it went this far. I had hoped that the Axanar would listen. That they would turn coward and relinquish their hold on the city before matters became so dire.”

He fell silent and turned back to his equipment. In the distance, sirens wailed. Leonard could practically feel the tension pulling at his own skin, but he didn’t know what to say. It felt as though they were all at an impasse, but then Jim spoke again.

“Ghzeth? I have a question for you.”

The Araxian glanced quickly, then turned his whole body to face them. “Ask, and I shall answer if I can.”

“You said that you warned your people away from the target areas. That you tried to keep them away from the violence. If your people took shelter, or made it just outside the city, they’d be safe from the small explosions, and most of the fighting within the city.”

“Correct,” Ghzeth said with noticeable hesitation.

“But... if negotiations fail, and you detonate the dilithium... the blast is going to flatten the city, and a pretty large area around it. I know you evacuated as many as you could, but there’s no way you could have really evacuated such a large area. Not completely. So... if you detonate... how many will die?”

For a moment, Ghzeth squeezed his eyes shut, and his head fell forward. Then, as though struggling under an unseen weight, he looked up again. “The precise number is unknown, but we estimate sixty thousand.”

The shock Leonard felt at the answer was overwhelming. “Wait a minute! How big is this goddamned bomb?”

Jim gave him a bleak look, and his pallor from a moment ago had turned a sick shade of green. “It’s not a normal bomb. It’s dilithium. There’s so much energy wrapped up in the molecular structure of the crystal... it’s incredibly stable until you trigger it, and then, it’s a chain reaction. The energy release is enormous.”

Leonard knew it was a high-energy substance with a unique molecular structure, but he’d never paid much attention to anything that wasn’t alive and sentient, so he had no idea how much of the stuff it would take to blow up... well... anything. “So... how much dilithium is there?”

Jim’s expression was so apologetic, it was almost painful to see. “Did you see those crates in the storage room below?”

Leonard felt his eyebrows go up. “That’s all dilithium?”

“Yeah,” Jim said in defeat. “And... sixty-thousand people. That’s....” His eyes widened in horror and his voice dropped to a whisper. “That’s half of the population,” he whispered.

“It is,” Ghzeth said sadly.

“You’d sacrifice half of your population...” Jim said vaguely, staring up at the Araxian.

“To save the rest. To ultimately save us all.” He turned and looked up at the window, then across the room at their equipment. “Pardon me, but I must contact the Control Team.”
Ghzeth walked away and began speaking in Araxian into his communications equipment. Zhareth kept a watchful eye on them, but he didn’t seem to be intruding into their space, so Leonard took it as a bit of breathing room. And damn, did he need some breathing room.

He looked at Jim. “You okay in there, kid?”

Jim was staring at the floor in front of him, eyes wide with horror. “What do you think, Bones?” His voice was shaky. “We’re sitting on sixty-thousand lives, including ours. I can’t let that happen.”

As angry as Leonard wanted to be at Jim for being a stubborn bastard, he had to feel for him there. “I know you can’t.” And dammit, neither can I, Leonard thought. He just had no idea what he could possibly do about it.

“Zhareth,” Ghzeth said suddenly. “Please stand guard outside the room. Shut the door. Do not allow any to enter... or exit.”

Leonard could read between the lines loud and clear. Just because these people were being cordial didn’t mean they wouldn’t still shoot if their hostages tried to escape. Or, with the negotiations going so badly, it was possible that they’d decided to execute one of them as a warning... and the Araxian was actually going to apologize first before killing them. The wary look on Jim’s face meant he was thinking the same thing.

Zhareth stepped out of the room, and Ghzeth settled himself heavily against the table with his commo equipment, rifle at the ready against his hip. “How much history and culture have you studied, Terrans?”

“Not much,” Leonard admitted, while Jim said, “A fair bit.”

“Do you know much of your own allies, the Vulcans?”

“What do the Vulcans have to do with this?” Jim asked, sounding confused.

Ghzeth actually gave a faint smile. “Nothing, and everything. One of your own Federation founders. They have a very interesting history. Once a violent, savage race, but now completely dedicated to the principles of logic and emotional restraint. Did it ever give you cause to wonder why the Romulans so vehemently objected to this, enough so that they split themselves from the Vulcans and became their own race?”

“Wait a minute,” Leonard blurted out. “Are you saying your people are like the Romulans?”

Ghzeth laughed - such a striking contrast to his posture as an armed combatant. “In philosophy, not at all. We have merely found ourselves in a historically similar situation. We know little of the Romulans aside from their violent ways and their hostilities towards the Federation, and we Araxians could not be more different. However, we have studied what is known of their cultural split with the Vulcans. We have also studied the Vulcan philosophies. Are you familiar with Vulcan philosophy, Terrans?”

“Then you know the Vulcan adage, ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,’ yes?”
Jim frowned. “Well of course, I...” His eyes widened. “That’s what we’ve been talking about this entire time, isn’t it? Same philosophy, different culture.”

Leonard barely knew the basics of Earth history, and much less about Vulcan history. This conversation was running loops around him. “What do you mean, Jim?”

Jim was shaking his head slowly, eyes still wide and distant. “The needs of the many... Bones, the Araxian and the Axanar have each taken the same philosophy and turned it upside down from each other.”

Yeah, still confused. “I don’t follow you.”

Jim held out his hands in front of himself as if he could frame his thoughts between his own splayed fingers. “The Axanar... they believe that the needs of the many are - I don’t know - somehow served best by subjugating the many to the few. And I... I’m not saying this right.”

“A correction,” Ghzeth said, with the surprisingly gentle tone of a teacher. “They labor under the idea that the many are best served by eliminating the free will of the few. Self-determination, my Terran friends. The freedom to choose your path. You must understand - the Vulcan philosophy only remains ethical as long as free will remains.”

Bones shook his head. “Are you saying the Axanar have no free will?”

Ghzeth looked at Bones sadly. “Do they give you any cause to believe that they do?”

“Well...”

Jim cleared his throat. “Bones... you’ve seen it yourself. They gave me the damned opal window from their Hall of Lords, just because I said I liked it. I really think they’re planning on giving the Federation anything we ask of them to keep the status of Federation Protectorate. They act like they owe their doctors everything.”

Leonard snorted. “It might make it easier to get patients to comply with treatment plans.” Then he sighed. “But I get your point.”

“And,” Ghzeth said softly, “because they believe that we Araxians are still Axanar, they feel that what we have... is theirs to offer as well. That we are to accept their lack of free will, because they refuse to accept that we are no longer Axanar. All because they believe that the needs of their society outweigh our freedom.”

“But... didn’t you say that Araxians also believe that the needs of the few are... well... secondary to the needs of the many?” Jim looked confused, and Leonard had to admit to himself that he was having just a bit of trouble following. The last thing he’d expected, in the middle of a battle, from the person holding him hostage, was a philosophy lesson about freedom.

Something bright and almost wistful lit Ghzeth’s expression, and Leonard was suddenly reminded of Jethan and Rhexen. “Only so far as an individual chooses to make it so. Jim... a single Vulcan would sacrifice himself if logic called for it, but it would still be a choice for him to make. You must remember... the many is composed of the few. Without the freedom of the few, the many have nothing. Life itself becomes meaningless.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Leonard asked, feeling a bit awkward and uneasy.

“Because, Terrans,” Ghzeth said tightly, “I am a historian... and a teacher. It is an essential part of who I am in this world, even at a time like this. I wanted you to understand why we have done this.
To understand why a peaceful people would go so far... and why we are willing to sacrifice everything.”

There was something ominous in those last few words, and Leonard felt a shiver work up his spine.

To his side, Jim spoke. “Your revolution is failing, isn’t it?”

The lightness in Ghzeth’s expression was abruptly extinguished, and he spared a dark glance at the window above his head. “It is. Our efforts within the city have all but failed. We are desperately trying to lever negotiations.”

“So this is it?” Leonard spat out, not wanting to hear any of this politely. “You wanted us to understand your philosophy before you paraded us out at gunpoint to make one last attempt at bargaining before you blow us all up?”

Ghzeth seemed shocked. “We... I had discussed this matter with the other teams, but we decided immediately that we could not do that. The destruction of our city and our occupiers was horrific enough... but we could not bring ourselves to execute someone in such a manner.”

Jim gave Ghzeth a long, considerate look. “But you’re not going to release us, are you?”

By the way Ghzeth’s expression fell, it was obvious that Jim had seen exactly what he was thinking. “We do not know yet. I have requested that we might, and our Control team is weighing the situation, and will decide shortly.” His expression became pinched. “I despise entrapping free beings, but we still need you.”

Leonard frowned. “Wait. If you weren’t planning to use us to make demands in exchange for our lives, what the hell was the point of keeping us captive?”

“Bargaining, Bones,” Jim said. “They couldn’t let us leave in the first place because we’d spill the beans on their plan to blow up the building, but they also kept us for bargaining. They didn’t need to kill us to have that leverage.”

Ghzeth nodded sadly. “And also, regrettably, because we are essentially using you as a safeguard against a raid on the building.”

Leonard balked. “Wait, what?”

“The Federation wants you back alive,” Ghzeth continued, “and the Axanar wish to remain in the Federation’s good graces. As long as you are here, they will not raid the building blindly unless they feel they have no choice.”

Leonard glared at him. The damned thing of it was that he already knew that. “Great. So now, we’re a pair of goddamned human shields in the middle of someone else’s civil war. Great. Just fucking peachy.”

“But he’s right.” Jim said softly. “If we leave, there will be nothing to hold the Axanar back.”

Leonard, stared at Jim for a second, then folded his arms across his chest as if he could physically hold himself together and grumbled, “It might not be enough to hold them back anyway, kid.”

Jim frowned. “What are you saying?”

He let out a tight breath. “When I was in the briefing room where they offered me this mission, Captain Porter told me that the Peacekeepers were holding off on raiding the building because of
the hostages. They were afraid that the... uh... terrorists would kill you if they raided the building. Porter said they’d hold off as long as the situation was stable, but... what’s Starfleet’s policy on hostages, Jim?”

Jim’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly, then he nodded in understanding. “Policy doesn’t allow for the protection of hostages if it creates a risk greater than the lives of those hostages.” Jim recited, then gave a silent, mirthless chuckle. “The needs of the few, Bones. I bet a Vulcan wrote that policy. And the fucked up part of it is... I agree with it.”

Leonard looked at him for several seconds. It was a sobering realization: the knowledge that Jim knew and accepted that his life wasn’t as important as the bigger picture and the other lives that might be lost. Leonard hadn’t been sure if he’d ever see that level of maturity in the kid. Not so much a kid anymore. Finally, he nodded. “So do I, Jim.”

“A noble policy, even if it is unfavorable to our situation at the moment,” Ghzeth said.

“Some situation,” Leonard mused, shaking his head. “How the hell did it go so far?”

“It has gone this far because of a fundamental difference in how our peoples view reality,” Ghzeth said sadly. “The Axanar cannot comprehend how we can possibly live without the structure of their society’s protection. If we survive without them, then it undermines their universal paradigm. It would destroy something of them. And so... they must keep us under the same proverbial chains they bear willingly.”

“Infinite diversity...” Jim said softly, his voice trailing off.

A surge of anger flashed in Leonard. Something instinctive. *Infinite Diversity* be damned - this was just wrong. “As far as I’m concerned, there are certain absolutes,” he growled, “and one of them is the right of humanoids to a free and unchained environment. The right to self-determine, and to grow.”

Ghzeth’s face lit up. “You do understand.”


Ghzeth’s expression quickly sobered, and he looked between both of them. “Then you understand why we are willing to kill and die to preserve our freedom... our right of self-determination.” He glanced around. “Even to do the unspeakable.”

“Trump card,” Jim said softly.

“Yes.”

Ghzeth returned to his equipment, leaving them to themselves. Then, Leonard heard something he thought he’d never hear out of Jim Kirk.

“It’s over.”

Leonard snapped his gaze sidewise towards Jim. “What?”

Jim was staring straight ahead. His jaw was clenched, the muscles in his neck were strained, and there were tight lines of stress around his eyes. “It’s over, Bones. I mean... maybe they’ll let us go. Maybe not. Either way, someone is going to break the standoff. Maybe they’ll do it with words, and maybe they’ll detonate the dilithium. But there is nothing we can say or do that will make any difference right now.” He swallowed tightly, then turned his head to make eye contact with
Leonard. Despite the furious tension written on his face, his eyes were desolate, and to Leonard’s dismay, slightly glassy. “It’s the no-win scenario, Bones... and I failed it. It’s over.”

Leonard opened his mouth to reply, but there was nothing he could say to that. Jim must have sensed it, and his gaze dropped back to the floor and he fell silent.

There was still the faint sound of sirens in the distance. The comm traffic in the room seemed like little more than a buzz in the background. The room was silent otherwise, but this time, the ominous tension was stronger. More immediate.

Leonard looked around the room, trying to quell his nerves. The slant of the light from the window was lower now. Afternoon was beginning to stretch out across the city. Leonard imagined that the weather outside was still gorgeous. Just this morning, it had been so peaceful and quiet. *Evacuated*, his mind supplied. Everything had seemed fine on the surface, even if the problems were boiling just below.

Leonard found himself clinging to the hope that maybe Ghzeth would be able to release them before they detonated the dilithium. They didn’t need to be involved in this fiasco. *Private little war*, Leonard pondered ruefully. He and Jim could leave, unscathed, and whatever happened... well... it was a big galaxy. Plenty of civilizations, including Earth, had brought themselves to the brink. Was this so different? Each species had to chart its own course through history. Looking back, it was sometimes hard to tell who was wrong and who was right. Leonard wondered if anyone would figure it out this time.

Hell, he just wondered if anyone would be able to sift through the aftermath to figure out what had gone wrong. Would anyone understand why it had all fallen apart? Would people analyze this for years to come and wonder what others had missed? Would Captain Porter live up to his personnel file and actually see what was going on?

Suddenly, he thought of Doctor Brex, back on the Athena.

*Something we missed...*

“Jim.”

“What, Bones?” Jim’s voice was so distant that it made Leonard cringe.

“I almost forgot - and it might not even be relevant - but Doctor Brex’s telepathy came back.”

Jim’s posture went from slouched defeat to rapt attention in a split second. “It came back? Suddenly?”

Leonard nodded. “In sickbay, before they asked me to come down here.”

“Did he say why? Can you think of *anything* that happened in conjunction with his telepathy coming back that was... weird? Anything at all?”

There was only one strange thing that had happened at that time, and Leonard was becoming more and more certain that the connection was *right there*, but he had no idea what the connection could be. “There was the Kazarite Ambassador. Brex started getting this odd headache. Then, the Kazarite was beamed up to the ship. He had severe injuries, and he was muttering something about being wrong. Sounded like he was blaming himself about something. They sedated him, and it was just about at that moment that Brex said his telepathy was back, and... what?”

Jim was looking at him, first with confusion, then with the wide-eyed horror of comprehension.
“Bones... Kazarites are telepaths. Really, really powerful telepaths. Their ability doesn’t work like most of the other telepathic races we know. They can manipulate thoughts... influence ideas... but...” He frowned sharply. “But they’re peaceful. I mean... absolutely pacifist. They work with animals and they hate politics. How could a Kazarite be involved in something like this?”

Leonard blinked, open-mouthed, trying to figure out what the hell Jim was getting at. “Jim, do you mean -”

But Jim had turned his attention towards their two captors. “Zhareth! You said you heard something about one of the Ambassadors getting involved in this. Was it the Kazarite?”

Zhareth looked over at Ghzeth, and Ghzeth answered for them. “It was. Zhareth witnessed him exiting the Prime Minister’s personal chambers many times with only the Axanar ambassador accompanying him.”

“Wait a minute,” Leonard cut in. “Are you telling me that this guy was somehow messed up in all of this? And now he’s back on the *Athena*... well, he’s unconscious with severe injuries.”

“We’ve got no proof, Bones, but it fits. Brex’s telepathy came back when the Kazarite was sedated.” Jim’s eyes were glinting sharply, the way they did when he got into that headspace of his where he just saw everything. “Bones... he must have come aboard at Axanar. That’s where we picked up all of the other ambassadors for this mission, and that’s when the trouble started. And... Bones! I saw him in Parliament Square when T’Val lost consciousness!”

Ghzeth leaned closer, his forehead wrinkled in skeptical curiosity. “Tell me more, Terrans.”

Jim didn’t even look at Ghzeth. “Bones, do you know anything else about the Kazarite? Did Brex say anything?”

“Well... Brex said he thinks he was supposed to forget about the Kazarite,” Leonard said flatly. “He couldn’t find out more because they’d sedated the guy, but... Jim, what the hell is going through that thick skull of yours?”

"It's a hunch. I mean... it doesn't make sense, but it's the only thing we've got. He's the only one who *could* have done this stuff. Those communiques that went missing... the attacks on Brex and T’Val... altering people's memories... all of it, Bones,” Jim said, with a tone of disbelief. “How could I have missed this?”

“Missed what? Dammit, man, are you saying this crazy alien could be responsible for this whole mess?”

“I...” He looked back and forth between Ghzeth and Leonard, then gave one decisive nod. “I can’t be sure, but... it's the best I've got, Bones.”

Leonard gave Jim a searching look. He had no idea how Jim had pieced this together – the kid was a damned walking encyclopedia – but he knew he trusted the kid. “You think you're right, Jim?”

Jim's eyes were shining with a strange mix of desperation and sincerity. “I do.”

“Then that's good enough for me, kid.” Leonard tried to give him a reassuring smile, but then frowned. “So what good does this information do for us?”

Jim gave him a sideways look, then fixed Ghzeth with a firm stare. “If I'm right, the Kazarite has all the information. He could set the record straight, and tell the captain what really happened. Hell, if I'm right, there’s a chance he's even been manipulating the captain. We can convince the
people on our ship to wake up the Kazarite and get him to talk.”

“Jim, he’s out cold. Severely injured and in surgery, or sedated in recovery.”

“It’s our only chance, Bones!”

After a moment of tense silence, Jim spoke again. “If I’m wrong, we lose nothing. If I’m right... we need to get the message through.” He looked squarely at Ghzeth. “I know the Control Team probably won’t want me to do this, but... let me try to talk to my ship. Let me try to get them to question the Kazarite. If you’re running out of options, then it can’t hurt to try, right?”

Ghzeth frowned. “Do you think they would listen?”

“They have to, Ghzeth! I mean, we have to try. This is it! This is what we were missing. This is our chance! You said you wanted to stop the bloodshed. So... what do you say?” Jim was breathing hard, and despite his pallor, his eyes were bright with adrenaline.

Ghzeth considered him for a moment, and then nodded. “Okay, Jim,” he said. “You are right. We must try. Allow me to contact the Control Team. Our options are running out, and I believe they will allow it.”

Leonard watched as Ghzeth went back to the commo equipment and flipped a switch. “Detonation Team to Control Team.” For a moment, there was silence. Ghzeth cast a nervous glance back over his shoulder at Leonard and Jim, then toggled the switch again. “Ghzeth to Control Team? Negotiations Team? Detonation Team to all teams -- is this message being received?”

The hope Leonard had felt a moment ago was quickly fading, replaced by nerves. “What’s going on?”

“Our communications appear to be dead,” Ghzeth replied, and for the first time, Leonard thought he heard real fear in the Araxian’s voice. “If our communications have been disrupted, it means that someone has physically severed the conduits or destroyed our relay equipment.”

Jim was nodding, his expression tight. “And if that equipment was sabotaged, then that means -”

“That they’re coming,” Leonard blurted out.

Ghzeth nodded. He looked defeated. “I believe so. And if this is true... we are at the mercy of the efforts of the Negotiations Team. There is no way for us to communicate out. We cannot tell them about the Kazarite. And there is no way for us to know how long it will be until the Axanar come here. And when they do...”

“You’ll have to detonate the dilithium,” Jim finished. His expression was hardened - angry and desolate at once.

“Yes.” Ghzeth’s expression was pained and remorseful. “I wish for you to go back to your ship, Terrans. Without communications, it is my decision. We may still have time to get you away from this building so that you may transport safely. Please... I shall make arrangements.” Without hesitation, he went to the door of the room and opened it, holding a quiet but strained conversation with Zhareth in Araxian.

Leonard’s nerves had gone from edgy to frantic. Not that he’d had any sense of control before, but until now, he’d at least given himself the illusion that there was some sense of structure to things. Now, they were cut off from everything. No eyes, no ears. For all he knew, the Axanar’s forces were going to storm the building any moment, and then... it would be over. He knew the Araxians
wouldn’t let themselves be taken, and although he still didn’t want to believe that violence was a solution for anything, he knew why they were doing it. He knew they wouldn’t hesitate.

Swallowing against the dryness in his throat, he turned to the side and looked at Jim.

Jim’s profile was a study in hard angles and harder emotions. His eyebrows were furrowed, his mouth drawn into a harsh scowl, and the muscles in his neck were tight and tense. In his lap, his hands were balled into tight fists. In contrast to the intensity in his expression, there was a sheen of sweat on his brow, his breathing was still too shallow, and his color was off. Analgesics and stabilizers could only do so much.

“Jim?”

A muscle near Jim’s eye twitched.

“Hey, Jim... talk to me. Is the pain getting worse?”

After a moment, Jim finally spoke. “I can’t let this happen.” His voice was a low, angry growl.

“I... I don’t think there’s a lot we can do about it, kid.” Leonard considered putting a hand on Jim’s shoulder, but held back. He shook his head. “We’ve got no say in what happens.”

“We always have a say. We always have a choice. To sit back and accept things, or to fight.” He was still staring at the floor in front of him, not moving except for the subtle strain of muscles in his neck. “You wanted me to change the rules. Well... I don’t know if I can do that... but that doesn’t mean there aren’t moves we haven’t considered yet.”

“What’s left to consider, Jim? We’ve got nothing. It’s up to them if they choose to keep us or let us go, and they’re letting us go. It’s up to the Axanar and Starfleet whether or not these folks will have their say. And these people have already made up their minds that life isn’t worth living if they can’t live their way.”

“I agree with them, Bones,” came the quiet reply.

Leonard tensed, wondering if he was reading too much into that, and hoping he was. “So do I,” he said cautiously. “But that doesn’t mean we can change anything. Not from here. Besides, this isn’t our fight.”

“Bones, we're here. That makes it our fight.”

“Does that mean it's always your fight, Jim? If you're there, you fight?”

Something in Jim's expression darkened, but he still didn't look up at Leonard. “Yes. At least, I did... until today. Until this mess. I always stuck my neck out in training, or when things went wrong before, and it worked. Bones. Not always, and not perfectly, but it did. But this time, I sat back and let things happen because I was supposed to. I didn't push my observations. I didn't react to my hunches. I held you back from investigating. And then, when it all blew up in my face, I played the cadet and obeyed orders even when I knew they were wrong. And because of that, Finney died, Johan almost died, and you... you're here.”

“Jim, I'm here because --”

“Don't say it, Bones.” Jim glanced up, but only for a second. “You're here because our team was here, and I could have prevented this, but I didn't.”
“Now wait just a minute – you have no way of knowing that!”

“You’re right.” Jim’s shoulders shook with a mirthless laugh. “Because I didn't even fucking try. But I'm not going to make that mistake again.” He finally turned his head and looked Leonard in the eye. His gaze was hardened and steady, and it looked as though he’d finally solved the mental puzzle he’d been struggling with earlier. It was a look of cold clarity that Leonard had never seen on him. “There are sixty-thousand lives on the line right now, including yours. Every one of those people is someone’s kid. And you’ve got your own kid at home who needs you.”

Leonard really, really didn’t like where this was going. “Jim, what the hell are you talking about?”

A faint smile curved Jim’s lips. “I’m talking about making a choice, Bones.” He shook his head, not losing the intensity of his expression, but his smile took on a hint of irony. “I told you... I learned all about what my father did aboard the Kelvin. I read it, I studied it, but I never understood it. Until now.”

“Understood what?” Leonard asked vaguely, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

“That he put himself last.” His smile faltered. “For years, I told myself that he put himself first. I told myself that he played the hero, he fucked up, he left us behind... but that wasn’t it at all. I needed to understand why he did it. And I do, Bones. I get it now.”

“What?” Leonard said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Jim’s eyes were clear. “That heroes don’t make a choice. They just accept that there’s only one choice they can live with.”

“Jim?”

“The needs of the few, Bones.”

Leonard tried to make himself breathe. “What are you going to do?”

Jim’s expression hardened, and his eyes were glinting like the razor edge of a blade, sharp and cutting. “I’m going to make a choice. The only choice I’ve got.” He reached out and patted Leonard lightly on the arm, then looked up.

Ghzeth had finished his conversation and was walking back towards them. “We are ready to escort you from the building to a location where you may transport to your ship. We can not guarantee your safety, Terrans, but it may be your only chance. You are free to go. There is no need to keep you here for this.”

Jim swallowed tightly, Adam’s apple bobbing, but that was the only sign Leonard could see that he was nervous. His gaze was steady. “Yeah, there is. I have an idea.”

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"I have an idea."

Ghzeth looked at Jim skeptically. “An idea, Terran? There is nothing left for us to do. I shall wait here and hope that somehow, the Axanar are stopped before they come to us. But if this cannot be done, and the Axanar attempt to take this building, I must assume that my people have failed. Then I will detonate the dilithium.”

“Well, let’s try not to do that until we’ve exhausted all of our options. Call it a last-ditch effort,” Jim said firmly. “I can’t accept you detonating the dilithium and killing all of those people until we’ve tried everything else.”

“We?” Ghzeth said with a curious expression.

Jim nodded. “Yeah. We.”

Something resembling hope lit Ghzeth’s face. “So what do you propose?”

Leonard knew that whatever Jim was about to say, he probably wouldn’t like it. He clenched his hands into fists, hard enough that even his tightly trimmed fingernails dug painfully into his palms.

Jim spared Leonard just the briefest of glances before leveling Ghzeth with an even stare. “Send me out there.”

It was like a physical blow to Leonard’s chest. “What?”

Ghzeth just looked confused. “Send you out where?”

“Out of the building,” Jim said. “Into the street. Let me go out there and try to speak to them, face-to-face. We’ve got no way to communicate from here, and communication is our only chance. If any of you go out there, they’ll probably shoot first, but they don’t want Federation people dead, so let me try it. I’ll speak for you. I’ll tell them that if I go beyond the transporter interference from the building, or that if they don’t listen to what I say, that you’ll shoot me. That way they won’t try to take me away without listening to me first.”

“And what about going back to the ship?” Leonard countered. “We can try to convince them from up there! You know... where we won’t get blown up!”

“No, Bones. Think about this carefully. If we leave, there’s nothing holding the Axanar back from raiding the building. You said it yourself - the Peacekeepers held off on raiding the building because they didn’t want us dead. The instant they hear that we’re aboard the ship, they’ll storm the building. We won’t have time to convince anybody of anything. By the time we’ve had a chance to talk to Captain Porter and convince him to talk to the Kazarite, it will be too late. As long as we’re still down here, the Peacekeepers will hesitate to raid the building. It might give us the time we need to get the message through. If we really want to stop them from blowing the dilithium, this is our best chance, Bones.”

Leonard was shaking his head. “And what if he still doesn’t listen to us, Jim? Besides, the Araxians have tried everything, and it’s all failed. Anything could happen the second you leave the building!” Leonard protested.

“I know, and I’ve already considered it. The Axanar could shoot me and blame the Araxians. The
Axanar could try to ‘rescue’ me, causing the Araxians to have to shoot. The groups could start a shoot-out and I could get caught in the middle. The whole thing could fail and the city goes sky-high.” He swallowed thickly and took a steadying breath. “Or... they could stop and listen.” He looked back up at Ghzeth. “What do you say?”

Ghzeth said nothing for a moment, looking Jim over solemnly. “You offer this of your own free will?”

Jim nodded. “Yeah. I do. Because if there’s any chance that I can stop this before they storm the building and you detonate the dilithium, even if it’s a long shot, then I have to take it.”

