

That Night in the Cave

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Summary

Tilly has a serious and secret crush on Christopher Pike. Saru's Vahar'ai has triggered his species version of puberty and he is looking for guidance via a stand-in father figure. Discovery's crew is curious about their temporary commander's background, especially his early missions shrouded in secrecy, his citations in battle, and atypical medical skills. After all why would a starship captain be honored with the prestigious Carrington Award bestowed by the Federation Council for a lifetime's excellence in medicine?

In addition to sorting out the mystery of the seven signals, Admiral Cornwell has assigned Pike a secret mission. Restless while Enterprise is docked for repairs, Una takes a vacation.

This is a story of dangers, heroics, rescues, awkward situations, getting to know your crewmates, friendship, dating, romance, and the trajectory of first love for a young girl as she finds her place in the galaxy. As well as the stranded in a cave during a storm trope.

Three Days Ago

"Team three" Saru barked into his communicator. Hearing the edge in his voice, Pike looked up from the map he and Nhan reviewed.

"Team three leader here sir."

"You are ten minutes late. Report to the rendezvous point," the Kelpien said.

"Ah...sir, we are just...finishing up a few last-minute details. A couple of final samples."

"Unacceptable!" was the loud reply.

Pike said to his security chief, "Retrieve team two from the river then beam directly to the ship. Take a medic with you and let me know if anyone was injured." Nhan nodded, gestured to a nurse, and jogged south. Walking over to the first officer, he straightened his shoulders and prepared to deal with the next problem. Ever since his Vahar'ai, Saru could go from calm past firm to disgruntled and then angry in less than thirty seconds. His behavior of late bounced from extreme to extreme in the blink of an eye, pushing at all boundaries and sometimes testing his superior officer's renowned patience. Saru described the Vahar'ai experience as an evolution, liberating him from constant and overriding fear. Pike was starting to view it as the equivalent of a human male entering puberty, one who engaged in an almost daily battle of wills.

"Report."

The Kelpien's eyes flashed with irritation, but he calmed his voice and said, "Teams one, four, five, and six are present. I was attempting to ascertain the status of team three, which you have interrupted." This response drew curious stares from the assembled crew.

"Very well. Please return to the ship with those here and ..."

"Captain, I prefer to ..." Saru's tone bordered on heated.

The other man's voice did not waver nor rise. "And take the conn." The storm will reach this system in ninety minutes. If there is a problem, I need you on the bridge."

"No. You should be on Discovery, I here. It is my responsibility to ensure your safety."

So much for providing a gracious exit, Pike thought. He warned in a quiet tone, "Not the time or place for this discussion."

Saru glared down at his captain.

Who serenely looked up at his first officer. After a few seconds he said, “Implement my instructions.”

They continued their mutual staring for another minute. It felt like an hour to the others until Saru looked away. “Yes sir.”

“Prepare to leave orbit. I’ll beam out with team three. And Mr. Saru, a job well done, my compliments to you and the science department.” The captain walked toward the cliffs without waiting to verify his orders were followed.

The geological survey sight was an easy fifteen-minute walk from the rendezvous point and with a comfortable margin of time before the geomagnetic storm encompassed the area, Pike, out of sight and hearing of all of his crew, sat on a fallen log, savoring a rare private moment. Three weeks previously they had encountered the sphere; the second signal led them to New Eden five weeks ago. This interval granted time for his secondary mission while onboard – evaluate the Discovery crew and decide if it should be disbanded and replaced.

A crew’s performance under intense pressure said much about their cohesion and ability. Managing the more predominant ordinary routine of space travel with no pressure of imminent catastrophe to focus thoughts and actions also spoke volumes. Did they miss subtle warning signs in the quiet of unremarkable days? Did they prepare for stealthy disasters with solutions beyond training and standard equipment? When mentoring he used the example of scaling Mount Everest – most deaths occur on the way down from the peak; after the goal is achieved climbers relax and forget hazards remain.

