## Singularities

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### Summary

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"Yes." Chris held his gaze.

"Involving an ax."

"I have it on good authority that it was in fact a traditional battle weapon from a planet his wife visited during a mission a few years ago."

"Well, that makes it all better, doesn't it," the doctor offered sarcastically. "Do you have a
death wish?"

In which Chris Pike finds his white elephant and unexpectedly falls in love, everybody re-evaluates their notions of the perfect family, Joanna McCoy wants a pony and a starship, and nobody gets to throw rice at anyone
Unique

Singularity

n. pl. sin·gu·lar·i·ties

1. The quality or condition of being singular.
2. A trait marking one as distinct from others; a peculiarity.
3. Something uncommon or unusual.
4. a) often Singularity Computers A hypothetical future point in time when artificial intelligence will surpass human intelligence and be able to self-replicate and improve itself autonomously.
   b) Astronomy & Physics A point in space-time, such as a black hole, at which matter has infinite density and infinitesimal volume and the curvature of space-time is infinite. Also called gravitational singularity.
   c) Mathematics A point at which the derivative does not exist for a given function but every neighborhood of which contains points for which the derivative exists. Also called singular point.


He was not a very religious man, and even though sometimes prone to philosophical reflection, Leonard McCoy did not believe in any form of predestination. Destiny, to him, was arbitrary. Fate, if anything, was a capricious bitch with a penchant for kicking you in the ass at inopportune moments. She certainly didn't have your life planned out for you.

And yet....

If you'd ask him, ten years, twenty years, forty years from now; ask him at Jo's wedding or the christening of Jim's infant son, or at Chris' funeral... if you'd ask him if there had been one defining, one fateful moment in his life, he would say yes.

And he would think back to that one day in mid-July, fifteen, twenty-five, forty-five years ago...

July 2253, Atlanta, United States, Earth
The heat was oppressive enough to make even the first tentative step outside seem like you had entered a particularly nasty dimension of hell, possibly the one reserved for people who routinely drowned puppies and murdered their elderly relatives out of greed.

The humidity pressed against your mouth and nose like a stifling piece of soaked, heavy fabric.

The two combined made you want to crawl into a corner, roll up and either die or wait for fall.

Leonard had had to venture outside - briefly - to help bring a patient in from a transport; he now leant against the heavenly cool surface of a wall, panting, and offered a fervent prayer to the inventors of air-conditioning.

A nurse and a medical technician were busy getting the patient off the stretcher and onto a biobed, carefully replacing emergency transport machinery with its more stationary and more sophisticated hospital cousin. A monitor flared into life with a soft whirr and streamed off a perplexing amount of data.

The patient in his medically induced sleep didn't notice anything.

"What happened?" Leonard had regained his breath and balance and turned to the paramedic who had accompanied the patient.

The woman - about forty, reddish-brown curls and freckles - frowned. "Difficult to say, exactly. It appears to have involved a rather large axe or a similar weapon. I'm not an expert. It looked foreign." She eyed the patient dubiously. "Seems like he pissed someone off pretty badly."

"Almost cost him his arm," Leonard remarked. "Not to mention his life."

"He was in luck, we were very close by and one of the people with him had some basic medical training."

"All set," the MT announced.

"Very well," Leonard said, leaning in to study the vital signs. "Ana, get me some backup. I'll need a neurosurgeon and a plastic surgeon on this one, if he is to retain the use of his arm and his good looks - is he good looking?" he asked the paramedic over his shoulder.

"For a man of his age and current condition...? Yes, I'd say so."

Leonard nodded absent mindedly.

"Bit of an idiot, though," the paramedic commented. "There are some things you just don't say to a man carrying a potentially lethal weapon."

"Have you notified his next of kin?" Leonard asked.

She shook her head. "Didn't get that far during transport. His emergency contact is his employer, and Kyle let them know what happened. I suppose they'll notify the family."

"And who is his employer?" Leonard asked. His gaze travelled over the unconscious man. There was something a bit odd about this whole thing. "He looks out of place. Like he shouldn't even be here. He's too pale, doesn't spend a lot of time in the sun, hasn't been in Georgia long. But he's in great physical shape, from what I can see. An indoor employee with an athlete's physique? Doesn't make sense."
The paramedic grinned. "Take a guess."

Leonard ran his eyes over the man once more. Clean shaven, sensible haircut. No tattoos, piercings, no jewelry or other adornment. Unassuming civilian clothing, as if he was trying to blend in.

"Police, military, or similar," he said. "And given his oddly light skin tone... Starfleet."

"Bingo," the paramedic said. "Captain Christopher Edmond Pike, forty-two years old."

"Captain, huh? I wonder what kind of trouble he got into."

The neurosurgeon arrived. She was tall and thin, quite attractive with copper skin and dark eyes, almost too pretty for a hospital, the nurses whispered, especially given the sad fact that most of her patients were unconscious when they met Dr. Erica Abante. On her heels followed a small, round faced man whose white hair glowed like a halo. The plastic surgeon, Leonard assumed.

"Uwe Larson," the man introduced himself, before looking down at the patient with interest. He whistled softly. "Oh my. What sort of beastie did he run into?"

"A man with an axe," Leonard offered laconically. "As you can see, he is stable. Our colleagues have taken good care of him. All we have to do is repair the damage."

"Oh, the wonders of modern medicine," Dr. Larson sighed. "That's the best thing about it, really, time. I remember all the mad rushes, all the dashing about when I first began to practice medicine. Always that hurry, no time to spare. Nowadays? There are no real emergencies anymore."

"And thank heaven for that," Dr. Abante said.

"I don't know," Leonard said. "I could do with a little adrenaline from time to time. It all seems so complacent." Boring even, his mind supplied. No real challenges, just cases, cases, cases. But you don't remember them, because there's nothing special about them.

He pushed those thoughts aside. "Shall we?"

"Lead on," Dr. Larson said, rubbing his fleshy hands.

Christopher Pike awoke to his very own nightmare - an unfamiliar room and an unfamiliar person beside him. He started and sat up instinctively, ready to get away from the stranger. The rapid movement made his head spin.

"Easy, there's no rush," the stranger told him in what was supposedly a soothing tone of voice. "You're safe. No crazy axe-men around."

Crazy axe-men...? His head still spun, but it was gradually slowing down. Enough to make him realize that he was in a hospital bed and that the stranger wore a doctor's coat and a pale blue name plate.

"Where am I?"
"Atlanta General. My name is Leonard McCoy, I'm your attending physician. I was going to have a pretty blond nurse sit by your bed when you woke up, but you were in such a rush." He smiled briefly at his own joke.

"Waste of time," Chris muttered. His entire right arm was wrapped into what looked like a dark purple bandage.

There was more on his shoulder and on his back, he could not see it, but he felt it.

"Is Mr. Taylor okay?" he asked.

"Who?"

"The crazy axe-man," Chris replied drily.

"Truth be told, I have no idea. I would expect him to be in police custody."

Chris shook his head. "It was a misunderstanding. I won't press charges."

The doctor looked as if he was seriously considering the possibility of having accidentally overlooked a brain injury. "A misunderstanding," he echoed.

"Yes." Chris held his gaze. He had very blue eyes. An unusually intense shade, not watered down with grey.

"Involving an axe."

"I have it on good authority that it was in fact a traditional battle weapon from a planet his wife visited during a mission a few years ago."

"Well, that makes it all better, doesn't it," the doctor offered sarcastically. "Do you have a death wish?"

Chris blinked. He could not quite understand why the man sounded so offended. It was almost as if Chris' wounds were a personal insult to him. Maybe, to a dedicated physician, all wounds were.

"No. Why?"

"Just checking. How does the arm feel?"

Chris looked down at it. The purple bandage looked strange, out of place. It somehow offended his sense of aesthetics. "Somewhat numb."

Dr. McCoy nodded. "That is to be expected. It'll pass. Give it a few days. Any other pains? Dizziness? Anything else?"

Surprisingly, no.

"No. How long do I have to stay?"

"See, this is what's so sad about working in a hospital - everybody wants to leave as soon as possible," the doctor commented, wry humor in his voice. "Give it two days, maybe three. You are scheduled for a checkup a week after your release. If all is well, we'll transfer both you and the relevant data to a physician of your choice - at Starfleet Medical, I assume?"

Chris nodded. Something else occurred to him: "Has Starfleet been informed?"
"Yes, of course. Your commanding officer sends her regards. She also said - I quote - tie him to the bed, if necessary." The doctor grinned.

Chris winced. He could hear Commodore Belmonte voice those exact words.

"I'm sure she meant that in the most affectionate way possible," Dr. McCoy told him, lightly patting his uninjured shoulder as he rose.

"Very well then. I'll do my rounds and I will check up on you later today. Ring if you need anything."

"So, tell me about the axe-man." Chris looked up to find Dr. McCoy entering the room, a steaming cup in each hand. The sharp, fresh smell of peppermint rose from both.

"I thought modern medicine frowned upon herbal remedies," he commented.

"Modern medicine might, but my Grandma swears that a good cup of tea can cure anything." The doctor set one of the cups down on the table next to Chris' bed and pulled up a chair with his now free hand. "So. Why did somebody take an axe to you? You don't strike me as a terribly unlikeable person."

Chris smiled briefly. "Is that a veiled compliment?"

"Not to disappoint you, but I don't flirt with patients. It upsets my wife."

Chris' eyes flickered to his hands and caught the golden gleam of a wedding band. He experienced a brief episode of 'why are all the good ones taken' before dismissing it as ridiculous.

"Here's a thought," McCoy added, eyeing him thoughtfully. "Did he catch you with his wife?"

Chris almost laughed, startled and amused by the suggestion. What an odd idea.

"He thought I was going to take away his daughter," he offered instead.

"Oh. Well, that would explain the axe, then."

"Excuse me?!" Chris sat up straighter, flinching as he moved his bandaged arm.

The doctor shrugged. "I'd be prepared to fight any man who tried to take my daughter."

"With an axe?"

Another shrug. "If there was nothing else at hand."

"Remind me to never try and recruit your daughter for Starfleet," Chris said drily.

"Gladly. I doubt it will come up, though, she's four. So that's what you were doing?"

Chris nodded. "Any Taylor is a remarkable young woman. She has a rare talent for interpreting body language and non-verbal signals and she is very emphatic. She is a student of cognitive
psychology. Starfleet wants her to become more than that."

The doctor nodded thoughtfully. "I'm guessing she could be very useful in first contact situations or diplomatic negotiations."

"Exactly," Chris said.

"But...?"

Chris sighed. "Her mother died two years ago. She was a brilliant scientist and a Starfleet officer. She joined as a postgraduate. It was supposed to be a temporary assignment, but she stayed. Against her husband's wishes; Mr. Taylor is... well, he's not exactly a fan. And I'm afraid his fears proved to be prophetic, because Jezabel Taylor died in a shuttle crash."

Blue eyes were watching him attentively. It was not an uncomfortable gaze, though. "What happened?"

"To be honest...? The pilot was an idiot." Chris frowned. He was a pilot himself, and a good one at that, and he had no mercy for incompetent wannabes. "He was young and probably too inexperienced and he took an unnecessary risk flying through that storm front. It cost him and seven other people their lives. There were no survivors."

"Tragic," the doctor commented. "I see why Mr. Taylor would object to his daughter joining Starfleet. He is afraid to lose her, too, and who could blame him?"

"I certainly don't," Chris said. "But ultimately, it's Anya's choice. And Starfleet wants her badly enough to send me down to Georgia in person."

"They probably weren't expecting you to get attacked with an axe," McCoy commented.

Chris smiled faintly. "Or maybe they were expecting me to be able to defend myself," he suggested.

The doctor muttered something unintelligible, but the disapproving look on his face told Chris exactly what he thought of Starfleet bravado. It was oddly refreshing. Many people he met were in awe of him. After all, one didn't meet a decorated Starfleet captain every day.

"It's what I do," Chris added conversationally. "I'm a special recruiter for Starfleet. I take the unusual cases - recruits from races underrepresented in Starfleet, people with disabilities or specific needs, minors, recruits who are likely to face difficulties because of their origin, culture, character, or other personal attributes. I also actively pursue candidates that I believe would be valuable, if unusual additions, even if they themselves have not yet expressed an interest in joining Starfleet. My superiors give me plenty of rope and I usually need it. Most of my choices raise a few eyebrows, some have even caused controversy."

"Let me guess - they don't conform to the norm? Don't really fit in?"

"The norm is boring. And yes, they usually do fit in surprisingly well, after some adjustment on all sides."

"Ah," McCoy grinned. "And you really enjoy rubbing that in, right? Drop a few well-placed 'I-told-you-so's'?"

"Guilty as charged." Chris replied with a grin of his own. "But it's more than that. My recruits are my personal projects. I like to see them succeed. You see, I don't only bring them into Starfleet; I usually mentor them, too. Some of them for years. Not all of them are as uncomplicated and extraverted as
Anya Taylor. Quite a few have caused me more than one sleepless night. I have broken up drunken fistsfights, taught cadets to swim or to use knife and fork, coached them through exams of all kinds, dealt with lovesickness, broken limbs, and the common cold, prevented an arranged marriage, babysat children, and smoothed things over with parents, partners, and instructors alike. It can be exhausting, but it is hardly ever boring.”

“You love your job.” Dr. McCoy noted, clear blue eyes watching him attentively. He seemed oddly pleased by his observation. It then occurred to Chris that most doctors did not take the time to sit down with their patients for a chat and a cup of tea, especially not when said patients were well on the way to recovery.

“So do you,” he countered.

McCoy chuckled. “Whatever gave me away? But yes, I do. Even though I suppose it is a little more mundane than yours and it involves a lot more routine. But every once in a while, you meet interesting people.” … such as you, was the unspoken addition, and Chris felt a little more flattered than he should have.

For a moment, they sipped their tea in companionable silence. Chris thought about Anya Taylor and her father and wondered if it was really in Anya’s best interest to join Starfleet. Her father was all the family she had, and she seemed very close to him. Leaving him, for months – maybe even years! - on end would certainly hurt. She could have a brilliant career in Starfleet that might bring her much fame and personal satisfaction… but would it truly make her happy? Not my call, he reminded himself. She must choose for herself.

“I almost forgot,” McCoy said suddenly, “would you like us to inform your family? Starfleet was listed as your emergency contact, so we called them, but is there anybody else who should know that you are here?”

There were a handful of questions that Chris dreaded, and this was one of them, even when it was voiced in such a circumspect way. He shook his head. “That will not be necessary. I am not married, nor do I have children and I am not that close to my extended family.”

McCoy frowned slightly before he caught himself doing it and forced his face into a polite mask showing neither approval nor disapproval. He did not quite manage it, he still seemed surprised. “Funny, I would have pegged you for a family man.”

It wasn’t the first time he heard a variation of this statement, but it still astonished him. “Why?”

The doctor shrugged. “Your job, and the fact that you enjoy it so much, implies that you are sociable and good with people. It would hardly be surprising if that extended to your private life.”

It was an acceptable explanation. One of the better ones he had heard so far, since they usually came down to idiocies like ‘you’re too handsome to be single’ or ‘what, at your age’?

“I don’t do well in long-term relationships,” he said.

McCoy accepted it without comment, yet another pleasant surprise. “Well,” the doctor said, “I had better leave you to rest and resume my rounds. Feel free to ring if you need anything, the attendant will be here in a heartbeat.”

Chris nodded. “Thank you.”
When Leonard got home that night, Joanna flung herself at him with all the force and enthusiasm a four-year old could muster (which was a lot). The black pug Sammy followed on her heels, yapping excitedly. Sammy was Jocelyn’s dog that she had brought into marriage. Leonard wasn’t a fan, but he had adjusted to the furry creature. Marriage, he reasoned, required sacrifices on both sides.

He walked into the kitchen to get dinner and a cold drink, Joanna on his hip, prattling happily about a butterfly in the garden, ice cream, and the exploits of her two favorite dolls, who had apparently gone horseback riding. Ever since she had been allowed to sit on a fat little pony at a friend’s birthday party a few weeks ago, Joanna was very excited about horses.

He found Jocelyn in the garden, sitting in a lawn chair and applying nail polish to her fingernails. Leonard slid his dinner tray onto the table and walked over to her, bending down to kiss her cheek. Joanna, still on his hip, giggled.

“How was your day?”

Jocelyn looked up. The freckles on her cheeks were covered by expertly done make-up. Leonard remembered them from the early days of their marriage, and he missed them somewhat.

“Good. Busy. Dorothy was sick, so I had to take her clients.” She worked part-time at a busy law firm, and more often than not, part-time turned into full time, which left Jocelyn dissatisfied with her job. “Yours?”

He shrugged. “Same old. I had an interesting patient today. Starfleet captain. He was attacked with an axe.”

Jocelyn raised her expertly plucked brows. “An axe?” she echoed.

“That’s what I said. Oddly enough, he didn’t seem too surprised or even offended.” Leonard shook his head. He put Joanna down, ignoring her protests, and took a seat at the table. Jocelyn continued to work on her nails as he told her about his meeting with Captain Christopher Pike in between bites of pasta salad.

“You seem fascinated,” she noted, disapproval clearly audible in her voice. “You’re not by any chance thinking about joining Starfleet?”

“Me? Ugh, no.” He frowned. “You know that I have a mortal fear of anything that flies and carries people. That includes starships and shuttles. Besides, space is lonely and cold.” He thought about his patient. I don’t do well in long-term relationships, Pike had said with an air of finality. If it was true, he had chosen the right job.

“I’m going to quit my job,” Jocelyn said suddenly.

Leonard looked up. It did come as a bit of a surprise, but he had known for a while that she was unhappy. “If that’s what you want… they don’t quite get the meaning of part-time, do they?”

“No, and I’ve had enough.” Jocelyn pursed her full lips. “I told them before I signed the contract that I have a child and that I can’t work overtime and they assured me it wouldn’t be a problem. Well, it is. And I can’t do it anymore. It’s too much, and I feel like I’m always in a rush. It’s also not fair to Jo. She deserves to get to see her parents for more than a couple of hours at night.”
That last remark was aimed at him, and he knew it, even though she wasn’t looking at him. He sighed. “Jocelyn… we’ve been over this. I’m doing what I can, but my job is a full-time position.”

“Full-time, yes.” She fixed her piercing green eyes on him. “And I’m fine with that. But you could really cut back on working overtime. Why does it always have to be you who fills in for a sick colleague? Why do you have to work on holidays?”

*Because I care about the patients, and somebody has to do it,* he thought. But he didn’t say it. This was an old argument, and nothing he could say would sway Jocelyn. She had made up her mind.

“I’ll try.”

Jocelyn made no reply, but blew on her fingernails where the nail polish was drying, a lovely shade of pale pink.

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When Leonard checked on Captain Pike the next day, he found the man to be recovering speedily. His face was already less pale and he seemed alert and not in pain. Good signs, but the charts on the monitor had told him as much.

He was staring at a PADD he held in his hand, and it seemed to be his own, not one that the hospital had given him so he could read books or magazines or watch a movie. Leonard, moving unhurriedly into the room, curiously looked over his shoulder at the screen. It showed the picture of a young boy, not a child anymore, but not quite a teenager yet.

“He seems a little young to become a Starfleet cadet,” Leonard commented and Pike started out of his reverie.

“What? Oh, it’s you. No, he is not a cadet.” He briefly looked up, then back at the picture. His face seemed pensive, melancholy even. “He’s the Kelvin Baby.”

Leonard frowned. “I’m sorry?”

Pike looked up. “You are old enough to remember the Kelvin Incident, aren’t you? A large foreign vessel of unknown origin attacked the USS Kelvin and destroyed it.” He stuck to the official story, the one told to the press and public, conveniently omitting the fact that Starfleet had a few ideas about the vessel's origin, even though they did seem rather far-fetched. "Most of the crew could be saved thanks to the sacrifices made by the Kelvin’s captain and first officer. During the evacuation, the first officer’s wife, Winona Kirk, who had also been on board, gave birth to a child. They called him the Kelvin Baby, the miracle baby. His father gave his life so that he and his mother could live. James Tiberius Kirk. But I knew him as Jimmie.”

“I remember,” Leonard said slowly. “I had forgotten the part about the baby, though. It was all over the news.” He inclined his head to look at the picture. “But surely he must be older now?”

“Yes. This was taken seven years ago. He would be an adult now, twenty years old.” His voice carried a regretful undertone.

“What happened?” Leonard asked, because something had to have happened. Maybe a tragic
accident.

Pike sighed. “Jimmie, he… well, he was always a difficult child. He was born amid chaos and destruction, a fatherless child, and one whose mother was severely traumatized by what she had been through.

He was a smart boy. Always very advanced for his age, and bored in school. And then of course, he was the Kelvin Baby, and the spitting image of both his parents, so easily recognizable. That didn’t help. He came to resent all the fuss. He wanted to be a normal boy, not his father’s son. And Winona – she couldn’t handle him. She barely could handle her own life after George’s death, and who could blame her. I hardly think there is anything more terrible or traumatizing than giving birth to your son while listening to his father preparing to die a violent death in order to save you both.

Winona finally sent Jimmie off to live with relatives on Tarsus IV. They had a son a couple of years older than him, and the colony was isolated enough, she thought that maybe life would be easier for him, there."

“Tarsus IV.” Leonard remembered hearing that name. It wasn’t a good memory. Snippets of news reports flashed through his mind ‘terrible tragedy’, ‘death and destruction’, ‘help arrived too late’. “Wasn’t that the massacre Starfleet tried to cover up? Some of the files were leaked a couple of years ago…” He stopped, as realization dawned on him. It was sickening. “Wait… so James Kirk, the Kelvin Baby died on Tarsus IV? What a terrible irony.” To survive the Kelvin Incident, only to die a few years later on a godforsaken planet and under still uncertain circumstances…!

Pike shook his head. “No, he didn’t die there. Miraculously, he was one of the few children who survived. Sam, too, his foster brother. I was on one of the ships Starfleet sent to investigate. We brought the survivors aboard, and that’s when this picture was taken. Jimmie and Sam and the other orphans were taken back to Earth and taken into care. And then they disappeared.”

“What do you mean they disappeared?”

“According to Starfleet sources, they were placed in foster families, but when I tried to track them down, I hit a wall of silence. Not even Winona could tell me where her son was… because she didn’t know. She was not a bad mother, no matter what some people said about her. She always cared about her son.”

“I’m not a big fan of conspiracy theories, but isn’t that a bit suspicious?” Leonard asked. “Starfleet messes up big time, and the few surviving witnesses just quietly disappear, never to be seen again?”

“My point exactly,” Pike nodded. To Leonard's surprise, his loyalty to Starfleet apparently didn't extend to finding excuses for their failures. “They claim it was to protect the children. Maybe so, but by now they are all young adults. I found Sam a few months ago. He lives under a false last name in rural Iowa. He became a farmer, of all things.” He paused briefly, stared off into the distance. “Maybe it helps him to combat the memories. Maybe it gives him a sense of security to grow his own food. They were starving to death on Tarsus.”

Leonard shuddered at the thought. “Does he know where his former foster brother is?”

“No. He says he hasn’t heard from Jimmie since they were separated, and I believe him. He recognized me, Sam I mean, and he knew I meant no harm.”

“Why are you looking for those children?”

“Not all of them,” Pike corrected him. “Just him.” He pointed at the photograph. “I guess he’s my
white elephant. Something of an obsession. George Kirk was my friend. A good friend. I feel that I owe it to him and to Winona to look after their boy. And I saw with my own eyes what happened on Tarsus IV. It was hell.” He looked up, sadness in his eyes. “I can’t be a whistleblower and call Starfleet out on its hypocrisy and failures; I love my job too much for that. But if I could find that boy… it would be something. A little thing.”

“I understand,” Leonard said, because he did. It made sense, strange and tragic story though it was.

“Do you? I don’t even know why I’m telling you all this.” He looked a bit surprised by himself. If Leonard had to guess he would have said that Captain Christopher Pike did not usually share his personal obsessions with near strangers... or anybody else for that matter.

* Maybe I should feel honored...? *

Leonard smiled. “I’m a doctor, I invite confidence. It’s a bit like being a priest or a teacher. People tell me all sorts of things. But I keep them to myself, so don't worry.”

"It's hardly a secret. Half of Starfleet knows of my search for Jimmie. There are some very interesting theories as to why I'm looking for him."

"Oh?" Leonard could imagine.

Pike shifted his weight to find a more comfortable position. It was a bit difficult with the injured arm. "Well," he said, "by far the most popular one is that I was secretly in love with either George or Winona Kirk - or even both of them. A variation of that one is that Jimmie is actually my son. Another one claims that I made a promise to George before his death to safeguard his wife and son - that one occasionally ties in with theory one. Then there's a very creative rumor going around that I am on a secret mission to find and kill the Tarsus IV survivors to help cover up what really happened - whatever that may be. Last but not least there are some who claim that I mean to recruit Jimmie for Starfleet, because he's some sort of teenage genius. I like that one. As if the boy had any reason whatsoever to trust, much less to join Starfleet...!"

Leonard shrugged. "People talk." And, he added silently, *I am sure not all of those theories are as far-fetched as you claim. Number one and three in particular sound as if there might be a grain of truth to them.*

Out loud he said: "I wish you good luck. Try not to run into any more angry men with axes as you search for your white elephant."

To his surprise, Pike smiled and winked at him. His clear eyes sparkled. *He looks years younger when he smiles.* "I'll try."

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Chris was discharged two days later; but not until Dr. McCoy had held a lengthy conversation with a physician at Starfleet Medical in San Francisco and transferred all the relevant information to his colleague.

"Dr. Al-Hosseini wants to see you on Wednesday, eleven o'clock sharp," he announced. "He also asked me to let you know that he has informed Commodore Belmonte of this appointment so that she..."
may remind you of it, lest you forget... do you have trouble keeping unpleasant appointments...?" He winked at Chris.

"I may have dodged a medical exam or two in the past," Chris admitted. "Not a big fan of hospitals or doctors... no offense."

"None taken, nobody really enjoys being injured or sick. But do me a favor and try to keep that appointment. And try to go light on the arm."

Chris nodded. "I'll do my best. Thank you, Dr. McCoy." He offered his uninjured hand to the younger man, who took it and held it for a few seconds before giving it a firm squeeze. His hand was warm, as was his smile.