Ghzeth appeared to consider the proposal, then turned back to the door and called out. One of the other guards appeared a moment later, and they began speaking in rapid Araxian. It gave Leonard the chance to tell Jim exactly what he thought about his cockeyed plan.

“Are you out of your goddamned mind?” he hissed. “Jim, do you have any idea what you’re saying?”

“I know exactly what I’m saying.”

“You’re injured!”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I’m not about to let you go marching out there on some god damned kamikaze suicide run when we still have a chance to ---”

“Bones.”

Leonard felt his diatribe come to a grinding halt before he’d even fully built up his head of steam, and he finally took a good look at Jim.

Jim’s expression was something that Leonard had seen on him once before... in a bunker north of San Francisco, in a small gray room with no windows. Jim had looked at the tricorder and hypospray in his hands, had created a plan out of thin air, and had made the whole crazy thing work. They’d gotten out alive. It was a clarity of purpose in his eyes - the absolute knowledge that his plan would work, not because it was guaranteed, but because there was no other option.

Jim seemed to see that Leonard understood, and nodded again. “Bones... this is their only chance. I’ve got to try it. Some things are just right and some things are wrong. And what the Araxians are doing... what I’m about to do... it’s right. It has to be.”

“Jim...” Leonard was shaking his head blankly, trying to think of some way to argue, but he knew it was useless.

“Even if the Araxians are wrong, and we’re being misled, and we’re on the wrong side of this whole fight... this is the only way we have a chance to stop them from detonating the dilithium, so it’s a chance I have to take. Sixty-thousand people, Bones. No matter what they’re fighting about, no matter who’s right or wrong, I can’t give up on that many lives without trying.”

“And I’m not gonna let you -”

The intensity of Jim’s gaze stopped him again. “I’ve got nothing to work with this time, Bones. No tricorder, no phaser, no tools, and no options... except myself. I’ve got myself, Bones. And for this... I’m willing to give that up.”
Leonard wanted to say that he wasn’t willing to give Jim up, but that wasn’t his choice to make. He was staring at Jim, wracking his brain for something to say, when Ghzeth came back into the room.

"I believe we are ready to do this. Jim, if you are certain of your choice, then we must hurry. There is little time."

Jim cast uneasy look at Leonard, then looked back at Ghzeth. "I’m ready.” And then, with the shaky movements of a man still in more pain than he’d admit, he got to his feet.

Ghzeth held out a small device that looked a bit like a small black button. “You will be carrying a short-range voice transmitter, which we will be monitoring.”

Jim nodded, but Leonard found himself scowling. “I thought you said you didn’t have any commo.”

Ghzeth was fastening the small device to the collar of Jim’s shirt. “With the dilithium field, these have a range of only two-hundred meters. Our other teams are kilometers away, and our communication relays were the only commo we had that could transmit through the field.”

“Oh,” Leonard said, feeling stupid. “But Jim... what if -”

“You need to go back to the ship, Bones.”

Leonard blinked, then shook his head as if he’d gotten something unpleasant in his ear. “Wait... what?”

“While Jim goes out the front of the building,” Ghzeth said calmly, “you will have an opportunity to escape out the back. There is good cover and concealment to the edge of this zone, and you can return to your ship.”

Jim was nodding in agreement as he fiddled with the transmitter on his collar.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Leonard turned back to Ghzeth. “Now just hold on a second! You’re about to send my best friend out into the middle of a warzone with less than a damned lucky penny, and you’re telling me that you expect me to slip out the back like a yellow-bellied turn-tail? I’ll be damned if I -”

Jim grabbed his shoulder. “Stop that! Now listen, I’m going to do this, and you’re going to take the chance to get back to the ship. This is the way it’s got to be.”

Leonard felt his mouth fall open and he gaped at Jim. An image flashed through his mind - of himself, walking out the back door, beaming back up to the ship, leaving Jim behind to be shot, blown up... anything. Hiding while Jim risked his life. Abandoning Jim. He’d walked out of his daughter’s life, and he hadn’t been there for her, but he wasn’t about to make that mistake again. He’d promised himself that he’d stop hiding, and he couldn’t back down on that promise now. Knowing that Jim would protest, but that he could never live with himself if he walked away from Jim now, he shook his head and used the tone of voice he always used to let Jim know it would be impossible to change his mind.

Leonard fixed Jim with a look of absolute determination. He was not about to back down from this. “If you stay, I stay.”

In a heartbeat, Jim’s eyes went wide, and his cool composure disappeared like a puff of smoke. “No way. This is your best chance. You can still get out of here! You already risked your neck
staying here in the first place. If it works, I’ll see you on the ship, but there’s no reason for you to stay, and I am not going to let you throw your life away!”

“But Jim didn’t crack. If anything, his face fell. “Because I don’t want you to die.”

Leonard’s attempt at raw humor fizzled and evaporated, and he clenched his jaw and balled his fists to hold himself together. “Yeah... well... the feeling’s mutual.” He sighed and turned back to Ghzeth. “Besides, I have an idea... to make sure those bastards don’t shoot first, blame later. I’ll still be your captive. If Jim messes up, or they don’t listen and just try to take him, tell them you’ll shoot me. There’s your leverage so they can’t just grab Jim and run.”

“Bones...” Jim was shaking his head, and his eyes were still wide and frantic.

“Jim... if you’re down here, I can’t leave. I told you that I was terrified that someday, I’d walk away from you when you needed me. So I’m staying. Besides, there’s no guarantee that we could get safely to a point where we can transport anyway. And... if you really believe you have a chance... then so do I. And I’ll bet my life that it’s the best chance we both have.”

A flash of... of something lit up Jim’s face. Maybe disbelief. Maybe wonder. “Bones?”

Leonard’s heart was pounding and he could feel the fear trickling down the back of his neck in cold, sweaty droplets, but at the core of it, Leonard believed Jim could do it. It was a long shot, but it was all they had. If Jim had thought of it, then there was a real chance it could work. Even if it didn’t... Leonard wasn’t going to leave him. Then, something Jim had said to him a couple of weeks ago drifted back. Words that meant one thing at the time, and meant so much more now. “Of all the people I’ve ever met, kid, you’re the one who would turn death itself into a fighting chance to live.”

Jim offered smile was weak but grateful. “It’ll work.”

“It will,” Leonard echoed roughly, because right then, he had to believe it. If he didn’t believe it, he had nothing.

Jim looked back at him with steady eyes and said, “Okay.” And then, to Ghzeth, he said, “Let’s do this.”

Ghzeth nodded, then called out. “Zhareth!”

The door to the room opened, and Zhareth stepped in, rifle still held at the ready. “Yes?”

“Please escort Jim to the front of the building, and then... allow him to exit, unaccompanied,” Ghzeth said. Then, he turned to look at Jim again. “There are inadequate words of gratitude for this occasion in your language, but you do have my sincere thanks.”

Jim coughed and shrugged awkwardly. “Yeah, well... don’t thank me yet. We still don’t know if it will work.”

“I would prefer to think that it will work. Perhaps, someday, I will teach about you in our Hall of Records.”

Jim stared back at Ghzeth for several long seconds before he finally blinked, shook his head awkwardly, and looked down at the floor. “Right,” he said roughly. “I... yeah. Thank you. I...” He shook his head again, took a deep breath, and looked Ghzeth in the eye again. “Okay, I’m ready.”
With a tilt of his head, Ghzeth dismissed him. Jim took three steps towards the door, then froze.

Then, slowly, he turned and looked back at Leonard.

“It’ll be okay, Bones.”

Leonard wanted to scream. He wanted to pull Jim back from the door and shout obscenities that would make a Klingon blush at the insane risk Jim was taking, but his body seemed useless at the surrealism of it all. It was like watching a holovid - surrounded by images but unable do anything about what would happen next. The air felt too thick, stiflingly hot and prickling cold at once, and Leonard didn’t know how he managed to make his voice work, but he forced the words out.

“I know, Jim.”

“You’ll get to see Joanna again.”

“I will.”

For another moment, neither of them moved. Leonard knew he should say something, but what the hell was he supposed to say? His best friend, and one of the few people left in the world who felt like family, was about to walk out the door, possibly to his death... and Leonard was going to let him. He should say something. Do something.

With a sudden lurch, Leonard was on his feet and standing in front of him. Some instinct told him that he should grab Jim into a hug, just in case it was his last chance to let the kid know that he was like a brother to him, but that instinct had been buried too deeply, too long ago. Not in front of people. Not in a situation like this. Besides, Jim was injured. And so he did the only thing his damnable, emotionally-stunted mind could come up with, and he held out his hand.

And damn him, but Jim gave him a look of amused incredulity as he took his hand in a sweaty, shaking grasp, belying the image of calm control the kid was trying to project. “Be safe, Bones.”

Leonard wanted to say a hundred things, but he could barely breathe. Instead, he just said, “You too.”

And then, Jim released his hand, turned, and walked out the door.

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His footsteps echoed sharp and hollow against the metal of the catwalk as Jim made his way out of the room. Right behind him, Zhareth’s footsteps were softer.

His gut twinged sharply as he walked. Either the damage was getting worse, or the drugs Bones had given him were wearing off. Still, with his heart racing and adrenaline surging, he wasn’t worried about it.

The look Bones had given him had almost been enough to get him to give up this crazy plan, but he couldn’t. It was a long shot, but it was the only shot at stopping the bomb. In truth, he had no idea if it could work. He didn’t know if he was just grasping at hope that wasn’t there, or if he’d somehow managed to divine the tiny thread in this massive puzzle that could unravel the whole thing. Hell, he wasn’t even sure what he was going to do or say. All he knew was that he had to try.

In the back of his mind, snippets of his training were spinning circles around his decision. He had learned, the hard way, not to stick his neck out on his own. Don’t play the lone wolf. Follow orders. Because only some people have the training and experience to bend the rules and strike out
on their own and buck the system... and they call those people captains. Finney had said so.

Here he was, sticking his neck out and putting it all on the line, but he wasn’t a captain. He wouldn’t be for a long time, and he’d never been so acutely aware of that simple fact. If he was a captain, he’d be on the starship, calling the shots. Or, if he’d been captured anyway, he’d be able to take what he’d learned from his captors and change the course of the entire debacle. Maybe he could have prevented things from going so horribly wrong in the first place.

He wasn’t doing this to be a hero or to stand alone. He wasn’t trying to play the lone wolf. He didn’t think he was doing anything particularly special. He was just making the best goddamned decision he could make, with the resources he had, and praying to God it would work.

Maybe that’s what his father had done, too. And maybe George Kirk would be proud of him.

And if they all survived this mess, maybe he’d be proud of himself, too.

But damn it all, why had Bones stayed?

The heavy clank of boots on the stairs echoed noisily in the cavernous storage facility. Shadowy towers of crates loomed up as they descended from the catwalk, and Jim shuddered at the thought of the sheer quantity of dilithium surrounding him.

He couldn’t let them detonate it. He had to succeed. But if he failed, he wouldn’t be around to witness the results of his failure anyway.

“What are you thinking, Terran?” Zhareth suddenly asked from behind him.

Jim almost startled at the sudden question. “I... guess I’m just hoping that I made the right decision.”

“You have made a noble decision,” Zhareth said firmly. “You hope for the Axanar to cease hostilities and allow talks?”

Yes, he wanted to say, but that wasn’t the real answer. At least, not the most important part. Sure, he agreed with the Araxians. At least, that’s what his gut instinct was saying, even though he knew he might not have all the facts. But that wasn’t how he’d made his decision. In fact, it would have been entirely irrelevant. His decision was based on one simple truth that had nothing to do with taking sides.

Jim glanced back over his shoulder at Zhareth and gave him a sincere look. “I just want to make sure nobody else dies today.”

“Including yourself?”

Jim forced a dry chuckle. “If I can possibly help it.”

“I hope you are successful.”

“Yeah, me too.”

They lapsed into silence again as they crossed the storage room floor. As they passed a small enclave, Jim stopped cold at the shadow on the floor. “Wait.”

There was the slight click of Zhareth’s rifle being shifted. “What is it?”

Jim nodded towards the form of Finney’s body. “My commanding officer. Promise me one thing.
If I don’t make it through this... but they manage not to blow up the dilithium... please make sure his body is returned to the ship unharmed. Okay?”

Zhareth looked down at Finney, then nodded. “If it is at all possible, I will see that it is done.”

“Thank you.”

They continued their walk through the building, finally coming to the front room where Jim had initially arrived with his squad. One of the Araxians who had been in the control room earlier was standing there, carefully keeping watch through the hole that had been blasted in the door. He turned when Jim and Zhareth stepped into the room.

“I heard the plan on our communication units,” he said, admiration evident in his tone. “You are truly making the choice to do this yourself?”

Jim nodded stiffly. “Yeah. It needed to be done.”

The guy suddenly bowed. “My respect, freely given. And good fortune to you.” He stood upright again and stepped aside.

Jim managed a wan smile. “Thanks.”

Taking an unsteady breath, Jim stepped through the gaping hole in the doorway and out into the street. He squinted and blinked against the brightness of the afternoon sun, which cut a sharp angle across the street. Shadows of buildings stretched out along the dusty ground. The place looked completely abandoned.

He knew better. There were Araxian operatives stationed in key buildings and vantage points around the area. He was being watched from several directions. If Ghzeth’s information had been accurate, the Axanar security forces were closing in.

He stepped further out into the street, looking around nervously as he moved, watching for any sign of life. Movement. Approaching Axanar. Approaching Starfleet security. Anyone.

He was starting to wonder just how far he’d have to go when the transmitter on his collar made a popping sound. A disembodied voice said, “Go no further, Jim.” It had to be Ghzeth.

Jim stopped in his tracks. “Okay... now what?”

“Wait there. If there is a Peacekeeper squad approaching, they will see you.”

Jim nodded, reminding himself to breathe evenly. “What do you want me to say?”

“Whatever you believe is right and necessary.”

Choking back his own nerves, Jim took a glance back at the building, where Bones waited inside. He had only one way out of this. “I’ll do my best.”

“I would expect nothing less. I sincerely wish for you to succeed.”

Jim took a quick look around again, scanning the buildings and rooftops for any sign of a camera or spy. “Yeah. That makes two of us.”

“I can see you through the window. I shall be watching.”

“No pressure or anything,” Jim mumbled, not really caring if they could hear him or not. Then, at
the far end of the street... movement. “And... I think the party just arrived.”

“We will remain silent and monitor your transmission.”

“Right,” Jim mumbled to himself.

There were about ten individuals approaching. If he could tell by the uniforms, even from that distance, there were eight or nine Axanar and two Starfleet security personnel.

From the distance of at least four hundred meters, he saw the group suddenly taking cover. There was a glint in the sunlight, and Jim knew they were aiming weapons. Quickly, he held up his hands and yelled into his transmitter. “Ghzeth! They’re aiming at me!”

“Our people in this building can attempt to shoot them.”

“No, don’t! I can’t talk to them if they’re dead.” A warning shot ricocheted off a nearby building and Jim flinched. “For fuck sake!”

He waved his hands frantically, hoping at least the Starfleet security would recognize what was happening. His uniform shirt was long gone, leaving only the charcoal-black undershirt and pants. From that distance, with the afternoon sun cutting sharp angles, it was possible they didn’t even recognize that he was human.

Another warning shot, this one closer. “Fuck,” he hissed. Taking a deep breath and ignoring the lance of pain it caused, he yelled at the top of his lungs, “CEASEFIRE!”

For a moment, nothing happened. And then... he saw the red of a Starfleet security uniform emerge from behind a low wall and gesture at the rest of the team. The rest of the team regrouped, and began moving towards him.

His instinct was to stride forward and meet the approaching group, but if he did, this would be over before it began. He needed to stay where he was, so instead, he waited. Slow breaths, in and out. He tried to will his heart to slow its frantic rhythm, but that wasn’t going to happen. Distantly, he was aware that his gut was throbbing, but the adrenaline was drowning it out. His hands were sweating, and dust and smoke in the air were sticking to his skin.

Finally, the patrol team came within easy shouting distance, and the Axanar at the front of the group called out. “Starfleet cadet! I am Peacekeeper Kreshax. We had been told you were taken hostage! Are you unharmed?”

“I’m fine,” Jim called back, and waited until they were close enough for him to speak without shouting.

“I’m Lieutenant Thompson,” the lieutenant said as he approached, but then his face twisted in surprise. “Cadet, you’re covered in blood! Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It’s not mine, sir. It’s from one of the people on our team who got shot. I’m okay,” he lied. “Sir, I need to --”

Kreshax interrupted him. “They did not inform us that they were releasing their hostages.”

“Maybe they would have, but someone cut their communications,” Jim said, eyeing Kreshax suspiciously. When Kreshax only stared at him blankly, Jim shook his head and looked back over to the Lieutenant. “Sir, they were going to let me contact the ship when they discovered that their commo was dead. I have information --”
“Slow down, Kirk,” Thompson said, cutting him off. “And first of all, if they released you, where is Cadet McCoy?”

“He’s still in there,” Jim said irritably. “And I’m still a hostage... by free choice.”

Thompson’s mouth twisted into a frown. “By... what the devil are you talking about, Cadet?”

Jim cast a nervous glance at Kreshax, then back over his shoulder. Ghzeth could hear every word. Bones could hear every word. He needed to get this right. “The Araxians offered to release us. If things keep going the way they are, then it’s about to go critical, and the destruction will be... devastating. I couldn’t let that happen, so I chose to stay... to try to stop it.”

Thompson looked livid. “Cadet Kirk, you have no authority to make those decisions!”

Jim steeled himself. This was no time to back down. “Sir, I had to do it!”

At the same time, Kreshax was babbling. “You chose to... this is madness! We must bring you to safety! You need protection --”

Jim shot a look at Kreshax, putting every shred of non-existent authority he had into it. “I don’t want your protection. And I can’t leave. If you take me out of range, they’ll shoot McCoy. We... we needed to do it this way to make sure you’d listen.”

“Listen to what, Kirk?” Lieutenant Thompson said edgily.

“Information, sir.”

“Information? What sort of information?”

Jim swallowed tightly. “We think we figured out what’s actually going on. The Araxian government is illegal, sir. And the Kazarite Ambassador... he’s the key to all of this. He has information that the captain needs, but he’s out cold in sickbay. They need to wake him up and have Captain Porter talk to him. He’ll explain what really happened here, and then the captain can open talks with these people for negotiations.”

But Thompson shook his head. “Kirk, I don’t know anything about a Kazarite, but if you’ve made it to Cadet First Class, then you know full well that the Federation does not negotiate with terrorists.”

“I know that, sir,” Jim said as evenly as possible. Of course it wouldn’t be that simple, but given what he’d already been through that day, an irritated lieutenant didn’t intimidate him. “And right now, this isn’t up to the Federation to negotiate anyway. By Federation law - Code seven, section three, sub-paragraph sixteen of the Federation Charter, if I’m not mistaken - this has been classified as a domestic dispute. That’s why Captain Porter isn’t stepping in. That’s why you’re on Kreshax’s team, assisting him, and not leading your own squad right now.”

The lieutenant looked shocked at Jim’s knowledge of the Federation Charter. Feeling encouraged, Jim took a step closer to and plowed on.

“But sir, this is only a domestic dispute until the ranking Federation representative recognizes that the government here is illegal. These people aren’t terrorists - they’re freedom fighters. Send a message to Captain Porter. The people he thinks are the Araxian leadership are really Axanar. The Axanar took over this planet, and the Araxians are being used. That’s why they’re fighting! Tell the captain that there’s a Kazarite Ambassador in sickbay who has information about this mess. We’ve got it all wrong, and the Kazarite can set it straight. Then, the captain can make the
determination that the people you’re calling terrorists are actually the real Araxians, and he can step in.”

“Cadet, the captain has far more information than you have, and I’m pretty sure he knows what he’s doing,” the lieutenant said, but he was frowning now, and it looked like uncertainty.

“How do you know until you give him the message?” Jim pressed. “You can stop an entire war, sir! If I’m wrong, we lose nothing, but if I’m right, we could save tens of thousands of lives! Just get the captain to listen to the Kazarite!”

The lieutenant’s mouth fell open slightly, and he seemed as though he was about to ask a question, but Kreshax spoke again, “If the terrorists have convinced you that they are the true voice of Araxis, then they have certainly misled you, Terran. They have destroyed half of the city, killing their own people!”

“They evacuated the target areas!” He clenched his hand, desperately wanting to punch something or someone, when something occurred to him. “And as far as their people are concerned... why didn’t you say our people, Peacekeeper?”

Jim swore Kreshax actually puffed up in indignation. “Their people are our people, but it does not change the fact that they killed their own.”

Jim narrowed his eyes. “You know what I mean,” he said, putting every shred of accusation he could into his voice. “You’re an Axanar.”

“I am Araxian! A Peacekeeper, appointed by the Araxian government.”

But Jim wasn’t backing down. “No, you’re not. Your skin tone is Axanar, and you’re too young to be an Araxian founder. You talk like an Axanar. Even your name is Axanar.”

The way Kreshax’s eyes widened told Jim he was right. A quick glance at Thompson told Jim that the lieutenant was finally listening. Subtly, Thompson pulled out his communicator.

Sensing a tiny victory, Jim turned back to the Peacekeeper. If Thompson was going to pass his message on to Captain Porter, that meant he needed to stall. “If I can’t get the captain to listen, then you need to listen. This is between the Araxians and the Axanar, isn’t it, Peacekeeper? The native Araxians, and the Axanar who took over.”

“Terran cadet,” Kreshax cut in sharply, “these isolationists have been spreading false propaganda for years. Yes, your captain knows their claims that our leaders are Axanar, but they are the desperate claims of political rebels. This is a legitimately elected government. The Araxians desire reunification with the Axanar! You are being misled by a group of violent terrorists.”

It was hard to keep calm, but Jim held it together as he maintained level eye contact with Kreshax and said, “I don’t think so. I think there’s been a lot of misleading around here, but nobody is ever going to know the truth unless all sides are allowed to speak openly, and that means open negotiations with the Federation as a third party.”

Kreshax shook his head dismissively. “There is nothing to negotiate, Terran. The insurgents have been contained. This building is their only stronghold left in the city, and we will stop them now.”

_Time for the trump card_, Jim thought to himself. “And if you do, the whole city goes up in a fireball,” Jim snarled. “The whole building, with all the dilithium, is set to explode. But I think you already know that.”
Lieutenant Thompson was putting away his communicator, but there was suddenly fear on his face. “What are you talking about, Kirk?”

Jim shook his head in frustration. “Sir... the dilithium is a bomb. It’s a massive stockpile. If they trigger it, it will take out the city and miles around it.”

“Holy shit!” blurted out the other Security crew member, but Thompson held out a hand to quiet him.

“I received that report, cadet. The last group of insurgents captured made that claim. It was determined to be a bluff.” His words were firm, but he didn’t seem too sure of himself.

Jim shook his head vehemently. “It’s no bluff, sir. It’s real, and they’ll do it. With no communications, this group will trigger the bomb if any hostile action is taken against them. It’s their failsafe... their last-ditch effort to get someone to listen. Even if Captain Porter doesn’t change his mind, we need the Axanar to accept a ceasefire, or the city goes sky high.”

To Jim’s dismay, Kreshax actually scoffed. “You expect us to listen to threats such as this from a small group of political rebels?”

\textit{Unbelievable.} “Political rebels with a massive bomb, Peacekeeper!” Jim countered.

But Kreshax shook his head. “You cannot honestly believe they would detonate a weapon such as that.”

Jim clenched his fists in annoyance. “After the way they’ve been treated -”

“They have been treated as well as all other Araxians, and yet this small fringe group resorts to violence! They defy the natural order! We cannot negotiate with those who are completely irrational, Terran.”

“They seem rational to me,” Jim countered.

“They captured and brutalized you!”

Jim narrowed his eyes. “Actually, they’ve been really cordial, considering the circumstances. In fact, they’re the most civilized people I’ve met on this planet. I believe them. And I’m prepared to protect them with my life.”

Kreshax suddenly sucked in a sharp breath, and Jim knew he’d hit a nerve. He glanced at Thompson, but the lieutenant was still standing aside. The communicator was inactive in the pouch on his belt. Jim grit his teeth and turned back to the Peacekeeper. “I’m telling you,” he continued, “and the other Axanar who are controlling Araxis, that you have one last chance to enact a ceasefire. Stop this charade with the Federation and tell them what really happened. Allow the Araxians to speak for themselves to the Federation before this conflict escalates any further.”

Kreshax’s stunned expression morphed into a scowl. “This will go no further. Our Araxian kin will rejoin with us, and they will discover that they are grateful for the peace and order brought by our traditions.”

Jim’s breath caught. Kreshax had finally given up all pretense at their political charade. That meant he was becoming more unpredictable. \textit{Come on, Captain Porter... comm us back.} To Kreshax, he said flatly, “They don’t want your traditions.”

“It does not matter. They are Axanar. They have always \textit{been} Axanar, and in their souls, most of
them know this. They embrace our ways. The isolationists are few, and while their initial assault was brutal, their attack could never have succeeded. They have used all of their options. It is over.” Kreshax’s words were confident, but his tone was nervous.

“Over? They’re sitting on the largest bomb in the quadrant, Peacekeeper!” Jim countered. “And whatever you think of them, they’re desperate enough to use it.”

But Kreshax shook his head. “Even people such as these could not tolerate destruction on such a level. They would destroy their own homes, their own people. It would be useless, and they know it.”

Jim raised his eyebrows. “You really don’t understand, do you?” he said, almost exasperated. “To the Araxians... freedom is more valuable than their lives. But that’s something you can’t understand.” He looked back over his shoulder at the dilithium storage building, then took a long hard look around the street, as if he knew it was the last thing he’d ever see. “They’ll do it, Kreshax, unless your leaders admit to the Axanar takeover of the Araxian government.” He fixed the Peacekeeper with a cold stare. “So... what will it be?”

Kreshax stared at him, horror and fury and fear rolling off him in waves, before he suddenly turned to one of his squadmates and started snapping orders in his own language.

Jim couldn’t understand a word of it, but he didn’t like the way it sounded. He looked back at the dilithium storage building. Something was at a tipping point, and he wasn’t sure what, but he didn’t like it.

Kreshax turned away from the other Peacekeeper and spoke again in Standard. “Lieutenant Thompson, secure your cadet. We must enter the building and deal with the isolationists.”

“No!” Jim shouted. He took a step towards Kreshax, only to be stopped by Lieutenant Thompson’s firm grip on his arm.

“Stand fast, cadet.”

“Are you kidding me?” he protested. “Kreshax, if you go in there, they’ll blow the building before you can stop them! Are you listening to me? All of this will be destroyed!” At the same time, something else made Jim’s heart clench. Bones.

Kreshax was hoisting his weapon, and the rest of the Axanar on his team were readying their own rifles. “We will deal with it properly.”

“You can’t deal with it!” Jim made a lunge against Thompson’s grip, only to be shoved back. “If you want to stop this, you need to listen to them!”

“Stand down, Cadet Kirk!” Thompson growled at him. “Or this will be your last starship assignment in your career.”

“It’s going to be the last assignment for all of us if you don’t help me stop them!” He was startled as the security crewman grabbed his other arm. “I thought you contacted the ship! Can’t you see what’s going on here?”

“It doesn’t matter what I see. I made my report,” Thompson said. His tone was completely unreadable. “I was given instructions directly from the captain to keep you from interfering further in a domestic dispute, and to stand by.”

“Stand by? We don’t have time!”
“You’ve been manipulated by your captors, Terran,” Kreshax said firmly as he raised his rifle to signal his team to form up.

“Even if I’ve been misled about everything else, they’ll still blow the building!” Jim shouted. “The whole city! Sixty thousand people, Kreshax!” In frantic desperation, he tried to make a lunge towards the Axanar, and managed to get one arm free, but the crewman grabbed him roughly around the waist.

It felt like a knife to the gut. With a gasp, Jim felt his knees go out from underneath him. It was only the crewman’s grasp around him that kept him from falling.