Under their commander’s mandate, the crew had spent the last weeks updating and fine-tuning ship’s systems, analyzing the sphere data, and remotely surveying a system of five planets in a complex orbit around a trinary star system. And though Pike knew this bright and talented, yet inexperienced group performed well under pressure, he had learned their inexperience could be an Achilles heel. Today reflected this. The expedition to the fourth planet began with an unpromising start as the landing party behaved like children visiting an amusement park, each running excitedly in a different direction examining any interesting object catching their attention. Consequences so far had been minor: lost time, a few bumps and bruises, and the team mapping the southern plain stranding themselves on an improvised raft in the middle of a wide river. *Their explanation should prove entertaining*, he thought with a silent chuckle.

Pike beamed down at the start of the day then returned to the ship allowing Saru the space and privacy for refocusing the science and emergency medical teams as well as their security escort; later he returned and spent one-on-one time with each group. Under Lorca’s management most of the crew interacted only with their department leaders, rarely entering their captain’s orbit. Earning their trust required consistent and repeated facetime.

Soon he would have to decide their future. Now it was time to end this indulgence and get back to work. He rose and took out his communicator. “Pike to team three. What’s your status?”

The reply came slower than expected and the young lieutenant leading the team sounded flustered. “Captain, sir? We’re ready for beam out ... except ... I mean ... there is one problem. Ensign Tilly is missing.”

Captains could miss subtle warning signs too. Pike swore silently to himself and ran to the geological survey site.

Tilly clung to the edge of the cliff with both hands. *Brilliant plan. Yes, it was an interesting and unexpected energy signature, but next time, mental note, tell someone in case, once again, the worst happens, like tumbling and barely catching a sharp rock before falling to a certain death. And losing my communicator, but then it wasn’t like I could let go to get it out of my pocket anyway. And hey girl, impressive reflexes and strength there, catching yourself. Kudos. And Oh my God, what am I going to do now? How much longer can I hold on?* She tried peering down to see what fate awaited when gravity won.

“I turned around and Tilly was gone. I don’t know for how long sir,” team three leader reported radiating anxiety with voice and body language.

Pike sought the right words to steady her, deciding the best way forward was for the geologist to focus on a task. Composing a friendly and reassuring ‘the situation is serious but under control’ expression he said, “I need you to take responsibility for getting your team back to the ship. I leave their safety in your capable hands.” She nodded and offered her tricorder.

Moving away from the others, he scanned for isolated life signs; interference stymied the readings. While waiting for Discovery’s sensors to sweep the area, he squinted at the distant horizon searching for signs of the coming storm. Growing wind swirled dust and tree branches.

Michael called back with the results or rather the lack of. “I’m beaming down.”

“Belay that,” Pike ordered in his firmest tone. Michael tended to act first, and then ask forgiveness, he didn’t need additional complications. *Time to put those old-fashioned tracking skills to use*, he thought and began walking away from the cliffs to the forest, examining the terrain for clues a biped had passed through.

Clinging to the edge, Tilly’s fingers cramped, and her arms and shoulders numbed. Fear gripped like a vise, her body shivered as the temperature dropped and the wind increased. When the time came, she didn’t feel her fingers relax and let go.

After several dead ends, Pike circled back to the cliffs and found a trail of disturbed rocks. He approached it cautiously probing for hidden recesses and other instabilities. The top of these bluffs tested stable. Following the best lead so far, he walked forward.

Instinct screamed at him to hurry, logic implored him to proceed with care. The terrain became treacherous with no warning; a small unseen hole tripped his feet. *Anyone passing through here at speed or reading data on a tricorder instead of monitoring the ground ... damn.* He peered cautiously over the edge of the cliff.

Tilly had fallen and landed on a small ledge several hundred meters below. Her right leg and arm were dangling over the outcropping, and she was starting to stir. If she panicked and moved slightly, she would roll off with nothing to break her fall until hitting the ground a thousand

meters below.

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