"It's been a pleasure. And that's not something I tell every patient. Ask any of my colleagues, they'll gleefully tell you that I have a horrible bedside manner." His blue eyes were sincere. And too beautiful to forget. I'll remember you, Chris thought, probably longer and more fondly than I should.

"Likewise." His gaze dropped to the framed picture on McCoy's otherwise stark desk. A little girl, dark haired and blue eyed and grinning ear to ear.

"Your daughter?" he guessed.

McCoy smiled. "Yes, Joanna." Parental pride and love were obvious in his expression.

"She's a beautiful child. I hope she'll bring you much joy... and please don't take an axe to the first person who'll attempt to date her or offer her a job."

The doctor chuckled. "We'll see. Goodbye, Captain Pike. Have a safe trip home."

Chris held his gaze for a moment. "Goodbye."

Yes, I'll definitely remember you.
Irina Savinova had been a social worker for almost two decades, and she had been working with children for most of that time. One would have thought that she had seen it all, all the tragic, heart-breaking, unfair or simply ridiculous cases. One would have thought that her many years of experience would have taught her how to deal with lost hope, unrealistic expectations, disillusionment, anger, and fear.

One would have thought...

The boy was looking at her, his dark-eyed gaze unwavering. He was an adorable child, slight and frail looking, with blond curls and jug ears, and those troubled, innocent eyes.

He was also responsible for blowing up a state of the art chemistry lab, the former pride and joy of the local high school.

Irina crossed her arms in front of her chest and rested them on the table.

"Pavel Andreievich." She sighed.

The boy flinched. "Ye-es?" His high voice trembled.

"Do you know why we are here?"

"Because Anna and Evgeny don't want me anymore?" he guessed. He was a clever child... and therein lay the problem.

Irina nodded. "I am afraid so."

His lips quivered and he pressed them together tightly. Fighting back tears, she assumed. She reached out a hand and grasped his. "Pavel, dear... this is the second foster family we have placed you in. You seemed to get along well with them. Why didn't you listen to Anna and Evgeny when they told you what you were and were not allowed to do? I'm sure they didn't ask for unreasonable things. Or did they treat you any different than Piotr?"

He seemed to think about this for a moment, but then he shook his head. "No, but..."

"But...?"

"Piotr is... slow. I am not. Piotr doesn't ask questions or try things. He doesn't want to be an explorer. I do."

Irina hid a smile. Oh yes. He was also incredibly curious.

"I understand that, Pavel, but you are also an eight-year old boy. You need to listen when adults tell you to do or not to do something. Promise me you'll try to do that next time? It will make things a lot easier... for everybody."

Pavel nodded solemnly.
"Well, then. You can go and join the other children. You will stay here until I find another foster family for you. Maybe someone with a scientific background would be better, I am afraid Anna and Evgeny did not quite understand your need to know how everything works. But whatever happens, Pavel, you have to make an effort to fit in. And you are expressly forbidden to go anywhere near anything explosive ever again."

"Forever and always?" His eyes turned round.

She sighed. "Well - at least until you're old enough to anticipate the consequences of your actions. Which you won't be for many years to come."

"But..."

"Pavel. No buts. Now go, the others are playing hide and seek in the garden. If you ask them nicely, I'm sure they'll let you join."

He pulled a sour face, but obediently stood up and left the room.

With another deep sigh, Irina began to scour her database for a foster family better suited to Pavel Andreievich Chekov's unique needs.

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**February 2254, Atlanta, United States, Earth**

"Leonard," MT Leyna Dale said, sticking her head into his office, "do you have a patient scheduled for a consult? Because I just walked past reception and there's a guy there who seems pretty intent on seeing you, but Terence says there's nothing in your calendar."

Leonard looked up from the screen in front of him, frowning slightly. He couldn't remember having scheduled an appointment. "No, but maybe he's a regular." There were a few patients with long-term problems who were wont to drop in unannounced every now and then and a few who rushed to see him with minor health issues whenever their GP was out of reach. He got up. Whoever they were, it was best not to keep them waiting.

The reception area was spacious, open and bright. A few people, most likely relatives or friends of various patients, sat in comfortable chairs, reading or chatting with each other. Terence, the receptionist, was talking to the person Leonard had least expected to see.

Captain Christopher Pike. In full uniform.

"Well, this is a surprise," Leonard said, stepping around the reception desk to greet him. Pike looked up, a wry smile forming on his lips. His complexion was healthier than the last time they had met, he held his arm as if it had never been injured, and the uniform looked damn good on him. "I see you haven't run into any furious relatives lately," Leonard commented.

"Dr. McCoy," Pike said, offering his hand, "it's a pleasure to see you again. How are you?"

"That's usually my question. Good, thank you. I was under the impression you didn't like doctors or
hospitals. What changed your mind?"

Pike grinned. "I am tempted to say 'you', but then, you don't flirt with patients. So I'll be blunt - it's all business. I need a medical consult and your name came up."

Leonard didn't believe a word he said. He didn't believe the first part of the statement because it was better for his peace of mind, and he didn't believe the second because it was highly improbable.

"Let's step into my office, shall we?" he asked.

"Of course."

Pike followed him, and Leonard asked him to take a seat while he fetched two cups of coffee from the tea kitchen. He set both down on his desk and slid into his own chair.

"So," he said, eyeing Pike curiously, "my name came up."

"Indeed." Pike took a sip of coffee. "You see, I never forget a face, or an interesting conversation. And I am terribly curious about people I meet. It's why I'm so good at my job. I meet people, I research their background, and I find out what makes them special, what they can do better than others. And you, Dr. McCoy, have been holding out on me when we first met. I had no idea I was talking to one of the most talented physicians of his generation. You not only hold a degree in medicine, but also in psychology and despite your youth, you've published two ground-breaking papers and a dozen articles that have received high praise within the medical community. My physician at Starfleet Medical was in raptures, when he learnt who had treated me and flat-out asked me to recruit you for Starfleet."

Leonard flinched inwardly. Of course. He had had an inkling something like this might be behind the unexpected visit.

"No thanks."

To his surprise, Pike smiled. "Just as I thought. Don't worry, it's not the primary focus of my visit. As I said, I need a consult. It's about one of my recruits."

Leonard raised his brows. "Oh? But Starfleet has doctors and other medical experts, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Of course. But it's a sensitive matter and they are... biased."

"Don't tell me you've found your white elephant. The Kelvin Baby?"

Pike shook his head. "Sadly, no. But there is a Russian kid who managed to baffle the local intelligenzia with his skills. A retired Starfleet officer came across him, took an interest and reported him. I am sure the reports are somewhat exaggerated, but even if they are, he is one damn clever kid. There are, however, several issues."

"Such as?"

Pike sighed and folded his hands on the desk. "He is an orphan, he has a criminal record, and he is currently serving time at a correctional facility for youths. It has also been hinted at that there might be psychological problems."

"Sounds like prime material for a Starfleet cadet," Leonard remarked drily.
Pike looked up at him, his face very serious. "Everybody deserves a second chance."

"Okay. So you want to go to Russia and have a look at him. Why do you need me?"

"As I said, there may be psychological problems. But I do not have the training to determine that. Furthermore, if I do decide to recruit him, and if I can wrangle him out of the claws of the local authorities, I need a medical expert to certify that he is both mentally and physically capable of facing Starfleet training, and no Starfleet doctor is going to risk his reputation on a case like this. The boy is thirteen, and he has spent the last eight years of his life in foster care and state run institutions. Moreover, he is responsible for some serious property damage and charges of bodily injury caused by negligence, breaking and entering, and espionage have been raised against him. Most of those were dropped, given his tender age, but nevertheless, he does appear to have authority issues."

Leonard watched at him for a long moment. *He's not serious, is he? Oh. Well. Maybe he is. Damn...* "You are nuts," he slowly said. "That has to be the craziest recruitment decision you have ever made. And you cannot recruit a thirteen year old for Starfleet, it's just wrong. He's a child!"

"First of all, I haven't made my decision yet," Pike stated calmly. "And second - watch me."

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Dr. Leonard McCoy looked decidedly unhappy when he met Chris at the shuttleport two days later. He was also quite possibly the only man Chris had ever met to still be devastatingly handsome while frowning. In his experience, it was usually only women who managed to reconcile good looks with bad temper.

"Well," the doctor said. "Here I am. Although I'll be damned if I know why. I have a job, and colleagues who are mad at me for leaving on such short notice. My wife hates me for just running off to God-knows-where. I still think you're nuts for doing this and I'm pretty sure I don't approve of the idea of a thirteen year old boy joining Starfleet. Last but not least, I have a mortal fear of things that fly. Remind me again why I'm doing this?"

Chris laughed, he simply couldn't help it. McCoy's grumpiness was very entertaining. His laughter earned him a glare, which he ignored nonchalantly. "You are here, because I can be very persuasive. It's part of my charm. But let me say that I very much appreciate your willingness to help me out here."

McCoy grumbled something under his breath.

"Come on." Chris slapped his shoulder and drew him towards the waiting shuttle.

They were shown to their seats by a uniformed attendant. Chris smiled faintly when he wasn't asked whether he was familiar with the safety procedures. His own uniform was a dead giveaway.

Next to him, his companion was buckling up with the grim expression of a man going into combat.

During his long career, Chris had been a flight instructor for a few months, killing time between assignments. He hadn't taught Starfleet's future pilots, even though he was a good one himself, but rather given basic flight training that was required for many career paths and positions. Those few months had taught him that there appeared to be a correlation between good sense and the
enthusiasm of his students. Those who had a measure of good sense were usually a lot less enthusiastic and tended to worry a lot more at the prospect of piloting a shuttle. Of course, they were also the ones less likely to cause accidents.

Leonard McCoy, judging from his blatantly unenthusiastic expression, was a very sensible and careful man. Good qualities in a doctor, obviously. You wouldn't want your doctor to be reckless and unconcerned with proper procedures.

"If I were to recruit you for Starfleet," Chris said conversationally, "I'd have to handpick your flight instructor."

"Starfleet teaches its doctors to fly these things?" McCoy sounded appalled. "Why?"

"It probably seems like a criminal waste of talent to you, but many Starfleet doctors receive command training. Rudimentary piloting skills are a requirement. The Chief Medical Officer is one of the most important people aboard a starship or station. When it comes to medical decisions, he or she outranks the Captain - and I've known more than one CMO who has had to assume command responsibilities when other officers were incapacitated. In addition to their medical duties, obviously."

"I guess that makes sense," McCoy grudgingly admitted. For some reason, that statement made Chris feel like he had won a small victory.

*Careful now, don't get your hopes up. He has expressly stated that he has no wish to join Starfleet.*

Which was a crying shame, of course. McCoy would have been quite a catch, his recruitment a decision nobody could doubt.

*Well, maybe in time...*

He was still considering possible arguments that might sway his travelling companion towards a more favorable opinion of Starfleet, when a sudden turbulence caused the shuttle to bolt and execute a brief, stomach-churning drop.

"Not to worry, everyone," the pilot's cheery voice announced through the speakers, "we have run into a little patch of bad weather, but everything's perfectly safe, just a bump in the road."

Chris glanced at the doctor, who had turned pale and did not seem the least bit reassured by this announcement.

"She's right," Chris said, "there's really nothing to worry about. These things are space-approved, and built to withstand conditions far worse than anything you would find on Earth. Even if our charming pilot and her co-pilot suddenly experienced a simultaneous heart attack, the autopilot would take over and put the shuttle down at the nearest safe landing site."

His words were in vain, because just then, another turbulence jostled the shuttle around. Chris knew from personal experience that those felt far worse than they actually were, but doubted that knowledge would comfort McCoy. His breaths came rapid and shallow now and there was a thin sheen of sweat covering his front.

*He's hyperventilating. Great.*

"Hey, look at me." Hand on his shoulder. It was difficult to turn in his seat, the straps and buckles effectively preventing him from moving out of it. McCoy had that distinctive 'dying fish on dry land' look about him. His fingers dug into Chris' arm, grasping for support, for something to hold onto.
The shuttle did another little jump, then drifted quietly into calmer weather.

"It's okay," Chris said, voice deliberately soothing. "We're out of the worst."

Or so he hoped...

McCoy blinked, gasped and began to calm down a little bit. His breathing evened, the taut muscles relaxed, but he was still gripping Chris' arm. He had a strong grip, it would leave bruises.

He cursed quietly, words too soft for Chris to catch and still breathless. Then his gaze drifted down to his hand and he seemed to realize that it was possibly inappropriate to clutch the arm of your travel companion and former patient. He removed his hand, seemingly embarrassed.

"Oh God, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I won't tell, and you aren't the first. People get scared of any number of things, from mice to elevators."

McCoy took a deep breath. "I... well... thanks, I guess."

"Don't mention it."

February 2254, Chelyabinsk, Russia, Earth

"Remind me never to break any laws around here," Leonard muttered when they entered the 'correctional facility' where Pavel Andreievich Chekov was currently being held. "This place is ghastly."

Pike nodded his agreement, while still looking around.

"The Ivan Petrovich Pavlov Youth Institute? That's a joke, right? Somebody's really twisted sense of humor...?"

"Possibly," Pike said. "Or just twisted, without the humor."

"How long has he been here?" Leonard asked.

"About two months. It's supposed to be temporary, while they figure out what to do with him next. There's still an ongoing trial, but he is unlikely to be convicted, according to his lawyer. Lack of evidence and intent, the only thing they can prove is negligence, and well, he's a boy of thirteen. We will meet the lawyer inside."

They followed a uniformed guard through stark, whitewashed hallways. The place was eerily quiet, only once when they passed a courtyard where a game of soccer was being played under strict supervision they saw and heard some of the youthful occupants.

The guard led them into a small, bleak room insufficiently lit by artificial light. A thin, grey-haired
man sat at a table and rose when they got up. The lawyer. He introduced himself as Mikhail Kamarov.

"Pavel should be here any moment," he said, eyeing both of them curiously. "So... Starfleet really has an interest in him...?" He sounded somewhat incredulous.

"We'll see," Pike said. "For now, I have taken an interest. If I find that he is promising, I'll make sure that Starfleet does, too. Has anyone told him why we are here?"

"The social worker, Ms. Savinova. She mentioned it to him, but she warned him not to get his hopes up. You know how boys that age are, though... and it's Starfleet." The lawyer shrugged almost apologetically. "But he really is an exceptionally bright boy. That's part of the problem, I'm afraid. Most people don't understand what he's saying half the time, and he makes them uncomfortable. He isn't a bad kid, he just doesn't think about the consequences of his actions. He isn't mean-spirited or violent, just very impulsive."


"I feel sorry for him. He never had much of a chance. He lost his mother when he was five, drug overdose, possible suicide. The father was known, but never in the picture. Died in a mining accident when Pavel was three. No surviving relatives. Four foster families, all of them gave up on him pretty soon. Ms. Savinova is his state-appointed legal guardian now." The lawyer sighed. "He makes friends easily, but has trouble keeping them. He is simply too smart to play well with children his age. The only thing he ever excelled at is his schoolwork - you should see his test scores and his teachers' evaluations, they are in raptures." He looked up. "That's why you are here, right?"

Pike nodded. "I have seen the test results. If they are real, and I presume they are, he is quite possibly the smartest thirteen-year old on the planet. There is no telling what he could do with proper training and education. And if he can overcome his other issues, Starfleet may provide both."

Just then, the door swung open to admit another guard and the subject of their conversation, followed by a small woman of indeterminate age. Probably the legal guardian.

Leonard studied the boy. He was thin and small for his age, and visibly nervous but alert. His eyes were dark, inquisitive and wide open. A head of curly hair and rather prominent jug ears, and a sprinkle of freckles on his pale face - he looked perfectly sweet, childlike, and innocent.

"Pavel," the lawyer said, "I want you to meet Captain Christopher Pike and Dr. Leonard McCoy. Captain Pike, Dr. McCoy, this is Pavel Chekov. And his legal guardian Irina Savinova."

They shook hands. The boy's hands were clammy and his handshake brief. Leonard smiled at him reassuringly. Poor kid. He seemed overwhelmed by all of this.

"Hello Pavel," Pike said evenly. "It's nice to finally meet you. People kept telling me about you, so I got curious."

Pavel eyed him with wary curiosity. "This is a test, right?" He had an audible accent, but his English was pretty good.

"No, this is a meeting. When I test you, I'll let you know beforehand."

"Are you really a Starfleet captain?" Pavel asked.

"No, I'm a hairdresser in disguise," Pike deadpanned. They both grinned.
"Do you have a ship?"

"Not currently. My last ship was decommissioned and I'm stationed in San Francisco at the moment."

Pavel looked slightly disappointed at that. "I would like to see a starship," he said. "For real, I mean. We saw some at the museum on a class trip, but they were very old."

"Was that the class trip where you hacked into the board computer of a shuttle and caused it to play Yellow Submarine?" Pike asked mildly.

Pavel blushed. "The other kids were bored. I wanted to do something funny for them."

"Oh, dear Lord..." Leonard muttered and silently vowed never to get into anything that could fly with Pavel Chekov. He caught Pike grinning at him. It was downright evil.

Pike continued his conversation with Pavel, asking him about school, hobbies, his plans for the future. Pavel answered openly and asked a lot of questions about Starfleet in return.

They left when Pavel was called to lunch, with a promise to return the next day.

"Well...?" Pike asked Leonard in the hallway.

Leonard shrugged. "What do you want me to say? He's a nice kid. No outward signs of trauma and developmental problems, but then, it is hard to judge somebody from an hour of light conversation. They are bound to have a psychologist on staff here, and if so, I'd like to talk to them. Also to the social worker, she has known him for years. And if you want me to do a full medical exam of the boy..."

"I do," Pike said. "It's imperative."

"Well, then. Get me half a day at whatever medical facility they have in this place and let's hope Pavel isn't afraid of doctors."

As it turned out, he wasn't. Nor of much else, it seemed.

He followed Leonard's lead docile enough and seemed genuinely interested in how the medical equipment used to examine him worked.

Leonard shooed Pike out at the beginning of the exam.

"This is private," he told the captain sternly. "You get to see the results, but since you are neither a patient nor a parent, you don't get to stay."

"I don't mind," Pavel chirped.

"Well, I do," Leonard replied and closed the door behind the pouting captain. Pavel chuckled. "I think you made him mad."
Leonard shrugged. "He'll live. He's just not used to not getting his way, Starfleet captain and all."

"Are you also in Starfleet?"

"God, no. I work at a regular hospital. I'm only here because somebody persuaded me to do him a favor." He threw a glance at the door. When he looked back at Pavel, the boy was grinning at him. "You like him."

"Absolutely not."

"Yeah, you do. Is this going to hurt?"

"No, I promise." Leonard checked the charts he had received from the attending physician. "Okay, it says here that you've had all your vaccinations and scheduled exams. Have you ever been really sick?"

Pavel shook his head.

"Broken any bones?"

"My left arm, a finger, and my right leg."

"That's what it says in your file, anything else?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe a toe? People say you sometimes don't even realize it when you break a toe."

Leonard examined his toes, mostly to humor him. "They seem fine to me. Do you ever get headaches?"

"I hit my head against a wall a while ago, does that count?"

"No. Of course your head would hurt after hitting it. Did you trip over something?"

"Something like that," Pavel said noncommittally and a sixth sense schooled in medical school raised its head within Leonard. He made a mental note.

"Any allergies?"

Pavel shook his head. "I hate vanilla, but unfortunately, I'm not allergic. They make me eat the vanilla pudding anyway. It's vile." He looked at Leonard hopefully. "Could you maybe note in my file that I'm allergic to vanilla?"

Leonard laughed. "Sorry kid, no tampering with your medical file."

He proceeded to ask Pavel a number of questions, but they all matched what he found in the file and gave the picture of an overall healthy boy. He was small for his age, but it was no cause for concern. There were no indicators for inherited conditions, his hearing and eyesight were good and his reflexes normal. So far, from a medical point of view, things looked good for Pavel Chekov.

Leonard attached a monitoring device and had him run and jump about the room for a little while. "I feel silly," Pavel complained.

"That's why I sent everybody else outside," Leonard said. "Okay, you can stop now. Everything's fine." He waited for Pavel to return to him than said: "This is probably going to embarrass you, but it's part of the exam. I need to ask you to undress."
Pavel frowned, but then he shrugged. "Okay."

He took off his clothing and let it drop to the floor with all the careless negligence of a teenage boy. Leonard smiled.

His smile froze when he saw the bruises. They were half-healed, a greenish-yellow color, but still quite visible.

"Pavel...? Did you get into a fight with somebody...?"

"Huh? Oh that..." Feigned innocence. "No, we were playing basketball."

*Lie.*

"Are you sure? Because those aren't the kind of bruises you get from playing basketball. They are in the wrong places, for one."

Pavel closed up like a clam. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I'm not here to judge, Pavel," Leonard told him. "You are not going to get in trouble, because I'm a doctor and if you tell me something and you don't want me to tell anybody else, I won't."

"But you'll put it in my file."

"Not necessarily," Leonard said carefully. "Only if it's medically relevant. So... did you get into a fight?"

"It's stupid," Pavel sniffed. "It was the other boys, some of the older ones, Mik and Vanya and Andrej. They think they can bully me because I'm small and I'm new here. Also, they don't like that I'm smarter than them."

Leonard nodded. It wasn't exactly unexpected. "Did they push you when you hit your wall?"

"Uh... maybe...?"

"Did you tell anyone?"

Pavel shook his head. "No, it's no use. The guards only get angry when they hear about fights, they don't want us to be fighting. Or they put you in solitary, and that's boring. Most of the other kids are okay, it's just those three." He frowned. "They are bullies. And strange. They ask funny questions... and they get mad when you don't answer. But I don't know what to say, most of the time."

*Funny questions.* Leonard had a bad feeling about this. "What did they ask?"

Pavel turned beet red. "If I had ever slept with a girl. I said no, and they said 'so you like boys', and I said no again, I don't care. And then they said that I was weird, and that they would show me..."

His bad feeling had been spot on. Damn.

Do not storm out of the room and demand to see the director of this facility, do not storm out of the room and...

"Did they?" Please say 'no', kid.

Pavel looked at the floor. "I guess."
"Pavel... it's okay if you don't want to tell me anything else, but this I need to know - did they hurt you?"

"Mik hit me, but that was another time. It was after my team had won the soccer match. And Vanya pushed me and I hit the wall. That hurt. My head was bleeding. The other stuff... it didn't hurt. It was just gross." He grimaced. "I'm pretty sure that's not how it's supposed to be. They were doing it wrong."

You have no idea of just how wrong, Pavel...

Leonard took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. Well, those bruises are almost healed. They'll be gone in a little while. You can put your clothes back on now. And Pavel - promise me that the next time somebody hits you, or says something bad to you, or does something you don't want, you'll tell the guards."

Pavel looked dubious. "They won't listen."

"Oh yes, they will. Trust me, I'll make sure of that."

"I don't want get in trouble."

"And you won't. Trust me."

"Okay... but I passed, right? The medical exam?"

Leonard forced himself to smile. "Yes, you did, Pavel. And I might even make a note regarding the vanilla thing."

Right after I inform Pike, your lawyer, your legal guardian, and the local authorities of the fact that you've been bullied and abused, that is.

"I'll see you soon, then. Off you go."

Chris Pike had seen many angry men in his time, but he couldn't remember the last time he had seen anybody as angry as McCoy when he returned from his examination of Pavel Chekov. He was positively trembling with barely suppressed fury.

"I don't care how you do it, but you have to get that kid out of this place, now."

"Okay," Chris said slowly, rising from his chair and eyeing him warily. "Back off a bit. What happened?"

"Your teenage prodigy is being abused by some of the other kids, and it seems that nobody is doing a damn thing about it. It's something that happens fairly frequently in places like this, so you'd think they'd be on the lookout, but no. Too much of an inconvenience, dealing with abused kids and kids who abuse others."

Chris felt his stomach drop at the implications. "Please tell me you're exaggerating because you are angry."
"No. I don't trifle with stuff like that. In plain terms: Pavel Chekov has been bullied, beaten, and almost certainly abused sexually in some way or another, even though he wouldn't go into detail on that, not that I blame him."

Chris froze. A wave of nausea hit him at the thought of Pavel, little Pavel, barely more than a child really... no. Just no. His fingers dug into the palm of his hand as he balled it to a fist almost unconsciously. Always the weak ones. Always the ones who couldn't defend themselves, because they were too young, too small, too scared.

He understood McCoy's anger now, because he felt it himself.

"Just how bad...?"

McCoy shrugged. "As I said, he didn't go into detail and I didn't press the matter. I was afraid of doing more harm than good. Since he explicitly stated that he hadn't been hurt, and he exhibits none of the behavioral signs of a child who has been raped, or who has been abused over a longer period of time, I'd say that it was probably an isolated incident and it was a 'milder' form of sexual abuse... if there is ever a 'mild' form, that is. But it's a guess, I'm no specialist and he didn't say much."

Chris desperately wanted to punch something, to let out some of the rage and disgust he felt. It seemed like a bad idea, though.

"The lawyer and the guardian have to be told. Now."

McCoy nodded. "He should be separated from the others until we can get him out. Or at least from the older boys."

"That won't be an issue, because I will have him out of this place by nightfall," Chris said grimly.

And he held word.

That evening, a surprised but happy Pavel found himself leaving the facility in the company of Irina Savinova, Chris and McCoy.

They sat in a whitewashed waiting room, not unlike the one at the correctional facility, but less stark, and Pavel was fidgeting in his chair.

"How much longer until they have the results?"

Chris smiled. "Any moment now. Give the computer some time to calculate, Pavel. Not everybody is as fast as you."

"The computer should be long done by now, it's people who are slow," Pavel said. He was many things, but patient wasn't one of them.

"This is just a preliminary test," Chris reminded him. "It's not the real thing yet. It's mostly to help me prove my point to Starfleet."

"But it is the real test, right?" Pavel said.
Chris nodded. "Yes. The written part of last year's entrance exam."

McCoy had called him crazy when he had arranged for Pavel to take the test.

"He's thirteen."

"He can do it."

The discovery that Pavel had been abused had forced their hand. There was no question that he had to be removed from the correctional facility, and in Chris' opinion, the best way of doing that was to recommend him to Starfleet's care. Since the medical exam, the conversations with his guardian and the psychologist at the institution had all cast a favorable light on Pavel, his prospects were good. The only real issue at hand was his tender age.

"Are the oral and the physical exams very hard?" Pavel asked.