“Cadet?” Thompson’s entire tone had changed in an instant. “I thought you said you weren’t injured.”

“Just a cut,” Jim said with a grunt, struggling to stand upright again. “You need to stop them. We can’t wait for the Captain’s orders.”

“Cadet Kirk,” Thompson said in an undertone as he glanced around uncertainly, “are you sure about what you’re saying?”

“I’d say I’d bet my life on it, but I already have,” Jim growled.

“Listen... I notified Captain Porter, and they’re looking into it,” he said hesitantly. “But I can’t act until I get some sort of confirmation.”

Jim could only shake his head, trying to focus despite the pain. “Not enough time. Sir, you need to make a decision. We can’t wait for the captain.” The Peacekeeper squad had reformed, and they were just about to move out. Jim looked at the storage building desperately. Ghzeth was listening to this whole conversation, and watching what the Axanar were doing. They could see he was failing. They were going to detonate the dilithium. Bones was still in there. He’d failed. Any second... he was sure...

The familiar sound of a communicator’s chirp caught his attention.

“Captain Porter to Lieutenant Thompson.”

Without letting go of his grip on Jim, Thompson grabbed his comm and replied. “Thompson here, sir.”

“Stop the Peacekeeper squad. Don’t let them anywhere near that building.”

Jim swore his heart lodged in his throat as Thompson let go of his arm. He stumbled a bit, but the crewman caught him. “Thanks,” he mumbled off-handedly. His eyes were glued to the lieutenant.

Thompson stepped forward and called out, “Kreshax! Stop your team.”

The Peacekeeper squad had barely begun to move forward. Kreshax, who seemed extremely flustered, broke formation and strode towards them. “We don’t have time for this! What is it?”

“Captain’s orders,” Thompson said firmly.

“Your captain doesn’t control my team, lieutenant.”

“No,” Porter’s voice came sharply over the comm, “but I do control the reports back to Starfleet Command, and I speak for Starfleet here. If you want to continue any negotiations with the
Kreshax suddenly looked far more terrified than he had been of the possibility of being attacked. "Wha... why... why not?"

"Because... the cadet was right. About all of it."

Jim felt his knees start to buckle again, this time in relief. Something between a cough, a laugh, and a sob escaped his throat. They believed him.

Porter kept talking. "We received some new information from the Kazarite Ambassador, who has just woken up in sickbay. Lieutenant Thompson, you’re no longer taking orders from the Peacekeepers. We’re sending down a team of our own people to meet with the isola... the Araxians. We’ve communicated a message with their negotiator, and they’ve agreed to halt hostilities until we can begin formal talks."

“Aye, sir,” Thompson responded, sounding surprisingly relieved. “What about security operations around the rest of the city?”

“Our personnel are ceasing security operations and beginning aid and rescue. The... Axanar leadership has agreed to cooperate.”

Slowly, Kreshax lowered his rifle until it dangled loosely by his side. “I... will contact my superiors... and will cease hostilities.” He looked defeated, like someone who’d been playing a game and realized it was suddenly over.

Suddenly, the small transmitter on Jim’s collar made a crackling noise, followed by Ghzeth’s voice, loud enough for the whole team to hear. “And if the Peacekeepers will all place their weapons on the ground, we will meet you in the open, and release the other hostage.”

The sound of Ghzeth’s voice calling a truce was a relief, but Jim could only think of one thing. “Bones?”

More faintly, over the transmitter, came a garbled, “Dammit, Jim.”

Jim started to smile, but the pain in his gut redoubled, and the security crewman barely managed to keep him on his feet this time. “Cadet? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I... no. I... I think I should sit down.” The adrenaline was definitely wearing off, and he was starting to shake.

Around him, people were talking, and Captain Porter was still barking orders over the comm, but Jim found himself sitting on the dusty road and not being able to focus on any of it. It felt like his brain was shutting down. He wondered when the weather had gotten so cold. Maybe it usually got cold like this when the sun started going down around here.

The crewman, whose name Jim still didn’t know, was keeping a hand on his shoulder, and he couldn’t really understand why until he realized how light-headed he was. He stared blankly at the rooftop of the dilithium storage building, and vaguely thought about how close it had come to being the center of a massive crater.

But they hadn’t blown the building. They’d succeeded. It was going to be okay. He latched onto that, and despite the pain in his gut, he smiled.

He thought the crewman was saying something to him, asking if he needed a medic, but before he
could put together an answer, he saw people emerge from the storage building. Four calm, stoic figures in dark tunics, and... there was Bones, dodging around them and running into the street, his oversized medkit flopping awkwardly.

Before he knew it, Bones was kneeling on the ground in front of him, ripping into his medkit and cussing up a storm as he wielded his tricorder.

“... damn fool crazy idiot! I don’t know how you get yourself into horse shit like this, but - Jesus Christ, Jim!”

Jim wasn’t sure if he was laughing or crying, but he was pretty sure he was going to start hyperventilating. He didn’t much care at that point. “Nice to see you, too, asshole.”

“Lie down, kid,” Bones said, simultaneously supporting him and pushing him to the ground. “Your blood pressure is shit and you’re in shock.” He turned away before Jim could retort, and raised his voice. “I need a communicator over here so I can get him up to sickbay.”

“I’m fine, Bones,” Jim said, and when Bones glared at him, Jim could only offer a weak smile. “And yeah, I’m lying through my teeth.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Bones grumbled under his breath.

“How about... I did it.”

To Jim’s surprise, Bones actually cracked a lopsided grin. “I knew that, too.”

A shadow blocked out the sun for a moment, and Jim squinted up to see Ghzeth looking down at him with something like fondness. “Jim.”

Jim blinked and managed another smile. “It’s going to be okay,” he said. His words seemed inadequate and pathetic after the scope of what had just happened, but he couldn’t get his brain to come up with anything better.

Ghzeth didn’t seem to mind. “Yes, it is. We have a chance now. Thank you.”

Before Jim could say anything else in reply, Lieutenant Thompson stepped in and slapped a communicator into Bones’ hand. Then, he looked down at Jim with an oddly respectful look. “You delayed them... just enough. And you were right. Nice job, Cadet Kirk.”

Jim tried for a salute, but his hand flopped awkwardly. “Just doing what I thought was right, sir.”

Bones growled low in his throat. “Right now, right would be getting your ass to Sickbay.”

Despite the pain, Jim found himself grinning as Bones called to the ship for transport. Then, maybe because of the slight delirium, he looked at Bones and said, “So... still afraid of transporters?”

Bones’ mouth fell open, but whatever he was going to say was swallowed by the hum of the transporter beam.
Chapter 21

“Is that everything you wish to include in your statement, Cadet McCoy?”

It was all Leonard could do to keep from groaning aloud and leaning his aching head into his upturned hands. “Yes, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

_Goddammit, I said that was it! Now let me the hell out of here, you harebrained excuse for a Starfleet officer!_ That’s what he wanted to say. He’d had more than enough of the man sitting across the table from him. But he’d also had more than enough trouble today. Instead, he let the rasp and exhaustion in his voice bleed through heavily as he said, “That’s everything, captain.”

Captain Porter looked sideways at Commander LaSalle, then around the table at the three other officers there. The Captain had introduced them, but Leonard had already forgotten their names. Hell, he could barely remember his own name. For that matter, Leonard couldn’t even remember most of what he’d just told the captain. It was all turning into a haze in his brain, and he didn’t really know which way was up anymore.

He and Jim had arrived on the floor of sickbay, and he’d promptly been pulled back as the medics had loaded Jim onto a stretcher and hauled him off to a treatment bay. Leonard had protested as Nurse Walsh scanned him and unceremoniously dosed him with an anxiolytic. Maybe he should be grateful; it was probably the only reason he wasn’t shaking now. But no, he’d been more ticked off than anything. And then, before he’d had a chance to even check on Jim, he’d come nose to nose with Captain Porter, who had dragged him straight to Conference Room One for a debriefing.

Debriefing. Ha. More like an interrogation, only with a more comfortable chair and a glass of ice water on the table in front of him. Weren’t debriefings supposed to give back some information?

No, of course not. Captain Porter hadn’t told him shit. Sure, Leonard probably knew as much as almost anyone else involved, and he had done his best to read between the lines in Porter’s reactions as he’d detailed what he and Jim had realized about the Araxians, the Axanar, and the Kazarite. Still, Leonard just wanted some confirmation that he and Jim had been right. There were too many pieces missing to put it all together, and if the way Porter nodded at LaSalle was any indication, it didn’t look like he’d be getting those pieces anytime soon. _Bastard._

Porter finally graced him with a nod. “Then there’s no reason to keep you any longer.”

Leonard was already halfway out of his seat, desperate to escape. He had no further desire to spend any more time in the presence of the man who might have prevented this whole mess if he’d just listened in the first place.

“But,” Porter continued, “I need to tell you something, Doctor McCoy.”

Leonard froze, hovering between sitting and standing. Tell him something? Porter was actually going to _give_ him some information? And since when had Porter called him by his professional title, instead of _cadet_? “Sir?”

Porter stood, looking Leonard directly in the eye. “I know you want full disclosure, and I can’t blame you. After what you’ve been through, you’d deserve it, but I can’t tell you much right now. Sure, you and Kirk have figured out most of it, but the rest... half of this will end up classified, and I can’t begin to guess which half. On top of that, I’ve got an entourage of Araxians set to beam up
here in the next ten minutes, so I don’t have time to explain. But... I want to personally apologize to you.”

Leonard felt his jaw go a bit slack as he straightened out his knees and stood numbly in front of the captain. “Apologize?” Sure, he wanted an apology, but he damned well hadn’t expected one.

Porter didn’t blink. “There’s no excuse for what must have looked like gross negligence on my part... and yes, I know what it looked like. I want you to know there was a reason for it, apparently beyond my control. I don’t ignore my crew, McCoy, regardless of rank. My record and my colleagues would tell you as much. But you didn’t get that consideration, and whether or not there was a reason for it, you deserve an apology... and a sincere expression of thanks. You and Cadet Kirk did an amazing thing today, against all odds.”

Leonard’s jaw was rapidly falling lower. He didn’t know what to make of the apology, and yeah he felt as though the captain had owed him one, but he choked on the complement. “I sent a man to his death today, captain.”

Porter’s expression was solemn. “So did I, doctor. More than one, if you want to know. Sometimes, it’s part of the job. But you saved many more, including the one you volunteered to save in the first place. I’m glad to have you as a member of my crew, temporary or not... even if you’ve got a bit of an attitude.” His mouth quirked a tired grin. “But that’s okay. I remember another cadet like that from my younger days, and I think he turned out pretty well.”

“Oh? Who?” Leonard couldn’t help but ask.

“Me.” The grin became just a bit conspiratorial. “I got myself into my fair share of horse shit before it started working out for me, and I learned how to balance my attitude with maturity. But... I understand it. And I respect it.” With that, he stuck out his hand across the table.

Leonard stared at Porter. Feeling oddly detached, he reached out and took the captain’s outstretched hand.

The handshake was firm and heartfelt, and as Leonard looked back into the face of the man he’d despised for two weeks, he realized that this didn’t seem like the same man. This seemed like the man Jim had described from his service record. This was a Starfleet captain, and a good one, Leonard wagered. Maybe Jim had been right about the Kazarite influencing the bridge crew, and...

Jim.

“Thank you, sir,” Leonard said roughly as he released the Captain’s hand, suddenly very distracted. “I... uh... should be --”

“You can go check on your friend now,” Porter said, not unsympathetically. “Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said in a rush. He only gave the other officers a cursory nod before hurrying out of the conference room.

Leonard made it about fifteen meters down the corridor before he realized his legs were shaking. He made it about another ten meters before his hand found the wall for much-needed balance. Crewmen and officers were looking at him oddly as he made it the last few steps to the turbolift and slipped inside. It was blessedly empty, and he quickly tabbed in his medical override code to lock out the lift from other people. Then, feeling as though the entire weight of the day had landed on his shoulders all at once, he leaned his back against the wall of the lift and slid awkwardly to the floor.
Somewhere, a detached part of his mind that never gave up the title Doctor was yelling at him about hyperventilation and emotional shock and low glucose levels, but Leonard told that part to go fuck itself. And Bones told them both to shut the hell up.

The day washed over him like a tidal wave.

He was breathing too fast and the room was spinning and tilting slightly, and some dim part of his brain told him that the anxiety meds Nurse Walsh had given him were thoroughly spent. He closed his eyes, and he heard the sound of gunfire. He smelled the stench of smoke and dust mingling with blood. He saw Hererra’s body in the middle of the street and the grotesque burns on Crewman Johan’s flank and Jim’s blood-stained skin. The memory of the beeping and whirring of the tricorder in his hands merged with the deafening thud of explosions. He felt the hot rage that had boiled up as he tried to argue down an armed terrorist, and damn, I can’t call Jim reckless anymore, not after that. But he could call Jim reckless because the kid had upped the ante and walked out into the middle of a battle, unarmed, unshielded… last ditch, last chance. And with one last look backwards - a look that was burned into Leonard’s memory like a hot brand - Jim had walked out of the room.

Leonard didn’t want to think of what that took meant.

He wanted to ask why me, but that was ridiculous. Absurd. That was so damned selfish it made him sick. There were a million reasons why hundreds or thousands of people had died today, and he’d come out of it alive, so the coincidental reasons why he’d ended up tangled in the middle of it weren’t worth contemplating. It didn’t matter why. The fact remained that he had been there, and so had Jim. He and Jim… always in the middle of everything. Every fucking disaster, it seemed. He knew that wasn’t true, of course, and that other mishaps and catastrophes, large and small, happened to other people every day. It just felt like he and Jim were always in the middle of every mess.

He should be grateful. He was still alive, dammit. He’d seen the success of a noble revolution, he’d played a part in stopping the bloodshed, and both he and Jim had come through it in one piece.

Well… mostly one piece.

Dammit, Jim.

He finally cracked open his eyes and stared at the grayscale walls of the turbolift as he forced himself to slow his breathing. He was a doctor, goddammit; he knew what to do. It just wasn’t as easy when he was the one losing his shit. He been on the edge of panic all day, and but he’d held it together. Now that the crisis was over, it was all crashing down on him. He felt cold and useless, overwhelmed and thoroughly wrung out.

He couldn’t stop now. The day wasn’t over, at least, not for him. He needed to check in with sickbay... and he needed to see Jim.

He took a few more bracing breaths, and when the room seemed to stop spinning, he carefully pulled himself to his feet and clung pathetically to the railing around the turbolift for balance. “Deck three.”

It took seconds for the doors to open into the corridor of deck three, almost directly across from sickbay, and he forced himself out of the turbolift on unsteady legs. The doors whooshed open and he trudged through, then came to a dead stop just inside, startled by the familiarity of it all. Even though it had only been a few hours since everything had turned upside-down, it felt as though he’d been gone for ages. So much had happened. He didn’t feel the same.
Still, he still had a job to do, and a friend to see.

On a cursory glance, it looked as though the worst of the crisis was over. It was busy, but not frantic. Nurses and medics were still tending to patients, and Leonard was sure some of the patients still needed significant treatment, but there was no yelling, no alarms blaring as biosigns faltered and failed, no fresh blood on the floor. Voices were calm and hushed so that patients could rest. Every bed was full, and Leonard remembered Brex saying that an additional recovery bay had been set up just down the corridor.

It could have been worse, he reminded himself. The medical facilities on Araxis had been undamaged, and with the cessation of hostilities, the Araxians were more than capable of caring for their own. That left only the injured crew members and Federation Ambassadors aboard the Athena. Most of the minor injuries had probably been discharged already, leaving the remaining biobeds for the worst injuries... and the one that had arrived last.

Even though he wanted nothing more than to make a beeline for Jim, his responsibilities went beyond his best friend. He was a doctor, and a member of Starfleet, and he knew the other medical staff had been through hell themselves while he’d been down on the planet. He wasn’t about to leave it all on their shoulders without at least checking to see if he could help. Besides, once he got to Jim, he knew he wouldn’t be able to focus on any other patients.

A memory, incongruous with his current setting, hit him like a ton of bricks. *A member of Starfleet is always on duty.* Thaleb. Jim’s Andorian friend had told him that.

Well damn.

Ignoring the heat rising around his collar, he continued through sickbay, checking in at the nurse’s station to get a general report before beginning a round of the patients. In the open areas of the main bay, dividers had been set up to afford some privacy to the patients now that sickbay was no longer in crisis mode. Some of them would likely be there for a few days, and privacy and comfort were important.

After two other patients, he found Crewman Johan, sedated but stable. He checked Johan’s treatment record and saw that the worst of the damage had been repaired. The guy had lost a kidney, but the other one was functioning well and would take over for the missing one. He’d need a couple more surgeries to finish removing and replacing the damaged tissue, but his prognosis looked excellent. Leonard allowed himself a satisfied smile as he moved on to the next bay.

However, before he could duck into the next patient’s area, a flash of red hair caught his attention as Nurse Walsh popped out from a treatment bay at the far end of the room. She took a few quick steps towards the supply room, but caught sight of Leonard and stopped with a knowing look.

“Doctor McCoy,” she said in the quiet tones of a nurse working around resting patients, “I’m sure you want to know... Kirk’s surgery went perfectly and he’s recovering in there.” She indicated the bay she’d just come from with a nod of her head. “In fact, I was just getting an extra blanket for him and a pack of blood replenishers to help restore his hemoglobin level.”

Leonard breathed in relief and frowned in concern at the same time. “How much blood did he lose?” According to the quick scan Leonard had run before they’d beamed up, the shrapnel in Jim’s gut had finally nicked a couple of decent-sized blood vessels.

“They estimated about a liter and a half, total,” Walsh said as she reached the supply cabinet and pulled a packet of rust-colored fluid out of a drawer, then quickly grabbed a blanket and walked back. “He’d recover without the replenishers, but he’ll feel better sooner with it.”
Leonard nodded as his concern faded a bit, and he fell into step behind her. Yeah, it would have been bad if Jim had kept bleeding, but they caught the injury in time. The crisis itself had actually been a much closer call.

They rounded the privacy screen and Leonard went directly over to Jim’s bedside as Walsh went to the other side of the bed to hook the medication up to the IV line. Jim looked pale, with dark circles under his eyes, but not too bad, all things considered. A quick check of the screen showed that his hemoglobin and blood pressure were low, and his core temperature was a bit below normal, but everything else looked really good.

Walsh spread out the blanket over Jim and smoothed it down. “I’ll leave you with him,” she said with a nod. “But... doctor? To offer my unsolicited professional opinion, you look like hell.”

He rolled his eyes. “That usually happens when you’ve been through it.”

“I didn’t say you didn’t have a good reason for it. But you need to get some rest, whether or not you want to. We’ve run out of biobeds, so if you collapse on us, I’ll just stick you on a stretcher in the middle of the hallway and let the rest of the crew wonder why we let one of our own medical staff make himself ill.” She gave him a look that didn’t leave room for argument, and Leonard remembered why she was the nurse of choice for dealing with stubborn patients.

Nodding warily, he eased himself into the chair next to Jim’s bed. “Aye-aye, sir.”

“Good,” she said flatly, softening it with a smile, then left the bay.

Finally alone with Jim, the soft noises of sickbay faded into the background. He was far past the point of awkward when it came to Jim, so Leonard didn’t hesitate as he reached over, took Jim’s hand, and gave it a squeeze. The kid should be waking up pretty soon, and while Leonard had no idea what he was going to say when Jim woke up, he knew what he wanted to say now. Maybe Jim would hear some of this. If he did... then perhaps it was for the better.

“You’re the biggest idiot of a genius I’ve ever met, kid.” He shook his head in silent awe. “Nobody else but you would have pulled that stunt... and maybe nobody else would have gotten out of it alive. You’re still a bit of an asshole, and there are days I don’t know why I put up with you... but Jim? I keep saying I’ll never let you surprise me again, and now I’m sure that’s the biggest pile of horse crap this side of the quadrant. I think you’re gonna keep surprising me for the rest of my life. Just don’t get yourself killed in the process, okay? You’re a bastard sometimes, and a crazy space cowboy with delusions of grandeur even when you swear you just want to be a normal cadet.” He snorted, then sighed.

“Jim, you were never just a normal cadet. I think I told you that almost two years ago. You’d be the guy who would save the world with the proverbial chewing gum and baling wire... or a tricorder and hypospray... or whatever... at the same time as you’re the reckless idiot who would go out on a limb until the limb snapped and then you’d just keep right on going. But kid?” He gave Jim’s hand a squeeze. “You’re my idiot. And I’m proud of you. Just wanted to tell you that.”

There wasn’t even a twitch from Jim.

Leonard furrowed his eyebrows slightly. The kid usually popped awake pretty fast after being sedated, so maybe he was just that damned wrung out. With a shrug, Leonard tapped into the biobed’s computer to get the rest of Jim’s chart. He’d come out of surgery about 45 minutes ago, while Leonard had still been up to his eyeballs in the debriefing. He was scheduled for some regen work overnight to avoid internal scarring and adhesions, but that would be easy. Of course, Jim would still be in quite a bit of discomfort when he woke up, but not terribly so.
Leonard tabbed to another screen and checked the levels of medications in Jim’s system. The blood replenisher dosing seemed more than adequate. While it wasn’t Leonard’s first choice, the antibiotic seemed to be doing the trick. The analgesic levels didn’t quite seem high enough in Leonard’s opinion for someone who would be waking up any minute from abdominal surgery, but there was still a surprisingly high amount of sedative in the kid’s system. If Leonard remembered correctly, and he did, Jim metabolized anesthesia drugs pretty rapidly.

Leonard looked over at the IV box above the biobed and noticed that the sedative was still being administered. Frowning deeply, he pulled up the orders for medications, and saw that they were going to keep Jim on a constant dose of sedatives until 0600 hours, or after his third round of regen work, whichever came first.

“What the hell?” he growled. Why weren’t they letting Jim wake up? Sure, he knew Jim was okay, but Leonard needed to see those eyes open. Needed to reassure himself that both he and his best friend had survived the crisis together and were both hale and whole, and some part of him wasn’t going to accept that unless Jim would just wake up, dammit!

Tabbing to another screen, he quickly looked down at the bottom of the page for the electronic signature. Brex had signed the orders. Feeling irrationally betrayed, he tapped the screen back to the main page, gave Jim’s hand a quick squeeze, and blew out of the treatment bay.

Brex was still on duty. Of course he was. And Leonard was going to find out why his best friend was being kept in a drug-induced doze because he just needed to talk to Jim before he lost his damned mind.

He hurried down the line of treatment bays, peeking around each privacy screen as he went. He made it almost to the opposite corner of the room and looked into the second-to-last bay. What he saw made his breath catch in his lungs, and almost made him forget why he came to find Brex in the first place.

Doctor Brex was sitting up with the Kazarite. Their hands were clasped between them, and their eyes were locked. Leonard watched, transfixed, as Brex smiled and nodded. Then the Kazarite shook his head. Brex shrugged. It was like watching a conversation, but there were no words.

Of course it’s a conversation, idiot, Leonard berated himself. He was debating whether to interrupt or to slip out before they saw him when Brex turned towards him and gave him a nod.

“McCoy, it’s quite alright. Come in.”

“I can wait,” he said automatically, but his feet didn’t seem to want to move. Instead, his mouth kept going. “I don’t want to get into the middle of your conversation, so I’ll leave you and the Ambassador to discuss... whatever it is you’re discussing, and when you’re done.... what?”

Brex was giving him a bemused look. “The Ambassador and I were discussing you and Kirk. He would like to speak with you.”

Leonard felt his eyes go wide. That was the last thing he wanted to do at that moment. He didn’t want to talk to anyone except Jim... and absolutely not the guy who was responsible for so much of the disaster today. “Doctor Brex... sir... with all due respect, that’s -”

“He has every reason to despise me, doctor,” the Kazarite said suddenly. “And no reason to wish to speak to me.”

Brex frowned, first down at the Kazarite, and then at Leonard. “McCoy, you’ll want to hear what
“I don’t,” Leonard said in a burst. “I... I’m sorry, but I need -”

“Doctor,” the Kazarite said softly, putting a hand on Brex’s arm. “Not tonight. He’s exhausted and frantic, and he’s worried about his friend. There will be time.”

Brex hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Then rest well. The nurse will check on you shortly.”

In one smooth movement, Brex stood and walked out of the small treatment bay.

Leonard almost stumbled as he turned and fell into step behind Brex. “Doctor Brex? What was that all about? And why is Jim still sedated? And... wait, Jim is that way!”

Brex slowed his footsteps just enough to let Leonard come up alongside him. “Yes, but my office is this way. And for the moment, that’s where we’re going.”

“But Jim -”

Brex finally stopped walking and turned so that they were face to face. His expression was concerned. “I promise, I’ll discuss everything with you,” he said as he reached out and gave Leonard’s shoulder a squeeze. “But not in the middle of sickbay, and not around patients who are trying to rest. So please... come with me for a moment.” He dropped his hand from Leonard’s arm without another word, finished walking across sickbay to his office. The door slid open, and then shut behind him.

Leonard stared at the closed door. Then he looked back over his shoulder at the far end of sickbay, where Jim was blissfully unaware of what was happening around him. Finally, he let his shoulders slump, and walked towards the CMO’s office.

The office door opened obediently, and then hissed softly as it sealed them in. Leonard slouched heavily into the chair across from Brex - his supervisor, colleague, and friend - and looked up.

Brex, for his part, was watching him expectantly.

Leonard had no idea what he was waiting for, because the guy already knew exactly what was on his mind. He wanted to talk to his best friend, and then sit up watching over the kid all night, fall asleep next to the biobed, and wake up with a miserable kink in the neck so he could grumble about it to make Jim laugh at him, because that’s what he did, dammit! It was better than losing his mind the way he was right now. The whole world had turned upside down, and Jim was the only familiar thing he had. A planet was in shambles below, countless people had died, the captain was apologizing to a cadet, and now Leonard had seen his boss sitting hand-in-hand with the guy who was at the heart of the whole thing, and -

“How the hell could you even talk to him after what happened?” It was out of Leonard’s mouth before he’d even realized his brain had formed the words, but that was good enough.

But Brex only shook his head tolerantly. “He’s my patient, McCoy. I needed to assess him.”

“That’s what a tricorder is for,” he snapped. “You were holding his hand... talking to him... good God, man, this is the guy who...” Leonard’s voice trailed off as he realized that he didn’t actually know exactly what the Kazarite had done. “I don’t know how he did what he did, but I know he’s at least partly responsible for that mess down there! And whatever else he’s done, he attacked you!”

Brex sighed heavily, closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. “He caused me no
permanent damage. He was actually quite cautious about that. It was the telepathic equivalent of
having a blindfold on.”

Leonard shook his head, dismayed at how easily Brex seemed to be accepting this. “But still... I
mean, he handicapped you... he put you into a coma for days! And your memory... what about your
memory?”

“Suppressed, not destroyed,” Brex said with a nod. “And McCoy... I don’t blame him for what
happened. That’s why you need to listen to him... but not tonight.”

“At least we agree on something,” Leonard said testily. He didn’t want to think about the Kazarite.
He just needed to see Jim. His brain was spinning, and that was the only thing that made sense
anymore. “Doctor Brex, you’ve got to let me talk to Jim. His chart says that his surgery was
textbook perfect, but you’ve got him out cold on pentazepam, and I don’t see why he needs to be
kept under sedation now that --”

“Doctor McCoy.” Brex’s tone was firm, and Leonard felt himself sit up a bit straighter. “We’re
keeping him sedated for a few reasons, not the least of which is that he’d still be in a fair bit of pain
if he were to wake up right now. His body is completely wrung out. He’s still got three more regen
sessions scheduled overnight, and they’d be much more effective if he doesn’t try to move around
too much. Based on his record, it’s likely that he’ll try to get out of bed as soon as he’s awake. You
know that. So instead, we’re letting him get some much-needed rest, avoid a lot of pain, and get
more effective treatment overnight. Nothing more sinister than that. Got it?”

Leonard hadn’t heard Brex use such a forceful tone towards him the entire time he’d been aboard
the *Athena*, but instead of throwing him off, it actually seemed to help. The firm edge of Brex’s
voice felt like something solid and reliable when everything else was spinning out of control. And
Brex was right, of course. As a doctor, Leonard had to agree with that assessment and treatment
plan. However, as Jim’s friend, Bones just wanted to see Jim wake up. Still, he nodded edgily.
“Yeah, I know that.”

Brex nodded gently, and his expression softened again. “I know you do. Kirk is fine for the
moment. But I’m more concerned right now that you’re not.”

Leonard frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brex gave him an incredulous look.

“Fine, okay, I know.” Leonard blew out a breath through pursed lips. “I’ve been in a hostage
situation. I sent someone to their death today. My best friend almost sacrificed himself in front of
me and there wasn’t a damned thing I could do to stop him. I know that I’m overtired and on the
edge of a panic attack, but my friend is in there, and he’s alive, so can you take him off the
sedatives so I can talk to him now?” He sounded crazy, even to his own ears, but he didn’t much
care at that moment.

“Leonard,” Brex said softly, “I know how good you are at regulations. It’s been an awful day for a
lot of people. Our medical staff is overwhelmed and stretched to the limits. So tell me... when a
member of the crew has been through what could be classified as a severe emotional trauma, what
should I do?”

Leonard furrowed his eyebrows as the regulation popped into his head and he automatically began
to rattle it off. “Minimally, a critical incident stress debriefing and baseline psych assessment
before permitting a return to duty, and ongoing counseling if... now wait just one minute there!”
Brex tilted his head, but not in concession. “I’m not going to provide less care for my own staff than I do for the rest of the crew. So talk to me, Leonard. This isn’t about jumping through some hoop in a standard operating procedure. This is me, worried about you, and wanting you to tell me what happened. We can substitute this for a formal assessment, if that will make you feel like you have an excuse to let loose, but please... talk.”

The air seemed too thick and too warm. Leonard had to remind himself to breathe evenly. “I usually talk to Jim.”

“I know.”

He didn’t want to talk about this at all. At least, not to someone who hadn’t been down there - someone who couldn’t understand. “I don’t know how much you know about what happened down there.”

“Only that you and Kirk figured out the connection with the Kazarite and somehow managed to get a message to Captain Porter. He came busting down into sickbay with an order to wake the Ambassador immediately. We did, and the whole thing came out. I heard that if we’d taken much longer, the Araxians would have detonated a fairly large bomb. But... I was in sickbay, taking care of patients. I wasn’t able to follow the whole thing.”

“Yeah. You got the gist of it,” Leonard said distractedly.

“Leonard, I’m not asking for a play-by-play report. I want to know how you’re feeling.”

At that, Leonard actually snorted, as if it could hide the fact that his throat was tight and his eyes were threatening to leak. “As if you don’t already know.”

“Tell me anyway.”

Brex’s voice was so patient, so non-judgemental, it would be so easy just to break and let the floodgates open. So much pent up stress, terror, fear... so much had happened. It all blurred together, and his mind fixed on one thing that had clung to his skin, his mind... everything.

“It was dusty.”

“Dusty?”

“Dust... smoke... on everything.” He looked down at his hands. There was still a crust of grime under his nails. They were usually perfectly manicured - clean and trimmed, as befitting the hands of a medical professional. Now, they were tainted. He was tainted by everything he had seen and heard and felt. The dust... in his nostrils, his clothes, his hair, the wrinkles of his skin. “The explosions around the city kicked all this dust into the air. It was everywhere. It was dusty, grimy... it was hell,” he said flatly.

“Tell me.”

The floodgate didn’t break. Instead, Leonard pulled it wide open and let it rush out. He was pretty sure he wasn’t making sense half of the time, but he got the impression that it didn’t matter. In his mind, it was a whirl of images, broken down into sensations and emotions, and it came pouring out in a torrent of words. But everything he thought of, every image that spun through his mind, he kept coming back to one thing... one image burned into his brain: Jim, walking out the door.

Finally, Leonard let himself slump back in the chair again, thoroughly spent. He closed his eyes, but the image of Jim walking away flashed through his thoughts again. “I only know one thing
right now,” Leonard said roughly.

“What’s that?”

“I’ll never let him walk away from me again. Not like that.” When Brex didn’t respond for a moment, Leonard cracked an eyelid. “Doctor?”

Brex was studying him carefully, but then he suddenly stood. “Okay. Come along.”

Leonard was confused and disoriented as he followed Brex out of the office and through sickbay, straight to Jim’s treatment bay. He was surprised by the sudden turnaround, but he wasn’t about to argue with it.

Jim hadn’t moved at all since he’d left, not that Leonard had expected him to. The biobed readouts looked steady and reassuring. Jim’s core temperature was better, and he was a bit less pale. Leonard noted that at least half of the blood replenisher had been infused already.

“Leonard, stop assessing the patient and sit down with your friend,” Brex said, startling him slightly.

Feeling a bit sheepish, Leonard glanced back over his shoulder and said, “It’s a habit.”

Brex smiled. “Not the worst habit in the world. I’ve been likewise guilty.”

Leonard nodded, sighed, and grabbed the small chair in the corner. He pulled it up next to the bed, then sat down heavily. “Crazy hero kid,” he said with a grumble. After a split second of hesitation, he reached out and grabbed Jim’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

He sat in silence for a couple of minutes, just being reassured by the subdued noises of sickbay and the steady thrum of Jim’s pulse beneath his fingertips. It was so real and immediate that Leonard could almost let himself believe that he hadn’t been in the middle of a battle just hours ago. Almost. The image of Jim walking out the door flashed through his mind again, and Leonard squeezed the kid’s hand tighter. Jim was right here, and he wasn’t about to walk away, like a damned martyr or some crazy shit like that...

“He didn’t walk away from you, Leonard.”

Leonard glanced back over his shoulder. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Brex was leaning against the partition with his arms folded across his chest, looking relaxed and non-threatening. “A subtle but important difference,” he said softly. “Walking away from someone means that the intent is to get away from that person. Kirk wasn’t walking away from you. He was walking into something dangerous, knowing that the risk was worth it. He was doing it to protect people he thought were worth protecting.”

There was an emphasis on certain words, and Leonard’s mouth had gone dry. “Did you read that in his head?” he asked, trying to cover the uneasy sensation in his stomach with sarcasm.

“No. But I know... based on what you told me back in the office.” Brex took a couple of steps further into the treatment bay, but still kept a courteous distance. “And I also know something else.”

Leonard licked his lips. “What’s that?”

“That he knows you didn’t walk away from him when he needed it.”
Leonard felt his eyes go wide. “He said...?”

Brex locked unwavering eyes with him. “A couple of weeks ago, you were sitting in my office, a complete wreck because you thought you’d walk away from the people you cared about when they needed you. Well, now you know you won’t. And Jim knows that. And I know this because while we were prepping him for surgery, he was talking up a storm.”

Leonard looked down at Jim’s peacefully slack features. “Dammit, Jim.”

Brex chuckled. “He said he tried to get you to come back to the ship, but you wouldn’t. He was frantic about it... but grateful. He would have still done it without you there, but... if I picked up anything from Kirk while we were getting him prepped, it was that he needs someone to care about what he does.”

“I know,” Leonard said roughly. “I’ve known that for a couple of years now. And how I learned it... the shit I’ve gone through with this guy... I’ll probably never know everything about him, but when it comes to that, I’m pretty sure I’ve got him figured out.”

“He’s got you figured out, too,” Brex said, with emphasis.

It took Leonard a moment to process the tone in Brex’s voice. “Wait... come again?”

Brex sighed. “I said there were a few reasons why he’s still sedated. Of course, it’ll be better for his recovery. But it’s also better for you, too”

Leonard dropped Jim’s hand and twisted around in the chair to look at Brex. “Just how the hell do you figure that?”

Brex looked at him patiently. “Aside from recovering from the injury, Kirk is also exhausted and overspent, and he’s dealing with the emotional aftermath of his ordeal. Sedatives are probably the only way he’s going to get the rest his body needs right now. But he’s not the only one, Leonard. Before we put him under, he said you’d come in here as soon as they released you from the debriefings, and you’d probably stay here all night, hovering over him instead of going back to your quarters and getting the rest you need.”

“Wait just one minute --”

“He also told me to make sure you took care of yourself,” Brex said firmly. “And I know you well enough to know that right now, this is the best thing for both of you.”

Before Leonard could ask what that was supposed to mean, Bred was standing over him, holding out a downturned fist. Leonard automatically opened his hand, and Brex deposited a small white pill in the center of his palm. He looked up at Brex, sputtering indignation. “What’s this all about?”

Brex leaned back against the edge of the biobed, looking at Leonard with an expression of sympathy. At least it wasn’t pity. “Leonard, you’re exhausted, and despite offloading some of your trauma in my office, you’re far more emotionally wrung out than you’re even admitting to yourself. I’m a friend and a colleague, but I’m also your commanding officer and the ship’s chief medical officer.”

Leonard looked at the pill in his hand in disbelief. “You’re ordering me to go back to my quarters and take a sedative?”

Brex nodded.
“While Jim is still here and hasn’t woken up yet?”

“He’s deep in a dreamless sleep. He’s resting comfortably, and that’s what he needs. You need the same thing, and you know it. You’re still shaking slightly, and I’ll guess the only reason you’re still upright is adrenaline.” His expression became plaintive. “You’ve seen him, Leonard. You know his injuries are mended, and he’s as comfortable as he could possibly be. Although I want to take you off-duty for the next couple of days, we’re short-staffed with a large patient load. We’ve got you scheduled for alpha shift. We need you to be well-rested if you’re going to be on-duty in the morning, when Kirk will be awake and wanting to talk to you.”

Leonard wavered.

Brex sighed. “You can’t take care of other people - including Jim - until you take care of yourself.”

Leonard looked at the pill in the palm of his hand. He recognized the drug, and it was just about the strongest sedative he’d dare to prescribe for a person who wasn’t being sedated under supervision. It would have him out cold for a solid eight hours, that’s for sure.

He looked back at Jim. He hated the idea of leaving Jim alone down here, but the kid was out cold. Jim wouldn’t notice, and dammit, Leonard was exhausted. He could get some sleep now, and then be there in the morning when Jim woke up. That’s when Jim would need him. And if Leonard was honest with himself, he’d need his best friend, too.

“Dammit, Jim.” Without another word, he palmed the pill and stood. “Okay. You win.”


Leonard nodded edgily. “Yeah, I know. Just seems like everything was win or lose today.”

“I understand,” Brex said, but his lips were pressed together in a thin line. “And you won more than you lost.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Did I? Did any of us?”

Brex rested a warm hand on his arm. “Get some sleep and tell me in the morning.”

“Sure.” That was all the conversation Leonard could handle. He reached down and gave Jim’s arm a squeeze. “Stay out of trouble while I’m gone. Got it? I’ll see you in the morning.”

With that, he turned and walked past Brex, who fell into step alongside him, aiming for the door out of sickbay. “Wake me up if something happens, okay?” he said flatly.

“Nothing should happen, but I will.”

“I’ll be here at 0800.” He’d have to set his alarm pretty loud, but if he took the pill as soon as he got to his quarters, he should be able to wake up.

“Okay. Don’t worry about oversleeping, though. Singh is coming in for alpha shift, too, and we’ve got enough backup staff to cover. I’ll let her know you might oversleep because of the sedative.”

“Okay.” He really didn’t want to talk anymore.

“Leonard?”

Leonard stopped just short of the doors of sickbay. “What?” Even as he said it, he cringed at how
sharp his tone was. “Sorry, what?”

Brex was giving him a gentle smile. “I’m proud of you, Leonard.”

Leonard meant to say something, but his throat choked closed, and there were no words anyway. Jaw tensed and eyes threatening to leak - God damn it, he was definitely overtired - Leonard could only nod and hurry out the door.

He was in his quarters before he knew it. He slapped the sedative pill down on the small table next to his bunk. Then, he stripped off his filthy uniform and shoved it into the cleaning unit, even though he had half a mind just to leave it in a heap on the floor. He could almost imagine Jim mocking him for that. I’m rubbing off on you, Bones, he’d say. The bastard.

Shaking it off, he dragged himself into the bathroom and tabbed in all his water credits, then turned the shower on as hot as he could tolerate it. He tried to imagine that the water was washing away more than just the physical filth of the day. Dust and soot and grime blasting off his skin and sluicing down the drain along with the shuddering explosions and sticky blood and the smell of death that he swore was still clinging to his skin and pervading the air. It wasn’t going away. He scrubbed and lathered and rinsed and scrubbed again until the computer informed him that he had two minutes of water credit left and he still felt dirty.

Breathing hard and trying not to think, he finally shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. The towel was rough and his skin was violently pink and it almost hurt and that was just fine by him. He didn’t know how the hell he was supposed to sleep after a day like this, sedative be damned. He thought about hitting the replicator coffee and reading medical journals on his PADD until it was time for his shift, but they’d know, and he’d been given a medical order.

Grumbling to himself, he tossed his towel into the cleaning unit, grabbed a pair of boxers out of his dresser, and pulled them on, all while shooting angry glares at the small white pill on his bedside table. He felt absurd, but he shook that off and indulged in his pointless anger. If he could be angry at the pill, he could ignore everything else.

Jesus H. Christ, he was really starting to lose it.

With a sigh of surrender, he grabbed a cup of water from the drink slot, plucked the pill off the table, and tossed it back. He had about fifteen minutes before it would kick in, so he might as well get comfortable. Placing the water glass on the bedside table, he pulled back the covers just a bit too roughly, and with a heavy grunt and Computer, lights off, dammit, he wrapped himself into a tight roll of bedsheets and blankets and tried to pretend the world didn’t exist.

The sheets were just starting to feel warm around his body when a loud beep cut the silence of his quarters. He startled and flailed out, tangling himself in sheets and blankets as his breath came too fast and harsh in his chest at the unexpected interruption.

“Fuck... lights... computer, lights! Goddammit, what the...”

He blinked and stared across the room to the flashing red light on the computer console at his desk. “The hell...?”

Leonard finally realized it was a notification for an incoming holovid call, and his heart stuttered as he realized what it might be. “Jim!” He scrambled out of bed, almost tripping on the sheets that were still wrapped around his legs. “Ouch, goddammit!”

Finally free of the sheet, he grabbed his bathrobe where he’d thrown it on the back of his chair
wrapped it around himself. He knew he looked like hell, but he didn’t care. He slapped the holovid panel as he dropped into the chair. “McCoy here.”

It took him a second to register the familiar face in front of him. “Doctor McCoy, it’s good to see you.”

Leonard blinked a couple of times. Of the many things he hadn’t expected, this was pretty close to the bottom of the list. “Captain Pike. I... uh... sorry I’m not in uniform.”

Pike gave a half-shrug. Even though he was in uniform, he looked like hell himself, and Leonard wondered if he hadn’t planned to be on duty at that moment. “I didn’t expect you to be in uniform. It’s pretty late over there. I understand you’ve been through quite a trying experience, and if anything, I should apologize for waking you up.”

A flash of annoyance, more at his situation than at Pike, twisted Leonard’s lips into a scowl. “I wasn’t asleep... yet. Just took a sedative, though, so I will be soon, but I’ve got a few minutes before it kicks in. What can I do for you, sir?”

Pike shifted in his seat, and Leonard got the distinct impression that the man was uneasy. And not just uneasy... nervous. In the two years Leonard had known Captain Pike, the man had been a veritable pillar of sanity and calmness. This just wasn’t right. But then again, wasn’t that the theme of the day?

Finally, Pike leaned a bit forward on his desk and spoke. “I just received a full report of what happened on Araxis, including a copy of your report.”

“Oh.” Of course. Why else would Pike be calling? He’d heard the whole thing, and he needed to check in on his cadets, including his advisee and pet project. “Kirk is still recovering from surgery, but he should be awake in the morning, if you need to talk to him, captain.”

“That was in the report I got, too. And I’ll need to talk to Kirk as well, but I was calling to talk to you first. And not because he’s still out cold.” Pike sighed and shook his head. “Captain Porter’s communique included a few things he probably couldn’t tell you. And some things I hadn’t known.” He hesitated, then let his shoulders slump just a bit. “McCoy... I’m sorry.”

That was the second time Leonard had heard those words from a Starfleet Captain in as many days. This time, the effect wasn’t quite the same.

Maybe it was because he was too exhausted to think straight. Or it could have been the anxiety and adrenaline mixing with the first traces of the sedative in his bloodstream. Perhaps it was because he’d been on the edge of blazing fury and paralyzing fear all afternoon without tipping into either side. Or... maybe it was because he’d been through hell, and he was looking at the man who had told Jim to just be a cadet, and that simple instruction had almost gotten them all killed.

“You’re... sorry,” Leonard said slowly, tasting the words and rolling them around in his mouth. For a split second, it looked like Pike was going to speak again, but Leonard pushed forward. “You’re sorry;” he said again, the words dripping with scorn mingled with the rough edge of dust and smoke still grating inside his throat. “You know... Jim said he talked to you. While we were down there... he told me that he’d commed you, and you’d just told him to be a good little cadet, to keep his head down... you essentially told James T. Kirk to get in line, sit down, and shut up, and he did. He jumped through every one of your little hoops like a well-trained show dog, and he kept his mouth shut when he was one of the only goddamned people on the ship who could see what was going on!”
To Leonard’s annoyance, Pike only sat calmly, letting the anger roll over him. “McCoy, you have every right to be angry.”

“You’re damned right, I do!” He slammed his palm down on his desk for good measure, letting the sting in his hand spur him on. “The number of people who died today - the destruction, the body count - and Jim was right in the middle of it, putting his ass on the line when neither of us could convince the oh-so-capable command crew to open their eyes and see what was happening! You told Jim to trust the officers, to trust the captain, and they all let him down!”

“They know that, McCoy. I spoke to Captain Porter briefly. I’ve known that man for years, and your captain is not the sort of man who misses things. I had no way to know that Porter had been compromised. I can’t tell you what happened, but I had every reason to believe that the Araxis situation was in capable hands.”

Leonard shook his head, feeling the incredulity oozing over him. “Every reason... no way to... good God, man! Jim told you they weren’t doing enough! I wasn’t there, but I know Jim. He tried to tell you, and you let it go!” He was leaning closer and closer to the vid screen, and the anger in his chest was erupting upwards, volcanic and explosive. It felt good after everything that had happened. His familiarity with Pike gave him a freedom that he didn’t feel like he had with Porter. He finally had a target for his anger; this was someone who should have stepped in, who should have fucking known.

Pike, however, was still the perfect picture of calm, laced with just a touch of remorse. If anything, it made Leonard want to put his fist through the computer terminal. “Yes, Kirk told me what he saw. He expressed his concerns, and I listened. And then, I talked to a capable, experienced Starfleet captain - a man I trust - and was told that everything was under control. McCoy... I had no way to know what was happening. Nobody did.”

“Jim did.” The heat bubbling in his chest took on a different quality. “And that ought to be enough for anyone.”

For the first time since the call started, Pike’s face hardened a bit. “I can’t take the word of a cadet over the word of a captain.”

“Is that what your gut tells you?” Leonard snapped. “That rank is everything out here? You told me once that this is Starfleet, and it’s always different. Well, you know what, captain? There’s your different! You recruited him because of that! Rank be damned, protocol be damned -- Jim was right!”

“I know, Doctor McCoy.” Pike’s face was completely unreadable.

Leonard pressed his face even closer to the screen, squinting slightly. It was starting to look fuzzy, but he was too ticked off to care. “You say you know, but you still didn’t do a damned thing. That kid sees everything, and I swear, someday, he’ll see something that nobody else sees, and he’ll try to warn them, but they won’t listen to him, and he won’t be able to pull a miracle out of his ass. Some arrogant, swaggering, over-confident bastard of a captain will brush him off, and everyone is going to die because of it! A ship, a city... who the fuck knows! I don’t know, but that’s what would happen!”

He made a move to stand so he could lean even closer to the screen, but the chair seemed to wobble beneath him. Hell, the damned floor was wobbling. Didn’t matter. “Jim Kirk is a goddamned idiot sometimes, and he’s a fucking infant when it’s time for his booster shots, but he’s still a damned genius, and not just in ways you can test. And... and you... you should have known... you should have stopped this... stopped it before it was too late.” The furious heat in his chest had
changed, and his face and eyes were warm... and wet?

“Leonard.” Pike’s voice was no quieter, but it seemed softer this time. In fact, everything seemed softer.

Leonard opened his mouth to speak again, but it came out in a choked sort of sound. He cleared his throat. “What Jim did today... he almost sacrificed himself to do it. I... I made a goddamned report, but there’s no way... I can’t ever explain... captain, the look on his face... oh God, the look on his face...”

“Leonard,” Pike said again. “You’ve been through a lot, and I’m pretty sure that sedative you took is about to drop you on your ass. We’ll have words about this later, but... under the circumstances, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear most of that. Besides, you’re not wrong.”

“I...” Leonard blinked a few times, trying to clear his head, but he couldn’t.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not enough, but it’ll have to be. I’m sorry. That’s all I can say. Now go to bed. That’s an order.” Pike’s voice was firm, but not unkind, and it was enough to get Leonard to act.

“Aye, sir,” he said, clumsily getting to his feet. Damn, the sedative was really hitting him hard.

“Good. And McCoy?” Pike hesitated for just a fraction of a second. “I’ll talk to Kirk tomorrow, but... you while you’re busy taking care of him... try to take care of yourself. Pike out.”

With that, the screen went dark.

Leonard blinked a few times, not really able to wrap his head around what had just happened. He couldn’t. Instead, he just steadied himself against the chair, then against the wall as he stumbled his way to his bunk. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he vaguely realized that he’d shoved his foot so far into his mouth it might have come out the other end, and that he was damned lucky he was that it was Pike and not somebody else. He also wondered if he might have learned a lot more if he’d been able to shut up for two seconds and let Pike talk. However, at the moment, he was barely able to keep his eyes open. He could feel the drug pulling him down, dampening his senses and making everything blurry.

He fell onto his bunk, muttered, “Computer... lights,” and seconds later, was dead to the world.

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Chapter 22

It only took a moment of disorientation for Jim to figure out where he was as he oozed back to consciousness. The soft sounds of voices mingling with the beeping of medical devices, the slight incline of a biobed beneath him, and the muted but distinct pain in his gut told him that he was in sickbay. A few seconds later, he remembered why he was there. All of it. He held back a groan at the memory as he blinked his eyes and waited for the world to come into focus around him.

“Computer -” His voice came out as a croak. Swallowing tightly and clearing his throat, he tried again. “Computer, what time is it?”

“Ship’s time is 0612 hours.”

Jim felt a flash of irritation. It was early morning, which meant they’d kept him asleep overnight. There was no way in hell he would have slept through everything if it hadn’t been drug-induced, so that meant they had him on sedatives the whole time. However, his irritation quickly morphed into acceptance, and then, to his surprise, a perverse sense of gratitude. Waking up the day after that fiasco, instead of later that evening, seemed less harsh... less immediate. Somehow, it felt like he could breathe again.

For now, sickbay was quiet, the light was subdued, and his biobed was surrounded by dull beige partition panels, giving him privacy. The space around the bed was small, and held only a display panel, some idle pieces of equipment, and a conspicuously empty chair.

He felt a split-second of surprise and an odd sense of emptiness as he realized he was alone, but he swallowed it back. It wasn’t even alpha shift yet, there were probably a ton of other patients, and he had no right to expect anyone to be there. Besides, if the chair was empty, it meant that someone had been able to convince Bones to take care of himself, and maybe the guy had even gotten some sleep in a real bed. It had probably taken a fair bit of cajoling. He imagined what Bones’ face must have looked like when the other doctor had kicked him out of sickbay for the night, and couldn’t quite stifle a small grin. Yeah, maybe it was for the best that Bones wasn’t there.

Still, it felt a bit strange waking up alone, and it surprised him a bit that nobody else was there to hover over him while he woke up. He could hear people shuffling around and talking softly beyond the partitions around his bed. Someone would come in eventually, but for now, he had a moment to breathe, and take stock of himself.

Other than the mild ache in his gut, he actually felt pretty good. There was a small patch of gauze taped to the back of his hand, but he didn’t seem to have anything attached to him. He tugged down the sheets and looked at his abdomen. Where there had been an ugly wound yesterday afternoon, there was a only thin, slightly crooked, light pink line, covered by a shiny layer of dermaseal. It seemed like a laughably small thing after everything that had happened. Nothing more than a scratch after having been so close to the brink. If modern medicine had anything to say about it, even that scar would fade and eventually disappear, leaving a memory without a mark.

“How are you feeling?”

Jim startled hard enough to make his gut twinge, and he quickly pulled the sheets back over his stomach as he looked up to see a doctor that he recognized. “I... I’m fine, uh, Doctor... Brex?”

“Yes,” the man confirmed with a nod as he stepped the rest of the way into the small treatment bay. “You know... your medical record has a notation that you metabolize sedatives quickly, but I
Jim didn’t expect you to wake up for at least another twenty minutes.”

Jim blinked, trying to process what the guy was saying, and realizing that he was still a bit hazy and slow on the uptake. “Bones told me I have a crazy metabolism,” he mumbled absently. “How’s Bo-McCoy?”

Brex smiled. “Asleep, I’d wager. I gave him a pretty strong sedative last night when I kicked him out of sickbay.”

Jim nodded, thinking again of the empty chair next to the bed, but how he was glad that Bones had gotten some rest. “Good. He needed that.”

“Yes, he did. He’s scheduled for alpha shift, but with the dose I gave him, I wouldn’t be surprised if he oversleeps.”

“Well, that would be good for him, too,” Jim said flatly. “The guy never gets enough sleep.”

“You know your friend pretty well... even when you should have been focusing on yourself. So that begs the question... what about you?”

The question was so simple, so innocuous, that Jim almost laughed it off, but he caught himself. “What about me?”

Brex didn’t say anything for a moment as he finished his scan and set aside the device before looking directly at Jim. “How are you doing?”

Jim frowned. “Well... my gut doesn’t hurt much anymore, and nothing else is really standing out. I’m a bit achy overall, but I think that’s from when the first explosion tossed me backwards, so... what?”

“I’m glad your body is physically better, but that’s not really what I was asking.”

Jim scrunched his head down. He knew that. He just had no idea how to answer it. Hell, he’d just barely woken up. “I... don’t really know how I’m doing yet. I’m still trying to figure it out.”

“Fair enough. But for now, let’s get you up and walking, check how your body is responding, and get you discharged.”

Jim felt his eyes widen. “You’re letting me out of here already?”

Brex smiled again. “Unless you like being stuck in sickbay.”

Jim shook his head emphatically.

“Good. Here, let me help you sit up.”

A moment later, Jim was on his feet, with Brex at his elbow, walking out into the main area of sickbay. He felt pretty good, and walking didn’t make anything hurt more. Brex led him to a small side room with some light equipment - a physical therapy area - and started directing him through some very gentle movements and stretches.

“It’s fine,” Jim said, pleased with himself as they walked back to his treatment bay. He could tell that there had been an injury, but the ache was mild and easily ignored. “Feels great.”

Brex was reaching into a cabinet, and he pulled out a clean set of Jim’s undergarments and one of his uniforms. Someone must have retrieved them from his quarters. “Good to know. Just remember
that you’re still on some fairly good pain medication, so don’t get carried away. I’m discharging you, not putting you back on duty.” As Jim opened his mouth to protest, Brex dropped his clothes into his outstretched hands and cut him off. “You’re off-duty for the next twenty-four hours, and light duty for four days after that. I’m sending you out with some pain pills, and I expect you to take them. Then, be sure to come in daily for follow-ups until you’re cleared for full duty. No argument.”

“But I’m fine.” Hell, he just wanted to get back to duty. He’d even take the pain pills without complaint. If he could just get back to work, he wouldn’t have to over-think. Routine. He just wanted some routine right now, before he started getting caught up in his head.