"The physical, not so much. If you are in good health and not a complete couch potato, you'll be able to pass. It's only the entrance exam, after all. There are others afterwards, if you choose certain career paths. But we can't let you take that, because it is aimed at people who are fully grown. The interviews can be challenging. They ask you all sorts of questions, and it's not just about knowledge."

Pavel looked slightly worried.

"Relax, kid. You won't be taking any of those exams anytime soon, no matter how smart you are. The earliest they are going to let you try is when you turn fifteen and even that is only a tentative 'maybe' I managed to wrangle out of the Academy Board."

Before Pavel could reply anything, the door to the next room opened and a woman in Starfleet uniform wandered out of it. She had a dreamy look on her face and wore the rank insignia of a lieutenant.

"Incredible," she said, her eyes darting to Pavel and back. "He passed it. With a 96% score. That's 10 points above the average of our last class accepted into the Academy."

Chris grinned ear to ear. "See, I told you," he said to Pavel, who was beaming.

"It shouldn't be possible," the lieutenant said.

"Maybe the test is too easy," Chris joked.

She frowned. "Hardly." And with another glance at Pavel: "Exceptional. I should love to run some further tests..."

"No. No turning him into a lab rat," Chris protested. "We know now that he can do it, that's enough. Can you send me a copy of the results? I'd like to present them to the Board as soon as possible."

"Of course." She nodded, then she turned to Pavel. "You'll do remarkable things," she told him.

Pavel blushed.

They celebrated that night with black forest cake - Pavel's choice - and discussed the future. Or rather, the adults did, Pavel himself was too excited to really contribute to the decision. He would have gone along with anything.

"I talked to the Academy Board this afternoon," Chris said, "and they are willing to set him up with a
scholarship. It's not unprecedented. Occasionally we get cadets with little or no formal education, or cadets who lack in certain areas of training, and Starfleet enrolls them in preliminary programs. There are also scholarships for children of Starfleet members or former Starfleet members, mainly for those whose parents have died in service. His scholarship would be something of a cross between those two. There is a boarding school in San Francisco, where some of the scholarship students are enrolled and they would be willing to take Pavel. Language won't be a problem, even though he should probably get a tutor for his written English."

"That sounds excellent," Irina Savinova said. "But it is very far away, and he knows nobody there."

Chris nodded. "I understand, but most of the other students there will be in the same situation. He should have no trouble finding friends there, because they all can relate. And the staff are trained to deal with those issues."

"Well," she said with a sigh, "I suppose it isn't much different from going to live with a foster family. You never know how it will turn out." She turned to Pavel. "What do you think, Pasha? Do you want to go?"

"Yes!" He was more than enthusiastic. "Of course I do!"

"Well, it's your choice. I certainly won't stop you, it sounds like a good opportunity."

"There should be no legal issues," Mikhail Kamarov cut in. "The charges have been dropped. If Ms. Savinova as his legal guardian agrees, he is free to go."

"Well, in that case, there's a shuttle flight to San Francisco in the morning," Chris said, mostly to Pavel. "I'll accompany you, to make sure you arrive safely and get settled in, and also to deal with the paperwork."

"I'll come along," McCoy, who had been quiet all along, announced. "I'd like to have a word with the school’s medical team and I'd like to introduce Pavel to Dr. Karima Favell. She'll be your therapist."

Pavel pulled a face. "Do I have to?"

"Yes," McCoy said. "But don't worry, you'll like her. She's a former classmate of mine from medical school; she is a chess genius and she solves mathematical equations for fun. The two of you should get along very well. Also, she knows an astonishing number of horribly bad jokes, you should make her tell you some."

"Okay, then." Pavel said with a shrug, apparently reassured.

Chris sent McCoy a smile and a mouthed 'thank you' behind his back.

Pavel took an instant liking to his new school, and the feeling appeared to be mutual, if the first reactions from his teachers and roommates were anything to go by. They had him grouped him together with three other children his age, another boy and two girls. One of the girls was also the recipient of a Starfleet scholarship.
Leonard's prediction about Dr. Favell also turned out to be true, Pavel did indeed get along well with her and she complimented Leonard on finally finding her a worthy opponent for her chess games.

"He's in good hands," he told Pike when they had dropped Pavel off at the therapist's office.

"I don't doubt it. I just wish there was no need for this." His face was dark as he said it. Leonard knew that he still struggled with the condition the Russian facility had set for Pavel's instant release - nondisclosure. Pavel was free to go, so long as the institution's reputation wouldn't be sullied by the insinuation that they didn't take proper care of their wards. Which meant that there would be no investigation, no trial, and that the offenders would go free, possibly endangering others.

Irina Savinova had promised to pay close attention, and she was well-connected within her community, but would it be enough to save other children from suffering similar horrors as Pavel?

"It feels like a deal with the devil," Pike said.

"Let's concentrate on the good that's come out of it," Leonard suggested. "Pavel is safe and obviously quite happy." And after a moment's pause he added: "You are aware of the fact that you pretty much adopted a child, aren't you?"

"That may be a bit of an exaggeration," Pike protested mildly, "I'm not going to raise him."

"...no?" Leonard asked with a smile. "You went out and selected a backpack and school materials with him yesterday and you spent two hours watching him decide on shoes and clothes. Which, by the way is more than I ever managed with my daughter without calling her mother for help. If that's not parental, tell me what is. Besides, if Pavel decides that you are going to be his new father figure, there's only so much you can do about that. And at the moment he worships the ground you walk on."

Pike looked startled and somewhat alarmed at the thought. "I never thought about it that way..."

"Well. Start thinking, because it's happening," Leonard noticed his expression, laughed and slapped his shoulder. "It seems terrifying at first, but it's not so bad. Children are actually a lot of fun."

"I'll take your word for it. This is... a bit sudden."

"So far, you're doing fine. Speaking of children, though, I need to get back to my own family." He missed Joanna. Jocelyn not so much, because he knew that she was going to throw a fit once he got home and he already dreaded it.

"Of course," Pike said. "Don't let me keep you. I owe you enough as it is."

"No you don't," Leonard said firmly. "It was my pleasure... well, everything except the shuttle ride, that is."

Pike grinned. "I could teach you to fly."

"I think you'd be more likely to teach a turtle to fly than me. No thanks."

"I was serious about Starfleet, though," Pike said. "If you want it, there'll always be a spot open for you."

Leonard bit his tongue and reminded himself that this was a friendly, and probably a generous offer. "I have a family, Captain Pike."
"And I have a first name. Use it. Please. Too many people don't."


Pike took it. "Chris. Should be easy to remember, no?"

"Easier if you keep in touch. I'll be interested to hear about Pavel's progress and I expect to be invited to the party when he gets accepted into the Academy."

"It's a date."

That grin. It was completely disarming, and it would probably haunt him.
Uncommon and Unusual

Messages (Excerpt)

February 18th, 2254

Chris: Hope you got home safely and with no further turbulences. Pavel says hi. He had his first day of classes today and enjoyed it. Take care.

February 22nd, 2254

Leonard: Thanks, I'm glad I won't see the inside of a shuttle for a while. I told Joanna about Pavel and now she wants to join Starfleet, too. I'll talk her out of it. And you do not get to meet her before she has chosen a more appropriate profession and committed herself to an Earth-bound life.

Chris: Your fear of Starfleet is irrational. We are not the enemy. Somebody has to protect the Federation's interests in space, don't they?

Leonard: Throughout the history of mankind, 'protecting one's interests' has always been code for terrorizing one's neighbors, oppressing opposition, committing any kind of crime, and generally ignoring other people's rights and boundaries. Just saying.

Chris: Man, you're hostile. Starfleet's mission is peacekeeping, among other things.

Leonard: Yet another euphemism...

Chris: What are you, an anarchist?

Leonard: It's not personal, Chris. I like you. I'm just not very fond of what you do.

March 1st, 2254

Chris: I took Pavel and one of his classmates to the shipyard last week. They charmed the engineers into letting them climb all over one of the ships and we ended up searching for them for three hours. We found them on the bridge and Pavel had just fixed a computer glitch that was causing the ship to stray off course. Sometimes he scares me.

Leonard: I'm trying not to laugh at that and failing miserably. Tell him I said hi.

April 12th, 2254

Chris: Pavel won the school's chess tournament today. Seems like his sessions with Dr. Favell are paying off. I don't know what else they talk about, but they seem to be playing a lot of chess.

Leonard: Glad to hear that. Karima doesn't tell me much, obviously, but she's very fond of him. I'm happy he found somebody he can talk to. He needs that.

Chris: He does. He talks to me, too, but it's different... there are some things he won't share, because
he's embarrassed, or scared, or he just can't put them into words. And I'm new to this whole thing.

**Leonard:** Seems like you're doing fine, though.

April 24th, 2254

**Leonard:** We enrolled Joanna in kindergarten today. Instead of a pony, she now wants a starship. Talk about dreaming big... I was going to tell her about all the possible things that can go horribly wrong in space, but my wife was against it. How is Pavel doing?

May 17th, 2254

**Chris:** I believe Pavel has a crush on his biology teacher. Is that normal at his age? She's at least thirty!

May 28th, 2254

**Leonard:** Joanna still wants a starship. I helped her build a model ship, and now she's trying to get it to fly around the yard. She keeps hitting the cherry tree, though. I don't think my daughter is going to be a pilot.

July 2nd, 2254

**Leonard:** My wife thinks I'm having an affair.

**Chris:** Oh? Do tell. With whom?

**Leonard:** With you! I showed her all your messages to ease her fears, I hope you don't mind. Don't ask me where that idea came from. How's Pavel?

**Chris:** Pavel is fine. Looking forward to the holidays, I promised to take him hiking. He needs a bit of fresh air. Please give my regards to your wife and tell her that I am far too busy to steal her husband. Otherwise, I wouldn't be averse to the idea.

August 3rd, 2254

**Chris:** I may have a lead on Jim Kirk. Sam called me. Apparently, he's in Iowa.

September 11th, 2254

**Leonard:** I heard about the earthquake in SF last night. Are you okay?

**Chris:** I'm okay. Just property damage. But I was going to move out anyway. Did I tell you? I found a house. It has a backyard with a pond and Pavel is inexplicably fond of the frogs there. That's not the reason I'm getting the house, though.

**Leonard:** Are you absolutely sure? He has you wrapped around his little finger.

September 24th, 2254

**Leonard:** How's the house hunt going? Have you already moved in?

**Chris:** Yes. It's too big, but I like it. Seems a bit empty, though. But that's going to change. I asked the family court and Irina Savinova to award me guardianship of Pavel and they did, so he's going to live with me. I think Dr. Favell's recommendation helped a lot with that. She's great.
Leonard: That's great, Chris. I'm happy for both of you.

November 7th, 2254

Leonard: Have you found your white elephant?

Chris: Sadly, no. He slipped through my fingers again.

December 24th, 2254

Leonard: Merry Christmas!

Chris: Merry Christmas, Leonard.

December 31st, 2254

Chris: I can't believe tomorrow we'll be in 2255. There goes another year. This one was pretty good, though. Happy New Year, Leonard. I'm attaching a picture of Pavel trying to set the house on fire (he claims he was going to create fireworks, but I believe he just wants something to explode).

January 1st 2255

Leonard: Happy New Year. I hope Pavel hasn't burned down the house. Jo slept right through the fireworks. She'll be upset tomorrow. Jocelyn left to go to a party with her girlfriends, and I'm staying with Jo to prove a point... I believe she still suspects me of having an affair. Don't ask me with whom it's supposed to be this time. I don't get it.

... 

(later that day) Leonard: Hey Chris, it's Leonard. I can't find my phone anymore, but PLEASE delete any messages I may have sent you last night. I was drunk and I have a horrible feeling that I wrote quite a bit of nonsense. I can't remember what it was, but please accept a blanket apology.

Chris: It was actually pretty sweet. I feel flattered.

Leonard: Shit, what did I write...?

Chris: You seem to have a thing for uniforms, I'll file that bit of information away for later use... I happen to own a few, as you know.

Chris: You're an adorable drunk, you know. Most people get either boring or whiny. I may be developing a crush on drunk-you.

Leonard: Oh my God... stop it, please.

Chris: Relax. It could be worse. You could have drunk-texted your mother-in-law.

Chris: On the off chance that your wife knows your password, you might want to delete the entire conversation, though.

Leonard: Oh, don't worry, I will!
"Karima, hi, it's Leonard. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Leonard! No, not at all." He could almost hear her smiling. "Are you calling to ask about Pavel? He's doing great."

"I know, Chris and I keep in touch, and Pavel's usually the subject of conversation. I'm glad, though."

"So, what can I do for you...?" It was a leading question. Leonard frowned at the phone.

"It's... well, I need to ask you something. I didn't know whom else to call. Jocelyn and I are fighting."

"Oh dear. What about?"

"She thinks I'm cheating on her."

"Are you?" Karima asked bluntly.

Leonard sighed. "I don't know."

"That sounds like a very interesting story, Len. Do tell. I have lots of time."

"Uh... thanks." Leonard did not quite know where to begin. "Is it cheating when I've formed an emotional attachment to somebody else, but nothing more? I still love Jocelyn. I'm not in a relationship with the other person, there's no sex involved and I'm not even sure it's mutual."

"I'm inclined to say 'no', but I don't know the whole story. What happened?"

*Good question, really.* He wasn't too sure about it himself. "I... met somebody a while ago. We had an interesting conversation and I guess we somehow formed a connection. We met again last year when he asked me for a favor. We've been in touch ever since... as friends, I guess. Most of it is just friendly banter and talk about the kids. I never expected it to turn into... more. It just doesn't fit, you know? Our lives are so different. But he's... I can't describe it. I admire him. He is clever, witty, has a good sense of humor. He is incredibly loyal and committed to his job and to the boy he's raising. It's just... well, I guess what it comes down to is that he makes me laugh and feel that I can share anything with him, and Jocelyn doesn't. Not at the moment. She is acting so strange lately. She quit job and I thought it would make her happier, because she hated it. I asked her if she wants to go back to university, or pursue an entirely different career and I told her that I'd fully support her choice, but she's undecided. Right now, she's not doing anything. She said she wanted to quit her job to spend more time with Joanna, but she's actually spending less time with her, she's always out and about with friends, or at the gym or some event or another. It's gotten to the point where Jo came to me and asked me why 'Mummy never wants to play or go to the pool'. And Jocelyn is always at me for spending too much time at work and too little with them, but when I make time for a family trip or something, she always tells me she has other plans..." All his frustration poured out with those words, and he felt a little bit guilty about loading it all on Karima, but he supposed she was used to it. Family counseling was one of her specialties.
After a brief moment of contemplation, Karima said: "Len... Jocelyn and you have been having problems pretty much since you got married, and that was while you were still in med school. You are very different people, it was to be expected that there would be difficulties, but what marriage doesn't face those? You got married mainly because of Joanna, right?"

"That too," he admitted. "We would probably have waited a bit longer if Jocelyn hadn't gotten pregnant then. But we wanted to get married, be a family. And I still want that. I think Jocelyn does, too."

"Okay. Maybe you should think about counseling. You don't seem to communicate well with each other at the moment."

"I suggested it, but she doesn't want to. What upsets me most is that Jo is starting to notice that something's wrong. And I don't want that. I don't want our problems troubling her, it's unfair."

"Children are very perceptive," Karima said. "You can't hide those things from her. But I think you should sit down and talk to Jocelyn. And maybe before that, you should try to figure out what you really want. We have a propensity to lie to ourselves, because it's easy. We tend to stick with what we know, trying to hold on to things we wanted yesterday."

"I want to be with my family," Leonard said, annoyed at himself because it sounded stubborn. "I want things to be alright again."

"Don't we all." Karima sighed. "I'm sorry, I can't offer any better advice from afar. You'll have to figure it out for yourself. Just one more thing, Len..."

"Yes?"

"Do I happen to know the person you are not seeing?"

April 2255, San Francisco, United States, Earth

Chris was watching Pavel clean the pond of old leaves and twigs to make it more habitable for the frogs and the newly added goldfish. His fascination with the small watery biotope had not diminished over the past months, but if it made him happy, Chris was happy to let him play there. He had few enough chances to be a child as it was, and his short childhood would be over if Starfleet was really going to let him join the ranks of their cadets when he turned fifteen.

Parenthood had snuck up on Chris and completely surprised him, but to his own astonishment, he appeared to be doing well. It was no less challenging than commanding a starship, but equally rewarding, if not more so. Before Pavel, the idea that something was missing from his life had been a vague feeling, something he pushed aside frequently by assuming a new task or drowning himself in work. Now he realized that he had indeed missed out on something... and he was glad to get a chance to catch up on it, no matter how unexpected.

Leonard's, Karima Favell's and Irina Savinova's advice had proven invaluable, but on the whole,
Pavel was not a difficult boy. He was eager to please in a slightly awkward, very endearing way, enthusiastic and easily excitable and friendly with almost anybody. He had quickly made friends among his classmates, even though it puzzled him that they often didn't understand what he was talking about. He was probably equally puzzling to them. Mary Ogambe, a Starfleet orphan who like Pavel enjoyed a scholarship, was a particular favorite. They were currently working on a chemistry project together that made Chris fear for the safety of the neighborhood, if not his life.

Thinking of Mary caused Chris to return to another 'lost' child. Though not really a child anymore.

*Jimmie would be twenty-one now. His birthday was in January.*

His birthday. The day the *Kelvin* had been destroyed, the day his father had died.

*More than twenty years since George died. It's hard to believe.*

And he still missed his friend. Chris had met George Kirk through Winona, who was an Academy classmate of his. They had played hockey and travelled to the desert together. That one glorious summer. Teaching George to ride - Winona and Chris had learnt as children - and laughing at his affronted look when he fell off the horse.

They had gotten married in fall, Chris as their best man.

He had been happy for them when he had heard that Winona was pregnant. George had been so proud.

*If only we had known then that he would never hold his son...*  

He remembered Winona with the baby, after their return to Earth. Pale as a ghost. A haunted look on her face, and asking him why, why George. Why him, who had had so much to hope and to live for? And Chris didn't have an answer. He hadn't had it then and he didn't have it now.

Winona had remarried seven years later, and he suspected it was mostly because she couldn't stand to be alone and hoped her new husband would help to keep George's shadow at bay. He wasn't a bad man, but he had little patience with George's hero status and the antics of little Jimmie, growing up in the knowledge that he was the survivor of a tragedy.

And Winona had sent Jimmie to live with her relatives on Tarsus IV...

"*It's for the best. He's not happy here. He will never have a normal life if people don't stop asking him about his father.*"

*Tarsus IV. A death trap.*

And Jimmie had survived it, miraculously.

The *Yorktown* had been one of the ships sent to investigate what had happened at the colony and to pick up any survivors they could find. Chris would never forget what he had seen there, the images had burned themselves into him and would darken his dreams until the end of his life. Carnage, destruction. The word 'genocide' had been uttered.

Those sallow, hungry faces. Bones sticking out at odd angles. The mass grave they had uncovered. Signs of torture, mutilation, cannibalism. Hunger turns people into animals. So does a lust for power.

Jimmie had seen it all, had lived through it, had disappeared.
"You'll never find him, if he doesn't want to be found," Sam had told him. "He doesn't trust people. Everybody is a stranger to him. He won't even go and see his mother. I think he blames her for what happened."

Other voices. His best friend, exasperated: "Why are you so obsessed with this boy? It can't be healthy. Stop looking, Chris. If he's lost, he's lost."

Winona, resigned: "I think he doesn't want to be found, Chris."

And George, in a dream: "Find my son. You owe him."

Finally Leonard: "I wish you good luck. Try not to run into any more angry men with axes as you search for your white elephant."

But Chris hadn't found him.

Yet.

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April 2255, Atlanta, United States, Earth

Oddly, the first thing that came to his mind when he groggily blinked awake was the question of who the hell had chosen this fucking annoying ringtone. Probably Jocelyn, and he hadn't paid enough attention and/or cared enough to do anything about it. So it was really his own fault.

"Daddy, phone," Joanna said cheerily. She stood in the doorway, clutching her stuffed dog. Even the pug had dragged itself up from its doggy bed in the living room, and it now wriggled past her, sniffing as if trying to uncover what was going on.

"Jo, you should really be in bed," Leonard told his daughter, yawning.

"But Daddy, the phone..."

"Yeah, I know, I'm getting it now." He got out of bed and walked barefoot across the room to the small terminal. His fingers tapped the code almost by their own volition, before his sleepy mind could catch up. Behind him, both Jo and the pug hopped onto the bed.

"Is it Mummy?"

God, he hoped not. Jocelyn calling in the middle of the night would definitely have been a bad sign.

Tap two more keys, and finally the call came through, video and all.

"Chris." Leonard stared. "Do you have any idea what time it is here?"

"Yes... well, no, actually I don't, I'm sorry Leonard." He seemed oddly confused. Given that Leonard had never seen him other than calm and collected, it was worrying.
"Are you okay?" He didn't look okay. In fact, he looked as if he had been hit by something big and fairly nasty. His face was pale, the usual laughter lines deepened into an anxious frown.

"Pavel's been shot," Chris blurted out.

Leonard drew in a sharp breath. "What? How?!"

Chris brushed a hand across his face, the gesture agitated. "There was an incident at his school, a hostage situation or something like it, and it ended badly. They don't know who's behind it yet. Kids were injured. Two of them are dead, they say, and a teacher... God, I think Mary is dead... we just took Pavel to the hospital."

No. No, it can't be... "How bad is it?"

Chris shook his head. "I don't know. He... they just got him into the emergency room. He wasn't conscious."

Leonard cursed, momentarily forgetting that Joanna was in the room, until she reminded him of it, stating: "Daddy, no, that's a bad word!"

"I'm sorry, Jo," he replied distractedly. "But something very bad just happened."

"Your daughter is with you?" Chris asked. "I'm sorry, I didn't know..."

"She's right behind me, and don't worry." He contemplated calling one of the people he knew at Starfleet Medical, but realized that they probably didn't have any news yet, and if so, wouldn't release them to him. Suddenly, there was only one obvious choice. "Listen, Chris, I'll come. I have to take Jo along, and probably even the stupid dog, because Jocelyn is out of town, but we'll be on the next flight to San Francisco."

He expected Chris to say something like 'don't' or 'that's not necessary', but all he said was "Thanks."

Oh yes, it was bad.

"Jo, go get dressed. And find Sammy's leash and collar, can you do that for me?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Great, then off you go." He turned back to Chris. "Call Karima or a friend. Get somebody to stay with you until we arrive, okay?"

Chris nodded numbly.

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April 2255, San Francisco, United States, Earth

The nighttime shuttle flight with a tired child and a pet carrier full of scared pug was Leonard's
personal version of hell, but somehow, he got through it.

They left Sammy to his own devices tied up outside the hospital building, and he seemed happy enough to escape his box. Then swishing glass doors opened their way into Starfleet Medical, and imposing complex of multi-storey buildings. An interactive floor plan led them to the right department through a series of corridors, bridges and elevators.

A computer voice asked for their names and admitted them into a waiting room painted in soothing shades of light green and blue, and then suddenly, there was Chris, still looking pale and gaunt. Leonard pulled him into a tight hug. It came naturally, no questions asked, except the one: "How is he?"

Chris let out a shuddering breath. "Stable, but he's not going to wake up soon. There's been a lot of tissue damage, and his right lung was affected. The doctor told me I could see him once they move him out of emergency care and into his own room. It shouldn't be long."

"Who's the attending physician?" Leonard asked. There was an off chance that he would know Pavel's doctor.

"Dr. Meyers."

Leonard shook his head. "Don't know him or her. But it doesn't matter. I'm sure they're all more than capable, this is Starfleet Medical, after all." It then occurred to him that he was still holding Chris close, which was probably inappropriate, even if it felt like the right thing to do. He dropped his arms and took a small step back. "And how are you?"

"Honestly? I don't think I've ever been so scared in my entire life."

Leonard nodded. He'd have felt the same way if it had been Joanna. Speaking of which...

"Come, meet my daughter." Joanna was still standing awkwardly behind him, shifting from one foot to the other. "Jo, this is Chris Pike, remember I told you about him and Pavel when I came back from Russia?"

She nodded.

Chris dropped down to get eye-to-eye with her. "Hello Joanna."

"Hello," Jo said, eyeing him shyly. "You're the captain."

"That's right," Chris said.

"That's pretty cool," Joanna decided, and apparently, that settled the matter for her. Leonard smiled.

"We left Sammy outside," Joanna told Chris.

"Sammy's the dog." Leonard clarified. "We'll check on him in a little while, Jo. He'll be fine, though."

"He's happy to be outside," Joanna stated. "He hates flying almost as much as you do."

That even drew a small smile from Chris.

They sat down, and after a while, Joanna put her head in her father's lap and went to sleep. Meanwhile, Leonard kept a hand lightly on Chris' arm for comfort. Neither of them mentioned it.
After what seemed like an eternity, a nurse slipped quietly into the room. "You can go see him now," she told Chris in a low voice. "But he's still unconscious."

"Okay, thanks." Chris was already rising from his chair. "Leonard..."

"We'll wait here."

"What's that?" Chris asked, when Leonard set a plate before him.

"Dinner. Or a very late lunch, if you prefer."

"I appreciate it, but..."

Leonard interrupted him. "No. Bad things happen, but people still need to eat. You'll do no one a favor by neglecting your own wellbeing."

He sat down next to Chris. "Joanna's outside exploring the garden, and that dog is probably digging up your flower beds, I hope you don't mind."

"I don't." Chris stabbed a forkful of vegetables. "Thanks."

"Please. This is what friends are for."

"Yeah, well, I'm not sure if all of my friends would have jumped up in the middle of the night, grabbed their child and their dog and flown across the country," Chris replied.

"Then you need better friends."

Chris looked up, meeting his eyes. "You are enough."

Leonard actually held his breath at that and he could have sworn that his heart missed a beat or two. It was lucky he didn't currently have any food in his mouth to choke on, because that would have been embarrassing.

Chris dropped his gaze again when the moment threatened to become awkward.

"I briefly got a chance to talk with Pavel's doctor while you were visiting him," Leonard mentioned. "He says Pavel was just incredibly lucky. They are confident that he'll make a full recovery. The damage to the lung is less severe than they initially thought."

"Thank God."

"Yes. He's one exceptionally lucky kid, it seems. Any news on who did it?"