Brex was giving him a concerned look. “McCoy is right about you.”

Jim glared, then huffed. “He usually is.” He put his clothes on the bio bed and shook out the pants before pulling them on.

“Your injury is healing well, and you’ll be physically fine with proper rest... but any normal sentient being needs time to process something like this.”

“Who said I was normal?” Jim muttered to himself.

Brex sighed. “I’m not even going to justify that with an explanation. So now that you’re more awake, tell me how you’re really doing.”

Jim gritted his teeth. No use lying to a telepath. “I feel like I should be happy right now. I mean... everything worked out. We should be congratulating ourselves on a successful mission. We stopped the bomb. We solved the mystery in time. We won. The Araxians won. We got out alive...” His voice trailed off, and he felt his throat tighten around the next few words before he managed to choke them out.

“But...?” Brex prompted him.

“Almost everyone got out alive.”

“Your lieutenant.”

Jim nodded, suddenly fixated on the one thing that had gone so wrong... so horribly, irreversibly wrong. His undershirt was blurry in front of him as he grabbed at it and pulled it roughly over his head.

“It’s backwards,” Brex said softly.

Jim ignored the hot flush in his cheeks as he pulled the shirt off, turned it around, and saw that he had indeed put it on backwards. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I understand.” There was no pressure in Brex’s voice.

Jim blinked a few times, then took his time pulling on his uniform shirt, double checking to make sure it was facing forward. Then... there was nothing else to do, and Jim realized he was staring blankly at the empty surface of the bio bed in front of him. “Did they get Lieutenant Finney’s body back from the surface?”

If Brex was surprised by the question, he didn’t show it. “We did. His body is in the mortuary.”

Jim swallowed, feeling nauseous and cold. He didn’t really know why he was saying this, but the
words tumbled out anyway. “I want to see him.”

Brex looked at him, not in surprise or dismay, but in sadness. “I can’t let you do that. We still need to do a post-mortem, and either way, that’s not what you need to see right now.”

A flash of indignation lit through him. How the hell did this doctor know what was best for him? Telepath or not, Brex didn’t know him. But before Jim could let his indignation lead to heated words he’d regret later, Brex continued. “But I’ve got something else for you. I’m sure McCoy will be getting down here soon, so if you stick around, it might be the best way to catch him. And in the meantime... there’s someone else in sickbay who you might want to see.”

Jim felt his heart thud unevenly for a moment. “Who?”

He smiled. “Follow me.”

Jim trailed Doctor Brex across sickbay, holding his confusion in silence until he was waved into one of the treatment areas. His eyes went wide at the sight of a familiar face, dark skin contrasting white sheets in stark relief. “Johan?”

The man on the biobed stirred slightly. His eyes were still closed, but his hands weren’t completely slack as they would be in sleep.

“He’ll be waking up soon, and I’m sure he’d appreciate some company,” Brex said softly from behind him.

Jim nodded blankly. Of course he wanted to stick around. Yesterday, he hadn’t even heard whether Johan had survived or not. There hadn’t been time in the chaos. And today... well, Jim hated himself a little bit for not thinking to ask sooner. But here he was, breathing and moving and living.

“You saved him,” Jim finally breathed.

“I was going to say the same thing to you,” Brex said mildly.

Jim startled and looked back at Brex, shaking his head. “What? No, not me. If anything, McCoy did. I couldn’t do anything but watch and -”

“And call for help before it was too late for us to be able to fix the damage.” Brex was giving him an odd look: pride, respect, admiration. It made him uncomfortable. “Maybe you couldn’t control what happened to Finney, but you got everyone else out.”

Jim blinked, not quite able to let himself take in what Brex was telling him. He’d forgotten to ask. “Everyone? Lieutenant Kim? Cadet Liu? They were injured. Badly. Nobody told me - did they -”

“They’re fine,” came the reassuring reply, and Jim let out a tight breath as Brex kept talking. “The Lieutenant is recovering three beds down from here, and Liu was discharged to quarters last night. In fact, I heard a rumor that he said something about you carrying him to safety through a firefight.” There was an unasked question somewhere in there.

Feeling inexplicably like an idiot, Jim shrugged and looked back down at Johan. “I didn’t think about it... I just couldn’t leave him out there.”

A warm hand rested on his shoulder.

“I’ll be just across the room if you need anything.”

Jim nodded silently, still staring at Johan as Brex’s hand fell away from his shoulder and footsteps
retracted. He stood still for a long moment, feeling awkward and relieved and unbalanced all at once. Seeing Johan alive seemed like proof that everything was okay. *I feel like I should be happy right now,* he’d said. It wasn’t happiness, not by a long shot, but it felt like permission to breathe again.

He slid onto the stool next to the biobed and cautiously reached out and touched Johan’s arm. “Hey... Johan? You awake?”

Johan made a low sound in his chest and moved his arm. “Come on, Plato. We didn’t drag your ass back to the ship so you can ignore me.”

“But if I ignore you,” came the rough reply, “will you go away so I can get some sleep?” Lips split into a tired grin, and Johan’s eyes popped open, looking more alert than they should have been if he’d been out cold only seconds before.

Jim let his mouth fall open. “You jackass! How long have you been awake?”

“Not long.”

“I...” Jim’s breath caught in a flush of warm embarrassment as he realized Johan must have heard him talking with Brex.

Johan grinned up at him. “The doc is right. You got us out alive. I knew you could do it.” Then he frowned. “But it sounded like you didn’t know I was still alive until just now. They must have let us go, so... didn’t you come back to the ship with me?”

Jim shook his head numbly. “They weren’t going to let us go. We knew too much. Doctor McCoy beamed down to treat you on site, but the damage was too bad. He convinced them that you had no chance of spilling the beans in the state you were in, so they let you go back to the ship and kept both of us.”

Johan’s eyes went a bit wider. “No kidding? Then how did you get out?”

Jim opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head. “That’s a story for another day. I promise. I’m just...” His throat tightened a bit. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“You too, Blues. Did they patch you up? I know you had more than a scratch.”

Jim waved it off. “Not much more than a scratch. I’m fine.”

“You’re full of shit... but I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I... I am now,” Jim said, suddenly finding his voice a bit thick. “I thought you were going to die on me.”

Johan actually gave a silent chuckle. “Nah. Had to survive. Someone’s gotta make sure Ensign Goldberg doesn’t fry himself on the power grid before he gets a bit more practical experience.” Then his smile faded. “But I think I’ll skip the landing party next time.”

“You don’t want to go exploring other planets?” Jim said, trying to make light of it.

Johan shook his head. “That’s not why I came out here.”

Jim frowned. “Why else would you join Starfleet? I mean, there are plenty of positions on Earth for someone with your skills.” And then Jim realized the depth of what he was asking, and it hit
him like a brick in his stomach. “Johan, why did you join Starfleet?”

Johan closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them slowly. “I hadn’t even planned to. After... after what happened to my father, it just didn’t interest me. So I went to technical school to work on dirtside power grids, and it turns out I was one of the best. I was working on the big power grid expansion project back home in South Africa when I got a communique. Starfleet wanted me for their ships... and by then, I was mature enough to want something bigger. I blew through their tech school and boot camp, and here I am. Still in one piece.” He looked down at his bandaged abdomen, shrugged, and looked back up at Jim with a lopsided grin. “ Mostly.”

Jim felt a bittersweet smile tug the corner of his mouth. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better, but I can’t complain.” Then he tilted his head and his expression changed. “You got everyone out.”

“You already said that,” Jim said, but the words washed over him like a balm, and he closed his eyes in relief. “I was so worried. I knew I’d made the wrong call at first, but I didn’t do anything about it until it was too late. You were right - I was in charge, and I knew I shouldn’t have listened to Finney, but we got out, and -”

“No, Blues, you’re not listening to me.” Johan’s deep voice undercut his own, and Jim opened his eyes to see Johan looking at him very intently. “You. Got. Everyone. Out. You stayed behind, and made sure we all got out alive, and then... you got out, too. Nobody went down with this ship, Kirk. You did it.”

The air was suddenly too thick to breathe, and Jim gasped as the implication landed on him with crushing weight.

It wasn’t the same as what his father had done - in no way could Jim ever think it was the same - but it fit. Hot and burning and bitter all at once, and yet he almost thought he could feel something letting go... something he’d clung to for far too long. He’d succeeded where he’d thought his father had failed.

“Blues? You okay?”

Jim swallowed past the lump in his throat and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah I am. I really think I am.”

*********

Johan fell asleep after about a half hour, but Jim stayed, sitting next to him in silent company until a nurse came in to run some scans and check Johan’s meds. Jim quietly slipped back out into the main part of sickbay. A quick check of the chrono told him that it was 0847 - well into alpha shift. Bones should already be there, but Jim had figured the first thing Bones would do on arrival would be to track him down. That hadn’t happened.

“Cadet Kirk?”

He turned to see a doctor he didn’t recognize approaching him. She had long, dark hair which was worked up into an elaborate twist on her head, and was carrying a tricorder in one hand and a PADD under the other arm.

“Doctor...?”

“Singh. My records said you were discharged, but Doctor Brex said you were still here, talking to Crewman Johan. How are you feeling? Are you having any problems?” She was already activating
Jim waved her off. “I’m fine. And I was also waiting around to see Doctor McCoy.”

She nodded in easy acceptance. “Ah. I understand. Actually, he isn’t here yet.”

Jim frowned. “I thought he was due on alpha shift.”

Singh actually gave him a slightly devious grin. “He was, but I’ll wager that the sedative Doctor Brex gave him still has him out cold.”

“Yeah, he mentioned.” Jim gave a small smile that didn’t feel too fake. “I’ve seen McCoy take sedatives to help him sleep after rough duty shifts or mid-term exams and finals. The guy sleeps like the dead for hours. Will he be in trouble?”

Singh shook her head. “Of course not. We would have given him the day off if we weren’t so short-handed in here. But right now, we’ve got it under control, and it’s not a problem.”

Jim looked around. It was busier around sickbay now that alpha shift had begun. One nurse was taking a patient to a treatment room on a stretcher, and another was helping a patient to walk on what must be a recently repaired leg. Things were getting back to normal. “So... should I wait for him here? Or... I could go to his quarters and pull him out of bed, if you think that would be a good idea.” And really, that’s what Jim wanted to do. He could go and wake Bones up and talk to the guy before he even got down to sickbay for his shift.

“You don’t need to wake him up, Cadet,” Singh said, shaking her head. “I’m sure he’ll be down here soon. It’s up to you, of course, but if you want to wait here, you can.”

“I...” On one hand, he didn’t want to wake Bones if the guy was actually sleeping, but he didn’t want to wait either. Waiting meant rehashing everything he’d just talked about with Johan. Waiting meant thinking about Finney and the failure that even his success couldn’t cover. But waiting also meant giving Bones time to rest, and he didn’t want to be greedy.

“Cadet?”

“I’ll wait.”

Doctor Singh nodded gently. “You... I heard about some of the things you did on the surface. I heard that you stayed to make sure they didn’t detonate the bomb... that you took care of other people. I admire and respect that.”

Jim shrugged awkwardly, feeling his face burn red. “I only did what seemed right at the time. I wasn’t trying to do it for any sort of recognition.”

She smiled. “I know. That’s why I respect it.”

She waved him to a chair next to the nurse’s station, and Jim sat down, feeling really awkward hanging around in sickbay when he’d been a patient just a couple of hours ago. He tried not to think too much.

Maybe he could go down to Bones’ quarters and just wake the guy up. Bones had given him the passcode, after all. And if he knew Bones, which he absolutely did, then the guy would probably appreciate the wake-up if he’d overslept into his shift.

He was about to stand up and excuse himself when the comm sounded. “Commander Shao to
Jim startled at the sound of his name. He looked up and saw one of the nurses - a red-headed woman he thought he recognized. “Uh... should I respond?”

She actually rolled her eyes at him, and for a moment, it reminded him of Bones. “If a commander comms a cadet, what do you think?” She laughed lightly at him as his jaw went slack. “Go ahead and take the call at the nurses’ station.”

Jim nodded dumbly, stood, and tapped the comm panel above the nurses’ computer. “Kirk here, sir.”

“Kirk, we were notified that you were discharged from sickbay. I understand that you’re off-duty for twenty-four hours, but Captain Porter wants you to report for a debriefing if you’re capable. Are you feeling up to it?” She sounded thoroughly apologetic.

Jim raised both eyebrows in surprise. “The captain?”

“Yes, cadet. He wants to talk to you as soon as possible, before the negotiations reconvene on the surface.”

“The negotiations are continuing?” Jim blurted out in disbelief. “I figured Starfleet would suspend everything... call off the talks and tell the Axanar where they can... uh... stick it. Uh... sir.” He cringed at his own slip of words.

If Shao was angry at his breach of protocol, she said nothing. “Do you feel that you’re physically able to attend a debriefing?”

“I feel fine, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Please report to Conference Room One promptly.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Shao out.”

Jim took a step back from the nurse’s station and shook his head. So much for going to wake up Bones.

“Are you sure you’re capable of attending a debriefing, Cadet?”

Jim turned to see Doctor Singh giving him a concerned look.

“Yeah... I mean, yes, sir. I’m fine.”

“You just look a bit pale.”

Jim shrugged. “I’m tired. I just... didn’t want to have to think about stuff. I just...” He shook his head. “I can’t believe they’re continuing the talks after everything that happened.”

“You’d be amazed at some of the things people work through out here. There’s always something... a battle, a political crisis, a natural disaster... but life continues on. It has to. Besides, I heard that the Araxians have petitioned for entry into the Federation... independently.”

“That’s... really good news,” Jim said, not holding back his surprise.
“I think it is,” she said with a smile. “A planet with a culture based on free will, academic dedication, and social equality? The Federation will likely welcome them with open arms. I might even move here when I retire.”

Jim let himself smile at the thought of this civilization joining the Federation. “Bones -- uh, McCoy likes them, too.” He let his shoulders relax. “So maybe the captain wants to know what I saw down there before they start the talks?”

“I have no idea what the captain wants to talk to you about, but if I were you, I wouldn’t keep him waiting.”

That was fair enough. Jim nodded, then tugged the hem of his uniform shirt to straighten it out. “Okay.”

**********

Jim arrived at Conference Room One with no idea what to expect. The door slid open, and Jim wasn’t surprised to see Captain Porter sitting next to Commander Shao, but it was the holovid screen that grabbed his attention.

“Captain Pike?”

Pike’s expression was exhausted and grim. “Good morning, Kirk,” came the tired reply, and Jim wondered if he’d gotten any sleep last night. “Don’t you think you ought to try greeting the actual ship’s captain first? You know... the guy sitting right in front of you who asked you to report?”

“I... uh...” Already off-balance, Jim turned slightly and snapped a salute as best he could. “Cadet Kirk reporting as ordered, captain.”

There might have been a hint of a smile as Porter returned the salute and gestured towards the chair across the conference table. “Have a seat, cadet.” He waited a moment for Jim to sit, and continued. “How are you feeling? I was told that you acquired a nasty injury yourself that you didn’t bother to report.”

Jim shrugged uneasily. “It’s fine, sir. They’ve fixed me up, good as new. And it wasn’t as important as getting help for Johan.” He flicked a glance sideways at the viewscreen, making brief eye contact with Pike. “Besides, I was still trying to figure out the situation, and I didn’t want to look weak.”

Pike raised an eyebrow, but Porter merely nodded. “Fair enough. And good tactics for a situation like that. I’m glad to see you on the mend. But now... it’s early, and I know you’re tired, but we should get to the reason I called this debriefing as soon as possible.”

Shao cleared her throat. “Cadet Kirk, first and foremost, I want to tell you that we consider your performance to be beyond reproach in this situation. In fact, we apologize for the circumstances that led to your concerns being ignored until it was almost too late. Still, we need to address the events down on the planet that led to your team being stranded, including the death of Lieutenant Finney.”
In an instant, the blood was rushing loudly in Jim’s ears, and his heart felt too heavy in his chest. This was inevitable. This discussion needed to happen. He had to make the report. He wasn’t ready for it, but the universe doesn’t wait for you to be ready before it drops a bomb on you. It merely grinds on, and all you can do is to react. So that’s what Jim would do.

But in his mind, all he could see was Finney’s blood all over the floor, feel the lifeless body underneath desperate hands, and hear those last orders ringing in his ears. He swallowed thickly, and blinked until he could focus on the room again. Then, feeling much older than he was, he leaned on the table and said, “Where do I begin?”

**********

It had been the last thing Jim had wanted to discuss. Sure, the Captain had also asked him about his tactical decisions, his observations of the Araxian people, and the things he’d noticed leading up to the battle, but they seemed to already know most of what he was telling them. He got the impression that they were simply asking him questions to confirm things they’d already learned. Mostly, the discussion had focused on Finney.

They had wanted to know what had happened, blow-by-blow, from the moment the power substation had detonated. Jim had recalled the events as best he could, but mostly, he saw Finney’s lifeless body on the floor of the storage building. He saw the blood on his hands. He heard the damning, awful words that had spilled from his mouth in front of Captain Porter, telling them all that the last thing Finney had done in his life was a massive mistake.

He’d told the bitter truth that Lieutenant Finney, the man who had died trying to protect them all, had seriously fucked up.

That wasn’t how he’d wanted to remember a friend and mentor. That wasn’t what he’d wanted to leave behind for Finney’s wife and young daughter. They’d get a copy of the report, and they’d see his name next to those horrible words. He could have lied... but he hadn’t.

And then, there had been Pike. He’d kept waiting for Pike to say something, but his advisor had barely said a word. There had been something in the man’s steady-but-exhausted gaze that Jim couldn’t quite decipher -- something that was passive and yet judgemental and apologetic and completely unbalanced.

He’d wanted Pike to just say something. He didn’t know what, but Pike had always been the one who had put everything right in the past. Instead, this time, Pike had been on the sidelines, and his advice had been wrong. In the end, the only thing he’d said before he’d had to excuse himself and close the comm-link had been enigmatic, “You did the best you could with a bad situation, and I’m sorry I couldn’t give you better advice. And... tell McCoy that he was right. And that I’m not going to write him up this time, but he’d better lock out his comm next time he’s on sedatives before he runs his mouth in front of the wrong officer.”

Jim had no idea what to make of that.

He also had no idea what to do next.

He stood outside the door to Conference Room One and stared at the people walking by. They were giving him odd looks. And why shouldn’t they? He was pretty sure he looked completely out of place - a cadet, standing in the hallway on Deck One, no going anywhere, looking lost? Yeah, he needed to get going... but where?

Bones would definitely be down in sickbay by now, but Jim didn’t want to go down there. There
would be people there... people he couldn’t face right now. He didn’t want to go back to his quarters, either. Liu would probably be in there, if not most of his squad. Shao had told him that the whole squad of cadets had been taken off-duty for the next twenty-four hours anyway. She’d suggested that he spend time with them, but he didn’t want to.

He didn’t want to see anyone.

Looking to his left, then his right, Jim’s gaze finally settled on the turbolift doors in front of him. Not really sure where exactly he was going, he stepped into the turbolift. “Deck twelve.”

**********
Chapter 23

The lights of sickbay were too bright, and Leonard’s head was throbbling as though he’d been on an all-night bender. He’d slept for almost ten hours, and it was almost two hours into alpha shift when he’d finally arrived in sickbay. His alarm hadn’t gone off, and when he’d questioned the computer as to why his alarm had been deactivated, it had politely informed him that Doctor Brex had used his medical override to turn off the alarm for him.

*Sneaky bastard.* At the same time, Leonard had to respect the trick. He’d probably use it in the future on patients and masochistic officers who needed to get more rest. But still, instead of making him feel rested, the extra sleep almost made him feel as though he had a hangover. The sedative had definitely knocked him out, but it wasn’t exactly the same as natural sleep. Still, it had been better than nothing, which is what he would have gotten without it.

Doctor Singh found him immediately when he arrived, catching him before he’d taken more than five steps into sickbay.

“McCoy, it’s good to see you up and about.”

As much as he didn’t feel like chatting, Singh didn’t deserve the sharp edge of his attitude. She, like everyone else on staff, was overworked and emotionally battered right now. “I’m fine,” he said in resignation. “Just sorry I’m late.”

“Why sorry? Brex ordered you to take a sedative and then he turned off your alarm.” She grinned. “He does things like that. And you probably needed it. Although it looks like you could use some more rest... or a headache pill.”

“Yeah, well... there are other things I need right now. Where’s Jim?”

At that, Singh frowned. “Actually, he was called to a debriefing with the captain just a little while ago. He’ll probably come back when he gets dismissed.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “Great, just what the kid needs right now - an interrogation with the captain. Was he actually discharged?”

“Oh yes. Before alpha shift. His chart is in the computer, if you want to check. He seemed fine when I saw him. He had just been waiting here for you until the captain ordered him to report.”

Leonard cast a sideways glance at the chrono on the wall. “When did he leave?”

“Maybe fifteen or twenty minutes ago.” She hesitated. “Are you sure you’re okay to start your shift?”

On one hand, Leonard was about as far from okay as he could be. On the other hand... the echoing sounds of weapons fire and explosions in his head were less sharp this morning, and he could almost ignore the faint whiffs of dust and smoke his nose was still telling him were there. He hadn’t been injured, he’d had a full night of sleep, and he’d seen no more death and damage than anyone else around him. There was a shift to work and patients who needed him,

Finally, he nodded. “Yeah. I’m no worse off than anyone else here. I’m ready to go.” Then he grimaced slightly in annoyance. “Although if I could get some coffee, that wouldn’t hurt. Had a cup before I came down, but I can’t find my canteen...”
A shiny metal cylinder suddenly appeared in front of him, and he wrapped his fingers around the familiar curve of his coffee canteen, and looked up in surprise to see Nurse Moretti with a grin on her face. “Walsh found this in the supply room last night after you left and told me to have it full of hot coffee when you got here. She guessed you left it here when you checked out a tricorder and med kit yesterday morning before you went on the landing party.”

Leonard flipped open the lid, closed his eyes, and inhaled the aroma of fresh, hot coffee wafting up from the canteen. “Give Walsh a promotion,” he moaned and took a sip.

Singh laughed lightly at him. “Instant human: just add caffeine. I’d hate to see what would happen if they tried to take you off the stuff.”


They both looked at him. Moretti blinked.

Leonard sighed. Jim and his stupid vintage movie quotes. “Never mind. Let’s get back to work.”

*********

Leonard threw himself into his work. After the first two patients, he stopped looking at the chrono and glancing at the door for Jim to come back. He couldn’t use the comm if Jim was in a briefing, so he had to wait. Besides, Jim was fine, and there were patients here in front of him who weren’t.

He checked in on Crewman Johan, who was recovering well, much to his satisfaction. He mentioned chatting with Jim, but he didn’t give any details other than to say that he’d seen the kid, and Jim was looking pretty good.

The Tellarite Ambassador was there, recovering from a minor injury from flying debris and a few broken bones. He seemed to be in good spirits, and tried to challenge Leonard to a debate. Leonard said he’d send Jim around if he could.

Cadet Liu stopped in for a follow-up, and Leonard was pleased to see that his emergency handiwork was clean and tidy, and Liu wouldn’t have any permanent muscle damage and barely any scarring on his leg. He would only need to use a crutch for another 24 hours, but that was it. And, of course, Liu asked after Jim. While Leonard ran a regen session and some nerve function tests, Liu gave him play-by-play details of what Jim had done until the moment Liu had arrived in sickbay.

By the time Leonard finally escorted Liu to the door with instructions for therapeutic stretches and follow-up care, his brain was spinning again. It all kept coming back to Jim, and goddammit, Leonard needed to stop thinking about the kid until Porter released him from the debriefing.

He pulled up the full patient roster in sickbay, and was about to check on the security guard with chest wound when Doctor Singh interrupted him.

“How are you holding up?”

Leonard shrugged. “As well as could be expected.”

“Glad to hear it.” She took a quick look at the chrono. “Everything seems under control for the moment. I just finished the second round of repair work on Thompson’s knee, and I need to go grab something to eat. Do you think you’d be able to cover for a little while?”
“Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Want anything from the mess hall?”

“Nah,” Leonard said with a casual shake of his head. He really didn’t have much of an appetite.

She gave him a sly smile. “I’ll bring you a sandwich.” And she hurried out the door before he could protest.

Grumbling to himself, Leonard started a quick round of all the patients. He didn’t want to start any major procedures without a backup doctor on hand in case something went critical on another patient, but when he got to the third bay, he stopped cold.

“Doctor McCoy,” the Kazarite Ambassador said, sounding hopeful. “I had wondered if you would return.”

Quickly, Leonard un-froze himself and set to work reviewing vitals and doing a routine scan. “I’m just here to check on you,” he said as neutrally as possible. “You’re scheduled for some more repair work on your left leg in a couple of hours. How are your pain levels?”

“My pain is negligible. But please, doctor...”

“I don’t want to talk to you,” Leonard snapped, unable to hold back. And why should he hold back? A powerful telepath like this already knew exactly how angry he was. It was bad enough that he’d taken it out on Pike last night (and the embarrassment over that outburst was still burning his ears) but this person was the real target of his fury. “I’m just here to take care of you. I’ll give you the best medical care, but that’s it.”

“The medical care has been exemplary. And I know you don’t want to talk to me,” the Kazarite said mildly, “but you want to hear what I have to say.”

“Do I now?” Leonard drawled sarcastically. “So go on... tell me what else I’m thinking.”

If the Ambassador was offended by the sarcasm, he didn’t show it. “You already know your own thoughts. I wish to share mine. I am Ambassador Hai’ksha, Doctor McCoy. Terrans seem to have difficulty with smooth pronunciation, so you may call me Sha.”

“Ambassador Sha,” Leonard acknowledged uneasily. Damn, he really didn’t want to have this conversation... but the Ambassador was right. He wanted to know just what the ever-blazing hell had been going through this guy’s thick skull. Even though blind anger was easier, Jim had said that Kazarites were peaceful, and this seemed like the last thing in which a member of his species would get involved. Yeah, Leonard wanted information. But... not now, dammit!

“I wish for you to understand this, McCoy. After your ordeal, you deserve to know. The Captain can not tell you, but I can. Also, the USS Intrepid is intercepting us tomorrow morning, and I shall be going with them.”

The message was clear. If he wanted the real story, straight from the horse’s mouth, this was his only chance. There were hundreds or thousands of reasons - all of them dead or injured - for Leonard to simply give him a succinct fuck you and walk away. However, this was the guy with answers. Besides, if he didn’t get this information, Jim would be pissed at him later.

Leonard shifted his weight and centered himself. Diplomacy had never been his strong suit, so he said the first thing that came to mind.
“How did you do it? No, forget that... how could you?”

The Ambassador actually flinched, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment before making tentative eye contact. “You and your friend actually figured out most of it. Everything you have considered - - your friend is a very clever man, and so are you.”

Leonard let that sink in. He and Jim had been right... but about what? “There was enough evidence that the command staff here should have been able to figure it out,” Leonard said cautiously. “Did you plant ideas in their heads? Did you stop the Captain from investigating?” If that was the case, then it was no wonder Porter had apologized.

Sha closed his eyes and his face twisted in an expression that Leonard took for remorse. “I did.”

Leonard clenched his teeth together for a moment, then forced himself to relax the muscles in his shoulders. He didn’t need to work himself up into a rage. Not yet, anyway. “Doctor Brex told me that telepaths couldn't do that.”

“Betazoids can’t,” Sha explained. “But you are aware that some species of humanoids can see ultraviolet and infrared light, and some produce sound outside your range of hearing? Kazarites' telepathy works outside the range of Betazoids'.”

Leonard nodded, trying to accept this, while keeping a lid on his anger. “So... you’re some sort of super-telepath... which means you had to have known what the Axanar were planning. So... goddammit, why?” He forced himself to take a calming breath. “While I was on the planet... Jim said that he didn’t think you wanted to do this. He said that Kazarites hate violence, and that you had to have been tricked or manipulated or something. But I admit, I’m having a hard time buying into that. I don’t see how you can trick a telepath. So... yeah, tell me why. If your people are peaceful, and you’re not some violent aberration, then why the hell would you let something like this happen?”

“It is... more complicated than you understand, Doctor McCoy,” Sha said, hesitantly.

“Ain’t it always?” Leonard mumbled to himself. “So... this is what you want to tell me? I’m listening.”

Sha nodded. “Originally, I was a researcher. My family... all of them... died fifteen years ago. It was an earthquake, in a seismically stable area. Our house collapsed while I was away. I could have remained with distant relatives, but... I chose to leave Kazar. It was easier than remaining at home with the constant reminders of my losses. I was eventually sent to help rehabilitate the domesticated animal populations of Axanar after the Battle ten years ago. It was a noble and pure purpose. It helped to fill the void left by my family.” His face became wistful, and despite an appearance so very different from humans, the expression was easy to read. Leonard thought he looked shockingly young. Innocent. And wounded. “Their people were deeply linked with each other for lacking even rudimentary telepathy, and when they began to speak of their lost brethren on Araxis, I understood their sense of loss. It seemed overwhelming.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow. “You lived with them all that time... embedded in their society?” This changed the entire picture.

“Yes.” He closed and opened his eyes slowly. “It was a good home, amongst good people. I had a strong sense of purpose in my work, and a sense of community, despite being so far from home. In time, I was introduced by the Minister of Agriculture to other members of the House of Lords, and was eventually asked to become an Ambassador. I did not expect such a thing, but I felt a bond with these people who had nearly lost everything. Their love of kin was much like that of my
people. I know what it is like to lose those who are dearest to you, and I recognized this sort of pain. I sympathized with it, and wished to help.”

Leonard had wanted to stay furious at the Kazarite, but he felt his inclination towards anger begin to fade. Nodding, he took a step closer. “But the things they asked you to do... you had to have known they were wrong.”

“I did, and yet... I thought it was for the greater good.” He looked down at his hands, folded in his lap. “Such horrific things in history have been done under that guise. I should have seen it. The Axanar... I had not understood their intentions. I was naive and foolish.”

Leonard frowned. “Okay, but I still don’t understand -- how the hell didn’t you know what they had planned?”

Sha cringed slightly and looked downwards.

“Every telepathic species’ sense works differently. My people are extremely adept telepaths, but we lack a certain range of perception that others seem to achieve easily. There is a reason why we choose to work with animals and avoid politics, Doctor McCoy. We have almost no sense of deception.”

Leonard felt his mouth fall open and stared incredulously at the Kazarite. “You really couldn’t tell?”

Sha’s eyes closed and opened slowly before he looked back up at Leonard. “I knew their plans were complicated, but I didn’t truly understand until things were already in motion. I was told that I would only be monitoring the thoughts of the other party, and reporting to the Axanar if there was any problem with the new Araxian government, or if Federation representatives did not favor their plans. At most, I would gently sway opinions to ensure that the Axanar and Araxians would reunite.”

“But it didn’t work out that way.”

Sha’s face twisted in remorse. “When Doctor Brex detected my activity, I was instructed to stop him and intercept his communiques. It was reprehensible, but I had sworn my protection to the Axanar. I knew it would cause Doctor Brex no permanent damage. The captain and other senior officers would naturally be concerned for their crew member and suspicious of the circumstances, and I was to convince them that it was an unfortunate happenstance. I argued with my Axanar friends, but in the end, they insisted it was necessary to bring their people together again without interference. And I listened to them.”

Leonard was frowning in distaste, but he could see how such a thing would happen. “By the time you realized what they were asking of you, it was too late to back out.”

Sha nodded, then shook his head. “I could have backed out at any time, McCoy, but at what price? You see... not only had I grown close to these people, but the promise of protection is a serious oath on Axanar. I couldn’t merely back out of my obligation. I felt certain that their efforts to reunite their people would be fruitful, and that all of those involved would be joyful at their reunion once the process was complete. It was a narrative of pure fiction that I wove for myself; a fanciful child’s tale, and I made myself believe it. I was kept from the mainstream Araxian population, surrounded only by Axanar, and I did not hear the thoughts of the Araxians. And so... I allowed myself to be pulled into this plan, even after I knew what was happening... until the battle began.”

Sha’s voice broke for a moment, and Leonard found himself starting to reach for him, instinctively
wanting to comfort a patient in distress. He held himself back, though. He wasn’t ready for that.

After a moment, Sha seemed to pull himself together. “When I realized the depth of what was unfolding, I told the Axanar that I was going to inform Starfleet. It had gone too far, and I wished to stop it. That’s when the second explosion at Parliament brought the roof down on us. The Axanar minister I had served for nearly five years - my colleague and friend - was crushed to death beside me... and I am not sure whether to grieve or not.”

Leonard opened his mouth, but he had no idea what to say. He wasn’t even sure he was able to process this. Such a huge disaster, all resting on the naïve hope of a generous-hearted being that everything would work out. Leonard looked at him for a moment, feeling a profound sense of pity, and wondering what sort of guilt the Ambassador must be feeling. He couldn’t even begin to imagine it.

“You were going to blow their plan... “ But then he had another thought, and he felt his eyes go wide. “Ambassador Sha, were you supposed to mess with everyone’s perceptions?”

At that, Sha smiled. A pained, tense smile. “No. Only those who I was instructed to influence. The command crew. The security staff. Any Federation Ambassadors that became suspicious.” He closed his eyes for a moment then opened them again. “Any telepaths who might detect my activity or read the intentions of the Axanar. I also regret the headaches I caused the partial telepaths onboard.”

Leonard was nodding to himself, letting himself read into the Kazarite’s words. “So... not everyone. You knew that Jim and I suspected something was going on, didn't you?”

Sha's smile returned. “I did. But the Axanar do not consider those of low rank to be important, and I did not tell them about you. I had hoped... if things went too far... that there would be a way out.”

Leonard studied the Kazarite’s face. “But you couldn’t just tell someone?”

“We all wish to be brave, McCoy. We wish to do the right thing. But I? I am a coward. I left when my family died, even though my extended family begged me to stay. I hid in my work. And once I’d found a life in which to hide, I was afraid to lose it. How could I defy the Axanar? Protection is lauded by the their people. but if you fail once protection is promised? Such shame, McCoy. And I was part of their society for so long...” His voice trailed off.

Feeling unsteady on his feet, Leonard took a couple of awkward steps and leaned heavily against a supply cabinet. “We all learn lessons the hard way, don’t we?” he said roughly.

“We do,” came Sha’s soft reply. “But I am still alive, and can go home to my family once again... if they will have me. And so can you. But I will never be able to fix the evils that have been suffered due to my actions today. I would beg your forgiveness, McCoy.”

“I...” He looked back at the Kazarite’s pleading eyes. The last thing he could do was offer a false forgiveness here. “I don’t know if I can do that yet... because I haven’t even learned to forgive myself for the shit I’ve done. But... I can tell you that I understand.”

Sha nodded in gratitude. “That is more than I should hope to expect. Thank you, Doctor McCoy.”

“Yeah... you’re... uh... welcome.” He glanced down at the PADD in his hand and scrolled through Sha’s chart. “It says you folks don’t sleep much except when you’re injured, but that you’re pretty good at self-healing. So... we’ve got you scheduled for that repair work in a couple of hours. Try to get some sleep, and hit your call button if you need anything.”
Sha merely nodded again, and closed his eyes without another word. It was damned unnerving.

Leonard took a few steps backwards and all but stumbled out of the Kazarite’s treatment bay. His head was buzzing with everything he’d just heard. He’d wanted to stay angry... he’d needed someone to be angry at. But now, he had nothing except the vague specter of the Axanar, and that was so broad, so nameless... it just left him feeling empty.

And the knowledge that the Kazarite had hoped that he and Jim, of all people, would blow the plan? Maybe he should feel good about that, but he just felt used.

Empty and used.

And utterly alone.

“McCoy? Are you okay?”

Leonard blinked a few times and realized he was standing in the middle of sickbay, staring blankly past Doctor Singh, who was looking at him with unmasked concern. “I... yeah, sorry. Just had a bit of a chat with one of the patients.”

“The Kazarite, huh?”

“Gee, how’d you guess?”

“I didn’t,” she said plainly. “I just saw you walk out of his treatment bay. When we changed out shifts, Brex mentioned that the Ambassador had wanted to speak to you.”

“Something like that,” Leonard mumbled.

Singh blew out an exasperated breath and held out a small bag. “Well, I won’t pry, but in the meantime, whether or not he put you off your appetite, you’re running on fumes. I don’t have to scan you to see that. So have yourself a sandwich and take a break.”

He accepted the bag and sniffed it. The scent of toasted bread met his nose, and despite his complete lack of an appetite, he had to appreciate the offer. “Thank you. I’m not really hungry... but I didn’t eat much for breakfast, so maybe I’ll stop around noon for a bite.”

Singh frowned. “It’s already 1220 hours.”

“What?” Leonard turned his head towards the wall chrono so fast that his neck twinged, making his eyes water. He blinked a few times. Singh was right. It was well past lunchtime.

“McCoy... I ran into Ankewicz down in the mess hall. He went off-duty at midnight last night, and he’s had some rest now. He said he could come in earlier if we needed him. How about I call him in, and you go off-duty for a while, eat something, and come back when you’re feeling better.”

“I’m feeling fine,” Leonard grumbled.

“And I’m a Klingon diplomat.” She fixed him with an unwavering stare.

“Okay.” He crinkled the lunch bag in his hand. “I’ll be back in 30 minutes.”

“I hope not,” she said mildly. “Come back when you’re ready, and not a moment sooner.”

Leonard nodded stiffly and walked out of sickbay without a single look back. The thing that bothered him most is that she was right, and he really wasn’t okay. He’d seen and heard too much
in the past twenty-four hours, and the conversation with the Kazarite felt like the last straw. And for that matter, he still hadn’t talked to Jim.

Leonard stopped so suddenly in the middle of the hallway that he almost tripped.

It was after noon already, so there was no way Jim was still in the debriefing. He’d been ordered off-duty, so after the debriefing, they should have released him. He hadn’t come back to sickbay yet. Scowling, Leonard hurried over to the nearest computer terminal. “Computer... location of Cadet Kirk.”

“Cadet Kirk is in Cargo Bay Two.”

Leonard frowned. “A cargo bay? Who else is in there?”

“Cadet Kirk is the only person in Cargo Bay Two.”

“What the hell is he doing in there?” Leonard mused under his breath.

“The purpose of Cadet Kirk’s presence in Cargo Bay Two is unknown.”

“Shut up,” Leonard snapped off-handedly. He was already putting the pieces together. He knew Jim Kirk. Something must have been said in the debriefing, or Jim had heard or seen something that had been that little bit too much - something about straws and camels - and the kid had gone off to try to put his head back together. So after everything he’d gone through, Jim was alone. Leonard just wasn’t going to let him stay that way.

With a determined nod, Leonard hurried to the nearest turbolift and slipped inside. “Cargo Bay Two.”

*********

The instant he walked into the cargo bay, Leonard knew exactly why Jim had taken refuge there. The lights were subdued, and the only sound was the low thrum of the impulse engines keeping the ship in orbit. Silence and shadows. Peace and tranquility... or the only thing on this ship that came close. There was no reason for any of the crew to come to the cargo bay right now, so it was possibly the only place on the ship where Jim was guaranteed the solace he was probably seeking.

Somehow, Leonard guessed that Jim wouldn’t mind if he interrupted.

He was just about to call out when he heard Jim’s voice echo through the cavernous room.

“Up here, Bones.”

It took Leonard a moment of looking until he spotted a shadow on what looked like a platform or catwalk on the far wall. “Dammit, Jim,” he said softly, with more affection than malice.

“I’ll come down.”

“No,” Leonard said quickly. “I’ll be right up.”

“You hate heights.” Jim’s voice was both surprised and amused.

“I hate space, too, and look where I am. So sit your ass down and stay put.”

Leonard crossed the cargo bay and found the base of the ladder. Sure, he could let Jim climb down, but he was coming to find the kid, so he was going the whole way. He was still carrying the
sandwich bag, so he held the bag in his teeth as he grabbed the ladder and hauled himself up.

It was dark and shadowy on the platform, but he could see the amused look on Jim’s face clearly enough.

“Here... lemme get that for you, Bones.” Jim took the bag out of his mouth with one hand, and reached out another to finish pulling Leonard through the opening in the platform railing. “What’s in the bag?”

Leonard crawled away from the edge of the platform and leaned back against the wall with a tired groan, more for melodrama than anything. “It’s a sandwich. Doctor Singh brought it for me from the mess hall, but...” He shot Jim a look. “You eaten yet today?”

Jim shrugged. “My stomach still aches a bit. It’s not bad, but I’m not really hungry.” He shifted around and settled himself next to Leonard, leaning his back against the wall, bringing his knees up to rest his hands on them.

Leonard resisted the urge to start questioning Jim about his injury. He had so many other things he wanted to ask and tell and discuss. God damn it, it felt like there was a blockade in his brain, holding back everything he’d been meaning to say and wanting to ask, and if he let it out all at once, he’d get trampled in his own thoughts and bring Jim down with him. Instead, he took a deep breath and started with the easiest thing. “What have you been doing all day?”

Jim shrugged. “Just the debriefing. Then I came here. Kinda wish I’d gone to my quarters to get my PADD so I could read a bit, but it didn’t seem worth going back.”

“You didn’t come back to sickbay after the debriefing, either,” Leonard said neutrally.

“They said I was discharged, so I didn’t think I had to.” Jim was carefully looking everywhere but at him, but Leonard didn’t need that tell to know it was bullshit.

“I never said you had to. But Doctor Singh said you’d been waiting for me before they called you to the debriefing. She guessed you planned to come back.” He shifted so his body was turned more towards Jim. “So what happened in there?”

For the briefest instant, Leonard swore he saw Jim’s face clench with emotion before the kid painted over it with a slow shake of his head and a brittle laugh. “It was a debriefing. We talked about the shit that happened down on the surface. I’m sure you remember that it was a bit of a mess, so the briefing wasn’t exactly a round of campfire stories.”

“I didn’t expect that it would be. Mine wasn’t exactly a cakewalk.”

“Yeah,” Jim’s voice was dry and rough. “They asked me about Lieutenant Finney.”

“Wha... wait, Finney?” His eyes went a bit wider. “You were fresh out of sickbay and they interrogated you about the death of your commanding officer?”

“It’s okay.” Jim’s voice was softer now. “They needed to. It’s protocol. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, they need statements from everyone involved or witnessing the death of an officer or crewman within twenty-four hours.”

“I’ll show them a set of goddamned extenuating circumstances, those insensitive, bull-headed -”

“It’s fine, Bones. It’s done. I don’t have to do it later.” Jim looked as though he was about to keep talking, but he snapped his mouth shut and stared off into the shadows. Leonard wasn’t sure what
to say, so he waited. Finally, Jim spoke again, more quietly this time.

“I tried not to think about it while I was still on the surface,” Jim said, talking more to the shadows than to Leonard. “But... after Finney died, while we were waiting for rescue, I kept thinking... that he made the wrong call. That he put everyone at risk. He was injured, and he couldn’t have been thinking clearly, but no matter the reason, he made the wrong call. I just didn’t want to let myself think like that. He was my leader... and he’d just died in front of me. I couldn’t let myself blame him.”

Leonard wanted to say something, but what?

Jim’s eyes had focused at some point in the distance. It was the look he got when he was putting things together. “While I was down there, it didn’t matter if his order had been right or wrong. Just act, don’t think. We followed the order, and when it all went to hell, we just kept doing what we needed to do to survive. I was a cadet, following protocols. It took the weight off my shoulders, and that’s supposed to be reassuring. But Bones?” His eyes focused back on Leonard, sharp and clear, and shining just a little bit in the shadows of the cargo bay. “It wasn’t.”

“Wasn’t...what?”

“Reassuring. To just let someone else make the call when I knew it was wrong. That’s one of the things we learn to do when we’re subordinates - let someone else make the call, and we just execute the orders.” His hands suddenly clenched into fists on his knees. “I’ve always trusted my gut instinct, and distrusted anyone who ever told me to put that aside and listen to them. Maybe it’s because all the people I’ve ever met who had absolute authority either tried to beat the snot out of me, or tried to kill me flat out.”

Jim sucked in a sharp breath at the same time as Leonard felt the air go a bit scarce in his lungs. It was true - anyone with absolute authority of Jim in his youth had abused the position. It had taken two years of Academy training and working under competent leaders for Jim to begin trusting his superiors... and now this.

“And I knew I should have listened to myself,” Jim finally continued. “And so when they asked me about Finney’s orders in the debriefing... I told them exactly what had happened.”

Leonard let that sink in, and his eyebrows furrowed together. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do in a debriefing?”

Jim shrugged. “Yeah, but we always have choices in what we say. At the end of the day, I left a shadow on the record of a dead man. He was a good officer, and a good leader. He just made a mistake.”

“A mistake that could have gotten people killed if you hadn’t stepped up.”

“It got him killed. I just... hope they focus on the good things he did in his career instead of what I said.”

“Jim... you’re one of those people who will say what needs to be said, even if the truth is ugly. Some people can’t handle that. The report has the truth on it. The rest will sort itself out.”

“Yes,” Jim said, but he didn’t sound like he meant it. The both fell silent for a moment, and Jim looked away again. Finally, he said, “So how are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.” The words came automatically.
Jim snorted and shook his head. “You were pretty freaked out the last time I saw you. And Bones? You’re shaking, and I don’t think it’s the heights. So now that you’ve interrogated me, it’s your turn. Are you okay? What happened?”

Leonard tilted his head, not in concession, but because shrugging would take too much effort. “I got pulled into a debriefing right after we got back to the ship. After that, I came back to sickbay, but they had you out cold. Doctor Brex talked to me, and ordered me to take a sedative. I got enough sleep. Then I came back to sickbay this morning. You weren’t there, so I worked on patients all morning. Oh, and I talked to the Kazarite Ambassador. You were right about him. Pretty much about everything. The Axanar pressured him into it, he didn’t want to, and yeah, he manipulated the bridge crew. But anyway, I don’t really want to talk about it. And then I came up here to find you.”

Jim looked at him incredulously. “That’s all you’re going to say?”

“Shit, Jim, what do you want me to say! That’s what happened! You know everything else.”

“I want to know if you’re okay, you asshole.”

“Goddammit, Jim, I’m fine. See?” He held out his arms. “No gaping wounds, no panic attacks.”

Jim, jackass that he was, actually rolled his eyes in mock impatience, then let out a low sigh. “The captain told me a bit about your report after I finished mine. Not much, but enough that I could read between the lines.”

“What lines, kid? I watched people dying and dead for reasons that only make sense if you can accept the fact that the Axanar had started all that political horse shit in the first place. I saw a civilization push itself to the blood-spattered brink. And... goddammit, Jim, I saw you almost sacrifice yourself! Those aren’t lines, Jim!” He could feel his breath coming hot and tight in his chest, and he had to force himself to breathe more evenly.

Jim, however, was looking at him almost sadly. “That’s what I mean.” He sighed. “I almost went to find you and drag you off-duty, but I knew you’d come find me when you were ready.”

“Oh? How’d you know that, kid?”

Jim gave him an enigmatic smile. “Because I’ve known you for two years, and you always come to find me. But mostly...” His smile faded into seriousness. “I saw your face yesterday, right before I left the room in the storage building.”

In a flash, the image that Leonard had been trying to forget all day came rushing back to him. The look on his face... oh God, the look on his face...

Echoes of words shrouded in a drug-induced haze, and damn, had Leonard really said all that to a captain? Leonard pushed it out of his mind and tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry even for that. He let his jaw hang loosely, and tried to remember to breathe. “Jim, I...”

Jim stopped him by shaking his head. “Listen, I... damn, how do I say this?”

“In Standard would be easiest,” Bones said thinly. “But I’ve heard you speak about five other languages.”

Jim shot him an utterly bemused look. “Six. Asshole.” His expression sobered. “Listen... you saved my life once, but even before that... I’ve never had someone I could rely on like this, and when I
saw you sitting there, in that room, watching me leave...”

But Leonard cut him off. “Jim, the look on your face just about broke me. You looked like... goddammit, you looked like a man being frog-marched to his own funeral, and that you were okay with it!”

Jim grabbed his arm, and there was something desperate in his eyes. “I was okay with it! The only thing I wasn’t okay with... was the fact that you were looking at me like I’d already died.”

“Jim...”

But Jim was shaking his head slowly, sadly, and he let go of Leonard’s arm and sank back heavily against the wall. “I didn’t want you to stay. I didn’t want to go out there thinking that if I failed, you were going to die with the rest of them. But knowing why you were staying? God, Bones.” He leaned his head into his hands. “I almost changed my mind when I saw the way you were looking at me.”

Leonard swallowed against the painful dryness in his throat. “But you knew that it was the only chance those people had.”

“Yeah,” came Jim’s answer in a rough whisper. “I had to. But you didn’t.”

“Well, I’m kinda good at focusing on other people’s shit so I don’t have to think about my own.”

Jim snorted at him. “I don’t even think you were worried about yourself and the fact that you might have died down there. Actually, I’m sure you weren’t thinking about that at all. Hyper-focusing on me so you didn’t have to worry about yourself.”

“Well, I’m kinda good at focusing on other people’s shit so I don’t have to think about my own.”

Jim was quiet for a moment, then spoke softly. “Bones, you’ve spent the entire time wondering if I was okay, but nobody asked you, did they? Did anyone really check on you after all this?”

“Well, Doctor Brex did. But I can’t exactly wallow in my own bullshit when there are patients who need help.”

“Well, I’m glad Brex looked after you, but I’m not just talking about here and now. I mean ever.”

“I don’t see what that’s got to do with anything right now. I’m fine, and that’s not the point, Jim. You have to -”

“Bones.” Jim was looking at him, and his eyes went a bit wider. “Nobody ever asked you if you were okay.” It wasn’t a question. “You keep asking everyone else how they’re feeling, and you worry yourself sick over people... yeah, including me... but who ever looked after you? Who asked how you were feeling?”

Bones felt an uncomfortable twist in his gut. “Jim, it’s my job to ask how other people are feeling. I’m a doctor. It’s what I do.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you don’t need anyone to look after you.” He shook his head with an expression of disbelief. “Fuck, I’m an asshole. I should have stopped into sickbay anyway. You always look after everyone else, and I just expected you to come find me, but I should have found you this time. I’ll bet your ex didn’t ask you if you were okay when you were up to your eyeballs in dealing with everyone else’s problems. She didn’t ask if you were okay when you were staying up all night, every night, for months, trying to cure your father... did she?”
“That’s not what this is about...” But Leonard’s words lost their momentum on their own.

Jim nodded at him slowly. “You worried about walking away from people... that you didn’t put them first... but I don’t think anyone ever put you first either. You said you took them for granted, but they took you for granted.” He sounded like he was on the verge of saying something, and couldn’t quite tip over that edge.

“Jim?”

Jim squared his shoulders. “Bones... I know you don’t think sincerity is one of my strong suits, but... I have never taken you for granted. I just... I need you to know that.”

Leonard stared at Jim through the shadows in disbelief. He knew that, of course. Jim had said it dozens or hundreds of times without ever actually *saying* it. It’s how they were. It was that bizarre sort of friendship that was completely reliable and you knew it would always be there, but you couldn’t put it aside or let it sit idly. Or maybe that was just the way Jim was. Because, even though the kid might be a certifiable asshole sometimes, there was something so unique about him that on the rare occasion when Leonard let himself think about it, it was enough to make his head spin.

Slowly, feeling detached from his body at the same time as he’d never felt more completely in-the-present, Leonard reached out and grasped Jim’s forearm. “Me too, Jim. I... goddammit.” In one rapid movement, before he could talk himself out of it like the emotionally stunted cynical old man that he pretended to be, he pulled Jim into a fierce hug. He held fast and tight, refusing to feel awkward, and squeezing Jim as though anything less of a grip would let the kid be swept away by squads of militants and explosions and weapons fire and all Leonard would have left would be the dead husk of a body that had once been his best friend.

And Jim held him. “I know, Bones. I know.”

After a moment - seconds or minutes, Leonard wasn’t quite sure - they broke apart at the same time. In silence, they sat back against the wall, shoulder pressing against shoulder, watching the shadows and listening to the hum of the impulse engines.

Whatever else had happened, whatever hell they’d gone through, and however much of a jackass Jim Kirk would always be, it was okay. Somehow, for that moment, things were okay. Maybe later, Leonard would break down, but for now, he was fine. He really was.

Then Jim cleared his throat. “Uh... Bones? By the way... what the hell did you say to Captain Pike?”

Leonard inhaled so fast he almost choked on the air in his lungs. He hadn’t thought about it all day... he’d almost forgotten... in fact, he *had* forgotten most of what he’d said to Pike. He remembered being pretty damned pissed, and blaming the guy for not doing something to stop the disaster from unravelling. He’d been upset and furious and sad and... dizzy...

“Seriously, what the hell did you say to Pike?”

Leonard snorted with delirious amusement. Whatever he’d said, he knew that he’d mouthed off to one of the most powerful people at the Academy, and probably the most influential captain in the ‘fleet. He’d been drugged and messed up and... he was laughing now. Shaking with inappropriate mirth. “Gave him a piece of my damn mind,” he choked out between wheezy laughs. “Don’t much remember what I said... I was kinda drugged to the gills at the time - sedative and all - but... oh shit. Oh *shit.*”
He wiped his arm roughly across his face, scrubbing away the half-assed tears that were leaking from his eyes and forcing him to mentally sober up. “I’m sorry.... sorry, Jim. I just... I’d almost forgotten about it. And no, I don’t remember much of what I said.”

Jim was looking at him warily, as if expecting him to go crazy at any moment. “Well, whatever you said, Bones... it must have made an impact.”

Leonard’s emotional sobriety came back full-force. “Wait, when did you talk to him?”

“He commed in to my debriefing,” Jim said plainly, as though it was obvious. “When the hell did you talk to him? Because there’s no way you were drugged on a sedative and going off on the captain at an official debriefing... did you?”

Leonard raised an eyebrow, considering the possibility. “You know, I could see it happening. But no, kid. He commed me in my quarters last night. I was already in bed when the comm alert sounded.” He tilted his head. “And... uh... I’m kinda lucky I’m not in the brig right now, because insubordination doesn’t even begin to describe it. I... uh... kinda blamed him for the whole mess... for not listening to you and investigating more from his end.”

Jim nodded as though he’d been expecting that. “You and I are really good at spending our brownie points as fast as we earn them.”

Leonard snored. “You can say that again.” He gave Jim a curious look. “What did he say to you?”

Jim’s mouth quirked, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Something about not being able to leave me alone for a minute, and how I need to stop ending up in the infirmary before I give you an aneurysm.”

“Jim...”

But Jim shook his head. “He didn’t say much, actually. He was on the comm link during the entire debriefing, but he just listened the whole time. Asked a couple of questions, but... he kept looking at me, and I’ve never seen that look on him. And as we were wrapping up, he said that he was sorry he hadn’t given me better advice... and that I did the best I could under the circumstances.”

“Well, that’s not exactly helpful,” Leonard said, frowning. “And that was it?”

Jim shrugged. “Pretty much, yeah.” Then he smirked. “He also said that you were right, and he’s not writing you up this time, but you’d better learn to control yourself or not accept comm calls when you’re on sedatives.”

“Yeah, I’ll remember that,” Leonard said dryly.

“Hey, we’re both still cadets. We get some leeway for our youth and inexperience.” He was still smirking, but then the smirk faded. “I have no way to know if there will ever be another reason for Pike, or anyone, to go out on a limb and trust me until I get some real experience and rank.”

“And what the hell was the last twenty-four hours? Hell, if that’s not real experience, I’m going AWOL before Starfleet gets me killed in some new and exciting way.”