Chris shook his head. "There are two scenarios, terrorist attack or an amok shooter with a personal grudge against the school. Investigations are still under way. Four victims have been confirmed, a teacher, two students and one outsider, possibly the attacker... or one of the attackers, if there were several."
Leonard shook his head. "Damn. Right in the middle of San Francisco. How could something like this happen? Here, I mean? Or at all..."

"I don't know. And all I'm thinking is 'why Pavel'? Hasn't he been through enough?"

"Hey." Leonard reached for his hand. "Don't you dare blame yourself, you could in no way have foreseen this. And he's a tough kid. He'll get through this."

"I know, it's just..." Chris sighed. "Is this what it feels like? Being a parent? Being scared to death, because something happened to him, and you might lose him?"

"Yeah it is," Leonard said. "It is, Chris. This is what loving somebody feels like, and it's terrifying. And it never goes away. The fear, I mean. Once you realize that they are mortal, and fragile, and that something could happen to them, you'll always look over your shoulder."

"Is it worth it?" Chris asked quietly.

"Every goddamn day." Leonard forced a smile.

Just then, they were interrupted by a call, and when Chris returned, he had a grim look on his face.

"That was Commander Dulaine, he's the Starfleet liaison to the investigation team. It was a terrorist attack. They are currently interrogating a suspect and searching for at least three more."

"Shit."

"Yes."

"Why the school, though?"

"Soft target. No guards, no defense systems in place. It's just a school, for Heaven's sake!" Chris ran a hand through his hair. "Those bastards. They're children! None of them ever harmed anybody."

"Wait... so it was an attack against Starfleet?" Leonard asked, horrified.

"Seems likely." Chris shrugged. "Starfleet funds the school and places its scholarship students there. And that is well known. Somebody had a grudge against us, and they took it out on our kids." There was a helpless rage in his eyes and in his taut stance, and Leonard could relate.

"That's just so wrong."

Pavel woke up the next day, bruised and battered and groggy, but alive, oh God, alive; and Chris couldn't bring himself to feel anything but gladness and relief. Leonard stepped in for a little bit, coming to say hello, the retreated to have a chat with the medical staff. Professional interest mingled with tact, and Chris appreciated both.

Pavel demanded to know what happened, and Chris told him, glossing over anything he deemed too disturbing.
"And now?" Pavel asked. "Will the school close?"

"I don't think so. Security will probably tighten, but that's not necessarily a bad thing." Chris gave his hand a soft squeeze. "Don't worry about it now. You focus on getting well, and let the rest of us worry about the other stuff..."

"Okay," Pavel agreed, apparently too tired for his usual barrage of questions. He closed his eyes and Chris assumed he had gone back to sleep. He just stayed by the bed, watching the even in and out of Pavel's breath.

A little while later, Leonard slipped back into the room. "Is he asleep?"

Chris nodded.

Leonard stepped closer, coming to stand next to him. He looked down at Pavel. "I talked to Dr. Meyers. It's all fine, he's going to make a full recovery. They want to keep him for a week, possibly ten days, after that you can probably take him home. But school might have to wait a little longer. - Oh, and Karima asked if she could visit?"

"Of course she can," Chris replied, touched by the thought. "In a few days, he'll be glad for any distraction he can get. If there's one thing Pavel is not good at it's sitting still." He smiled at the sleeping boy, a wave of affection rushing through him.

What would I do without you...?

"He looks so... young," Leonard commented quietly. "I mean, I know he is young, but I tend to forget just how young." And after a pause: "Are you sure you want him to enter the Academy next year?"

"Right now, I'm not sure of anything," Chris admitted. "I'm just glad he's alive. Everything else pales in comparison."

"I have to check on Jo. Do you want to stay with him a little while longer?"

Chris nodded.

"Okay." Leonard briefly patted his shoulder and left the room, closing the door behind himself.

And why is the kindest, most considerate, loveliest person I have ever met a straight married man twenty years my junior...? Questions for the universe to answer. He could still feel the touch on his shoulder. Leonard was very tactile, with everybody, but oddly enough it had never bothered Chris. Right from the start, it had felt comfortable, affectionate and reassuring, there had never been anything strange about it.

And now...! Now Leonard, who was afraid of flying, had flown across the country in the middle of the night, accepting every inconvenience it brought on, just to come and offer his support.

Gives you a nice little warm feeling of your own importance, right?

Recap. Go back two years - I was a solitary man, living for his career and his current assignment. And not unhappy with that. Fast forward: now I'm raising a child, and in the short time I've known him, he has already become so incredibly important to me... and then there's a man I could love, if circumstances were different, if it was permitted.

I don't recognize my life anymore. Is this really me...?
He looked down at Pavel's sleeping face. Well, whatever happened, I don't regret it.

Predictably, Jocelyn threw a fit when she learnt where Leonard was and that he had taken Joanna along.

"What were you thinking? She could be in danger. If there's been one attack, who's to say that there won't be more!"

"I think that's very unlikely," Leonard replied, trying to sound reasonable. "The city is crawling with police right now, on top of all the Starfleet personnel already here. I don't think you could push someone on the street at the moment without somebody noticing and arresting you for it. It's safe, Jocelyn. And I've been keeping her with me all the time."

"But Len, what the hell, why jump up and fly up to San Francisco in the first place? You hate flying. You said you were going to take a holiday with Jo, at home. Why? I don't understand."

"No, that much is obvious," Leonard muttered. "Listen, Chris is a friend. His foster son was severely injured in a terrible attack, and he's naturally very upset about that. I felt that going to San Francisco and offering my support was the right thing to do. I mean, wouldn't you want our friends to help us if something happened to Jo?"

"That's different," Jocelyn snapped.

"How is it different? Because you don't know him? I'm sure Chris would be delighted to meet you in person. It hasn't come up yet, mainly because of a lack of interest on your part."

"Well excuse me if I don't want to meet the man my husband is so infatuated with that he's risking our marriage on it," she spat.

The accusation stung, mainly because there was more truth to it that Leonard liked to admit.

There was really no talking to her. Not now.

"I refuse to have this conversation with you again," Leonard replied. "We'll talk when I get back. Bye Jocelyn."

He turned off the screen, angry and upset, and in no mood to think about the state of his marriage. Chris looked up when he entered the living room and raised his eyebrows at his dark expression.

"You're wearing your grim face again. Trouble?"

"She drives me nuts." Leonard dropped into a chair. "No matter what I say, it's always the wrong thing." He sighed. "Is Jo outside?"

"Again with the frogs." Chris smiled. "Those frogs are better than any toy or holo game it would seem." He put his PADD aside. "I just got a call from a friend, a fellow officer. She asked me about a birthday gift for her girlfriend's daughter. Maybe I should send her a couple of frogs?"

"I doubt they'd do well in space," Leonard said. "And the girlfriend would probably be less than
thrilled, so unless you think they're really ill suited to each other, I wouldn't suggest it."

"No, they are actually a rather lovely couple," Chris replied. “They are keeping it pretty quiet, though. She’s a private person anyway; sharing her personal life with strangers isn’t really her thing. But I think she’s afraid people will give her grief for seeing Daisy. It makes her vulnerable, and she hates being vulnerable.” He smiled faintly, probably at a memory.

*I could watch you smile all day.* The thought came unbidden, and it startled him a bit.

Time to satisfy his curiosity, though. “There are still groups and cultures within the Federation that have problems with homosexuality, but certainly Starfleet as an organization is beyond that…?”

It was an open question, inviting Chris to elaborate... and to answer a question that had been burning on Leonard's tongue pretty much since they had met. '*I don't do well in long-term relationships.' Well, damn Chris. You're a wonderful human being with no obvious antisocial habits, so excuse me if I don't quite believe that.*

Chris shrugged. “Most of Starfleet, anyway. Every organization gets its share of idiots. I’ve never had anybody say anything to my face, probably because they know I wouldn’t tolerate it, but I have very good hearing and people don’t always pay attention to who’s listening.”

“So… you’re gay?” Leonard asked. Oh hell, it was awkward. *Curiosity killed the cat.*

But Chris had been flirting with him right from the start, albeit in a light, friendly, non-intrusive way.

Leonard thought of their New Year's conversation, the one he had deleted after recovering his phone, but not until reading through it at least ten more times and marveling at the fact that Chris, who had obviously known that he was drunk, had gone along with it.

“That would imply that I’m sexually attracted to men, and I’m not,” Chris said complacently. It was obviously not the first time he had been asked and had answered this particular question. “So no, I’m not.”

“Oh… okay. " *Are you absolutely sure about that...?* "Wait, though… you didn’t use the word, but you pretty much stated that you’re attracted to *me*, Chris. More than once. How does that fit?”

“There are different forms of attraction,” Chris made it sound almost like a question, so Leonard nodded. “Yes.”

Chris took a deep breath. It was a ‘moment-of-truth’ sort of breath. “Well. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not sexually attracted to you. *Nor to anyone else, for that matter.* Never have been, and now that half my life lies behind me, I think I can safely say that I probably never will be. But that doesn’t mean I don’t experience other forms of attraction.” Pause. Leonard had to remind himself to keep breathing. It was supposed to be healthy. Or something. “*I am* attracted to you. I’ve tried not to be, but when has that ever worked for anyone?” He smiled wryly; then shook his head. “I suppose I can’t really help it. You are one of the most beautiful people I have ever met, Leonard, inside and out.”

Now what to reply to *that?* If there even was an adequate reply… Leonard’s head spun. He opened his mouth, but just then Chris added: “I’m sorry if I have made you uncomfortable. I just felt it needed to be said… once, at least. I’m aware of the fact that it’s… unfortunate. Given the circumstances.”

It was Leonard’s turn to shake his head. Slowly. He was still trying to process this. “No. I don’t think *unfortunate* is the right word.” He looked up, met Chris’ eyes again. Clear grey, sincere, unafraid,
hiding nothing.

Shit, Chris, if I have ever wanted to be in a parallel universe, it would be now... a parallel universe that doesn't have my wife and your job in it...

"Chris..."

What am I doing?

Their lips met, and it had been his move. Soft, a closed-mouth kiss, gentler than any Leonard could remember giving or receiving, because Chris, despite his considerable self-confidence and experience seemed so fragile in that moment, and because this thing between them, whatever it was - more than a friendship, so much more, attraction, love, not sexual, affection, soul-gazing, trust - was intangible and inconceivable.

"This is wrong," Chris said, pulling back.

Leonard nodded miserably.

"I'm sorry."

Leonard frowned. "Why are you apologizing when I initiated the kiss?"

"I... it's inappropriate. You are married, you have a family... this sort of thing..." he interrupted himself, obviously frustrated with the conflicting emotions that clawed at him. His hands froze, fingers curled up, but then they resumed their course as if by their own volition, one still pressing against Leonard's back, the other running through his hair.

He seemed unable to stop, and Leonard didn't want him to.

"So... this attraction is physical, too...?" Leonard asked tentatively. "Sensual?"

Chris swallowed and nodded.

"... romantic?"

"Are you sure you want me to answer that?" He drew a ragged breath.

"I'm just trying to understand..." Please, I need to...

"Well then, you asked," Chris said, sounding almost defiant despite the softness of his voice. "Yes, yes it is. I am attracted to you. Romantically, aesthetically, sensually - I'm not even sure attraction is still the right term for it... it's just so much. I want you in every possible way except one, and it's just wrong and messed up, because I can't... we can't."

Leonard breathed a long sigh, but he didn't let go. Neither of them did.

"We shouldn't..."

"No..."

"If this is wrong, then why does it feel so right...?" Leonard muttered.

"I don't know."

Lips on his again, soft, so soft. This time it was Chris kissing him.
Then he let go.

Watching Leonard leave, and returning to his life before, his life as it should have been, felt like having an open chest wound that refused to close. It was an almost physical ache, a constant, distracting pain refusing to subside.

He would wake up in the middle of the night, having to violently fight down the urge to jump up, get dressed and rush to the other side of the country to find Leonard, to see him, hold him, be with him.

He would sit in his office, staring blankly into the distance, imagining a hundred-thousand 'what-ifs'.

He would walk in a crowd, and imagine hearing Leonard's voice, his head jerking up, eyes searching in vain.

Chris briefly wondered if this was in any way like the urges people who actually experienced sexual attraction felt. If it was, it would have explained a few behavioral patterns that had puzzled him for most of his life.

I have never felt this way about anybody.

He had been attracted to people before. He had developed crushes, mooned over unattainable idols, dated, attempted relationships, just like anybody else. He had experimented with physical affection, found his boundaries and tried and tested them. He had had sex, under various circumstances, and realized that it was not for him.

But nothing had prepared him for this.

When it got to the point where Pavel started to notice that something was off - despite still being at the hospital -, Chris decided that he needed help.

Heard you were up for leave, can you tell me when you get in town? I need advice and I'd rather have it in person, he wrote to his best friend.

Wednesday next week, but I have to see Daisy first. See you Thursday night at our bar? she replied.
"Why isn't there a name next to your rank?" Chris asked his new first officer, frowning down at the list on his PADD.

She shrugged. "Somebody's idea of a joke, no doubt. People always give me a hard time about my name."

He looked up, carefully studying her. She was an attractive brunette of indiscernible age, and her calm, composed expression put him at ease. Her service record, he knew, was quite impressive and that comforted him even more.

"What's your name?"

She raised both hands and performed a dizzyingly complicated set of gestures.

"Oh, I see."

"My people do not generally communicate verbally, sir," she explained. "Most of us are born deaf; the ability to hear is a mutation that only occurs in one out of forty individuals. Those of us who travel and interact with verbal cultures learn to communicate verbally and wear implants."

He had known about that, but never considered the implications.

"Is there no translation?"

She frowned slightly. "Well, yes, I suppose so. Literally it would be 'firstborn child, first flower to open at dawn'."

"That's a very... interesting name." He struggled to keep his face impassive.

She shrugged again. "My family was very happy when I was born and named me to express that happiness. Also, there are worse names. A childhood friend of mine is named 'too many sons'."

"Seriously? That's not very nice."

"He was the fifth son. In our culture, maternal grandmothers name newborn boys and paternal grandmothers name newborn girls. Females are considered members of the father's family and males members of the mother's family. In this particular case, the grandmothers were close cousins and the name expresses displeasure with the unjustness of just one grandmother getting to name the children. Calling a woman a 'mother of sons' is actually an insult, since it implies that she has neglected her duty to her husband's family."

"Firstborn child..." he mused.

"I have adopted a Terran name, if you prefer to use it. Li Na. It means quiet. I thought it very fitting."
He looked at her for a moment. "I disagree. It doesn't quite fit."

Over the course of the next few weeks, he began to call her by a nickname that would stick to her during her long years of service in Starfleet: Number One.

She never complained.

May 2255, San Francisco, USA, Earth

"Number One."

She smiled at him, a full smile, brief but warm. She was wearing civilian clothing and she had cut her hair recently. Both looked good on her.

"Hey Chris." She gave him a short, one-armed hug and took the chair beside him. "What are you having?"

"Tequila."

"Oh, must be serious." Her eyes twinkled.

He had missed her.

"You have no idea."

"Go right ahead. I am happy to be here. My girlfriend ditched me for the soccer world cup and beer and popcorn with her guys. I am not keen on going back there anytime soon, those people get pretty gross when they are drunk." She wrinkled her nose.

"Even Daisy?"

"Especially Daisy. I love her. I do not have to love all of her hobbies, do I?" She took her glass from the waiter. A martini. How very classy... and typical. Chris smiled faintly. "So..., she asked, leaning forward, her cat eyes focusing on him again, "you said something about advice? How can I help?"

"I'm not sure you can. In fact, I'm almost convinced you can't, but I really do need a sounding board right now," he admitted.

"What did you do?"

"Well," Chris said, feeling faintly ridiculous about himself, "it would seem that I've fallen in love."

To his surprise - though he probably shouldn't have been surprised, he had known her long enough - Number One jumped up from her chair, martini still in hand, and did a whooping little victory dance.

"Yes! Finally! Please tell me it's the real thing this time and I get to attend your wedding and plan your party, and throw rice at you, and catch the bouquet? All that funny human stuff that Daisy,
mean as she is, refuses to let me do for us because she says that marriage is irrelevant and outdated? Please...?"

"You wouldn't get to throw rice at yourself and Daisy anyway," Chris remarked drily. "And I'm afraid I have to disappoint you - he's already married."

"What? If you're telling me that you got married and didn't breathe a word about it to me, I am going to be so mad, Chris, so, so mad there will be nowhere in the universe to hide from me..."

"He's married. But not to me."

Her excitement died down instantly. "Oh. Well. That's a bit annoying, isn't it?"


"So no wedding," she mused. "You still have that law against multiple marriages, don't you? That one is outdated, if you ask me. Anyway, I'm still happy for you... I think. Tell me more. What's his name? Where did you meet? Is he from a good family?"

"Leonard. He's a doctor, we met when Charles Taylor decided to whack me with an axe, and I've no idea if his family is good, I never met any of them. Well no, that's not true; I've met his daughter. She is a very cute child."

"You should definitely check out the family," Number One advised. "It is never a good idea to pursue a romance and neglect the family. For all you know, they might be horrible people; and your family will be asking about them, so you should be prepared."

Chris sent her a long look. "My family is mostly dead, and I doubt the rest of them care too much. Things are different here. We don't form intimately entangled clannish structures that meddle in everybody's lives like you do."

She giggled. "Come on. Just because my great-aunt tried to marry you to my second cousin... anyway, my family loved you. But that's not the point. So, is he in San Francisco?"

"He's in Atlanta."

"Long distance then," she nodded. "Sad."

"No. I mean, yes it's sad, but no, we are not in a relationship. Again, he's married."

"You aren't?" She frowned. "But you said you were in love. And anyway, why is it so important that he is married? Marriages can be dissolved. If you have found your soulmate, you should be with him."

"It's not that easy." Oh, but don't I wish it were...!

"Because you are making it complicated," she accused.

Just then, Chris spotted Dr. Philip Boyce, his former CMO on the Yorktown, walk into the bar.

"Did you call Phil?"

"Yes," Number One said, "I thought he would like to join us. For old times' sake?"

"Huh." She had no concept of privacy when it came to her friends.
What followed was a friendly round of bear hugs and backslaps.

"So, are there any news?" Boyce asked, dropping down heavily into a chair beside them.

"It seems that Chris has finally found his soulmate," Number One informed him in a perfectly impassive tone of voice while Chris himself cringed.

"Oh?" Boyce raised his eyebrows. "Well, cheers to you then...! - Wait, what's with the glum look?"

Chris opened his mouth to say something, but Number One beat him to it. "He is married. To somebody else. A very unfortunate circumstance, even though I am sure it could be overcome. Chris and I differ on that point."

Boyce snorted. "Imagine that. Well, his moral compass and yours don't always completely align, do they?" He turned to Chris. "So, how bad is it?"

"On a scale of one to ten? Eleven and a half." Chris sighed and took a sip of his drink.

"Very witty. It's bad, I get it. Does he at least return your interest?"

"That's part of the problem," Chris replied, thinking of his last meeting with Leonard.

"Because he does, or because he doesn't?"

"He does."

"Well, of course," Number One said. "If he didn't, he wouldn't be your soulmate."

"What's with the soulmate stuff?" Boyce asked.

"Her people believe that for every person, there is only one other person exactly right and fitting. They call them soulmates," Chris explained. "There can be other relationships, but they are never as fulfilling as a relationship with that one special person. And apparently, you know right away when you meet them."

"Sounds very romantic," Boyce said. "And complicated. What happens if you don't meet them? There are a lot of people in the world."

They both looked to the resident expert on soulmates. She shrugged philosophically. "Some people are lucky. Others not so much."

"So," Chris said slowly, "I guess that means I should consider myself lucky...?"

"You should. And here's another thing for you to consider - maybe it will ease your conscience: this unfortunate marriage is preventing three people from finding and being with their soulmates. You, him, and the person he is married to."

"I'm not sure his wife would agree with you on that one," Chris said glumly. "Most people around here still believe marriage to be for life, or at least a considerable part of it."

"It's not her fault," Number One conceded, apparently completely missing the point, "she probably believed he was the right man to marry and that she was the right person for him. It happens. People get excited or confused and they make mistakes. But your laws allow for this particular mistake to be corrected, so that's good. It's a bit unfortunate that there is a child involved, that always complicates things, but I am sure arrangements can be made to suit everybody."

Chris and Boyce stared at her for a moment, then exchanged a look.

"Oh dear," Boyce said, hiding a grin behind his hand, "talk about cultural differences...! You've got to admit, though, her view on this is a lot more practical than ours."

"And that surprises you because...?" Number One asked, raising her brows.

He laughed.

She turned back to Chris. "I expect to be introduced to him," she said matter-of-factly.

Chris looked at her, slightly terrified.

'Leonard, meet my best friend. She doesn't have a first name, but she has very clear opinions regarding your marriage.'

Next to him, Boyce was chuckling into his beer.

"Come on, it will be fun."

"For you, maybe."

June 2255, Atlanta, USA, Earth

Leonard: My wife just had her lawyer drop off the divorce papers. I don't know whether I want to cry or hit the lawyer.

Chris: I suggest hitting the lawyer. Seriously, though, I'm sorry. Have you tried to talk to her in person?

Leonard: That's why she sent the lawyer. She doesn't want to see me. She's at her parents' place, and she took Jo.

Leonard was miserable.

At some point during the past 72 hours, he had to have died and gone to hell without realizing it. There was just not other explanation for what had happened since.

He stared at the dining room table, an expanse of blonde wood, empty except for the slim black folder holding a piece of paperwork, held in clipped, impersonal lawyer-speak and informing him of the fact that Mrs. Jocelyn McCoy, née Darnell, wished to divorce him. She had simultaneously filed a lawsuit with the family court asking for sole custody of Joanna.

He stared at the lawyer, who was still regarding him impassively. "The divorce will go through whether you sign those papers or not, you know," he said conversationally. "It merely makes things
"I have no interest in making things any easier for you," Leonard informed him. "Or for Jocelyn, for that matter. What the hell does she think she's doing?"

The lawyer shrugged. "I have only met Mrs. McCoy briefly and frankly, I am not particularly interested in knowing what she is thinking. She is a client, I represent her to the best of my abilities; it's a business deal. You are married to her, so you should know her better. Maybe you don't, and maybe that's the reason why she wants a divorce, but in the end, it doesn't matter. I have been a lawyer for twenty-three years, and let me tell you, people get married and divorced for the silliest of reasons." He shrugged again. "I suggest you sign those papers, Dr. McCoy, so we can all get on with our lives. And have your own lawyer get in touch with me, so we can work out the details."

Leonard held his gaze, very deliberately pushed the black folder away and quietly said: "Get out."

"As you wish." The lawyer grabbed the folder and both disappeared from his field of vision. He continued to sit at the table staring blankly at nothing.

And here's why you don't tell your wife that you're in love with someone else...

He had told her about Chris, about what had happened in San Francisco, about his confused and conflicting feelings; had told her everything, poured his heart out to her. Because she was his wife, and the mother of his child, because he had loved her and still did, because he felt that she of all people had a right to know.

He had always been truthful with Jocelyn. Well, and a fat lot of good that had done him...!

"I'm sorry," he had told her, "I can see that it is wrong, and I knew it would hurt you, but I can't lie to you. It doesn't mean that I don't love you anymore; I do. That's why I had to tell you, you deserve to know."

And Jocelyn had stared at him, her face a pale mask, full lips quivering, had simply stared at him as if she had no words to express her anger. Finally she had turned on her heel and slammed a door in his face. He had not seen her again that day; had decided to give her space to sort out her thoughts and feelings. They would talk again when she was calmer, not as angry as she was now.

When he had returned from work the next day, she had been gone.

And Joanna, too.

My baby girl...! We dragged her into this, I dragged her into this. That should never have happened.

And truth be told, he wasn't entirely sure how it had happened. All of this. His life had never been perfect, but how had it turned into such a mess?

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions"...

"It's all my fault, isn't it?" he asked Karima somewhat defensively, because he expected that to be her answer. She was an expert on failing relationships, after all.

"Leonard." She sighed. "What do you want me to tell you? I think you know yourself that it probably wasn't the best idea to confront Jocelyn head-on with the fact that she was right about you and Chris all along. And there's no use arguing about whether you were cheating on her or not, and what counts as cheating in the first place. Jocelyn is hurt. She probably thinks you lied to her before, when you told her that Chris was only a friend. Most likely she's jealous, and angry, and blames you..."
"I get that," Leonard replied miserably. "And she's got every right to be angry, but this...? It's too much. I try to be truthful with her, and save what we have, and she throws it all away? What kind of warped logic is that?"

"I see your point," Karima said. "You're upset because you attempted to save your marriage at the cost of your own happiness, because you care deeply about Jocelyn and Joanna and you are unfailingly loyal to them, but it blew up in your face. That makes sense. But so does Jocelyn's reaction. Maybe she's seeing things clearer than you are right now. If she knows that she can't live with the knowledge that you love somebody else, and the jealousy and heartbreak that comes with it, it seems sensible to pull the plug and get out. Jocelyn is a smart and strong woman, Len. Why would she stay in a situation that is hurtful to her?"

It annoyed him that she appeared to be taking Jocelyn's side in this. "But why this way? Why didn't she say anything, give me a chance to fully explain, to talk with her, for Heaven's sake?! Why did she run? And why take Jo?" he asked.

"Probably out of spite," Karima said bluntly. "You hurt her, and this is payback. Jocelyn has been married to you for six years, Len. Trust me, she knows where to hit. Where it hurts you most. And I wouldn't be surprised to find that she has a vindictive streak. This could get very ugly very soon."

"God." Leonard hid his face in his hands, groaned, ran his fingers through his already messy hair. 

*How is this my life?*

"What do I do now?" It was a rhetorical question; he did not expect her to answer, but she did.

"I'm speaking as your friend, not in a professional capacity, okay? Sign those papers, Leonard. You are doing nobody a favor by dragging things out any longer – not yourself, not Joanna, not Jocelyn. Certainly not Chris, but that's beside the point.” She was looking at him, studying him, he could feel it.

He raised his head. "What?"

"I'm curious... you and Chris - how did that happen?"

Leonard gave a humorless laugh. "I'll be damned if I know."

*It just did.*

"Fate," Chris said, when Leonard asked him the same thing a day later.

"Excuse me?"

"According to a close friend of mine, this is fate," Chris replied, and his voice held an undertone best described as resigned amusement. "Number One, or *Li Na*, according to her official record. She's convinced that people are destined to find their soulmates, no matter how inconvenient the circumstances. By the way, fair warning, she wants to meet you."
"I'm really not in the mood right now," Leonard grumbled.

"I understand." There was a long, awkward silence. Leonard listened to the sound of Chris’ breathing, and despite everything wished that he was there with him, not on the other side of the continent.

*I miss you.* The longing was fierce, consuming, disconcerting. Had he ever felt this way before? He couldn't remember... not with Jocelyn, certainly not with Jocelyn, because that had been a whirlwind courtship and romance, passionate and impatient and a little bit mad. Even to think about it now, about those first glorious days... it hurt.

And yet... he didn't miss Jocelyn. He was angry at her, yes, disappointed and mad, and at the same time he felt guilty, felt that he had in some way betrayed her. He wanted her to come back, wanted a chance to talk things over and to pick up the pieces of their relationship and examine them, to see if there was any way they could come out of this with as little damage possible.

But he missed Chris.

Karima’s words came to mind: "And maybe before that, you should try to figure out what you really want. We have a propensity to lie to ourselves, because it's easy. We tend to stick with what we know, trying to hold on to things we wanted yesterday."

*Well,* he thought, *there's your answer.*

"Why us, Chris?" he asked.

"Fate?" Chris suggested with a small smile. He shrugged. "I have no idea, really. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I should never have said anything; it was wrong. I put you in a miserable position, caught in the middle. I'm sorry."

Leonard shook his head. "Don't. Stop apologizing. I'm sure you never expected me to or intended for me to take to you like a fly to honey. You certainly made no attempt to seduce me. You never asked for anything."

At that, Chris gave a humorless laugh. "Oh, if only you knew. I asked for *everything.* Just not out loud, not to your ears." He looked troubled, pained even."I could not be a fair judge of your wife. She has something I want desperately; and I feel that she does not value it enough. Don't ask my advice in this, Leonard, I am the last person to ask. I am too selfish."

Leonard regarded him with an immeasurably fond, desperate and slow boiling frustration. *Again: how is this my life?* He wanted to grab Chris, hold him tight, kiss him senseless and tell him that he was very much inclined to actually give *everything.* Including a number of things Chris certainly hadn't asked for and never would.

Not that that was ever going to happen.

"Well, as for selfish - you and me both," he replied with a heavy sigh.

*And I wish you were here...*

"Leonard, I'm sorry but I have to go now," Chris said. "I have a meeting with the Academy Board scheduled in about - oh, two minutes. Call me if there is anything I can do to help. Please."

Leonard slowly shook his head. "No, I think I need to sort this out by myself."
"Take care, Leonard." Which wasn't what his face said. What his face said, very clearly, spelling it out in glaring red letters was: *I love you.*

Leonard shuddered.

*No. That's just too much right now.*

He ended the call.

---

Sunday dinner with his mother was just about the last thing Leonard was in the mood for. He would rather have flown to Mars or faced an outbreak of the bubonic plague than faced her after relaying the news that Jocelyn was about to divorce him and that she had taken Jo.

To make matters worse, it wasn't just his mother - his sister Anne, her husband Gabriel, their children, and his mother's sister Judith were present as well.

*Oh joy.*

Everybody looked up when he entered the room, and everybody wore similar expressions of astonished disapproval.

"I'm surprised you're even here," his mother told him in her usual blunt manner, and Leonard winced. "After all that has happened."

"Mom, please." Sigh.

"Jocelyn called me, you know."

Why was he not surprised? Trust Jocelyn to move right in and get ahead of the story, to spin it her way. She was a paralegal, after all.

"I'm disappointed, Leonard," his mother said.

"Me, too. I thought I had married a sensible person, not a vengeful child. She refuses to even speak to me, did she tell you that?"

"Well, I am not surprised," his mother replied drily, "after all, this is all your fault."

"Mom," Anne interrupted gently, "don't you think that's a bit harsh?"

Leonard could barely contain his anger. Okay, so Jocelyn was a vindictive bitch. But for his own mother to take sides like that... "How is this...? Okay, listen, I don't even wanna know what she told you. But can you please accept that there are two sides to this story?"

His mother shrugged. "*You cheated on her.*"

"That's not..."

Well. In a way, it *was* true, he supposed.
"Can we maybe discuss this after lunch?" His brother-in-law shifted awkwardly in his seat, glancing back and forth between them and his two boys, who were following the exchange with wide-eyed fascination.

"Yes, let's eat," Anne said, audibly glad for the intervention. "Steve, give me your plate."

"No veggies, Mom," the little boy pleaded.

"Hush. You'll eat your veggies like everybody else."

Sufficient to say, lunch was a terribly awkward affair. Gabriel excused himself as soon as his sons had finished eating, ushering them outside to play in the garden. He had been married to Anne long enough to know to avoid McCoy family rows.

Aunt Judith took the plates away.

From her seat across the table, his mother glared at Leonard.

"I hear Jocelyn plans to sue for sole custody of Joanna," she said. "And it looks like she's got a pretty good chance of winning that lawsuit, if you ask me. You know what that means, right? Her family is going to keep Joanna, and we won't get to see her anymore. My own grandchild, Leonard. It's shameful."

No arguments there. "I've hired a lawyer. I am not going to give up on Jo, no matter what Jocelyn says or does."

Never, ever.

"Poor baby," Anne said, "she must be so confused right now."

It hurt to even think of it. If he knew Jocelyn at all, she had taken Jo to her parents' home, and Jo hated it there. The house was furnished like a museum, with antique tables, lots of small, breakable things, and very little room to breathe. It was a nightmare to be a child in that house.

He could hear Jo asking 'Where is Daddy?,' and the heavy silence that followed.

What would they tell her? Certainly not the truth, but what else...?

"You should have thought of your daughter before all this," his mother interrupted his thoughts. "No parent in their right mind would risk losing their child. What were you thinking?"

*I was trying to do the right thing*, Leonard thought bitterly, *and look where it left me.*

Things went downhill from there. While Anne was vaguely supportive, and Aunt Judith kept her thoughts to herself in her usual quiet way, his mother clearly blamed him for everything that had happened and grew increasingly hostile. It got to the point where Leonard left the house, angry and upset, because being called a 'selfish bastard' by his own mother felt like a well-aimed punch in the gut.

When he got home, there were still no news from Jo and Jocelyn, just a message from his lawyer informing him that Jocelyn had indeed filed for sole custody, but that no court date had been set yet. Things would drag on for a while, he warned, and most likely get even more unpleasant.

Leonard tried to bury himself in work, but found that he was unable to concentrate. When it got to the point where his patients started to notice that he was distracted, he went to the hospital
administration and asked for personal leave.

"How long do you need?" the head of human resources asked dubiously.

"I don't know. However long it takes to settle things with my wife, and the lawsuit."

"We can give you two weeks, but you know that we're understaffed, so..."

Two weeks wasn't going to be enough. They both knew it.

The next day, Leonard handed in his resignation.

---

_July 2255, Wichita Falls, USA, Earth_

Nyota Uhura was a lovely young woman. Intelligent, polite, beautiful, pleasant to talk to, with aptitude scores that rocked the charts... it was a joy to be around her. And Chris had had plenty of time around her during the last ten days, because she had been number one on his list of new recruits on this particular trip, and he was up to twelve by now.

She was also incredibly annoying.

She had this uncanny ability to look at you and to read your true feelings right off your face, and it spooked Chris a little, if he was perfectly truthful. She looked right past his carefully constructed facade and into the turmoil boiling beneath it.

"You seem distracted, sir."

No kidding. And certainly not by the fantastic scenery or impressive sights of this place.

_Wichita Falls. What's in Wichita Falls?_ No wonder the two young men they had picked up here had been happy when they were accepted into the Academy.

"I'm sorry." He smiled with perfunctionary politeness. "You were saying?"

Her eyes were kind, a little too understanding. "You look a little... tired?"

 Yeah, well, maybe that's because I don't sleep.

"It's nothing."

"Oh."

He frowned at her. "Oh?" he repeated.

"It's personal. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"How in the world are you doing this?" Chris shook his head. "Is it a magic trick or something?"
She smirked. "Isn't this why you recruited me? I communicate well. It's more than just languages, really. I'm good at reading people."

"Apparently," he conceded gruffly. "Well, you certainly are something, Cadet Uhura." And after a brief pause: "I'm very glad you're on our side."

"I'll take that as a compliment...?"

He nodded. "Go get some rest. We'll head out early tomorrow."

"Okay." She got up, and just before she turned to leave added: "You, too, sir."

_Ha, I wish...!_

He waved the comment away with a vague gesture.

After she had left the room, he looked down at the list on his PADD. _Tulsa, Quincy, Riverside _... _seriously? Is this the 'grand rural America tour'?_

But then, he went were his cadets, or potential cadets were.

_Maybe I should pay Sam another visit while I'm in the area. He might have heard from his brother._

It was a faint hope, but it served to momentarily distract him.

---

When the pre-recorded voice message from the Atlanta recruitment office reached him, Chris thought nothing of it and made the mistake of listening to it while seated in a public place. He should have known better... but then, how could he have known?

The subsequent string of colorful curses - Number One, who had made a hobby of collecting human swearwords, would have been proud - made several people seated around him blush and hide behind their cups of whatever they were drinking.

"Are you alright, sir?" Nyota Uhura asked with what appeared to be mild concern. _She _hadn't blushed. Maybe she, too, compiled lists of swearwords in her free time, who knew.

"Fine," Chris replied, after catching a deep breath. It was a lie. He was anything but. "I think I have to go now."

She raised her brows. "To where?"

"Atlanta."

"What's in Atlanta?"

_Nothing. Everything. Leonard._

"A moron throwing his life away because he doesn't know what to do with it," Chris replied. "He's also a fucking genius. And utterly insufferable, but somehow perfect... _and_ I'm rambling. Great. Look, it's hard to explain. But I have to go. Now."
He rose from his chair.

She looked at him for a moment, considering. "Okay."

"See you in Riverside, then? Don't let the boys get to you, they're hotheads and idiots, the lot of them."

She huffed. "As if...! But I'm coming with you." Pause. "... with your permission, sir." No question mark.

Chris stared at her. And then he chuckled. Oh hell, why not? This can't get any stranger.

"Fine."

She smiled briefly and rose in one fluid motion. "Well, then. Oh, by the way, what did this poor guy do to upset you this much?"

"He joined Starfleet." Chris was still trying to wrap his mind around that. Unbelievable.

He was too preoccupied to even realize how weird that statement must sound, coming out of the mouth of a Starfleet recruiter.

"Uh... sir...?" Nyota Uhura looked at him sideways. "Way to reassure a freshly minted cadet. Really."

"Oh." Chris looked at her, realized that it was actually hilarious in a really warped way, and they both grinned. "Well. I didn't mean it quite that way. But for Leonard McCoy to voluntarily join Starfleet...? That's as if I suddenly decided to run a brothel."

"I hear that the level of job satisfaction in the entertainment industry is actually surprisingly high," she said with a perfectly straight face.

"To each his own." Chris shook his head. "Oh hell, this is just too strange for words... he hates Starfleet. And shuttles, and pretty much everything that flies. He hates space and our command structure, and the military elements of it. For two years I have tried to sway him with anything from logical arguments to promises of fame and research funds, to no avail. And now he suddenly signs up? Just like that...? ...anyway, I have to head to Atlanta and beat some sense into him. Or something."

"You know this guy," she stated.

Massive understatement.

"Yes."

"And you want him to join Starfleet...?"

Chris shook his head. "Not like this. Not because he's upset and confused and probably running from something." He didn't need Karima to tell him that this was a cry for help.

But damn, Leonard, why didn't you call me...?"

Questions for the universe to answer... he repeated this particular question to Leonard's face some four hours later. After calling him a couple of names and asking in three different, largely rhetorical ways whether he had lost his marbles.
Leonard looked at him from bloodshot blue eyes. He looked defeated, not tired, but utterly exhausted with life. Chris wanted to grab him and shake some sense into him, wanted to pick up the broken pieces of the man in front of him, put them together, mend him. It hurt to see him like this.

"You know," Leonard rasped, "not everything in my life is about you."

Chris clamped his lips shut before the 'no but I wish it were' could escape them.

"Leonard, you idiot," he said without malice, closing the distance between them and pulling him into a hug. Leonard’s stubble chafed against his cheek and he could have used a shower and a fresh shirt, but it was still him, solid and warm and really too familiar given the state of relations between them, and he filled the void in Chris' soul that he hadn't even realized was there.

Leonard exhaled deeply and put his arms around Chris' waist. He was close to breaking down, Chris could feel it.

"Let me fix this," Chris muttered. *Let me fix whatever is wrong with your life. With you.*

Leonard gave a short, mirthless laugh. "You can't."

Chris pulled back and raised his hands to both sides of Leonard's face, forcing him to look at him. "Watch me."

Behind them, Nyota coughed softly. "Does this count as beating some sense into him?"

"Are you questioning my methods, Cadet Uhura?" Chris asked, feeling unexpectedly happy and inclined to joke despite himself, because - well, *Leonard.*

He let go and left the embrace with a reluctance that surprised him himself, and turned towards Nyota. It occurred to him that this whole thing was completely unprofessional, but it had been right from the start, so the damage was done.

"Cadet Uhura, this is Dr. Leonard McCoy. Leonard, meet Nyota Uhura. She's quite possibly my best catch yet."

The young woman had the grace to look flattered. *She knows she's good, but she isn't too arrogant about it,* Chris thought. *Good.*

"I thought that was Pavel," Leonard said, eyeing Nyota curiously.

"He hasn't officially joined Starfleet yet."

"Pleased to meet you," Nyota said, offering Leonard her hand. "What's your specialty? Aside from making Captain Untouchable go all touchy-feely?"

Chris raised his brows at her. *Are you serious? Oh. You are.*

"I like her," Leonard told him.

Chris sighed. *Of course you do.* And, turning back to her: "You've been with us for what, two weeks? How did you pick up on that nickname?"

She smiled. *Linguist and translator extraordinaire, remember? And gossip is a valuable source of information.* She ran her eyes over them. Chris didn't care, or so he told himself. *Though this wasn't covered by the grapevine.*
"There's no 'this'," Chris told her firmly.

"Whatever you say." She looked at Leonard. "So... you're a doctor?"

Leonard nodded.

Nyota studied him for another moment. "I really can't blame you, sir," she finally said with a smirk.

---

"Leonard. Talk to me."

He could feel a pair of grey eyes on him, watching him with concern. Leonard had been only mildly surprised when Chris had shown up in Atlanta a mere twenty hours after he had submitted his application to Starfleet.

*If you want it, there'll always be a spot open for you.*

Maybe there was even some sort of general directive that had been issued to all Starfleet recruitment offices: if Leonard McCoy expresses any interest in joining, drop whatever else you're doing and call Captain Pike.

Maybe. The local recruiter had certainly given him a funny enough look after entering his name into the database.

Actually... "Did you red-flag me?"

"What?" It came out short and a bit harsh, Chris was obviously confused and quite possibly a little hurt.

"Is there a reason you're here?" Leonard elaborated.

"Well, yes," Chris replied, his voice very dry. "Somebody I care about is behaving like an idiot despite the fact that he's one of the smartest people I know; so I figured I'd go check on him to see what was wrong." Leonard looked up to find Chris staring at him. He was very obviously not happy.

Sigh. "What happened, Leonard? You hate Starfleet. Why are you doing this?"

Good question. Leonard shrugged. "Lack of other options."

Chris snorted. "Please. Try that with somebody who hasn't read the full record of your career and accomplishments." He moved closer with a certain hesitancy to his steps. As if he didn't know how to deal with this fucked up situation any more than Leonard did.

*Well, great. At least I'm not alone,* Leonard thought ironically.

"What happened?" Chris asked. "You've been very quiet these past few weeks."

What happened? Oh, let's see - my wife divorced me, took our daughter, holed up at her parent's place and did her best to convince the family court that I'm an unfit parent. Oh, and she also let all our mutual friends as well as the family know that I'm a lying, cheating SOB. My own mother called
me a bastard, which I suppose means that I'm no son of hers.

I'm about to lose the house, and most of our other assets, because Jocelyn apparently has the better lawyers, but I can't really bring myself to care about anymore.

I quit my job, because I felt that I was slipping, having trouble concentrating, and I had a responsibility to my patients.

And on top of it all, I'm in love with you, and I have no idea what to do with that feeling.

But he mentioned none of that to Chris.

"Fine," Chris finally said, sounding resigned. "If you're not comfortable talking about it with me, don't. But I don't think joining Starfleet helps or solves anything. In fact, it's a really stupid idea."

"This from the guy who's been trying to get me to sign up for two years," Leonard replied, not bothering to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Leonard." There was an intensity to Chris' tone of voice that made him look up. "I do want you to join Starfleet, but for the right reasons. I want you to join with the conviction that it's the right thing to do. I want you to want to be a part of it, part of something good, or even great at times. A peacekeeping and humanitarian armada, an organization dedicated to scientific research and exploration, to making contact and establishing peaceful and prosperous relations with other worlds and races... I want you to be a part of that. I do not want you to make a mistake because you're angry and hurt, and lost out there, or because you have the sick idea that you need to punish yourself by doing something you'll hate. And you will hate being a member of Starfleet if you join with those thoughts in mind."

Leonard looked at him for a long moment, before turning his gaze away. Part of him knew that Chris was right. The other was just exhausted and stubborn and tired of being told what he felt, or should feel, or shouldn't feel.

"Well, tough," he said. "I've already signed up. There's no going back now."

"There is always a way of setting things straight," Chris replied. "It may require some bureaucratic juggling, but I'm sure I can help you to drop out if you change your mind."

"Do you want me to change my mind?" Leonard asked.

"I want you to be happy," Chris said, and it was so raw and honest that Leonard couldn't find anything to say in reply. He felt the petty stubbornness and some of the pent up anger seep away, leaving behind only a bone-deep weariness.

"Chris, I'm tired," he admitted.

Wordlessly, Chris held out a hand. Leonard looked at it for a moment, stupidly, before taking it and letting himself be led across the room to the sofa. His limbs seemed to move out of their own accord, without paying much attention to his tired mind, and he found himself leaning against Chris, cradled in his arms, his head coming to rest on a warm, firm shoulder.

"Then rest," Chris murmured into his hair.
"Too little, too late," was Captain Robert April's verdict as he watched the rescue efforts in the colony unfold. His people, as well as teams from the *Yorktown* and her sistership *Yildiz*, had swarmed out and were making the most of the daylight hours. Night brought shadows and silence, as the colonists hid or huddled together, unwilling to talk.

Night brought the ghosts.

Chris was inclined to agree with April, but felt that the poor man hardly needed such confirmation, he was disconsolate enough without receiving the scorn of his peers. Although, if you asked Chris, it was hardly April's fault that he had arrived late. Neither he nor anybody else had had an inkling of what was really happening on this godforsaken planet.

So far, they had established few facts without doubt, but more were coming in every hour, adding pieces of a maddening puzzle and painting a grim picture indeed.

The colony had been dying. It had been dying of hunger, after a dreadful crop failure brought on by a fungus that had attacked the stored food supplies, as well as all the seed and grain. A slow, but sure death.

And instead of calling for help in time, the colony's governor, one obviously crazed madman in the grip of the inhumane notions of a past age, had decided that in order for the colony to survive, some of its people would have to die. The weakest links. Those that were already sick, or elderly, or deemed genetically imperfect.

Some, as it turned out, meant about half of them.

Four thousand colonists.

Slaughtered and buried en masse.

No wonder Robert April looked as if he had not slept for days and would never catch a peaceful night's rest until the very end of his days.

Out in the fields, as they counted and registered survivors, provided medical aid and distributed food, the crewmen of the three ships were still turning up shallow graves. Hollow eyes gazed at them from darkened windows. It was very hard to know how to treat these people, when each and every one of them was a victim, and everyone, too, was either a murderer or a collaborator. There were no signs of any major resistance against Governor Kodos' orders of execution.

They had kept their heads down, weakened by hunger and weighed by fear, devoid of all hope but the one: that they would not be next.

No wonder the shadows of the dead haunted them.
"Boyce to Pike." The sound of his comm made him jump.

"Go ahead."

"Captain, there's something here that you probably should have a look at." The doctor's voice sounded off, somehow. But then, it wasn't much of a wonder, he had seen more hideous things in the past few hours on Tarsus IV than in a decade of traveling with Starfleet. They all had.

"Can you spare me for a little while?" He asked April, who waved a negligent hand. "Go, have a look at whatever abominable thing they've found now..."

Chris left their makeshift command center, set up in what had once been a school building, and made his way across the square to the clinic where Boyce and his team were up to their ears in malnourished sick people. Even harmless diseases turned dangerous as they attacked the colonists' emaciated bodies. Worst of all were the children. Chris tried not to look too closely at swollen stomachs and the sharp angles of ribs as he passed them.

An oddly hushed air hung over the entire colony, even inside the clinic, filled with patients awaiting treatment. A low mumble of voices, a quiet sob, the shuffling of feet. But nothing else.

It was eerie.

Amid the subdued mass of ragged humans, Boyce stood out in his bright uniform, bustling around with efficient energy. If you knew him well - and Chris did - you could not fail to notice the toll the past twelve hours had taken on him, but he still looked a far sight more lively than any of the colonists.

"Captain," he greeted Chris. "Come, have a look."

He led Chris into an adjacent small room, crammed with two cots and a makeshift stretcher. The room's occupants, three boys in their early teens, looked up, one of them flinched, and another withdrew to the far corner. The third just sat there, as if frozen, but there was something defiant in his blue eyes.

Which, by the way, were horribly familiar.

Chris stared.

The boy stared back.

He was twelve, maybe thirteen, and as thin as the rest of them. His blond hair was matted and could have used a good long bath and a haircut. There were scratches and scabs on his bare arms and a hole in his dirty pants showed that his knee was scraped.

"Chris," Boyce said, pointing towards the boy, "this is James. The other two are his friends Sam and Kevin. He turned to look Chris straight in the eye. "I checked the records. His full name is James Tiberius Kirk." He paused, either for dramatic effort or to draw breath. "Chris, he's the Kelvin Baby."

"No," Chris said, turning back to the boy, "he's Jimmie."

Blue eyes eyed him warily. "Who are you?" He sounded apprehensive, and Chris could hardly blame him.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking a step closer. "You probably won't remember me, you were quite a bit
smaller when we met last. I'm Chris Pike. I was a classmate of your mother at the Academy, and I knew your father, too."

The boy perked up. "Really?"

Chris nodded numbly.

"Oh." Jimmie relaxed visibly. "Are you here to take me home? And can Sam and Kev come, too?"
The sudden tentative hope in his eyes was heartbreaking.

"Of course," Chris said. "Let's get you fed, cleaned and dressed first, shall we? Doctor? Are they good to go?"

Boyce nodded. "Sure. Ensign Fratelli is in charge of the food regimen, have her help you with that."

"I'm guessing that's a no to ice cream and PB&J?" Chris asked wryly.

"Absolutely."

Jimmie sighed audibly, and that made Chris smile despite himself.

"Later," he promised.

---

_July 2255, Riverside, USA, Earth_

"What is this place?" Leonard asked, staring out of the window mostly to distract himself from the fact that the shuttle was about to execute landing maneuvers.

"Riverside Shipyards in Riverside, Iowa." Chris replied, without looking up from his PADD.

"It looks more like 'Architectural Monstrosity smack in the middle of Nowhere'."

"That's pretty close, actually."

"Why in the world did Starfleet built a shipyard here?"

Chris shrugged. "There was enough space available, I presume. There's nothing around here for miles. Nothing except farmland, and most of it isn't even good farmland."

Leonard could see that for himself; the surrounding countryside was a vast, monotonous expanse of dusty fields.

"If you care to see more of Iowa, you are welcome to accompany me on a little field trip. I am going to meet Sam this afternoon. His farm is some thirty-five miles from here."

"Sam?" Leonard asked, before remembering. "Right. James Kirk's foster brother. You still haven't given up on you search, then?"
Chris' lips quirked in a brief, ironic smile. "I am nothing if not stubbornly persistent."

Apparently, Leonard thought. He had been looking for James Kirk on and off for over eight years. Joining Chris in his search was a welcome distraction, though, and Leonard was in dire need of distractions right now, so he stopped only to drop his bag off and then followed Chris, who navigated the shipyards with easy familiarity.

"The rest of the recruits and the two officers who accompanied me on this trip are waiting for us here," Chris explained. "Lieutenant Kelly is supposed to pick up one more recruit from the area, and tomorrow we will all continue our journey to San Francisco. It was a good trip. I mostly came along for Nyota, but we'll see how the rest of them turns out."

"Including me, I suppose," Leonard said sourly.

Chris looked at him sideways. "You know, chances are that you may actually enjoy Starfleet Medical. Their research and treatment facilities are the best you'll find on Earth. And they will no doubt be happy to have you. The Atlanta recruitment office got a call from the dean almost as soon as they had fed your information into the database. It seems I'm not the only one who red-flagged you."

Leonard was honestly surprised to hear that. He'd expect the dean of Starfleet Medical to have other concerns aplenty, and surely, they did not suffer from a lack of qualified applicants...?

Apparently, Chris had caught his dubious look, because he laughed. "Don't be alarmed. Starfleet's always on the lookout for talent, and Medical especially is known for its aggressive recruitment policies. They've caused more than one diplomatic incident in the past. It seems that Dean Nurmi wants you to work for him, badly. That gives you some leverage, and I suggest you use it to try and wriggle out of command training. If you manage to convince the dean that your talents would be far better used by putting you to work at Medical right away, he may petition the Academy Board for an exception."

Leonard had to admit that that sounded a lot better than having to learn how to pilot a shuttle, or the basic schematics of a warp engine.

"So, no space training?" he asked.

"Oh, you will have to go through basic training; it's mandatory. Starfleet operates in space, Leonard. And even if Medical poaches you from the Academy right away, they can't bend all the rules." Chris smiled at him. "It's not so bad, really."

"I have three words for you," Leonard grumbled: "things that fly."

The expression on Chris' face turned serious all of a sudden. "If you decide to go through with this I promise you to be there with you every step of the way."

It was touching, the earnestness of his tone, and Leonard fidgeted a bit under his intense gaze. "I know that," he said quietly, thinking hell, Chris, that's the only reason why Starfleet was even a option... you are the reason.

"I guess I wouldn't be the first recruit you coached through basic training," he added, trying for light and missing by about half a mile.