Jim actually laughed lightly. “Disease and danger, right, Bones?”

“Something like that, kid.”

Jim nodded, and was silent for another moment. “You know... maybe I really should try to stay out
of trouble for a while.”

“You? Stay out of trouble? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Jim gave a silent chuckle, then shook his head. “It’s not just that. It’s... I want them to trust me. I thought I wanted that before, but... after Finney died, everyone who was left... they all looked at me and asked me what to do next. They trusted me, Bones. And God, I want to be worthy of that sort of trust. I want to give Pike a reason to believe he made the right decision in giving me a chance. Well... more than one chance, really.”

The sudden weight of the conversation hit Leonard out of nowhere. “Jim...”

But Jim kept pushing forward. “When Pike recruited me, he told me that I’m my father’s son, and maybe I am. I did finally figure out what my father was thinking when he set the collision course. And maybe I succeeded where I’d convinced myself that he’d failed, but I think that was the wrong question in the first place.”

Leonard’s heartbeat was feeling a bit too heavy in his chest. “What’s the right question?”

Jim gave him a bittersweet smile. “Did I do it for the right reasons?”

“And did you?”

For a moment, Jim said nothing, but then he stood. Confused, Leonard scrambled to stand after him, and for the first time, noticed that they had been sitting beneath a viewport the entire time.

From the steep angle below, it had been seemed like nothing but a black panel. As he stood, however, a bright curve filled the bottom of the view - a wash of green, blue, and golden brown. Araxis.

Jim was leaning on the ledge at the bottom of the viewport, looking for all the world like a little boy leaning on a window sill. It was a startling image, in stark contrast to everything Leonard had seen yesterday. The ledge was wide enough for two, so Leonard stepped forward and leaned down on the ledge himself, looking out over the breathtaking view of the planet. He waited in silence until Jim finally spoke.

“They’re alive down there,” Jim said softly, staring out the viewport at the planet below. “Maybe not everyone, but as many as we could have saved. And Johan made it back alive. We made it back alive.” He turned his head so he was looking at Leonard. His face was lit in eerie relief by the blue-green light of the planet shining through the viewport. “I think I did it for the right reasons.”

Leonard licked his own dry lips and nodded. “I think you did, too.”


Leonard frowned. “Why the hell would you ask me that now, kid? I’m here, ain’t I?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

As Jim kept looking at him, and Araxis turned serenely beneath them, Leonard felt his stomach spin just a bit itself. Not once during the entire crisis had Leonard wished he hadn’t signed up. He hadn’t lamented his decision or wished he’d taken a dirtside internship. It had been hell, but he didn’t regret a moment of it. And now, looking at Jim’s face, which bore a remarkable echo of the expression he’d worn before leaving the room where they’d been held hostage, Leonard knew that he couldn’t wish he’d been anywhere else.
“Yeah, Jim... I can handle it.”

Jim was smiling back at him, with no trace of irony. “I knew that. I just wanted to make sure you did.”


The smile turned mischievous. “You betcha.” Then he sobered again. “No regrets?”

Leonard glanced out the window, then back at Jim. “There are always regrets, kid. Part of the human condition, as far as I can see. But this?” He looked around at the cavernous shadows of the cargo bay, then again out through the viewport. “I don’t regret this, Jim. Not at all.”

Jim nodded slowly. “Good.” He settled himself against the viewport frame again. The glow from the planet outlined his face, and Leonard’s breath caught. There was something so pure and honest about the image... so striking about the look of hope and and excitement and anticipation on the face of a person who had seen so many horrors... it made Leonard want to believe that no matter how bad things got, there was always something beautiful to see, something to hope for, something worth saving.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Leonard re-settled himself against the viewport, too. His arm pressed against Jim’s arm - something warm and solid in a world of cold uncertainty. He smiled. “I’m exactly where I need to be.”

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Leonard felt the slight change in the vibration of the ship’s deck plates as the USS Athena dropped out of warp. He paused out of instinct, glanced at the chrono on the wall, then went back to folding his few belongings into his duffel.

In 30 minutes, they would make their rendezvous with the Federation transport ship Sutter, where the cadets would transfer ships and make the three-day journey back to Earth. Their internship was over. In just over a week, the fall semester would be starting. There’d be a new wave of fresh-faced cadets. The tedium of lecture halls, labs, training simulations, and fitness routines. Clinical duty at Starfleet Medical. Back to normal.

Normal.

Leonard shoved a folded t-shirt into his bag much more violently than necessary, scowling to himself. There was no such thing as normal anymore, and the fact that he was still pretending he knew anything about normalcy was ridiculous.

So much had happened. So much had changed. In the middle of everything, the idea of space exploration and Starfleet’s mission had gone from a gloriously abstract concept in an academy professor’s lecture to cold, hard reality. On a superficial level, in the immediate calm following the storm, the peace he’d made with it had turned out to be more of a temporary truce to keep himself together. He was still trying to process what had happened, and truth be told, he wasn’t altogether sure what he thought of it.

He was about to zip his duffel shut when his door chimed. He frowned; he wasn’t expecting anyone, and Jim had said he’d meet him down in the shuttle bay. “Enter.”

A familiar head of brown hair and a warm smile greeted him. "You weren’t going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?" Doctor Brex asked.

Leonard relaxed and leaned against the wall next to his bunk. "I thought the surprise not-going-away party you sprang on me yesterday was enough," he replied lightly.

Brex chuckled. "I had nothing to do with that, actually."

"Walsh, right?" Leonard said, picking up another shirt and folded it. "She’s a damned good nurse to have around."

"She definitely is." Brex walked in and sank down onto the bunk across from Leonard’s, crossing his right ankle across his left knee casually. "Just to let you know... when you’re CMO of your own medical bay on a starship - and yes, Leonard, you will be - if you’re lucky, you’ll have a head nurse who will know what you need before you know it yourself, and will be able to scare your captain into coming down for his physical with nothing but a cheerful reminder."

Leonard snorted in amusement, but In the back of his mind, he pictured Nurse Aldrich from his
rotations at Starfleet Medical’s ER and wondered if she’d be amenable to a shipboard position someday. “I’ve known a few nurses like that over the years.”

“Over the years?” Brex gave him a look. “Still trying to sound like an old man?”

“I am an old man,” he replied automatically.

“I’ve said this before. You’re not old, Leonard.”

His instinctive sarcastic retort died before it reached his lips. He’d meant to say that after the shit he’d been through, he’d aged three times as fast as another man his age. Instead, a different sensation worked its way through him... something that he hadn’t felt in years.

In the face of the horrors he’d witnessed, he felt overwhelmed and innocent, like a child who hadn’t been ready for the real world. It had been terrifying. He had gone in so naive, without the experience needed to deal with that sort of thing, and he’d been surrounded by people who had already been dealing with space exploration for years.

He looked at Brex’s face, and not for the first time, he reminded himself that Brex was much older than he looked by human standards. The man had seen a lot, and there he was, patiently listening to Leonard call himself old.

Brex was right. Leonard wasn’t old, and the realization that he couldn’t hide behind that lie anymore left him feeling uneasy and exposed. He had been a skilled surgeon on earth, young but respected in his field, and confident beyond what he had a right to be... but as a Starfleet officer, he was as green as a new colt. He was awkward and unseasoned and not nearly ready for this.

At the same time, a new sensation was dawning on him. He felt strangely exhilarated by the unknown, the challenge, the abyss of his future stretched out in front of him. The last time he’d felt like that, he’d been holding his acceptance letter to medical school, nervous and excited and terrified all at once. All of his studying and testing up to that point had seemed like such a daunting task that he’d overcome, and he’d expected relief that he’d achieved it... only to realize that he had only climbed the first step in his attempt to summit a mountain.

For years, Leonard had been looking back at his trail down the mountain behind him, feeling his age as he’d focused on where he’d been. Now, he was looking up again. He wasn’t sure what the sensation was, but it was leaving him unbalanced.

“Leonard? Are you okay?”

Leonard shook his head, trying to clear the image. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He grabbed his PADD and dropped it on top of his folded clothing, then zipped up the duffel. “Just thinking too much.”

Brex smiled. “You’ve done more than enough thinking over the past two months. Your thesis looks great, you’ve helped quite a few members of our crew make progress in dealing with their phobias, and you’ve proven yourself to be an excellent shipboard doctor.”

Ignoring the heat rising in his cheeks, Leonard shrugged. “Just doing my job.”

“Someday,” Brex said as he rose to his feet, “you’ll learn to accept a compliment as smoothly as you perform emergency surgery.”

“Well, we can’t all of us be perfect now, can we?” He slung his duffle bag over his shoulder. “For now, I’ll be happy if I can survive until graduation with all my limbs attached, and maybe see if I can help Jim accomplish the same.”
“With you around, he’s got a pretty good chance.” Brex inclined his head towards the door. “Walk you to the shuttle bay?”

Leonard smiled easily. “Why not?”

The hallways weren’t any more active than usual for 0845 hours. The rendezvous with the *Sutter* was routine for everyone except the cadets who would be heading back to Earth. Pick up a few supplies, drop off a few cadets, and continue with the mission. Life in the black would continue without Leonard McCoy - all the adventures and emergencies and excitement even if he wasn’t there to see it.

Yeah, maybe he didn’t feel as old as he’d thought.

“You’re thinking too hard again,” Brex said lightly as the turbolift dropped them off on Deck 14.

“Force of habit.” He sighed as he shifted the strap of his bag on his shoulder. “Once I get back to Earth, I’m gonna drag Jim to O’Leary’s Pub, and we’re going to drink too much and stop thinking for a few hours.”

“If that’s what you need to do to re-set yourself, then go for it, but don’t you have some real time off before the start of the next semester?”

“Yeah. We’ve got a couple of weeks before fall semester starts up.”

Brex nodded thoughtfully. “I’d really suggest getting away for a few days. Get out of the city. Take some quiet time.”

“And that’s supposed to help me stop thinking?”

Brex gave him a sideways glance. “Or maybe give you time to think about things the way you need to. You’ve been through a lot. I’m glad you took the time to talk to me about it, but it will take you a while to process it the way you need to. And besides... what were we talking about on the first day of your internship? Something about how the health of the mind is just as important as the health of the body, and that’s something a lot of Starfleet doctors tend to forget?”

Leonard raised an eyebrow and sighed with chagrin. “*Doctor, heal thyself.* Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” he said with a sly smile. “That’s why they made me a Commander.”

Leonard rolled his eyes as the shuttle bay doors opened in front of them. He pulled up short just inside the shuttle bay. Some of the cadets were already down there, but he didn’t see Jim. A hand rested gently on his shoulder, and he startled slightly to see Brex giving him a warm look.

“I know you’re going to go wherever they assign you, but with your credentials, you’ve got a say in it. The *Athena* is being refitted at the end of this tour as a research vessel. I’ve been offered the CMO position aboard the *USS Farragut* once they finish the refit on her next spring, and I’m thinking about taking it. She’s a Constitution Class ship, and there will probably be some exciting times. That will be right around the time you graduate, if I’m not mistaken.”

Leonard opened his mouth to reply, and realized he had no idea what to say. “I... thank you, but I have no idea where I want to serve. I hadn’t really thought about it actually. I kinda figure... I...”

His voice trailed off.

Brex nodded in understanding. “You kinda figured you’d request to go wherever Kirk goes.”
Leonard nodded, feeling a bit sheepish.

“Well, honestly... I think that sounds like a good plan. He needs you as much as you need him, and if this internship of yours was any indication, the two of you are going to do some interesting things in your careers.”

A warm flush that Leonard couldn’t quite define crept up his neck and threatened to overtake his ears and cheeks. “We’ll probably just find new and interesting ways to get ourselves killed.”

Brex laughed. “You are the proverbial ray of sunshine.”

Leonard couldn’t help but chuckle. “Glad to brighten your day.”

“You have, actually. You usually do.” Brex’s expression became absolutely sincere. He took a quick glance over at the group of cadets by the shuttlecraft before looking back at Leonard. “It’s been a pleasure serving with you, Doctor McCoy,” he said, holding out his hand.

Leonard accepted the handshake, warm and friendly. “Likewise, Doctor Brex.”

But Brex didn’t release his hand immediately. “And Leonard? It’s been a pleasure having you as a friend. I’m proud of you.”

“I...” Leonard blinked in surprise, and the automatic impulse to brush off the kind words almost broke through... but in a heartbeat, he pushed that impulse back down. Then he smiled. “Thank you.”

“Just being honest. Stay in touch after you graduate, and maybe consider a tour on the Farragut if you can drag Kirk along for the ride.”

“Will do. Thank you.”

With one last firm pump of the handshake, Brex released his hand, turned, and walked out of the shuttlebay. Leonard watched him go, shuddering with the same odd chill he’d felt far too many times in recent weeks when watching someone walk away. The mental image of Jim walking out the door on Araxis flickered through his mind.

Yeah, maybe he did need some time to process things.

He turned and looked at the rest of the cadets, talking amongst themselves next to the shuttlecraft. Like him, they were all back in their cadet reds. It seemed wrong, somehow.

He heard the hiss of the door behind him, and the cheerful greeting, “Bones!” a split second before a hand clapped him heavily on the shoulder. He startled sharply, his breath catching in his chest as Jim fell into stride behind him, grinning broadly at having surprised his best friend.

Again.

Leonard rolled his eyes. “Infant.”

“Come on, Bones... we’ve got three days to be cooped up on a transport ship. If I don’t start blowing off energy now, I might reach critical mass, implode, and form a rift in space-time, and that can’t be good for getting back to campus in time for the next semester.”

“Well, just implode in your own quarters, not mine.”

“Oh! Forgot to tell you - the transport ship bunks us two to a room, so I got us assigned to the same
quarters.”

Leonard looked up at the ceiling and sighed, hiding his impulse to grin at Jim’s usual meddling. “For the love of bourbon, please tell me you brought some study material.”

Jim grinned more broadly. “No assignments yet for next semester’s classes.”

“Reading material?”

“Porn.”

“Goddammit, Jim.”

Jim’s laughter echoed off the walls and ceiling of the shuttle bay.

*******

The shuttle from Starbase 1 to the Academy Shuttle Hangar was almost as spartan as the one they’d taken from the Riverside Shipyard two years ago. This one was designed for space flight, not just high atmosphere transport, so it was a bit more substantial, but not by much. Still, when Jim looked over at Bones, he was pleased to see that the guy didn’t look the slightest bit anxious.

Well... he didn’t look as though he was uneasy about the flight. He did, on the other hand, look preoccupied. He was staring out the viewport, but he didn’t seem to be looking at the familiar planet spinning below them, or at anything else in particular.

“Bones?”

Bones didn’t respond. He didn’t even blink.

Jim frowned. His best friend had been unusually quiet during their three days on the transport ship. Jim had given him plenty of openings for conversation, but Bones hadn’t taken any of them. He’d been like that during the last couple of weeks on the Athena, but with Earth in front of them and their internship now behind them, the silence was too much. “Hey, Bones?” This time, he nudged the guy with his elbow for good measure.

“Huh?” Bones startled and turned towards Jim, his eyes coming into focus from somewhere far away. “What?”

Jim shook his head in frustration. “Come on, man... what’s eating you?”

“Just... just stuff, Jim.”

Jim gave him a look. “And you think I’m going to take that for an answer?”

When Bones didn’t reply, Jim sighed and turned slightly in his seat to face Bones more straight on. “Listen, I know we both went through a lot over the past couple of months, but you talked more in the days right after Araxis than you did in the last couple of weeks. I know you, Bones. Something’s up. So stop stewing in your own brain juices and just tell me what’s going on.”

Bones lips twisted into an unreadable expression. “Brain juices, Jim?”

“Yeah, I know, I’m weird. But spill it.”

For a long moment, Bones was quiet. Then, in a small voice, without looking at Jim, he said, “I got in touch with Jocelyn a week after the battle.”
Jim felt his eyes go wide. “You never told me. What did you say to her? What did she say?”

“Well... she had heard about what happened on Araxis through the Federation News Network, and I told her in the first message that I had been there.” He took an unsteady breath. “Apparently, she didn’t really believe me at first, but when she looked into it, she found out that I’d been in the middle of the whole mess... so she replied. And we talked.”

Jim let out a low whistle. “What did you talk about?”

Another long, silent moment passed. “About acting like adults because life is too short and fragile to be petty when our daughter deserves better than that. We remembered that we were friends once, and while some bridges can’t be mended, we can be civil.”

Jim nodded slowly. “Then... that’s pretty good, right? I mean, if you two are talking... that means you’ll get to see Joanna again, and maybe spend more time with her... what?”

Bones’ expression became pinched and strained. “That’s just it - she stopped replying two weeks ago when I asked her if I could spend some of my time with Joanna before the start of the semester.”

“Oh.” Bones’ mood was making more sense now. “Hey, maybe she was just busy, right? I mean, you said she was always doing social bullshit and getting wrapped up in events and stuff, right?”

“Yeah,” Bones replied, his voice flat. “Maybe.” He looked back out the window and fell silent again.

Jim was trying to figure out what to say to reassure the guy, but nothing was coming to mind. Just a few short weeks ago, they’d come within minutes - or maybe seconds - of being vaporized. Now, with Bones having been given a second chance, it probably felt like that chance was being taken away again, and Jim had no idea what to say to that.

“Hey Jim?” Bones’ voice finally cut the silence, although he didn’t turn away from the window. “What are you doing until the start of the next semester?”

Jim frowned. “Well... I didn’t really have any set plans. Maybe schedule some group sim time with my flight squad once they all get back to campus next week. Do some extra physical training. Maybe I’ll even sleep in a couple of times. Why?”

“Remember that idea we had last summer... about getting out of the city, renting a cabin up in the Sierra Nevadas, and just having some quiet time away from everyone else?”

“Yeah,” Jim said feeling a flash of regret. “And then I got selected as a flight team candidate and had to stay for training and evaluations. I’m sorry about that, Bones. I wanted to do it.” Then he grinned. “Want to go for it now?”

Bones finally turned away from the viewport, giving Jim a tentative smile in return. “I was considering it. Wanted to see what your plans were first.”

“I think I have plans to sit around a campfire, drink beer, go fishing, and maybe do some rock climbing.”

Bones smile turned into a critical scowl. “Rock climbing, Jim? I was planning this to be relaxing.”

“Climbing is relaxing!”
The eyebrow crept up towards Bones’ hairline. “Maybe for you, but I’m just picturing myself on the ground, trying not to have a hypertensive stroke watching you risk your damned neck for a thrill. Why the hell would anyone want to climb a mountain?”

“Because it’s there,” Jim said simply. Then, at the sudden shift in Bones’ expression, Jim nodded, and pointed towards the window. “Same reason we go into space, Bones. Because it’s there. That’s who we are.”

For a long moment, Bones looked at him, then sighed. “You’re right, kid.” Then he looked out the window again. “I’ll have to pack some anti-anxiety meds, but yeah, I think you’re right.”

Jim chuckled, and he could see Bones smiling in the reflection in the shuttle viewport.

The fell into silence again, but the silence wasn’t heavy or oppressive. They watched the view outside the window turn lighter as the vacuum of space retreated behind them. In only a few minutes, the curved horizon of the Earth became flat, and vague landscapes began to resolve into a familiar city. The Golden Gate Bridge cut through light puffs of fog, bright red in the sunlight.

“Home, sweet home,” Bones mumbled to himself.

“Mmm-hmm,” Jim replied softly.

The shuttle banked to the left, and Jim watched over Bones’ shoulder as they made their final approach. Then he frowned. “There’s a crowd outside the hangar.”

“Yeah, there is,” Bones said in confused agreement.

“And... they’re assembling,” Jim said in surprise. “There’s a stage. Holy shit, Bones... they didn’t tell us.”

“Of course they didn’t tell us.” His words were laced with annoyance. “That’s why they call crap like this a surprise.”

“I’m surprised.”

Bones looked back at him with a strange expression on his face. “You shouldn’t be, Jim. After what you did -”

But Jim found himself shaking his head. “I just did my duty.”

Bones let out a soft sigh. “Yeah, you did, Jim. And the thing of it is... that’s more than most people ever do.”

“You did it, too.”

There was a soft clank as the shuttlecraft touched down on the plascrete floor of the shuttle hangar.

Bones looked back at him, his mouth hanging slightly open. For a moment, Jim thought he was going to protest, but then his eyes closed for a second. When they opened, he was smiling softly. “Thanks, kid. Come on... let’s go see what all the fuss is about.”

They went to the back of the compartment to get their duffels, talking quietly to the other cadets in the shuttle, who seemed just as surprised as they were.

“Any chance we can just slip out the back?” Liu said uneasily as he swung his bag out of the storage compartment. As confident as he was about his duties, he hated being in front of people.
Buhari gave him an amused look. “You can take a bullet, but you’re camera shy?”

“We all have our issues,” Liu replied in an undertone.

“All I want is to go hide in my dorm room until the start of the semester,” Nadeau chimed in. “I’m just glad we’re all alive.”

“We’re not all alive,” Wilcox said flatly.

Everyone in the shuttle’s passenger compartment froze. They looked at each other, nobody daring to break the silence first. Hererra’s death had been mourned aboard the ship, but after that, none of the cadets had talked about it much. It was too raw, and hit too close to home. Jim knew that Bones had been talking to Doctor Brex about it a little bit, but mostly, they’d remained silent.

To Jim’s surprise, it was Bones who broke the standstill. “I’ve lost patients plenty of times before,” he said roughly, “but I’ve never seen someone killed in front of me. Not like that. Still... we’re Starfleet now. We’re not going to hide from what happened, just like we’re not going to hide from the crowd out there.” Then he turned to Jim, who had, in many ways, remained the effective leader of the cadets even after they’d recovered from the events on Araxis. “Isn’t that right, Kirk?”

Bones held eye contact until Jim was compelled to nod. “Yeah.” Then he looked at everyone else in the shuttle. “That’s right.”

When everyone had nodded and murmured their agreement, Jim stepped forward and triggered the hatch release. “Come on, guys. Let’s go.”

*********

It wasn’t a long ceremony. There was a crowd, but it wasn’t too big. Captain Pike was officiating.

To Jim, it was all a blur.

There was a moment of silence for Hererra, and an announcement of the official memorial service to be held at the start of the semester. Pike gave a brief recap of the events on Araxis. Then there was applause as Jim, Buhari, Liu, and Wilcox received commendations for being wounded in the line of duty. Bones was given some sort of special recognition for valor in the line of duty as a medical professional. Jim didn’t even catch the name of the award, but he was impressed by how gracious Bones was when he accepted it.

And suddenly, Pike was standing in front of him again with a box.

“Sir?”

“This is a joint award from Starfleet and the people of both Axanar and Araxis.” Pike’s voice echoed over the loudspeakers from the tiny microphone clipped to his collar, but his eyes were on Jim, and his smile was warm. “Both planets bear a plant that resembles a Terran palm tree. It has long been a symbol of selflessness and service on their planets, and represents those who are held in the highest honor by both the Axanar and Araxians. On Earth, it symbolizes victory and triumph. Therefore, for exceptional valor and selfless service which was instrumental in the successful resolution of the events on Araxis, I am proud to present you with the Palm Leaf of Axanar Peace Mission.”

Pike opened the box, revealing a medal with an unusual design - a silver-toned ribbon, from which hung a silver palm leaf cluster encrusted with a single opal.
This was too weird. Jim stared at it, feeling oddly separate from his own body. He was on a stage, in front of a few hundred people, being presented with an award that hadn’t existed until just now, and he didn’t know what to say.

Then there was an elbow against his arm, and the familiar sound of Bones clearing his throat.

Heat rose in Jim’s cheeks, and he pulled himself together. “I... thank you, sir.” His voice didn’t even sound like his own in his ears.

Still, Captain Pike just gave a gentle smile as he lifted the medal out of the box and pinned it to the front of Jim’s uniform. Then, he stepped back to the podium, said a few more words, and the crowd applauded enthusiastically.

Jim knew he should feel proud. He should feel thrilled, really. A prestigious award, interplanetary recognition for his part in such a momentous event, and the trust of his peers were raining down on him... but all he could think about were the things that had gone wrong. In fact, those had been the biggest things stewing in his mind ever since he’d woken up in sickbay the morning after the battle. Now, those thoughts were reaching a crescendo in his head, and he couldn’t ignore them.

Why the hell was he being rewarded when so much had gone wrong?

Even as they were waved off the stage and down a set of stairs, Jim could barely think past the dizzying sense of failure that was wrapping everything in a fog.

“Hey, Jim, are you okay?”

“Yeah, Bones,” he replied automatically. “I’m just... thinking.”

“You’re thinking, and you’re shaking. After what you said to me earlier, do you think I’m going to let you get away with giving me that for an answer?”

Jim turned to face his friend. “No... but not here, okay? Maybe over a beer later. I think we’re overdue for a beer night.”

Bones looked at him with understanding and sympathy in his eyes. “Yeah, I think we are.” He took a quick glance back at the pile of bags the cadets had left just inside the hangar, then looked back at Jim. “Yeah, we’re way overdue. How about we grab our bags, drop them off at our rooms, change into civvies, and... and...” His voice trailed off.

“Bones?”

But Bones wasn’t looking at Jim anymore. He was staring over Jim’s shoulder with rapidly widening eyes, and his mouth was hanging open in an expression of disbelief.

With a sudden suspicion, Jim turned around to see a woman standing there. Brown hair done up in a loose braid, brown eyes, wearing a full-length summer dress, and she was distantly familiar. Jim looked back at Bones, who finally spoke, bringing the brief mystery to a close with one word.

“Jocelyn.”

“Leonard,” she replied evenly. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer your last few messages, but Captain Pike told me about this little welcome home ceremony, and... well... I wanted to surprise you.”

Bones’ eyes were still wide, and he looked as though he was afraid to move, for fear that it would either explode or disappear. “I’m surprised. I’m damned surprised.”
Jocelyn’s expression soured briefly. “Now, Leonard... you know better than to cuss in front of a child.” And before anyone could ask what she meant, Jocelyn stepped to the side, revealing a short figure that rapidly ducked behind her skirt again. “Come on, Jo. You said you were excited to see him. I think he’d like to see you, too.”

“Joanna?” Bones breathed.

Brown hair and freckles peeked out from behind Jocelyn’s skirt. Hazel eyes blinked, looking so much like Bones’ eyes that it was startling. Three years old? Four? Jim couldn’t remember, but she wasn’t very old. Bones had been in contact with his daughter by commlink for a while, but Jim knew he hadn’t seen her in person since the divorce. That would be a long time for a kid that age. It was no wonder she was being shy.

“Go on, Jo,” Jocelyn said softly. “You talked to him just a couple of weeks ago.”

Slowly, Bones sank down to one knee, putting himself essentially at eye level with his daughter. It was as though he couldn’t see anything else in the universe. “Jo-Jo? Hey, it’s me. I’ve missed you, baby girl. Did you get the doll I sent for your birthday?”

Joanna nodded, and in a small, hesitant voice, she said, “I really like her. She looks like me. Like a little sister. I named her Jenny.”

“That’s a good name,” Bones said carefully but warmly. “I wish I could have brought it to you myself, but I was still in space.”

“I know.”

“Did you have fun taking the shuttle here?”

The little girl shrugged. “I got to read stories on the way here, but I don’t really like shuttles. They make noises.”

Bones sucked in a sharp breath, and Jim could see him shaking slightly. “Want to know a secret? I don’t like shuttles either.”

At that, Joanna took a full step out from behind Jocelyn. “You don’t like shuttles? But I thought you went into space on shuttles.”

Bones smiled, and... was that moisture on his cheeks? “I do go into space on shuttles even though I don’t like them. But I do it because I want to help people. There are a lot of people out there who need help. And then I took a shuttle back here so I could see you.”

Joanna hesitated for a second, then looked up at Jocelyn.

Jocelyn smiled at her and nodded. “Go ahead, sweetheart.”