Chris huffed. "Certainly not."
The farmhouse was old and fairly small, but in very good repair. There was a barn to one side, and a vegetable patch to the other, and a shaggy brown and white sheepdog came running up to them.

"Does he live alone?" Leonard asked, thinking that it had to be a lonely life.

Chris nodded. "Sam... he - well, he has a hard time trusting people after what happened to him on Tarsus IV. He has a few people who help him at harvest time, and a young man who does odd chores and repairs when needed. He once told me that he asked Jim to stay and live with him, but apparently, that didn't go to well."

The dog's bark had called its owner out of the house, and he stepped into the sunlit yard. He was a tall young man, broad shouldered and strong, with a rugged, sunburned look to him. At first, he seemed wary, but when he recognized Chris, his face broke into a smile and he stepped closer.

"Captain Pike."

"Hello Sam," Chris said, extending a hand. "It's good to see you. How are you doing?"


"I brought a friend," Chris said quickly, "I hope you don't mind. This is Dr. Leonard McCoy. We are both on our way to San Francisco and he decided to tag along."

Sam relaxed a bit at that. "Back to the city, then?"

Chris smiled. "Yes, I'm not much of a fan, either. It's too wet for my taste, but that's where my people are... and I guess I'm beginning to put down roots. Speaking of which... you know why I'm here, I suppose."

Sam chuckled at that. "You actually missed him again, Captain," he said, "but very narrowly, this time. He left this morning, but said he would be back tonight. If he turns up, shall I try to send him your way?"

Leonard heard Chris draw in a sharp breath. "You think he'd come to meet me?" He sounded surprised.

Once again, Sam shrugged. "Jim is nothing if not curious. And he knows you've been looking for him. He wants to know why, but I told him only you could answer that question."

"Riverside Shipyards," Chris said. "They're hard to miss, and once there, everybody can tell him where to find me."

Sam nodded. "I'll tell him, if he returns."
Chris was almost giddy with excitement and valiantly trying not to let it show, but apparently without much success, if Leonard's smirk was anything to go by.

"I half expected you to do a little victory dance."

"I'd never." But... "I found him. I actually found him this time, Leonard."

"Your obsession with this boy isn't creepy or anything. At all," Leonard said, shaking his head. "You know, I'm curious. If you don't manage to scare him away immediately, I think I'd like to meet him." He paused briefly, as if considering. "If that's okay?"

A fuzzy warm feeling wrapped furry paws around Chris' heart. "Yes, of course."

"So what's the story," Leonard asked, pushing his plate away and leaning across the table. "The real story, I mean, not the conspiracy theories." They were seated in a quiet corner of the Shipyard's canteen, ostensibly watching a group of Chris' younger recruits at their table across the room, but really off to themselves. There wasn't much trouble the recruits could get up to in a place like this, Chris reasoned with himself.

He shrugged. "It's really not much of a story," he said, because really, it wasn't. "Winona, Jimmie's mother, was a classmate of mine at the Academy. We lived on the same floor, and we were both in command track, so we shared a lot of classes. It didn't take us long to become friends." He smiled at the memories of her. Brilliant Winona, so full of life, always in motion, always up for a joke or a prank, or a silly game.

"Despite the rumors, we never dated or anything like that. She was just a good friend."

And he still missed her. Missed the person she had been, before the Kelvin Incident, before George's death.

"She met George Kirk on a training mission. He was a few years older... one of the brightest young officers of the 'Fleet. We all looked up to him. And Winona... well, I guess Winona actually got under his skin." He smiled at the thought. George Kirk, honestly confused by a quirky, charming young woman with a quicksilver mind, and half in love with her already.

"It was a bit of a scandal at the time, but he wasn't technically her instructor, so the Board couldn't do anything about it. He got off with a caution.

And they were perfect together."

Chris shook his head. "I guess I had a little bit of a crush on George myself," he confessed.

"I never would have guessed that," Leonard teased. "In your defense, though - he was quite attractive. I actually looked him up a little while after your first mentioned your search for his son."

"You did? Anyways... Winona and George got married, and a little while later he got his assignment on the Kelvin. Winona served on the Kelvin as a junior science officer, and from her reports, she really enjoyed her work. The pregnancy was a bit of an accident, but they were both very happy..."

And then it all went pear-shaped. But he didn't even have to say it, Leonard read it off his face and nodded.

"He died a hero. Small consolation to his wife and son. He never actually met Jimmie. Never held him in his arms."
Leonard's hand covered his, warm and comforting. "But you did?"

"Yes, when he was a small child... and later, on Tarsus IV. And then he disappeared."

"Well. Not anymore, it seems."

"No," Chris said quietly.

Chris spent the rest of the afternoon dealing with recruitment-related paperwork, and somewhat reluctantly left Leonard to explore the shipyard in the company of Nyota Uhura.

He would have liked to keep Leonard in his sight, constantly, but that was ridiculously impractical, and smacked of unhealthy obsession. Besides, the important thing was to keep him occupied and take his mind off his misery, and Nyota could do that. The two of them got along well, and Chris trusted her instincts.

Nyota certainly didn't need a guardian, but accompanying her gave Leonard something to do, and the feeling that he was useful in some little way, and that was apparently what he needed right now.

Sure enough, they both returned from their trip somewhat dusty, but chatting amiably, and she dropped him off at Chris' quarters.

"Look, Captain, I brought him back in one piece," Nyota said cheerfully.

"He's not my personal property," Chris said, eyebrows raised, as he let them both in. "You know that, right?"

She shrugged. "You act like a mother-hen with only one chick."

"I do not!" Chris protested, but it was half-hearted, and even Leonard shook his head at him.

"It's useless arguing. You can't win a fight with her."

Nyota grinned. "A few of us are heading out to celebrate our last night of freedom. Want to join us?"

"That would take all the fun out of it, trust me," Chris said wryly. "You wouldn't go clubbing with your Dad, would you? I'm Dad in this scenario, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Fair point." She shrugged, looking at Leonard. "I guess that means you aren't coming, either?"

"I think I'll pass, thank you. I'm not the best company right now."

"Okay then. See you tomorrow!"

She left with a swish of long dark hair, off to break several poor idiots' hearts, no doubt.

"She's great," Leonard said off-handedly, stepping further into the room. "Her tongue is a lethal weapon, though. I don't envy the guys who will no doubt hit on her tonight."

"They'll most likely deserve it. Can I offer you a drink?"
"Please."

Leonard crossed the room and sat down on the sofa that was awkwardly wedged between the desk and the window overlooking the shuttleport. Chris poured them each a glass of bourbon and joined him.

"How's the lawsuit going?" he asked.

Leonard sighed. "Not as bad as it could go, but it's tedious. My lawyer is an overconfident asshole, but he's good at what he does, apparently. Right now, it doesn't look like it's going to be a win for either of us. Jocelyn wants sole custody, I want joint-custody. It's probably going to come down to her being named the primary guardian, and me being granted pretty extensive visitation and co-parenting rights."

"That's... good, I guess?" Chris said, somewhat uncertain. "I mean, it could be worse..."

"Sure."

"Has anyone thought to ask Joanna what she wants?"

Leonard squirmed. "She's six. We're trying not to drag her into this, and that's pretty much the only thing I can currently say in favor of Jocelyn; she cares about protecting Jo as much as I do."

Chris considered that for a moment. "You wouldn't be the first cadet with a child," he said carefully. "The Academy's admin board could arrange for appropriate housing and childcare. One of my recruits had nine months old twins when she joined. It took a bit of creative scheduling, and I spent a fair bit of her first year babysitting, but she's a science officer on Starbase 7 now."

Leonard smiled briefly, no doubt at the thought of Chris with a pair of toddlers intent on taking apart his office (and granted, it had to have been a hilarious picture).

Then he said: "You don't need to convince me to join Starfleet anymore. I already signed, remember?"

"I know. I'm just trying to make you feel better about it," Chris admitted sheepishly. He gave a somewhat helpless shrug. "It's what I do, I guess."

"Well, I appreciate it." Leonard took a long sip of his bourbon, before adding: "Does Starfleet have anti-fraternization rules? Because if it does, I don't want you to get into trouble over this. Nyota may be able to keep a secret, but any large organization creates it's grapevine and gossip."

Chris was a bit surprised by the sudden change of topic, but maybe he shouldn't have been. And it was a question to be considered. In fact, he had considered it rather extensively.

"There are rules, and they are pretty strict. But I think we're good for now. I didn't recruit you; you walked into the Atlanta recruitment office on your own and didn't so much as state my name. That helps.

And I only teach two courses next semester, *Attack* and *Leading by Example* - don't look at me like that, I didn't name them, admin did, and 'AdTac' is actually short for 'Advanced Tactical', but the cadets pronounce it 'attack' and that sort of stuck. I can't see why you would be taking either of those two, so I likely won't be teaching you. Your academic adviser will be somebody from Medical.

So, if we don't manage to somehow get ourselves into a situation where I am your instructor or commanding officer, or where you are treating me in your capacity as a physician, we should be
okay."

He looked at Leonard, wondering how to phrase his follow-up question. Straightforward, he decided. Sometimes, that was best.

"Are we in a relationship?"

Leonard blinked, clearly taken aback by the question.

Not a good sign. Chris felt sudden anxiety constricting his chest, and cursed himself for being too forward. Foot, meet mouth.

Leonard took up his glass and emptied it in one gulp, before setting it down and turning back to face Chris. His expression was unreadable.

"I can say with absolute certainty that that is a question I have never been asked before," he said. "I don't know. According to Karima, my soon-to-be-ex-wife, my mother, your best friend, Nyota Uhura, and possibly everyone else who knows either of us, we are." He frowned slightly and shook his head. "Given the overwhelming consensus, shall we make it official?"

Despite the brief, lop-sided smile, there was a hesitation to those last words, a sense of insecurity.

Chris took a deep breath. "I would like nothing better," he said, fighting to keep his voice steady and calm, while his heart raced.

This is ridiculous. We are two grown men, and here we are, dancing around each other like scared children.

Leonard nodded. "Okay. Before we discuss the pesky logistics that come with me being a straight guy currently in the process of getting divorced from his wife, and you being asexual, and technically my superior, plus both of us having kids and jobs, can we please be a little bit irresponsible for about three to five minutes so that I can kiss you?"

Chris couldn't help himself, the grin took over his face before he could hold it back. He put down his own glass and moved closer.

"Three to five minutes?" Chris asked, one hand already curling around the back of Leonard's neck, and the other coming to rest gently at the height of his hip.

"Mhm."

"I think we can do better than that."

Think again. Because as soon as their lips brushed - it wasn't even a kiss, for God's sake - they were rather rudely interrupted by Jim Kirk. It was going to become a pattern over the next few years, and had Chris known that there and then, he probably wouldn't have recruited George's and Winona's son, or at the very least, he would have thought about it longer.

Jim Kirk didn't interrupt them personally that first time, obviously. But he was ultimately responsible for the call Chris got from a former Starfleet officer turned owner of a Riverside bar named 'The Yard'.

"Captain Pike," Maxwell Tibbs said over the background noise of a rowdy late-night crowd, "there's
something here you need to see to believe it. James Kirk just walked into my bar and sat down at the counter. He's currently flirting with one of your cadets, I believe. Rather unsuccessully, I must say." He took a breath and let it out in a low huff. "Damn, the kid even looks like his father."

He did look like his father, Chris thought. And also like Winona, the family resemblance was unmistakable and striking.

Although it had to be said, he had never seen either of them engaged in a drunken fistfight.

Nyota, ever the sensible one, was unsuccessfully trying to break up the fight, shouting at the group of young men to stop.

That wouldn't do. Chris needed to take a closer look at Jimmie - James Kirk - and preferably while he was still conscious.

The sharp whistle abruptly brought his recruits to attention. They had only been members of Starfleet for a few days - or hours, in some cases - and they didn't yet possess the set of quasi-instinctive reactions to certain alarm sounds all Starfleet personnel acquired over time, but the sound was piercing and unpleasant enough to startle them all.

"Outside. All of you. Now!" Chris ordered in his best command voice, and they scattered like frightened chicken.

"Yes, sir." one of the boys said. There was a bit of low grumbling from a few others, but not much.

Chris stepped closer, studying James Kirk. He looked... bad, for lack of a better word. Bruised, bloody and battered. "You all right, son?"

"You can whistle really loud, you know that?"

Okay, maybe he had hit his head a bit harder than previously thought. Chris wondered whether he would have to ask Leonard to check on the boy and make sure his skull wasn't cracked.

He watched as Jimmie - James, damn, he wasn't a child anymore - got up groggily. Maxwell Tibbs came and handed him what looked like a clean, wet kitchen towel, and he used it to wipe the blood off his face. Well, most of it, anyway.


And to James, he added: "Sit down. I need to talk to you."

The young man eyed him dubiously. He had George's eyes, and it was disconcerting, to say the least. All things considered, he was quite good looking, even with the split lip, handsome in a youthful way bordering on pretty. Chris checked surreptitiously and was relieved to see that he appeared to be well fed and in good health, bruises aside.

It was a vast improvement over the last time they had met.

"You don't recognize me, do you?" he asked.
James frowned slightly. "No...? Should I?"

It was impossible to tell whether he was bluffing. Maybe. Maybe not. Chris was willing to bet that James had retained a fair share of psychological baggage from his experiences on Tarsus IV, and memory loss wasn't unheard of in combination with traumatic events.

He waved it away. Better not to wake old demons, at least not until they were in a more controlled environment. "It's not important. Captain Christopher Pike." He nodded at James. "No need to introduce yourself. You know, I couldn't believe it when the bartender told me who you are."

"Who am I, Captain Pike?" Stubborn, defiant. Not a good sign. The boy clearly had a George-sized chip on his shoulder. Well, it wasn't too unexpected, really...

"Your father's son."

James had finished his drink and asked Tibbs for another. Chris decided not to call him out on it. Better to proceed with care, this conversation was too important to risk scaring James off.

In a sudden flash of intuition, Chris decided to handle this like any other recruitment interview. He didn't particularly want to recruit James Kirk, and the latter certainly had no reason to want to join Starfleet, but his role as a Starfleet recruiter gave him a perfect cover in this situation. He was pretty damn sure that 'I was friends with your Mom and Dad and have been searching for you for the past ten years ever since I lost you after the incident on Tarsus IV' would have freaked James out and possibly sent him running.

"For my dissertation, I was assigned the USS Kelvin." Which was perfectly true, and also just about the biggest lie by omission he had ever told. "Something I admired about your dad, he didn't believe in no-win scenarios."

James huffed, obviously unimpressed. "Sure learned his lesson."

"Well, it depends on how you define winning. You're here, aren't you?"

"Thanks." Sardonic, self-depreciative humor.

Self-esteem issues, Chris added to his mental list. And he's trying to hide them beneath the swagger and the cocky grin.

"You know, that instinct to leap without looking, that was in his nature, too, and in my opinion, it's something Starfleet's lost. Well. Except George never used it in bar fights..."

"Why are you talking to me, man?"

Because I knew your parents and loved them dearly, and because I feel guilty for having lost you after Tarsus and having left you to an uncertain fate.

"'Cause I looked up your file while you were drooling on the floor." Not true, Maxwell had sent it to his PADD while he was making his way to the bar. The publicly accessible part of it, anyway.

"Your aptitude tests are off the charts, so what is it? You like being the only genius-level repeat offender in the Midwest?"

They both knew what the issue was, of course. Or rather, issues. One of them began with a G and the other with a T. But James didn't know that he knew about the latter, and he didn't need to know, either. Not just yet.
"Maybe I love it."

Chris, who had seen enough cockiness from his cadets to last him a lifetime, was seriously unimpressed. Besides, he had an act to keep up.

"Look, so your dad dies. You can settle for a less than ordinary life. Or do you feel like you were meant for something better?"

Probably not, but James, too, had an act to keep up.

"Something special? Enlist in Starfleet." ... so that I can take you under my wing and keep you in my sight. So that you won't disappear again, not before I get to the bottom of this.

It wasn't quite fair to Starfleet to abuse his powers as a recruiter this way, but Chris felt that Starfleet owed both James and him a pretty big favor, and he was calling it in.

"Enli-" James laughed. Loudly, incredulously. "You guys must be way down in your recruiting quota for the month."

Nah, actually, it's looking pretty good.

"If you're half the man your father was, Jim, Starfleet could use you." True. Also, Jim? Where had that come from?

"You could be an officer in four years. You could have your own ship in eight. You understand what the Federation is, don't you?" It was his usual spiel, well practiced by now. "It's important. It's a peacekeeping humanitarian armada."

Thank God Leonard isn't here, I would never hear the end of it...

"We done?" James asked, feigning bored impatience.

"I'm done." I hope. "Riverside Shipyard. The shuttle for new recruits leaves tomorrow oh-eight hundred. You know, your father was Captain of a starship for twelve minutes. He saved eight hundred lives, including your mother's. And yours. I dare you to do better."

Take that, swallow it, and let's hope that you are stubborn enough to be unable to resist a dare.

He left it at that, hoping it had been enough.

"You what?" Leonard asked incredulously, when he returned.

Chris shrugged. "I recruited him. Or rather, tried to recruit him. I guess we'll see tomorrow if it worked."

Leonard shook his head. "That's either ingenious, or impossibly idiotic. You do realize that if he really is suffering from PTSD, you're leading him straight back into hell. Also, you have no clue what happened to him, and reason enough to suspect that Starfleet had a hand in his disappearance. Will you be able to protect him?"

"Probably not without help," Chris admitted. "So..."

Leonard groaned. "Oh, hell no. I've got enough on my plate at the moment without babysitting a traumatized kid with a criminal record and a tendency to pick the wrong side in a fight, who may or may not be on Starfleet's hit list."
"You'll like him." *And it'll give you something to do, and keep you from brooding too much.*

"I doubt it."

Chris smiled at him. With dimples.

"*That* is not fair," Leonard said.

Maybe it was a combination of night of bad sleep, worrying about everything and everyone - Jo, the lawsuit, Jocelyn, Starfleet, Chris - and a little too much alcohol after dinner. In any case, the morning of their departure to San Francisco did not dawn gently on Leonard.

There was a queasy feeling bouncing around his stomach, and it only intensified when he looked out of the window and realized that, *shit*, he'd be spending quality time on a shuttle today.

Unlike the other recruits, he had not been provided with a red cadet uniform yet, there had been no time in Atlanta, and apparently it hadn't been enough of a priority for Chris to take care of it at the shipyard. It was a small comfort to be able to wear his civvies a little while longer, but it also made him stand out among the group of over-exited redshirts.

Oh well. He was at least a good five years older than any of them, anyway.

They all stood around for a bit, waiting for their bags to get stowed away, while a female officer from Starfleet Academy rattled off a line of flight safety instructions.

"In the event of an emergency..."

*Oh God.*

The queasy feeling, now grown into a sizable monster, punched against the walls of his stomach, and Leonard recognized the symptoms of an oncoming panic attack.

The recruits were ushered aboard the shuttle, and Leonard lagged behind, staying outside for as long as he could. When the officer waved him on impatiently, he stepped inside with all the eagerness of a man walking to his own execution.

"I need to go to the bathroom," he managed to say between half-clenched teeth, because last night's dinner was on its way up again.

He barely made it.

Outside the door, the officer hovered, obviously concerned. "You need a doctor."

Leonard gave a joyless laugh that dissolved into a pretty miserable sound. "I don't need a doctor, I am a doctor." Not that it helped him right now.

"You need to get back to your seat."

"What is this?" A familiar voice cut in, then: "Lieutenant. Step aside."
The door swished open to admit Chris, wearing concern like a second uniform.

"Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay to you?"

Chris didn't seem offended by his scathing tone. "Not particularly, no," he said, putting a hand on the small of Leonard's back, and the other on his hip, turning him around gently.

"Panic attack?"

"From hell. And if you say something like 'just breathe through it', I'm going to hit you."

"Um... no. Let's not do that," Chris said, pulling him closer, and Leonard had to admit that breathing got easier with his face buried at Chris' shoulder, and a gentle hand rubbing soothing circles into his back.

"Do you trust me?" Chris asked.

What a ridiculous question. Of course he did.

Leonard nodded.

"Okay, good. Now, you trust me, and I am not going to let anything happen to you, okay? If I tell you that I am going to pilot this shuttle, and fly it safely to San Francisco, and set it down gently, will that make you feel better?"

Leonard looked up. "They'd let you do that?"

"I have the necessary qualifications, a ridiculous amount of experience, and I outrank everybody aboard this shuttle. What do you think?" He sounded amused. "A few eyebrows might go up, but that's it. Do you trust me to get us safely to San Francisco?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Good." Chris patted him on the back. "Then go back to your seat."

Still not entirely steady on his feet, Leonard left the bathroom.

"You need to get back to your seat," the anxious lieutenant told him.

"I had one, in the bathroom, with no windows," Leonard groused. She didn't take kindly to it.

Gritting his teeth, he returned to his seat, and the only thing that helped him to fight down a new wave of panic was Chris' voice over the speakers, announcing: "This is Captain Pike. We have been cleared for takeoff."

"I may throw up on you," Leonard told the young man next to him.

"I think these things are pretty safe."

_Ha! You wish!_ "Don't pander to me, kid. One tiny crack in the hull, and our blood boils in thirteen seconds. A solar flare might pop up and cook us in our seats. And wait 'til your sitting pretty with a case of Andorian shingles. See if you're still so relaxed when your eyeballs are bleeding. Space is disease and danger after darkness and silence."
The guy looked at him, wearing a slightly bemused expression. He was blond and looked as if he’d had a rough night, too. Or possibly more than one, judging from the bruises.

"Well, I hate to break this to you, but Starfleet operates in space."

"Yeah, well, got nowhere else to go. The ex-wife took the whole damn planet in the divorce. All I've got left is my bones." Which wasn't entirely true, and more than a bit unfair to both Joanna and Chris, but Leonard wasn't in a charitable mood right now.

The kid grinned, and just before he said it, Leonard finally connected the dots.

_Hell, no._

"Jim Kirk."

"McCoy. Leonard McCoy."

_Way to introduce yourself, Leonard._

"Pleasure," Jim said cheerfully, and it sounded genuine. "So, last minute decision for you, too?"

"Sort of."

"Well, that makes two of us. I still don't know what Starfleet expects to do with me, but Captain Pike can be pretty persuasive."

_Understatement of the year. Also, he wants me to keep an eye on you._

"What happened to your face?"

Jim winced. "Ah... slight misunderstanding with some guys. You know."

Actually, he did, but Jim didn't need to know that. "If you like, I can have a look at those bruises later. I'm a doctor."

Jim's reaction was not what he had expected, but it was very telling. His cheerful, open expression immediately disappeared, and he even shifted away a little. It was probably an unconscious movement.

Leonard pretended to shrug it off. "Or not, if your juvenile male ego can't take it."

Surprisingly, that got him a somewhat guarded smile. "Nah, that's okay." And, after a moment's consideration: "I think we'll get along just fine."
July 2255, San Francisco, United States, Earth

Much as he hated to admit it, San Francisco felt like home now. Christopher Pike had been born in the town (well, if you could call it that) of Mojave, and like most of its other inhabitants, he had long harbored a certain distrust and disdain for the northern part of California and anything beyond it.

For one, it was simply too wet there. No, really. Chris did not appreciate rain, or fog, or ambient moisture in the air.

Yet Starfleet, for whatever reasons, had decided that San Francisco was a damn fine place to build an Academy, and the largest, most sophisticated hospital on Earth, and a staggering number of research facilities, offices, conference halls, and annexes; and of course all those officers and cadets and researchers and civilian experts needed housing, and cafeterias, and recreational facilities, and so on. In short, Starfleet had taken over the city of San Francisco and made it its own.

And San Francisco, in its new Starfleet-shaped incarnation, had a strange tendency to assimilate people who were 'just passing through'.

It even smelled of home, Chris thought as he took in a lungful of air in one deep breath. It was strange to think that after leaving Mojave and spending years in space, always on the move, never settling long in one place, this wet, green city had become his home.

But then again... home was less about places and more about people...

Pavel had somehow wheedled his way into the shuttleport and was waiting for them, bouncing on the balls of his feet impatiently. When he caught sight of Chris, he came running.

"Oof," Chris said, after being hit by the force of nature that was his adoptive son, all sharp angles and the gangly awkwardness of a teenager. Pavel grinned up at him. He had grown quite a bit, but he would never be particularly tall.

"You're not even supposed to be here, Pasha." Chris tried for stern and failed, predictably.

"But I couldn't wait!" Pavel argued. "And I'm taking the tests tomorrow!"

The Academy Board, after a prolonged administrative battle over his age, had agreed to let Pavel take the entrance exam this year, and he was terribly excited about it.

"Indeed," Chris said mildly.

Pavel's eyes grew round. "Is that Leonard?"

"I certainly hope so; he's a bit shaken up by the flight, but he should still be himself."

"You didn't say anything! Leonard!" And Pavel rushed off.

Chris watched, a bit bemused, as Leonard, still pale from the flight, was hit by the same elemental force of nature that had just hit him. Pavel hugged him enthusiastically, then bounced back, prattling
excitedly. The smile that snuck onto Leonard's face was nice to see, though.

"You have kids," Jim said next to him, sounding more astonished than he had any right to.

"One kid, singular," Chris corrected, still watching said kid. "He's quite enough."

"Huh."

"Don't sound so surprised. Even Starfleet officers are entitled to a personal life. Case in point, your parents."

Jim took a moment to chew on that, before grudgingly admitting: "He's sort of cute."

"And I hope that you mean that in the sense of puppies and kittens, and not in any sexual way, because otherwise I would have to dismember you and hide your body," Chris said, completely straight-faced, but not completely in jest.

"Uh - what? No, of course not!" Jim looked appalled. Good for him, Chris approved.

"Just so we're clear."

"Crystal." Jim gulped. "You're a bit scary just now."

"Just looking out for my people."

Leonard and Pavel came over to join them, followed slowly by the rest of the recruits. Except for Leonard, they all looked excited. But at least, his face had regained some of its natural color.

"How are you?" Chris asked, eyeing him carefully.

Leonard winced. "Do we have to do this here?"

Considering that most of the shuttle had witnessed the tail end of Leonard's panic attack, there wasn't much use in pretending it hadn't happened, if you asked Chris, but if Leonard thought otherwise...

"No. If you're okay for now, we can discuss it later."

"Thank you," Leonard said sarcastically. A few of the other cadets eyed them curiously.

Jim patted Leonard's arm sympathetically. "If it's any consolation, he saw me drooling on the table last night, and wipe my own blood off my face with a kitchen towel," he muttered.

Chris pretended to have overheard the comment, but he was quietly impressed. He straightened his stance a little and looked at the group of recruits.

"All right, everyone, Lieutenant Hatari will accompany you to the quartermaster. You will be assigned quarters, pick up your uniforms, if you haven't done so already, and be shown around campus by the first year tutors. You will all meet your academic advisers tomorrow morning and receive further instructions." Eager nods all around. Leonard rolled his eyes.

"Kirk, you're with me. We still need to get your paperwork out of the way, since you turned up late."

He turned to Pavel. "You know where to go."

Pavel pulled a face. "But..."

"I was under the impression you had a test to prepare for?"
"Okay," Pavel said, drawing out the word.

"Good boy."

He watched the recruits troop off after Lieutenant Hatari, until only Jim remained by his side.

"Paperwork? Really?"

"An unfortunate amount of it," Chris affirmed.

He led Jim to the registrar's office, to fill out the basic forms, and took a moment to go over the data from his aptitude tests again.

"You know, if these scores aren't a fluke, you may have a chance at command track right away." He eyed Jim speculatively. "I can talk to Captain Fuentes, ask her to let you take the tests. She usually has a few late-comers, and classes don't start until Tuesday next week, until then it's all getting settled in and introductions." He paused. "If you're up for it."

Jim huffed, managing to look offended. "Please. Bring it on."

Chris hid a smile. "That's the spirit. Now. You still need to get your medical exam out of the way, and somebody should probably do something about those bruises, otherwise you'll scare your new roommate off right away."

Jim tensed visibly. "Is that really necessary?"

"Yes," Chris said bluntly, "it's part of the admissions procedure." He frowned down at the PADD in his hand. "You know, there are pretty big gaps in your medical file. In fact, the entire file is one big gap."

_Tarsus, his mind supplied, of course._

Well, maybe they could avoid the topic for a little while longer by carefully circumnavigating it. "When was the last time you had your vaccination shots?"

Jim shrugged uncomfortably. "Dunno, a while ago? I don't really like doctors."

Everything about his expression and composure screamed _SUPERMASSIVE UNDERSTATEMENT_ at Chris, in bold, uppercase letters. He had hit the first roadblock in his journey to the truth about Jim Kirk far sooner than expected.

Nevertheless, he pretended to shrug it off. "Better get over that. Starfleet demands regular medical exams."

Jim looked alarmed, there was really no other word for it. Chris saw him tense, eyes widening and hands clenching at his sides, and that was _never_ a good sign with humans, particularly young, skittish humans with a tragic past, and what was seriously beginning to look like a nasty case of untreated PTSD. Not that he was surprised.

"The tests aren't particularly intrusive," he tried to reassure the young man. "Pretty standard stuff, really, and usually over quickly. I'm not fond of them, either, but Medical is brisk and professional about them." _Unless they discover something interesting_, he thought privately.

"I'm not... I don't like strangers touching me, okay?" Jim's tone was defensive, and he did not look reassured at all.
Huh. That was an issue, and not just because of the medical exam. But first things first; Chris could and would consult with one of the Academy's psychosocial counselors later. "Would it help if you got to choose the doctor? I could have a few of our physicians over at Medical meet you, and you could see whom you like best." Phil, his mind supplied. He was good with problematic patients, his gruffly friendly nature, easy chatter, and humor put them at ease.

Jim considered it. "I want McCoy," he said.

*Oh. Even better. "Okay."*

Jim's eyes narrowed. "What, just like that?"

Chris shrugged. "Well, I'd have to ask him, but I can't really think of a reason why he would refuse. He should be done right about now. I'll call him, and we can all go to Medical and get the exam out of the way sooner rather than later."

"There's something you're not telling me," Jim accused.

*You have no idea... "There are a lot of things I'm not telling you. Also - pot, meet kettle."

Jim pouted, but didn't argue the point. Chris called Leonard, who was gruff, but agreed to come.

"Oh, it's you again," he said to Jim, when he entered the examination room Chris had talked the desk officer into vacating for them. "Fancy that. Met any more short-tempered guys who wouldn't put up with your mouthiness?"

"They were idiots," Jim said, frowning.

"This from the guy who picked a fight with several guys twice his size," Chris muttered.

Jim shrugged. "Leap without looking. Isn't that why you recruited me?"

"I'm beginning to question that decision."

"Too late." Jim grinned.

Chris looked at Leonard. "Are you okay with this? You are cleared to do the exam; the regulations state that a cadet entering the Academy may be examined either by a Starfleet medical officer or by a certified physician of their own choice. That was put in place to pave the way for cadets with certain cultural sensitivities."

Leonard shrugged. "I'm good." He looked at Jim. "You?"

"Hardly." Jim scowled. "But he says I have to."

"Well then, let's get it over with. Chris, you know the drill. Outside. This is private."

"I'm pretty sure there is supposed to be a 'sir' somewhere in that sentence, now that we're on Academy grounds and you are technically a cadet," Chris teased. He was glad Leonard had agreed to help, and certain he would be told anything he needed to know about Jim's health and medical history.

"I'm not technically your cadet, and we can discuss your preferred forms of address for specific situations later," Leonard said, straight-faced, but Chris caught the flicker of amusement in his eyes.

So did Jim, apparently. "Are the two of you fucking?"
"Oh, great. Just what he needed."


"Ouch," Jim said, once Chris was out of the room. "That was pretty straightforward. Sorry, Bones."

Leonard frowned at him. "Bones?"

Jim shrugged. "It sort of fits."

Leonard decided to let it slide... for now. He had more important things to address. "For the record, kid, I'm doing you a favor here. So is Chris - well, Captain Pike to you, I guess. Keep that in mind and try not to be too much of an obnoxious idiot."

Jim grinned at him. "Charming. I can see why he likes you so much."

_He likes me just fine, kid, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around that._ He and Chris would have to have a talk, and soon, but Jim Kirk seemed be determined to interfere. It was infuriating.

"So. Not fond of doctors, are we? You and Chris Pike should start a club," he said conversationally, because Jim, for all his bratty insolence, seemed more than a bit nervous about this whole thing.

Jim scowled. "I've had some bad experiences."

"Fair enough," Leonard said with a shrug. "We'll work through the list together and I will explain everything I do to you before I do it, okay? Let me know if anything I do makes you uncomfortable." He frowned at the PADD in his hand. "Your medical file is pretty coherent until you hit your tenth birthday, so I am going to work on the assumption that it is accurate up to that point." He looked up. "You do know that you have a shitload of allergies, don't you?"

Jim rolled his eyes. "Duh. It's pretty hard to miss. My Mom said it had to do with being exposed to harmful radiation as a baby."

Aboard the shuttle that had carried him away from the _Kelvin_, Leonard supposed.

"I keep a mental list," Jim said. "It's currently at 54 known substances. I discover a new one every now and again. Usually in some painful and/or embarrassing way."

"Jesus." Leonard shook his head. "Okay, I want that list. It goes into your file, and any new additions will be added, understood? If you serve aboard a starship, your CMO needs to know about those things."

To his surprise, Jim didn't appear to have any issues with that. "Okay."

"I want to do a full body scan first. It's not technically required, but with your lack of medical history, it's the easiest way to answer a lot of questions at once - and the only way that doesn't involve you telling me pretty much the entire story of your life, which I have a feeling you'd be reluctant to do... so..."
"You're right about that," Jim confirmed.

"Well, then. Don't move. No touching, I promise."

"Pike just had to tell you that, didn't he?" Jim complained with a frown of distaste that was probably two thirds embarrassment.

"As your doctor, I should know those things," Leonard pointed out as he readied the scanner. He silently apologized to Chris for ever having thought him to be a difficult patient. Jim was ten times worse.

"Don't you need to ask me questions about my parents, genetic diseases and weaknesses, that sort of stuff?" Jim asked suspiciously.

"Not really. I have your DNA-profile on file, and since that is one thing that usually doesn't change in humans, there seems to be no need to reconfirm it. It's pretty boring, really. Your eyesight will probably weaken as you enter your forties, but that's about it. I can ask you questions about your parents, if you want me to, but it isn't really necessary."

"Oh." Jim deflated slightly, his tense stance loosening. "Everybody always asks about my parents," he said quietly.

Yeah, I can see why that would bother you.

Leonard gave a shrug. "I won't."

They were quiet for a little while, the only sound in the room the soft beeps the scanner gave off at various points during the exam. When the scan was done, Leonard told Jim that he was free to move again.

"I need to do a stress ECG, it's mandatory. But you can attach the sensors yourself, if you like." He handed them to Jim. "They go under your shirt, but you don't have to take it off."

Jim's lips quirked into an amused grin. "I have no problem taking off my shirt," he said, and proceeded to do so.

"Suit yourself." Leonard said, absentmindedly as he looked at the monitor.

"That's not usually the reaction I get when I take my shirt off," Jim commented.

"Nothing I haven't seen before, kid. Also, for the record - not interested." He looked up. "For somebody who doesn't like strangers touching him, you're pretty forward. Just saying."

"Ah, but you aren't a stranger, are you Bones?" Jim shrugged. "It's okay. I get it. You have a mighty crush on Pike, and he's right outside that door."

"None of your damn business," Leonard said firmly. "Now, get moving, we don't have all day."

As he had expected, the ECG revealed no problems. His allergies aside, Jim appeared to be healthy and physically fit, although Leonard did not envy the person who would have to do his psych eval, if it ever came to that.

"That wasn't so bad," Jim admitted, when he was done with the exam. "Is that it?"

"That's it. I'll have a look at the scan results and let you know if anything comes up."
"Great," Jim said, cheerful at the prospect of getting to leave. "See you around, yeah?"

"Probably," Leonard agreed, "I'd be surprised if you managed to stay out of trouble, so next time somebody breaks your nose, come to me."

"And on this cheery note..." Jim opened the door. "All done, sir!" He said to Chris.

"You can head straight to the quartermaster's office then, they'll provide you with uniforms and accommodation," Chris said, still out of sight. "I expect to see you at my office, 9 AM tomorrow, to discuss your schedule and the possibility of taking the preliminary exam for command track."

"Sure thing!" And with that, he was gone.

Leonard sighed and gathered up his equipment.

"From his demeanor I gather that it went well," Chris said, now in the doorway.

"Better than expected, at least." Leonard looked down at his PADD, monitoring the transfer of data from the scanner, and his eyes grew wider as he watched. It was an awful lot of information, considering Jim's age.

"Fuck."

"What is it?" Chris asked.

Leonard looked up at him, suddenly unsure. "Chris... what the hell happened on Tarsus IV?"

There was a brief pause, and when Chris spoke again, his voice was tight. "Bad stuff."

"That may be a pretty huge understatement. Because Jim Kirk's medical file, when all of this goes into it, is going to be longer than that of a man three times his age who's spent his life in the most remote and dangerous corners of the known universe." Leonard shook his head in disbelief. "He's... he shouldn't be around, Chris. He shouldn't be alive."

Chris stepped into the room and to his side, lightly touching his arm. "Will you let me see?"

Leonard shook his head. "Not without his permission, and as for getting that - good luck. But I'm guessing you know some of it anyways?" He searched Chris' face for an explanation, and found none.

Chris sighed. "You know, I was going to ask you out to dinner. But if we're going to talk about Tarsus, we had better do it somewhere less public. I have a meeting with Admiral Barnett scheduled, but would you care to come around for dinner later?"

"To discuss child abuse and carnage? Sounds lovely," Leonard said with heavy irony in his voice.

"Well, you did ask."

"I know, I'm sorry." He put a hand on Chris' shoulder and squeezed it lightly, turning towards him with his entire body until they stood face to face. "We are doing this all wrong, aren't we?"

"Look on the bright side: if this relationship survives your divorce, a custody battle, Starfleet Academy, and Jim Kirk, it can survive anything," Chris replied with a small smile.

"Good God."
Since he had half the afternoon left, Leonard checked in on Joanna, and to his delight got to chat with her via video comm for about half an hour. Jocelyn had grudgingly agreed to these little talks, mostly, Leonard suspected, because Jo had kept badgering her about it, and she didn't have a good reason to deny them.

Jo was chatty as always, but somewhat less cheerful. She didn't say it outright, but Leonard got the feeling that she wasn't quite happy at her grandparents' house, and cranky because she missed home and her friends. Leonard didn't quite understand why Jocelyn hadn't returned to their house, particularly since she knew by now that he had left; but then, he didn't understand much of her behavior these days.

"When are you coming home, Daddy?" Jo asked him - of course she did - and it broke his heart, but he had expected the question and was prepared for it.

"Sweetheart, we talked about this, remember? Mummy and I had a fight, and we need to settle things first, before I can come and see you. I'm really sorry, because none of this is your fault; and I miss you."

"I miss you, too," Jo said, making sad puppy-dog eyes at him. "And I want to come to San Francisco and see Pavel and Chris. It's so boring here."

"I know, honey. I promise, once things settle down a bit, you can come and visit."

"Soon!" Joanna demanded.

"I hope so." God, I hope so. This has already gone on too long. He really missed his little girl. He still had only a very vague idea of how this arrangement with Jocelyn would look like, but they had to find one, for Jo's sake. Whatever had happened between the two of them (and Leonard still wasn't sure he understood all of it), Jo was more important. They had to pull their shit together for her sake.

Jocelyn still wouldn't talk to him, which was more than a bit childish; but maybe it was time to write to her and propose a sort of truce for Jo's benefit. She didn't have to like it, she just had to see that it was reasonable, and Jo was very important to her, so chances were that she would see reason. Eventually.

With that resolve and an already half-composed letter in mind, he arrived on the doorstep of Chris' house, and vowed to put all unpleasant thoughts of Jocelyn and the end of his marriage aside for the time being. Chris deserved his undivided attention, and there was the mystery of Jim Kirk and his appallingly long list of past injuries to consider. Said list was much too detailed to be the result of a scanner malfunction, and it was likely connected to both the suspicious gap in Jim's medical file, and his strange disappearance.

Somebody had tried to cover something up; something big, something nasty. Some words that came to mind were child abuse, torture, and illegal medical experimentation.

Leonard had not had the time to study the list in full detail, and cross-reference it with medical databases, but he had run it through a diagnostic program and roughly categorized the entries into four time-periods: age 0 to 10 (the end of Jim's official, and fairly accurate medical record); age 10 to
13, the time during which Jim had supposedly lived on Tarsus IV, Chris hadn't been terribly specific about it; age 13 to about 20, when Chris had caught the first traces of a reappeared Jim; and age 20 to present.

Unsurprisingly, the last period held the fewest entries, only a note on a broken wrist that had healed well, and the fresh bruising from Jim's bar-fight in Iowa.

Similarly, Jim's early childhood had been fairly carefree health-wise, if you discounted the after-effects of having been born weeks prematurely in space during an attack by forces unknown that had destroyed a state of the art spaceship. But, allergies and a slight and eventually overcome developmental delay aside, Jim had been a fairly healthy child until Tarsus IV.

Chris hadn't said much, but the memories of whatever he had witnessed during the rescue mission were obviously still haunting him, and Leonard had not forgotten his comment about Sam's reasons for choosing to become a farmer: They were starving to death on Tarsus. Which explained some, but hardly all of his finding from that period of Jim's medical history.

Malnutrition, likely combined with inadequate health care, had left traces in his bone structure, and in the form of antibodies to several infectious diseases in his blood. But there were signs of various broken bones, some of them poorly healed, and of scar tissue that later dermal regeneration had not been able to fully removed, likely because of a long delay between injury and treatment.

*Signs of violent physical abuse,* Leonard concluded. It wasn't entirely unexpected, after all, Jim was by all accounts the survivor of a massacre.

What really surprised him, though, was the data from the period after Jim had been rescued from Tarsus IV; and presumably placed in a foster family on Earth, where he was safe and had regular access to medical care. For one, there should have been entries in his medical file, detailing treatment for injuries incurred on Tarsus, regular vaccinations, and health checkups. His known allergies should have been listed, too.

There was nothing but a gaping hole, though.

A hole the scan and subsequent categorization had filled with fresh data - more broken bones, all of them well-healed, suggesting adequate and timely treatment. But far more than average in a teenage boy. Even more interesting was evidence of several more viral and bacterial infections, at least two of them with diseases rare enough to raise hairs on the back of Leonard's neck.

*Something doesn't add up here. He had access to pretty decent health care, so somebody was obviously taking care of him; but how in the world did he manage to contract those diseases and injure himself so often?*

There was a good enough chance that Jim's immune system had been compromised by his experiences on Tarsus IV, thus making him more susceptible to illness, but it would have been a pretty rare coincidence for him to randomly get infected with a virus that had shown up in only three documented cases over the last decade. (None of which, incidentally, was the case of one *James Tiberius Kirk.*)
"Something is very wrong here," Leonard said to Chris when he opened the door, "and I smell foul play."

"I was rather hoping you would smell the roast," Chris replied, "but come inside."

The table was already set for three, and Leonard refrained from discussing conspiracy theories and infectious diseases in the presence of Pavel, who was pushing food around on his plate and fidgeting in his chair.

"He's nervous," Chris said with a shrug, when Pavel had gone into the kitchen to fetch dessert. "They'll have him sit for his combined written and oral exam tomorrow. He already passed the physical exam last week."

"Fourteen is very young, Chris." Leonard tried to keep the judgment out of his voice, but he wasn't fully successful.

Chris sighed. "I know. But he's determined, and he is already running circles around his teachers. His math and physics teacher gave up and set him up with a long distance university-level program. In most other classes, they simply let him do as he pleases, or teach him the curriculum at three times the normal speed, and he still gets bored. The only new things he's learning these days are languages, and I'm surprisingly happy to say that he's no more than averagely gifted when it comes to those."

"Klingon sounds less like a language and more like a really bad head cold," Pavel said as he returned, pulling a face. "And Vulcan is just weird. I can never express what I really want to say, because they either don't have a word for it, or simply don't say that."

Leonard smiled at that.

"Remind me to introduce you to Commander Spock," Chris told his son. "His mother is a teacher and he told me once that she wrote a fairly comprehensive course on 'Vulcan for Humans'. He may be able to provide a copy."

"Is she a Vulcan?" Pavel asked. "Because if she is, she wouldn't get it. Vulcans simply don't understand humans very well. I think it's mutual."

"No, Amanda Grayson is human. Possibly the first human to ever marry a Vulcan. She should have ample experience with those cultural differences."

"There's a Vulcan-human hybrid in Starfleet?" Leonard asked, intrigued. "Huh. I didn't think that was biologically possible. But then again, that sort of genetic experimentation is frowned upon, so the presumed reproductive barrier might only be a cultural, rather than a biological one."

"I'd advise against asking Commander Spock what sort of genetic or cultural experimentation led to his conception," Chris said drily. "It is - understandably - a somewhat touchy subject. I got the impression that he suffered cruel and intense derision and mobbing as a child, and he is very sensitive to insults against his mother."

"He's one of your recruits, isn't he?" Leonard asked shrewdly, looking up from his chocolate mousse. It wasn't a very big leap - you didn't even need the words to hear that Chris cared about this young man, as he seemed to do about all of his recruits.

Chris nodded. "One of my first, before I even officially became a recruitment officer. I was his mentor. He graduated early and at the top of his class, but there were some adjustment issues when he entered the Academy." He shrugged. "Nothing serious, really. Mostly, Spock was just puzzled by irrational human behavior. He still is, occasionally. But he is an excellent officer, and well on the
path of a distinguished scientific career."

He looked at Pavel. "He teaches a class at the Academy next semester, so he might even end up teaching you."

"What's it about?"

"I have no idea. Something complicated and mind-bogglingly boring, most likely." Chris grinned as Pavel elbowed him.

"Come on!"

"I honestly don't know. You can look it up in the course registry, if you like."

Pavel shrugged. "Okay, I will. I need to go over last year's test questions one more time anyways..."

Chris emphatically shook his head. "You need to do something fun, stop worrying about the test, and go to bed early. Wasn't there some video you wanted to watch? You told me about it this morning."

Pavel's expression brightened visibly. "It's about the history of android development and the current state of research - did you know that while no one has been able to create an artificial neural network that perfectly imitates the human brain; most cyberneticists are convinced that it should theoretically be possible?" His enthusiasm was endearing, and Leonard hid a smile. When Pavel talked about science - whether it was cybernetics, xenobiology, or the inner workings of a transporter - he always sounded as if he was describing the greatest adventure imaginable.

"No, but I'm not particularly surprised by it. Starfleet scientists have been claiming the same of transwarp beaming, the rapid and complete terraforming of uninhabitable planets, and time travel, for decades. I suppose we need our scientists to be visionaries." Chris smiled at Pavel. "Who knows... maybe you'll help to solve one of those puzzles."

Pavel shook his head. "No... I like science, and puzzles, but I'm more interested in the practical application than in the theory. I want to be on a starship and explore new planets..." For a moment, his expression turned dreamy, but he shook it off. "Do you want to watch the video?"

"Not right now; I need to talk to Leonard," Chris explained.

Pavel's eyes darted from him to Leonard and back, and he looked amused. "And by talk you mean..."

"... none of your business," Chris said firmly, but the corners of his mouth were twitching with a barely suppressed smile, so he wasn't really fooling anybody.

Pavel rolled his eyes. "I don't even want to know. Just... close the doors. In case... you know..." He blushed, but managed a grin at the same time.

"Funny," Chris' voice was dry, "now shoo!"

Pavel headed upstairs, and Leonard turned to look at Chris, eyebrows raised. "Okay, so he's a normal teenager after all. Genius brain aside. I'm not sure whether to be relieved or terrified."

"That was his stamp of approval," Chris said, sounding amused and unconcerned. "As loud and clear as it's going to get. Trust me. I'm fluent in 'teenager' by now."

Which was reason enough for relief, Leonard supposed. He hadn't really thought much about Pavel's
reaction to whatever relationship Chris and he were trying to build here. Maybe that had been a mistake. But on the other hand -

"Do you know what he said to me in Russia, when I had sent you out of the room to examine him? *You like him."

"Well..." Chris said slowly, "he wasn't wrong, was he? Jim Kirk, on the other hand, was off by about a mile. But still headed in the right direction."

"I suppose, neither of us does subtlety very well," Leonard admitted, slightly rueful. He thought of Jocelyn's suspicions (proven right in the end) and Karima's blatant lack of surprise when he had told her.

"No." Chris agreed. "And I have a confession; I sort of outed us to Admiral Barnett today. Mostly, because he was getting on my nerves. He's not happy, unsurprisingly. But then, he's even more unhappy about Jim Kirk, and with much better reason, it would appear."

"I'll ask him to join the club, then," Leonard grumbled, half to himself. *He* wasn't happy about Jim, either; but that had less to do with Jim himself, than with whatever hideous things were hidden in his murky past.

"Barnett seems to think there's a real possibility that somebody will try to physically harm Jim," Chris said, and Leonard's head jerked up.

"What?"

"He didn't offer any specifics. But he pretty much ordered me to keep an eye on him, make sure that he's never alone, and find him a suitable roommate. And by 'suitable' he apparently meant 'able to defend himself and others'."

Okay, that was bad. What Leonard had said to Chris about Jim potentially being on Starfleet's hit list had been a joke, mostly... but it suddenly began to look uncomfortably close to the truth. It seemed that Jim was on somebody's hit list, at least.

"Did you?" he asked Chris.

"It would have been slightly suspicious if I had assigned him a roommate who's a cadet from security track straightaway, and it would have been impractical for both of them, since security runs on a different schedule. So I spent some time scouring Captain Fuentes' course list; and I found him a command track cadet who might be suitable. They'll be in the same year, and if Jim makes command track - which he will, most likely - they'll share a lot of courses. It also can't hurt that the other cadet appears to be a sociable and even-tempered individual, according to his file."

"And he has combat training?"

Chris smirked. "He's a fencing master. Pretty impressive record, given his age. He dabbled a bit in weaponless martial arts here and there, too, which can't hurt either. The beauty of it is that while phasers and all other kinds of firearms are expressly prohibited on campus anywhere outside the shooting ranges, fencing sabers, swords, and sticks are considered sports equipment and therefore may be kept in quarters. It's a loophole nobody has thought about yet... probably, because it's not very common to carry swords and rapiers these days. And I've never heard of a cadet being attacked with a saber. They usually use their fists, if they get into fights."

"Clever," Leonard acknowledged. "Okay, then let's hope that Jim doesn't manage to scare off his new friend. I have a feeling he can get a bit... annoying."
Well. That was probably an understatement.

"So Admiral Barnett thinks somebody may try to off Jim," he summed up, getting back to the underlying question. "Great. Did he offer any explanation?"

"No, of course not. I got the feeling that he knows something, but can't talk about it."

"Can't or won't?"

"Both, probably. Anything related to Tarsus is classified information, and most of it is above my clearance level - despite the fact that I was personally involved in the rescue mission."

"Chris," Leonard said, putting down his glass and leaning forward, "what the hell is Starfleet so afraid of? What happened on Tarsus IV that needs to be covered up so badly? And is it really about what happened in the colony; or is it about what happened to the survivors afterwards?"

Chris returned his gaze, eyes narrowing as he frowned. "What do you mean, afterwards?"

Leonard shook his head, frustrated. "I don't really know. But something doesn't add up in Jim's medical records, and it goes beyond Tarsus. Wherever he spent those missing years between his disappearance and turning up in rural Iowa, it can't have been a very pleasant place."

"I can't tell you, because I don't know," Chris said, sounding every bit as frustrated as Leonard felt. "I wish I could. I suppose we could ask Jim, but I suspect that would scare him right back into hiding; and I want to keep him in my sights until I get to the heart of this matter. Or, failing that, at least until this shady threat Admiral Barnett foresees is eliminated. I feel I owe the kid that much for dragging him back into the spotlight." He sighed deeply. "I'm beginning to regret that. Maybe I should have just left him where he was. He seemed to be doing fine on his own."

Leonard disagreed. From what little he had glimpsed of Jim's world, fine was not the right word. Always on the run, with no stable home or place to stay, picking fights he couldn't win... that sort of life left much to be desired. And if he was as smart as his test results suggested, he should be given the chance to get a formal education, to study and to learn. Starfleet could provide that. If it didn't kill Jim first.

"Maybe being in the spotlight is the one thing that will protect him," he suggested (mostly, because Chris was doubting himself and needed reassurance, but there was also some truth to it).