Small feet pattered across the plascrete and Joanna threw her arms around Bones, and Bones was clinging to her as though his life depended on it. They were surrounded by a crowd of people, but they could have been anywhere, and Bones wouldn’t have noticed. There were definitely tears on his cheeks now, and he held Joanna and was saying something softly to her that wasn’t for anyone else to hear.

Jim felt something hot and intense well up in his own chest and eyes, and he had to blink a few times to hold it back. Then looked up at Jocelyn, who was giving him a curious look. Before she could say anything, he gave her a tight smile, a nod, and then... he walked away.
Sure, he and Bones had just been talking about going out for drinks, but not now. No, this was too important, and Jim wasn’t going to begrudge Bones the time he needed with his daughter, and he wasn’t going to interrupt. This was the moment for him to step aside.

Still, his breath was coming just a bit too fast as he walked over to where the cadets had dropped their duffel bags when they’d come off the shuttle. He reached for his bag from the pile, then stopped. Frowned. He counted, and realized that all of the other cadets’ bags were still there.

Curious, Jim looked up and scanned the crowd.

Liu was being hugged fiercely by a tiny woman, and was surrounded by a large group of Chinese people of various ages who could have been his extended family. Wilcox was standing with some of the cadets from her flight squad, but a middle-aged man had his arm around her shoulders, and Jim realized that the guy had the same facial features as she did - probably her father. Buhari was holding hands with another cadet, and based on body language, it was probably her boyfriend. Surrounding them, however, was a tight knot of people who were obviously family members. And finally, off to the side, Nadeau was getting thoroughly fussied-over by a woman who had to be his mother, speaking rapidly in French that Jim could hear all the way from there.

That was everyone. They all had their families there. Jim looked around for the folks from Nova Squadron, but then remembered that everyone on his team had assignments that summer, or were off-campus until next week. Nobody was there.

With a sigh, and trying not to let it get to him, Jim grabbed his duffel and slung it over his shoulder. When he turned around, however, he found himself face-to-face with Captain Pike.

“Captain Pike,” Jim greeted him formally. Other than that moment on stage, and the weekly reports, Jim hadn’t had any contact with Pike since before the debacle on Araxis. The reports were all written, not verbal, and Jim had simply reported what was going on. Pike had occasionally replied with a few questions, but really, they hadn’t spoken.

“At ease, Kirk,” Pike said gently. “In fact, here... let me take that.”

He reached for Jim’s bag, and Jim was too startled to do anything but hand it over.

“Sir?”

“You’ve had a long trip, and I’ve been stuck behind my desk all week,” he explained as he started walking, indicating for Jim to follow along. “Besides, you’ll probably never have a senior officer carry your bags again, so just go with it.”

Jim flushed. “Aye, sir.” Then, “Where are we going?”

“Just for an unofficial debriefing.” He gave Jim a sideways glance. “In other words, I owe you some time after everything that happened, and a simple commlink wouldn’t have been the same. So we’re going to grab some coffee and talk.”

“Okay... wait.” Jim stopped short and looked back at Bones. He was standing now, with Joanna in his arms, propped up on his hip, and he was smiling and crying and talking. Even Jocelyn had a pleasant expression on her face, and Joanna’s high-pitched laughter could be heard over the rest of the crowd. Jim was pretty sure he’d never seen Bones looking quite so happy, and he sighed. “Never mind. He’s got his hands full right now.”

“You’ve kept his hands full for a couple of years,” Pike said.
“I know. I shouldn’t... this is his time with his daughter. I’d be selfish if I got in the middle of that.”

“You’re not selfish. You two have been through a lot together.” Pike tipped his head towards the family reunion in-progress. “His ex contacted us about when he was returning and she explained why, and I decided to help her surprise him. Anyway, I figured he might be a bit busy with his daughter this afternoon. Seemed like a good time for us to talk.”

Jim looked up at Pike, and he suddenly realized that this was more than just an unofficial debriefing. While everyone else had their families there to greet them, Pike was making sure that he wasn’t alone.

He cleared his throat, which had gone a bit tight. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome;” came the soft reply. Pike started walking again, and Jim fell into step. “Your mother couldn’t be here, but she wanted to be. I sent her a vid of the ceremony. You might want to send her a comm tonight.”

“I will.”

They approached a ground car, and with a press of Pike’s thumbprint, the doors and trunk opened. He tossed the duffel bag in the trunk and indicated for Jim to get into the passenger seat. “Also, you should know that I got an interesting communiqué from a particular Tellarite ambassador, asking if we would assign you the Diplomatic Corps as his assistant when you graduate,” he said as he fastened his safety harness. “Care to explain?”

Jim stared at Pike in surprise until the captain cracked a grin. Jim laughed aloud as Pike pulled the car away from the parking area and toward the campus access road. As he did, Jim looked back at the area where cadets and family were still gathered, and he saw Bones.

Bones was still holding Joanna, but he was no longer talking and laughing. His eyes were fixed on the car as if he could see straight through the polarized windows at Jim, and his expression was confused and a bit lost.

Jim swallowed tightly, then said, “Wait, sir... I need to go do something.”

“I understand.” Pike’s voice was set in a tone of unending patience, and it made Jim feel as though he was standing on solid ground for the first time since he stepped off the shuttle. It was a good feeling.

Pike stopped the car, and Jim hopped out, then jogged back over to where Bones was standing, watching him intently.

“Just gonna leave without saying a word, Jim?”

“I wasn’t leaving. I mean... I was, but Pike wanted to talk to me, and... well... you were busy with your family. I figured you’d comm me later.”

Bones gave him an incredulous look, eyebrow raised ominously.

“What?”

“You’re right, Jim. I’m busy with family. And you can be such an idiot sometimes.” He looked at his daughter. “One moment, Jo.” Then he put her down, and without any warning, he grabbed Jim in a tight hug.
After a moment of surprise, Jim found himself returning the hug, patting Bones awkwardly on the back. When they finally broke apart, Bones was giving him that look again. “When I say I’m busy with family, I mean all of it.”

The obvious implication struck Jim, and he looked back and forth between Bones, Jocelyn, and Joanna, not quite sure what to say.

Then a small voice chimed in. “Are you two gonna kiss?”

With a burst of laughter, the tension was broken. Bones picked Joanna up again, tossing her into the air as she squealed, obviously having gotten over her shyness from before. Introductions were made, and Jim decided that while Jocelyn seemed pleasant enough, he couldn’t imagine Bones actually married to her. She seemed far too stuffy. Or maybe that was Bones before he’d met Jim Kirk.

Finally, Jim looked back over at the waiting car with Pike in it.

“Bones, I’ve actually got to go.”

Bones frowned. “Are you sure? I mean, you could come with us. I was going to take Jo to the beach, and then for ice cream in the Mission district.”

“I’m sure,” Jim replied with more certainty than he felt. “I really do need to talk to Pike. Besides, we see each other all the time. Half the time, you’re yelling at me to get out from underfoot. Go spend the afternoon with Joanna.” He looked at the young girl who looked eerily like Bones. “And you go have some ice cream for me.”

“I like mint chocolate chip ice cream.”

Jim smiled broadly. “Me too.” Then, to Bones, “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay, Jim,” came the uncertain reply.

With a wave, Jim jogged back to the car.

********

The coffee was steaming hot with just the right amount of cream in it, and Jim closed his eyes and held the cup under his nose for a long, indulgent moment. It was one scrap of familiarity and comfort in a world that seemed strange, unbalanced, and just plain wrong. Maybe, if he kept his eyes closed, it would all disappear.

It was a ridiculous thought, of course, and when he opened his eyes, Pike was still there, sitting across the small table from him.

They were tucked into one corner of the Warming Hut on the edge of the campus, out of the line of sight of anybody who might venture in. It didn’t really matter where they were sitting, though. This afternoon, the old cafe building was quiet and almost deserted. It was a warm enough day that most people would be spending the afternoon on the beach, in the Mission District, or up in the mountains if they could get away.

Jim looked out the window and imagined the mountains beyond the skyline of the city. He wouldn’t intrude on Bones’ time with Joanna, but maybe he and Bones would still have time to rent a cabin for a couple of days before the start of the semester. Once the idea of a camping trip had been planted in his head, it had taken root. He needed to escape. He needed a distraction. He
needed time to clear his head.

“Need to talk, son?”

*Yeah, that too.*

Jim took a slow sip of coffee before speaking. “Not really sure what to say, sir.”

“I’d start with whatever’s on your mind, and go from there.”

Pike’s tone of voice was so calm, so damned unflappable that Jim found himself laughing, but not happily.

“What... whatever’s on my mind? Sir, with all due respect, if I tell you what I’m thinking right now... I’d probably get written up.” He shook his head in dismay. “You can’t just... you can’t possibly.”

“Understand?” Pike interrupted without malice. “Can’t understand what it’s like to go through a crisis? Can’t understand what it’s like to watch a fellow officer die in front of me? Kirk, where do you think I got these stripes on my sleeve?”

Stunned at being verbally slapped across the face with the obvious, Jim slowly put down his cup of coffee, and swallowed tightly. “I didn’t mean...” Then he shook his head again, staring down at the table. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He sounded like he meant that. “Like I said... whatever is on your mind. Why do you think we’re here and not in my office? I want you to speak freely. I’ve been there myself, and yeah, I understand. The garbage it leaves in your head isn’t pretty.”

Jim looked up, realization and *I’m such an idiot* dawning on him. Of course Pike had seen shit before. How could he have thought otherwise? He sucked in a bracing breath, then let it out slowly, nodding in acceptance. “Then you know why it’s hard to talk about it, even when you know you need to.”

“I do. And I can tell you this much: it doesn’t really get easier as you get older. Different, maybe. Time and distance are filters that change your perspective.” He laughed in a self-effacing sort of way. “Maybe age is another one.”

“Bones calls himself an old man,” Jim mused softly.

Pike snorted. “Yeah, I’ve heard him spout that bullshit. Someday, in the distant future, the simple fact that he’s actually old will catch up with him and bite him in the ass, and he’ll wonder where it came from.” He shook his head and leaned his elbows heavily on the table. “You two are still so young. You’re older than most of the cadets, but you’re not old.”

"I know, sir."

Pike raised an eyebrow. "Do you?"

Jim blew out an exasperated breath. "I know I'm young and inexperienced, and if I hadn't been, then maybe people would have listened to me, Finney wouldn't be dead, and this whole thing wouldn't have blown up in my face. I'm just a cadet. At least... that's what people keep telling me." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Pike looked at Jim for a long moment, then sighed. “Age and experience count for a lot in
Starfleet, but they're not everything. Rank isn't everything.”

Something in Pike's tone had changed, and Jim hunched his shoulders defensively. Memories of his failures on Araxis spun in his head. So many things he should have done differently. So much he'd screwed up. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have -"

"Now there you go again, jumping to conclusions. That’s not where I was going.” Pike looked at him for a long moment. “Part of the problem... in more ways than I can express... is that it’s been too long since I’ve been out there in the black. Don’t you be sorry, Jim. I’m sorry. It’s been too long, and I was too complacent. As I said, age and experience count for a lot... but not everything. I forgot that every day out there is the unexpected. And I forgot why I recruited you.”

Some of the tension in Jim’s shoulders loosened up, but he was still confused. He really had no idea where Pike was going with this. “Sir?”

“Actually,” Pike continued, “it was Cadet McCoy who reminded me. He went off like a string of firecrackers that night... after the battle. Ripped into me in a way I haven’t experienced since I was an ensign.” A small grin curled the corner of his mouth.

Jim raised an eyebrow in curiosity. “If it was that spectacular, do I get to ask what you got chewed out for when you were an ensign?”

“No.” Then the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement. “But I’ll tell you this much: if you’re late reporting back from your first shore leave, make sure you’re not obviously hung over... and try to remember all of your uniform.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” Jim said, letting the picture paint itself.

Pike nodded. “Good. And I’ll try to remember what McCoy burned into my ears that night.” He paused for a moment, looked down at his folded hands on the table in front of him, then finally looked up again. His expression was serious. “I recruited you because I felt that Starfleet had lost something, and that you had what we needed. You think outside the box. You don’t see regulations and rules as the absolute binding constraints that most officers see. And, as McCoy eloquently slurried through a hefty dose of sedatives, you’re different. That’s what saved a whole lot of people on Araxis a few weeks ago. Someday... well, I guess that someday, you’ll probably do it again.”

Jim wasn’t sure what to say to that. “I hope I don’t need to do it again anytime soon.”

Pike gave him a sympathetic look. “Don’t we all? But listen - I may have recruited you on a hunch, but that’s not why you’re still here. You’re here because you’ve shown us - over and over again - that you’re worthy of that uniform. You earned every scrap of it yourself, and I want you to remember that.” He made eye contact again, and didn’t look back down.

Jim’s mouth fell open slightly, but this time, he didn’t have anything else to say to fill in.

“You don’t do anything in half-measures, and in some people’s eyes, that’s dangerous. They might be right. It can be dangerous, and you’ve seen what happens when you leap without looking and you’re wrong.”

A flash of shame welled up in Jim’s chest, but he pushed it back down. Now wasn’t the time for it.

Pike continued. “The thing is... you’re getting the experience you need to start being right more often. That’s what training is about. And you’ve got the guts to back it up. Let me ask you something. What do you think was going through my head when they described what you did?”
Jim frowned. “I... what do you mean?”

“When they told me that you willingly walked out into the middle of an urban battlefield, unarmed and without so much as a helmet for protection... what do you think was going through my head?”

Jim felt his eyebrows creep upwards. Sure, Bones had described that scenario to him objectively, but that was Bones. The guy could describe a walk around the block and give it enough colorful embellishment to decorate a Christmas tree. Hearing it from Pike, in plain language, made it so much more real. Fuck, he really did that, didn’t he? “I have no idea.”

At that, Pike actually gave a dry chuckle. “That’s funny... neither did I. It took me the better part of the past few weeks to figure it out, too.”

“Well, sir... what’s your conclusion?”

Pike smiled. “That I hope I can find enough people with guts like that to fill my crew roster when I get my ship. And, more importantly, that I was right about you. Even though you’ve fucked up - and trust me, we all have - you’ve shown me over and over again that you’ll do whatever it takes to succeed. You won’t give up, and you’ll find resources you didn’t know you had, even if all you have is yourself.”

“I just did what I had to do,” Jim answered automatically.

“Exactly,” Pike replied. “That’s all we can ever do. Some people run away from it, and some people program a collision course and set thrusters on full.”

Jim’s breath caught.

Pike nodded. “You’ve been slowly becoming that man over the past two years, and now, I know you can get there. I absolutely believe that.”

For a long moment, Jim stared back at Captain Pike before he had to look away. The man was his academic advisor, but in little, insidious ways, their relationship had evolved. It felt like something more now, and the need for Pike’s approval had slowly grown over time. He’d never cared about what any authority figures thought of him before, so wasn’t sure how to process it. Briefly, Jim wondered if this was a hint of what it was like to have a father, but he dismissed that idea. That’s not what he was looking for anyway.

Or maybe, like Bones, he didn’t need to define it. Perhaps, for once, he should just accept it for what it was, and be grateful.

With a smile that didn’t feel fake, Jim met Pike’s gaze. “Thank you, sir.”

“That’s better.” Pike leaned back and took a sip of coffee. “Now... what else is on your mind?”

Jim took a sip of his own coffee, then leaned on the table, and spoke. This time, words came more easily.

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Leonard’s boots knocked softly on the wooden planks of the old pier as he walked out over the water. One lone figure was waiting for him. He hadn’t called ahead, hadn’t checked to see if Jim would be there. He just knew where to find the kid.

Without a word, he removed his boots and socks, rolled up the cuffs of his jeans, and sat down on
the edge of the pier, dangling his feet over the side. The fine spray of salt water was cold against his bare feet. The sensation sent a shiver up his spine, and let his feet swing above the waves.

He leaned back, propping himself on hands splayed against the weather-worn wood of the old pier. The endless sound of the sea blended and churned with the sharper noises of the city behind him, weaving the familiar symphony of San Francisco Bay. It was a remarkably clear night, with no fog and no clouds. The specter of the Golden Gate Bridge loomed in the night, bright against the darkness of the sky.

Even though the Bridge had only been there for a short span of human history, it sometimes felt as though had always been there, and always would be.

Some things never change.

He looked sideways at Jim’s profile. The details were obscured by the shadows, but his eyes were bright as he stared at the Bridge.

*And even when things do change, they’re still the same.*

“Knew you’d come.” Jim’s voice was so soft that it was hard to hear over the wind and waves.

“Yeah.” Then Leonard frowned. “How long have you been sitting here?”

Jim shrugged. Then he turned to Leonard with an honest smile. “How was your day with Joanna?”

Warmth flooded Leonard along with the fresh memories. “It was great. I mean... she’s still a bit shy around me. We’ve talked by vidcom plenty, but this is different. But... my God, Jim, she’s grown up so much. She’s so smart, and she’s got my eyes and mouth and nose. She’s already a curious little scientist, and she asks questions about everything.” He stopped himself, then took a deep breath. “Sorry, I’m rambling.”

But Jim was still smiling at him. “Why sorry? You had a great time with your daughter, and I’m happy for you. So how long is she going to be in town?”

“Four days. They have to leave on Sunday morning because Joanna starts school on Monday.”

Jim nodded. “How old is she again?”

“Just turned four a couple of weeks ago. It’s incredible, Jim. I still can’t...” A splash of water against his feet sent another shiver through him. He shook his head. “I’ve missed so much. I’ve made her miss so much because I was a stubborn bastard who couldn’t get over my own pride. How the hell do I make up for that in a few weekends and vacation weeks each year?”

“Bones.”

“She deserved better. Everyone has deserved better from me, and I -”

Jim put his hand firmly on Leonard’s shoulder. “*Bones.*”

Leonard blinked, and refocused on Jim’s shadowy features. “Yeah?”

“Let it go.”

“But -”

“Let it go.” His voice was so steady, so sincere, that Leonard found himself breathless for a
moment. “You can’t change the past. You can only tackle the present and plan for the future.”

“Oh, okay.” He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax a bit as he looked at the lights across the bay. He still had a world and a half of doubts and self-blame churning in his mind, but for now, he could put them aside. Jim was right - he couldn’t change the past.

After a moment, he ventured a question. “So... what did Pike have to say to you?”

Jim snorted. “Something about oxymorons and the impossibility of telling me to trust my instincts while also keeping my mouth shut and being a good little cadet.”

“Jim...”

But Jim held up a hand, stopping him gently. “What Pike actually told me... was that it had been too long since he’d been out in the black. That you’d reminded him, in your own unique way, why he’d recruited me. And if that’s what he really believes - that Starfleet needs people who do things differently, who think outside the box - then he’s got to put his credits where his mouth is.”

“Well, that’s for damned sure,” Leonard grumbled. “Did he apologize?”

“He did.” There was silence for another moment. “He let me talk a lot, too. He let me tell him about what had happened. Apparently, he’s been through some shit himself, so he understands. I should have known that.”

“Really now? What kind of shit?”

“Stuff that reminds us that it’s always risky out there,” Jim said in an unreadable tone. “That people are going to die. That there will be more close calls. And that it’s always different.”

A hint of memory from Leonard’s heated, drugged tirade at Captain Pike came back to haunt him. “You’re different.”

Jim gave him a curious look. “Pike said that, too.” Then he turned his gaze back out over the water. “He told me that my instincts are good. And that maybe I am becoming the man he thought I could be. Hell, right before he dropped me off at my dorm, he told me that he thinks I’m that kind of man now... someone he could trust in a crisis... as long as I keep myself out of trouble.”

“You? Stay out of trouble? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Jim chuckled dryly. “And then he said that I might be that sort of man even if I don’t keep myself out of trouble.”

Leonard found himself chuckling, too. “Now that sounds more like it.”

“I don’t know if he’s right.” Jim’s voice was so quiet, Leonard wasn’t quite sure if he’d heard correctly.

“What’s that, kid?”

“I said...” Jim swallowed thickly, and Leonard could see the silhouette of his Adam’s apple bob. “I’m not sure if Pike is right about that. He did a good job of building me up, but I know how much went wrong on Araxis. I know how much I fucked up. We almost didn’t make it, Bones. I almost let you die down there. And I couldn’t save Finney.”

“Well, I’m still alive, and I couldn’t save Hererra,” Leonard shot back. “There are lots of patients I
couldn’t save over the years, too. You can’t let that break you, kid.”

“I should have done something different. I should have been able to save him. If I’d done things differently, maybe we could have done something to stop the fighting before it started.”

“Jim, you can’t fix everything and you’re not going to be able to save everyone. Someday, there will be a crisis that makes Araxis look like a schoolyard scuffle, and knowing you, you’ll be right in the middle of it. But no matter how bad it gets, you’ll keep going, because you know that nothing is a lost cause. That’s why I trust you, kid. That’s why I know you’ll make it.”

For a long moment, they were quiet. The rhythm of the waves beat out a haphazard pattern against the pilings. Salt spray tickled bare feet, and the evening wind brought a fine mist across Leonard’s face. It felt good. It made him finally feel as though he was actually light years away from the dust and grit and heat of battle in the heart of Axanar City.

At the same time, it was still so close, and so real.

“You’re someone I can trust in a crisis,” Jim said suddenly. His voice was tight and uneasy.

Leonard frowned. “Thanks, kid, but... I know that tone from you. What’s going on?”

Jim took a deep breath. “I know that what happened freaked you out. You said you were okay afterwards, but I know that you never wanted to deal with stuff like that. It’s not you. And now that you’ve got your daughter back in your life... Bones, with your record, you could get just about any assignment you want when you graduate. You could stay dirtside. I wanted you to know that I’d understand if you decided to.”

Leonard felt his mouth drop open. “Jim, I’ve done all this extra work to get a shipboard assignment. Why the hell do you think I’d change my plans now?”

“All those reasons I just listed. I figured that would be obvious,” he said dryly.

“It’s not like I... wait, let me ask you a question. Where are you going to try to get assigned?”

Jim glanced sideways at him, then looked back out over the water. “Pike told me that he wants people like me aboard his ship when he gets it next year. He’s getting the Enterprise. That’s the new flagship, Bones. And... I’m going to request it. I think I could get it.”

Leonard found himself nodding slowly. “Couldn’t imagine you anywhere less than the flagship, kid. And since you seem to think I could get just about any assignment I want, I guess I’ll request the Enterprise, too.”

This time, Jim turned his body slightly so that he could look at Leonard directly. “Bones? Are you sure? I mean... are you sure you’d be okay with that? The flagship goes on some pretty prestigious missions, but it’s far from a safe assignment. Your daughter... your life back here... are you sure?”

Leonard looked at Jim’s expression, trying to pick apart the emotions he saw there. Disbelief was somewhere in the mix, but more than that, he saw gratitude, hope, and something else that he couldn’t pin down, but it made him absolutely certain. “Yeah, kid. I’m sure.”

To his surprise, Leonard really was sure. The danger out there still terrified him on some level, but after what he’d been through, the fear no longer controlled him. He owned it. Oddly, some part of him craved it. The idea of returning to a normal, mundane life didn’t suit him anymore, and he knew that when the time came to venture into the black on his first real assignment, he’d be ready. He hadn’t felt ready this time, but he’d accomplished so much. And hell, somewhere, in the middle
of the whole interplanetary debacle, he’d even managed to finish his research project.

The excitement he was starting to feel at the idea of adventure and exploration and... and yes, even danger... was addictive. That sensation of wide-eyed enthusiasm was welling up inside him again. Never mind the start of medical school - he hadn’t felt like this since he’d been a child. There was so much he hadn’t seen, and now, he was determined to see it all, even if he needed anti-anxiety medication as a backup plan. He’d do it, though, and if his hunch was right, he’d do it alongside his best friend.

Jim was searching his face for something. Then, he seemed to find it. “Thanks, Bones,” he said, nodding in satisfaction before looking back out across the bay. He was gazing at the Bridge, eyes shining in the oily glare of the city lights.

“It’s like coming home,” Jim mused. “Except I don’t mean here. Not San Francisco or the Academy. I mean... up there. Going into space. The unknown. It’s like coming home. I think... for people like us... the journey is home.”

Leonard raised an eyebrow as he took in his friend’s profile. Jim had certainly done a lot of thinking. He’d grown up a lot. And while Leonard was sure he’d stumble and backslide and mess up all over again, there was no denying that the man who sat next to him today was both the same person and an altogether different man than the guy who had sat next to him on a shuttle two years prior.

Leonard let the memory come back, and he pasted it alongside what he was seeing now. He’d been drunk, and Jim had a broken nose. They’d been a complete mess, and both so jaded and cynical, far beyond what was justified by their years. He’d felt so old at the time. He’d felt as though his life was over, and Jim had seemed as though life wasn’t all that important to him anymore.

So much had changed.

Leonard shifted slightly and looked back out across the bay, letting the cool breeze and night sky ease his thoughts away. There was a light fog rolling in now, and he watched as the lights of the Starfleet Headquarters were slowly wrapped in the haze.

After a moment, he felt pressure and warmth against his shoulder, and knew that Jim was leaning against him, just enough to feel supportive. It reminded him that he wasn’t alone.

He let his feet swing back and forth over the waves, thinking about his daughter and mint chocolate-chip ice cream and duty assignments and adventures, and yet not thinking about any of them. It was okay. For the moment, he didn’t need to think about any of them. It was freeing.

Then he felt Jim shiver against his arm. He glanced to the side and saw that Jim’s expression was tight, and there was a light sheen of moisture around his eyes.

“Jim?”

Jim didn’t turn to look at him. “Yeah, Bones?”

“You okay? How are you feeling, Jim?”

For a moment, Jim didn’t move or speak. He blinked a couple of times and took a stilted breath. No tears escaped down his cheeks, but his lashes were just a bit wet in the glare of the city lights. Finally, he spoke. “Young. I feel young.”
Leonard looked up at the bright spires of the Golden Gate Bridge against the thin fog and night sky. It left him feeling so small and yet so confident at once. He realized that Jim had pinned down what he’d been feeling himself.

His whole future was ahead of him, and he didn’t need to let his past hold him back anymore. He smiled and leaned back against Jim’s arm.

“Yeah, kid. Me, too.” He smiled. “Me too.”

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~FIN~

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, everyone, for reading through to the end of this saga. It’s been a long time coming, and it feels strange to me that it’s over. I’m grateful for everyone who came along for the ride. If you enjoyed the story, please take the time to leave me a quick note to let me know.

Any of you who are old-school Star Trek fans probably caught a lot of nods to TOS canon throughout the fic. I want to take a moment to give nods to some of those moments.

Jim's comment in this chapter, "I feel young," is a direct quote out of Wrath of Khan.

The quote about "the journey... is home" comes from the alternate ending for the 2009 Star Trek movie that was never filmed, but would have had Shatner making a cameo appearance.

The mention of Kirk wanting to go rock climbing is a reference to his mountain-climbing adventure at the beginning of "The Final Frontier." And yes, for those of you who haven't seen it, Bones is on the ground, watching with futuristic binoculars, freaking the fuck out.

Bones' comment in chapter 19 (“As far as I’m concerned, there are certain absolutes,” he growled, “and one of them is the right of humanoids to a free and unchained environment. The right to self-determine, and to grow.”) is right out of TOS. I can't remember the episode right now, but that's something Bones went on a rant about in TOS canon. It was a good rant.

Bones' comment to Jim in chapter 20 (“Of all the people I’ve ever met, kid, you’re the one who would turn death itself into a fighting chance to live.”) is another page out of TOS, too.

I admit... there are probably other tid-bits out of TOS that I should quote here, and... I can't remember them right now. Either way, there are definitely some intentional tie-ins to TOS canon throughout the fic. Just some little nuggets for my fellow old-school fans.

Anyway, that's about it. I hope you enjoyed the story. If you enjoyed this one along with the rest of my Academy series, take the time to look at some of my other fics.
There are short stories as well as a companion series that I wrote to this Academy series. The companion series is adult-rated slash, called "Academy Series Spinoff Stories." Take a peek.

Thanks again for reading!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!