"That's close to what Barnett said about keeping him in sight and surrounded by people," Chris acknowledged.

"Exactly. Jim's father died a hero, right? And the whole tragic Kelvin story was all over the media. Jim was the Kelvin Baby, the miracle baby. So people should be reasonably interested in his story, and his sudden reappearance will probably cause quite a stir. It's a lot harder to quietly 'disappear' somebody if he's at the center of everyone's attention. Whoever is behind this threat on Jim's life has something to hide and values secrecy. Attempting to assassinate a Starfleet cadet with a famous name in full view of the entire Academy would be counterproductive."

"So you're saying, make sure Jim stays in the spotlight?" Chris asked.

Leonard shrugged. "For the time being. Though I would really feel better about this if we could figure out who's behind it."

Chris drummed his fingers on the table, a sure sign that he was agitated. "I have some ideas," he said,
"but they are fairly convoluted, and I can't really put my finger on anything, because every time I feel like I'm getting a bit closer to the truth, I run into a wall of silence. All of the Tarsus files are classified, as I said, and what was leaked to the press a few years ago was just a very small part of the puzzle. I've talked to some of the others who were involved in the rescue mission, but those who agreed to talk to me didn't have the full picture, either. It's one big mess."

"What do you know?"

Another sigh. "Tarsus IV was an Earth colony, but not a very successful one. Its economy was mainly based on agriculture, but there were issues right from the beginning. The soil wasn't ideal, for one. There were issues with irrigation as well. They had some early successes with terraforming and continued to experiment with various techniques. According to Starfleet records - and those were public, so they couldn't be covered up - there were about eight thousand colonists by 2246. The population was mostly human, with only a handful of colonists from other humanoid species. Population growth was stable and in line with envisioned models. People were still moving to the colony, mostly attracted by the idea of being part of a growing, self-governed community. There was a lot of talk about sustainability, but also criticism because not everybody is a fan of terraforming, and environmental activists were claiming that the colony and its agricultural projects were destroying native ecosystems on Tarsus IV. But you get those sorts of arguments in most colonies; it wasn't exactly unusual.

Tarsus IV was governed by a ruling council, a sort of parliament with members elected for a fixed term. They chose a governor among their ranks, who was the political leader of the colony and represented Tarsus IV in negotiations with the Federation. Certainly not a perfect system, but it worked for quite a while, apparently. The lack of checks and balances apparently didn't bother anyone until it became too late."

"There was a famine," Leonard said, recalling news reports.

"Among other things. The famine was the catalyst, but the socio-political problems were probably already there and lying dormant long before. If Tarsus IV had been a perfectly democratic and egalitarian system with a shared and commonly agreed upon code of rights and values, the famine would have been a terrible thing; but most of the colonists would probably have survived it. Unfortunately for them, their last governor turned out to be a madman, and nobody had the means or the popular support to stop him.

It was later determined that the famine was caused by an invasive fungus, likely introduced by a shipment of seeds from off-world. It destroyed most of the harvest, which would have been bad enough, but it also got into the colony's stores, and wiped out their food supply."

Leonard frowned. "That's one aggressive fungus. I'm not an expert, but..."

"... it sounds odd? Yeah. I talked to a xenobiologist who said the same. She didn't quite buy the 'accidental import by seed grain' theory, because screening is pretty tight and apparently, if there was a risk about a whole colony falling prey to a single and apparently untreatable fungal infestation, we would have heard more about that fungus before."

"Foul play?" But who would want to wipe out an entire colony?

"She suggested a political ploy, which wouldn't make sense, because the Tarsus IV colony was well established and not contested; or an act of eco-terrorism." Chris shrugged. "If Starfleet ever investigated that, they did so very quietly, and I'm not privy to the results.

In any case, it wouldn't have mattered much to the colonists where the fungus came from, because
the fungus didn't kill them; their own governor did. When it became obvious that they wouldn't be able to deal with the famine themselves, the ruling council asked the Federation for help and requested emergency supplies for the colony. Whether it was due to pride, or to a lack of coordination, that request came pretty late, and it takes a while to get supplies for that many people together. Maybe Starfleet didn't recognize the urgency, in any case, the mission took a while to kick off.

Meanwhile, people were starving on Tarsus IV. It's not a planet that is rich in natural vegetation or wildlife, and many of its natural life forms aren't edible or even poisonous to humans. The colonists tried to hold out by rationing their remaining food supply, and they ate all of their livestock, down to cats, dogs and other pets. Diseases spread, and people began to die... mostly elderly and sick people. They were getting desperate, and when their governor, a charismatic leader, who was hugely popular, offered them a solution, they took it. He was ruling under martial law by then, and without control or interference from the council. He decided, that in order for the colony to survive, they had to shrink their numbers. The food wouldn't last for all, he argued, but maybe some could be saved, if others were sacrificed.

Some turned out to be about half of them.

I don't know by what mad logic he convinced them that half of the colony would have to die in order for the other half to live; but from what evidence we gathered, the selection process wasn't random. They didn't draw lots or anything like that. It seems that Governor Kodos himself decided who would live and who would die, based on his personal theory of eugenics."

Leonard was unable to hide his disbelief. "I thought that particular horror was dead." Jesus Christ, eugenics... It was one of the darkest chapters in human history.

"Apparently not entirely. Members of the rescue crews found some of Kodos' personal notes and logs, and they offered a glimpse into a very sick mind.

He used an antimatter chamber for some of the executions. I'm sure the symbolism and historical parallels aren't lost on anybody." Chris looked as if he was going to be sick, and Leonard had to remind himself that he had actually seen the aftermath of the massacre. At the same time, he was quietly awed by the amount of trust Chris placed in him - he was not only risking his career in Starfleet by sharing classified information, but also recounting what had to be one some of his worst memories. It was no small thing.

"So when you arrived... you found only half of the colony still alive?"

"It was even less than that. There had been riots... it was hard to reconstruct what had happened, and people weren't particularly keen on talking to us. They were sick, starved, and traumatized, and at least the adults were aware of the fact that they could be held accountable for crimes committed as collaborators to Kodos' madness. He was their leader, but most of them had gone along with what he had said and done, or even executed his orders... what we did notice was that there were a lot more children and teenagers than adults. Maybe that was due to the fact that most parents will do anything to protect their kids, or maybe Kodos thought that they would be easier to control. But there were a lot of orphans.

I never saw the figures, but I know that lists of names were compiled... of the living and the dead. I think there were a few hundred survivors, but I can't be sure of the exact numbers."

"That's still a huge number to spirit away," Leonard mused. The logistics of making several hundred people disappear would have been a nightmare, and Starfleet was capable and well organized, but that...? It seemed unlikely.
"Not all of them disappeared. Some settled in other colonies. Some children, like Sam, were given a new identity and placed in foster families on Earth. I've found some evidence of an unusually high number of suicides among the survivors, but that is more likely due to what happened on Tarsus IV, than to some heinous conspiracy. It seems that Starfleet Command made an effort to sweep the whole affair under the proverbial rug, hoping that none of the colonists would find it in their interest to talk about it - which they indeed didn't - and that the three involved starship crews could be kept quiet by invoking various gag rules and shuffling them around after the incident. There were a lot of transfers on those three ships, particularly among senior officers. Robert April went on an extended personal leave - possibly not voluntarily - and they gave me the Enterprise."

"To keep you quiet?" Leonard suggested. If so, it clearly hadn't worked.

Chris shrugged. "Who knows. I was up for a promotion, and they needed to replace Robert, at least temporarily."

"So in short, hideous things happened on Tarsus IV, Starfleet tried to cover them up, and nobody was ever held accountable," Leonard summed up. "That's bad enough, but it still doesn't explain what happened to Jim Kirk. Or at least not all of it."

He told Chris about his findings. It was neither lawful, nor strictly speaking ethical, because he was certainly violating Jim's trust and doctor-patient confidentiality by sharing his findings; but Leonard felt that in this case, the transgression was justified. Chris was committed to keeping Jim safe, and in order to do that, he had to get the full picture.

"What I would really like to know is where the other half of his medical file wandered off to."

Chris frowned. "Tampering with someone's medical file is a punishable offense..."

"... and no doctor in their right mind would do such a thing," Leonard completed the thought. "Precisely. Which leads me to believe that whoever treated him either wasn't a certified medical professional, or an individual of questionable ethics who apparently wasn't concerned about getting caught. Maybe they had friends in high places, whose protection they could count on..."

"The same people in high places that seem to have an interest in keeping Jim Kirk out of the spotlight...? Seems plausible enough."

"The problem with this whole investigation, if you want to call it that, is that the only witness is also the victim, and more than reluctant to talk," Leonard noted.

"Can you blame him?" Chris shook his head.

"Hardly."

"We can't force him, and pushing too hard will probably scare him away. So the only sensible option appears to be to wait and see, and earn his trust... and make sure nobody tries to silence him for good... Barnett made me his academic adviser, that gives me a way in. He seems to like you well enough, and to trust you to a certain extent, so..."

"More babysitting," Leonard concluded with a slight eye roll. It was mostly a void complaint, he felt somewhat responsible for Jim already, and he wasn't a bad kid, all things considered. Besides, Leonard took it personally when somebody tried to harm his patients, and Jim was one of them now, for better or for worse.

"Welcome to my world," Chris said. "But I'm glad you're willing to help. Thank you." He covered Leonard's hand with his, one of those small, fond gestures Leonard had learned to love, and to
secretly crave.

Okay, so if he was perfectly honest with himself, he was also doing this for Chris. Leonard understood that Chris had made it his personal mission to find and protect Jim, whether it was out of loyalty to his parents, or as a form of atonement. They were in this together now, and even though it scared him, there was no place Leonard would rather have been.

Chris relaxed his tense posture slightly, and with his free hand raised his glass to take another sip of wine, watching Leonard all the while.

"Now, maybe we could talk about something that isn't Jim Kirk, massacres, and heinous conspiracies...?"

"Talk," Leonard asked, borrowing a page out of Pavel's book "or talk?"

Chris laughed, interlacing their fingers. "Whatever you want."
Epilogue: The Future

Chapter Notes

Just to let you know: McCoy and Pike have an "adult" conversation in this chapter. There are no graphic descriptions, but mentions of sex and sexual acts.

Starfleet Academy / Starfleet Medical Academy trivia are mostly drawn from Memory Alpha and my own college experiences.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

July 2255, San Francisco, United States, Earth

"You're humming," Jim whispered, his tone of voice accusatory, despite the low volume. "Why are you humming? We are about to be bored to death by another two hours of Admiral Richard 'I ate a rulebook for breakfast and it tasted just fine' Barnett citing rules and regulations."

"Don't be too harsh on the man, it's his job," Leonard said mildly. Even he had to admit that Admiral Barnett was a bit of a bore, but it probably came with the territory. Head of Starfleet Academy. He really didn't envy the man.

"Yes, but that doesn't mean he has to enjoy it, and he clearly does." Jim pulled a face. "If that's what a Starfleet Admiral is supposed to look like, I may have joined the wrong club."

"I'm sure they aren't all like Barnett. The Dean of Starfleet Medical is an Admiral, and he seems quite entertaining." Dean Nurmi had welcomed the new medical cadets with a jovial (and thankfully short) speech, before sending them off with their academic advisers. He was a small, wiry man with a thick grey beard and lively dark eyes sparkling with humor. If first impressions were anything to go by, Leonard rather liked him.

"You guys in Medical have all the luck," Jim muttered darkly. "You get the nicer uniforms, too. Blue looks good on everyone."

"White doesn't," Leonard countered. "And neither does red."

Although it did look on Jim. In fact, he and Nyota Uhura, three rows down and to the right, were possibly the only two people who managed to make the cadet reds look good.

"Besides, you want to enter Command, right? So it'll be grey, black; or gold for you before long, depending on your position. Black looks good on most people." It certainly did on Chris, but he kept that to himself. "When's your exam?"

"Day after tomorrow." Jim's expression brightened. "I'll pass with flying colors, you'll see."

"Overconfident much?"
Jim grinned. "Nah. Just faith in my abilities. Besides, my adviser encourages me to think big."

"Of course he does," Leonard muttered, making a mental note to tell Chris not to overdo it. Jim's ego was big enough as it was, and the underlying insecurities weren't going to be addressed by egging him on.

"So, how did your meeting with your adviser go?"

Well... "It was a bit... odd," he admitted.

"How so?" Jim asked curiously.

"Turns out, Dr. Boyce used to be Christopher Pike's CMO, and they're friends. Halfway through my interview, he decided to give me the 'if you hurt him, I'll cut out your heart with a blunt scalpel and no anesthesia' speech." Leonard frowned.

Predictably, Jim thought it was hilarious. "No! He said that? Okay, spill."

After the Dean had finished his speech, the designated advisers gathered their cadets around them and took them aside for a chat. While medical cadets shared various courses with the other cadets, Starfleet Medical Academy was a more or less independent body. Classes were generally smaller, and advisers rarely had more than a handful of students they were mentoring.

Leonard therefore wasn't too surprised to find that he appeared to be his adviser's only first year advisee.

"Dr. Philip Boyce." A large, warm hand was extended to him, along with a friendly smile. Dr. Boyce wore his age with dignity and many laughter lines.

He eyed Leonard curiously. "So. You're the medical wunderkind everyone's talking about."

Leonard squirmed. "I wouldn't say that."

"Oh, I assure you, it's true. Everyone around here is talking about you. We are a chatty bunch." Boyce shrugged. "Don't worry, it'll pass. Once the novelty wears off, and somebody does something incredibly foolish that's more interesting than your - considerable - accomplishments. Which will inevitably happen between weeks two and five of the new semester. I know my cadets."

Boyce led him down the hall, up a flight of stairs and into a small office crowded with shelves, a large wooden desk and three comfortable armchairs. Cozy was the word that came to mind.

"So," he said, after settling comfortably into the armchair across from Leonard. "What brings you to Starfleet? I'm guessing it isn't the pursuit of glory and riches."

Leonard shook his head. "An ugly divorce," he confessed. Ugly was certainly the right word for his ongoing legal fight with Jocelyn.

Boyce nodded. "Well, you're hardly the first one. I'll let the Dean know that he can send the flowers to your - wife? ex-wife? - then."
"Soon-to-be-ex, and I'm not sure she'd appreciate them."

"In any case, we're happy to have you," Boyce shrugged. "For whatever reasons."

He leant back in his chair. "As for the basics, it's pretty straightforward. You'll attend one week of orientation with all other first year cadets. It's mandatory, and boring as hell, particularly because Barnett is teaching most of it, but it's a good opportunity to meet other people and to get your bearings.

After that, you'll begin your regular courses. It's pretty straightforward. Six courses per semester, plus one elective. Medical cadets have clinic duty and lab assignments on top of that. So you won't get bored.

The core courses are mandatory, you can choose the others according to your prior experience and interests. For the first semester, you'll attend Astrotheory 101, Early Starfleet History, and Starfleet History and Protocol along with everybody else. You can choose the other three, plus the elective.

I have PADD with the full catalogue of courses, course information, and requirements for you here. Have a look at it and come see me if you have any questions, or if you need advice for choosing your courses."

He looked down at what was presumably Leonard's file.

"Given your prior work experience, I'll sign you up for Trauma II right away. It'll probably still be below your skill level, but I'm teaching that one, and I'll find a way to make it interesting for you." Boyce looked up at him again, grinning.

Leonard got the feeling that Trauma II under Dr. Philip Boyce was going to be an interesting course.

"Are you teaching any other courses?"

"Two more, this semester. Emergency Medicine and Gynecology for Nurses and Medical Support Staff. I doubt I'll see you in either of them."

Leonard nodded.

"Well. That covers the basics of your schedule. On another note, regarding labs - most lab assignments require partners. I'd advise finding several early on and sticking with them, unless they turn out to be horribly clumsy. It'll save you a world of trouble.

Have you been assigned quarters?"

Leonard nodded. "In Pasteur." It was one of the medical dorms, a square, impersonal building with long hallways. The apartments for the medical students were small and functional, but unlike most other cadets, they didn't have to share. From the looks of it, he wasn't going to be spending much time at his dorm anyways, and most of that sleeping.

"Good. I live on campus. I'm in Virchow, should you ever need to reach me outside of office hours."

Leonard was surprised by the casual offer, and apparently, it showed on his face, because Boyce laughed.

"I only have three advisees this term, I can afford to be generous. Besides" - he leant forward a little, fixing Leonard with an intense gaze that made him feel instantly uncomfortable - "Chris Pike is a close personal friend."
Shit. That was just about the last thing he needed.

"And he told you to keep an eye on me?" Leonard asked, offended and vaguely horrified. Damn Chris and his overprotective need to take care of people by managing their lives...!

Boyce huffed. "No such thing, but it wasn't necessary. I asked to be named your adviser. Chris doesn't know, and he probably wouldn't appreciate it, but I was curious."

Leonard relaxed slightly. At least, until he heard the next sentence coming out of Boyce's mouth.

"Which leads us straight to my next talking point: this is where I tell you that I'll cheerfully murder you if you ever hurt him, and no, I don't care for what reason." Boyce smiled. It wasn't a particularly nice smile.

Leonard gulped. "O-kay. Um... I have no intention of hurting him?"

"No doubt," Boyce said. "People never do, but it happens anyways." There was something in his voice as he said it, an undertone of regret and resignation, maybe a memory.

"And Chris, despite all his bravado, is more vulnerable than others," he added. "You know what I mean." It wasn't phrased as a question, but the accompanying look made it one.

"I do." At least I think I do.

"And it doesn't bother you?" Boyce insisted.

"Not particularly, no."

"Ah." Boyce sighed, and somehow, it didn't really sound like a sigh of relief. "Well, in that case... you need to understand that I don't intend to meddle. Chris is a grown man, and so are you. If you know what you're doing, great. But as I said, he's a friend, and I look out for my friends. That means, if you break his heart, I'll pick up the pieces. I've done it before. It also means that I'll make you suffer disproportionally. I will take you apart, and then I will bury you. And I have the means to do it, never doubt that. That's why I had myself named your adviser in the first place.

Are we clear?"

All traces of the smile, or the laughter lines were gone.

Leonard stared at him, half in disbelief, half impressed. It was a good speech. He also didn't doubt that Boyce would make good on his threat. And while he didn't appreciate being addressed like a schoolboy, he respected the older man's loyalty to his friend.

"Well?" Boyce asked impatiently.

"I'll keep that in mind," Leonard acknowledged.

"Lovely. Now, shall we talk about the particulars of clinic duty?"

"Yes?"

"Are you and Pike really a thing?"

Leonard rolled his eyes. "Is that any of your business?"

Jim shrugged. "Probably not, but maybe somebody should give him the shovel talk on your behalf."

"Please don't," Leonard said fervently, because he didn't even want to imagine how that conversation would pan out.

"Whatever happened to 'not gonna happen', by the way? He changed his mind quickly." Jim's eyes widened with sudden realization. "Wait. Is that why you were so happy, and whistling? Bones? Did you screw Captain Pike last night?" Mirth danced in his eyes, and his grin was mischievous.

Leonard huffed. "Again - none of your business. And it's not like that."

"Yeah, right."

"It isn't," Leonard insisted.

"Then why are you so happy?"

They had moved themselves and their conversation to the living room and onto the sofa. It was perhaps inevitable that they should fall into a more intimate position, but Leonard felt that it was also appropriate to the conversation.

Chris was leaning over and resting his head against his bent right arm, which itself rested comfortably on a well-cushioned armrest. His left rested loosely on his side, with Leonard's head leaning against it as he mirrored the position, using Chris' comfortably bent legs as both pillow and support. The position was effortlessly intimate, without stifling either of them or putting them outside their personal comfort zones.

... speaking of comfort zones -

- "I guess it's time to talk about house rules," Leonard said.

"House rules?" Chris asked.

"Or relationship rules, or personal boundaries, or whatever you want to call them. Because we should. We should take advantage of the fact that we are both reasonable, consenting adults and not currently under the influence of raging hormones, alcohol, or any other mind-altering substances. I have a feeling that doesn't happen too often at the start of a relationship. At least, it's the first time for me."

Chris chuckled, the sound low and pleasant, washing over Leonard like a warm breeze. - Okay, maybe the part about the hormones wasn't entirely true. Oxytocin was a hormone as well, and a
behavior-altering one at that. It was probably no accident of evolution that the same peptide played a role in orgasm and pair bonding. (And in effecting the milk-ejection reflex, but Leonard preferred not to delve too deeply into the possible implications of that.)

"Calling them rules sounds so very formal," Chris objected, "but I suppose you're right. We need to assess each other's comfort level."

"I'm very comfortable right now," Leonard assured him. "If I were I cat, I'd be purring."

"I'll put that down as 'cuddling on the sofa, good.'"

"Put it in the 'yes, please' column, while you're at it. Along with hugging, holding hands, backrubs, and kissing...?" He made it a question. They had done all of those before, and Leonard would have been rather unhappy to have to give up even one of them.

"Absolutely," Chris affirmed.

"You may want to add 'soulful gazing' in that category as well. You're always looking at me."

"I like looking at you. Does it bother you?"

"No. It puzzles me, sometimes, but it's not uncomfortable."

"There's no big secret to it: you're a very attractive man, Leonard, and I'm not blind to that."

"Why, thank you." Leonard grinned, relishing the compliment. Okay, so maybe he was preening a bit. So sue him. After his relationship with Jocelyn had gone up in flames, he felt that he needed a little bit of reassurance.

"Is there anything else that should be added under the heading 'yes, please'?"

"I'm sure there are a lot of things, and we'll have a lot of fun discovering them one by one. But maybe we should take care of 'no, thank you' first...?"

"Sure. So...?"

"Sex?" Leonard suggested. It seemed obvious.

"It's a rather broad term," Chris said.

"Okay, then. I would definitely be uncomfortable with anything that made you uncomfortable."

"Likewise. Are you sexually attracted to me?"

Leonard took a moment to consider the question. He had thought about it before, but not come up with a clear answer. There was definitely something there, but it was difficult to fully grasp, and it felt somehow different to what he had felt for Jocelyn or any of his girlfriends before her.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "I'm... I've always considered myself straight. I'm usually attracted to women, and while I participated in some experimentation in college, being with another man never really did much for me. I had one encounter with someone from a species with more than two biological genders, but that was too different to really fall into any of our usual categories. At the same time, I wouldn't exclude the possibility of feeling aroused by something we do together, or even just something you do in my presence... but then again, arousal and sexual attraction are not the same thing."
"That's true," Chris agreed, "and it'd be similar for me. I'm incapable of sexual attraction, but not incapable of arousal. I just generally prefer to ignore it, and I'd ask you to do the same, when it comes to me. Not your own, obviously."

That was more straightforward and simpler than Leonard had expected. This was also turning out to be the most frank conversation about sex he'd ever had outside of med school. But maybe he should have expected nothing less from Chris. Chris knew what he did and did not want, and apparently, he had no problem discussing it. It was refreshingly uncomplicated.

"So in plain terms: what do we not do? I can only list the things I tried and didn't like, so here goes: anal sex, tried it, didn't like it; oral, yes, but feels weird if it's not with a woman. I'm open to being kissed and touched pretty much anywhere. No licking, though. I'm not a dog. I will neither lick nor be licked by anybody."

"I wasn't about to lick you, but that's good to know," Chris teased, leaning down to kiss the top of Leonard's head and blow a gentle, warm breath through his hair. "Kisses are okay, though?"

"More than okay. As in 'please do that again'?"

"Perfect. You've covered most of my no-go areas. I'd just like to add, no kissing or touching on or near the genitals, unless it's accidental."

"Can you accidentally kiss somebody's dick?" Now it was Leonard's turn to tease.

"I meant accidental touches. Be serious," Chris admonished, but Leonard could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Does that more or less cover the big stuff? What about massages?"

"Most welcome. Pet names?"

"Depends," Leonard said, drawing out the word. "Common terms of endearment are fine. But should you ever get it into your head to call me animal names, or things like 'honeybun' or similar, I will flee the scene."

"You have my word that I will do no such thing," Chris promised, chuckling again. "So, what do I call you in front of others? Boyfriend? Partner? Lover? - 'Boyfriend' makes me feel like a dirty old man..."

"Then don't use that one. 'Partner' has a nice ring to it, though. Let's be partners." Leonard gently pressed his lips to the back of Chris' palm, resting on his knees.

"You have that blissed-out, dreamy look on your face," Jim said disapprovingly. "You know what, I'm not even going to ask. I still need to be able to look Pike in the eye next time I'm called to his office. There are some images I just don't need in my mind."


"I'm curious, though. You just got divorced, right? Is he the rebound?"
Leonard shook his head. "He's one of the reasons for the divorce," he admitted. "The others would be incompatibility and Jocelyn being a bitch." His voice sounded bitter even to his own ears.

"Damn. Remind me never to get married," Jim said. "Hey - Pike has a kid. Is he married?"

"No. Pavel is his foster son. He's taking the entry exam today, by the way. Might be in our class."

"What? He's just a kid!" Jim looked honestly affronted. "They can't let him... can they?"

"He's a very special kid," Leonard said, rubbing his temples and refraining from mentioning his own misgivings about Pavel's tender age. "Genius brain. He took the written exam some time ago and passed with a 96% score."


Just then, a collective murmur and shuffle went through the assembled crowd of cadets, and when they looked up, they found that Admiral Barnett had walked into the room, followed by a stout woman with an impressive mane of dark curls.

Jim groaned quietly.

Barnett introduced the woman by his side as Captain Saïda Razek, Academy instructor for several combat courses and his teaching partner for the orientation week. Following that, he launched into a long-winded explanation of the fundamentals of the Academy code of conduct.

"Kill me now," Jim muttered. "I won't survive a week of this."

It was clearly meant as a joke, but knowing what he did, it had a somewhat sinister ring to Leonard's ears. *Somebody might try that sooner than you think, kid.* He wondered if he should tell Jim about the potential threat against his life. It seemed unfair to leave him in the dark - but on the other hand, he didn't want to scare him away either.

In the end, he said nothing and tried to make light of it, patting Jim's arm. "It's four years. And he teaches *Starfleet History and Protocol.* That's an entire first-semester course with your new favorite Admiral to look forward to."

Jim rolled his eyes theatrically. "Anyone ever tell you you're evil?"

Chapter End Notes

This is it! Thank you for following this story, and I hope you enjoyed it! I'm already working on a sequel.

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