

Yours If You Want It

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Summary

Instead of leaving his son on Boreth, Ash decides to keep him and raise him himself. Pike proves unexpectedly helpful.

Notes

Written for IridescentLily in the 2022 Alternate Universe exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

I haven't given the baby a name in this fic since the odds of Ash picking the same name as the monks seemed unlikely to me, but I'm sure Ash will think of something eventually.

"Are you sure you want your boy to become a monk?"

"It's what L'Rell wants," Ash tells her absently, jiggling the baby a little in his arms. His eyes are big and bright, staring up at Ash with interest.

"And you?"

Ash doesn't answer for a moment. He knows the logic behind it; their son will be safe on Boreth. He'll grow up alone, without a family or clan, but he'll be safe. It's a smart plan, but something twists in Ash's chest as he looks down at the warm weight in his arms, small and helpless and his. He knows how much it hurt Voq to grow up without that kind of connection to his clan, how deeply it scarred him.

His son will be safe, true, but at what cost?

"No," he says, the word pulled out of him almost against his will. "I don't want that. But what other choice do I have?"

He never thought that much about having kids, just assumed it was something that would happen in the future when he found the right person. L'Rell is the opposite of the right person, but this child still exists, is still, in a manner of speaking, his, and that means something. Means everything.

He glances up at Georgiou to see her studying him intently, her head tilted. "Perhaps more than you think," she says. "But it will require sacrifices."

"Doesn't it always?" Ash asks, shifting the baby in his arms. His mom raised him alone, and she was amazing, but he knows it wasn't always easy. If he does this, his life won't be truly his again for years, if ever. It'll be the hardest thing he's ever done.

He looks down at the bundle in his arms, brushing his finger over a tiny cheek. The hardest, and the most rewarding.

Georgiou is still watching him, and he meets her gaze squarely. "What do I have to do?"

* * *

Several weeks later

Ash sighs as he walks the length of his quarters and back, a wailing baby in his arms. As far as Ash can tell, he isn't hungry or wet or anything, but he woke up screaming about twenty minutes ago and won't go back to sleep. Which is not ideal when Ash has to be up in – he checks the time – just under four hours for his job.

It's times like this, in the middle of the night when he's all alone with a crying baby, that Ash wonders if it was the right choice to bring him here. He's trying his best, but there's *so much* that he doesn't know. He's scoured the Federation databases for all the information on Klingon infants he could find and, while it's more than he honestly expected, there are a lot of gaps. And since he's pretty sure any attempt to reach out to L'Rell would just lead to a screaming match on the subject of 'I told you to leave him on Boreth', he's basically been making it up as he goes along.

The one time he got up the courage to brave sickbay, Pollard told him his son was doing fine – a little small, maybe, but developing well – but Ash is so, so afraid of screwing up and harming him somehow. Or screwing up his *other* job, and making Leland regret sending him here.

It isn't as if he doesn't have enough to deal with, he thinks tiredly. For someone who seems to have the crew eating out of the palm of his hand, Captain Pike is actually kind of a dick. He hasn't been shy about expressing how much he resents having someone from Section 31 on his ship, and seems to think the best way to deal with it is to stonewall Ash at every turn. Ash is doing his best, but he's pretty sure Leland is starting to get annoyed with his lack of progress.

The baby – he's really going to have to come up with a name at some point – pauses in his crying long enough to yawn widely, and Ash rocks him gently, hoping he'll finally calm down and go to sleep. "Shh, it's okay, I'm here."

Out of desperation, he begins humming an old lullaby his mother used to sing to him. It isn't exactly Klingon standard, but it seems to work. The baby's cries trail off into sniffles, his eyes slipping shut. Ash continues rocking him for a few minutes, still humming, then, barely daring to breathe, sets him down carefully in the crib and steps away.

The baby shifts a little, settling in, but doesn't wake. Ash sighs in relief and collapses onto his own bed, hoping he can squeeze in a few more hours of sleep before he has to go back to banging his head against a wall.

* * *

Things aren't any better the next morning. The baby spits up all over him during breakfast, necessitating a change of uniform and nearly making him late, and then he finds out that Michael has left the ship and *of course* Pike insists on being his usual asshole self and refuses to tell Ash why.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out it has something to do with Spock, and while Ash actually kind of hopes she finds him before Section 31 do, Leland isn't going to be happy about it, which means Ash's life is going to suck even more than it already does.

He isn't surprised when Pike volunteers himself to pilot a shuttle towards the anomaly – the man seems to love playing the hero – and since Ash isn't about to be left out of the loop *yet again*, that means going with him.

"Shouldn't you be looking after Junior?" Pike asks, glancing at Ash as the turbolift doors slide shut. Ash bristles at his tone; Pike has been very clear that he disagrees with Ash's choice to bring a baby to *Discovery*, and while there's a small part of him that can see where Pike is coming from, it's still his son, and his decision, and *what the hell else was he supposed to do?*

"He'll be fine," he says shortly, hoping the *Not that it's any of your business* is implied. "We have work to do."

It's just a little shuttle flight, after all. What could go wrong?

* * *

Ash's door chimes that evening, just as the baby is finishing his night-time bottle. Ash frowns as he lays him down carefully in his crib and goes to answer the door, wondering who could possibly be visiting him. He doesn't exactly have a lot of friends here.

He gets his answer as the door slides open to reveal Captain Pike. He's out of uniform for once, looking as if he's on the way to the gym.

"Hey," Pike says with a brief smile. "I just wanted to see how you were."

Ash stares at him blankly for a moment before he remembers his injured shoulder. He got used to shrugging off minor injuries like that a long time ago; he wasn't kidding when he told Pike a Klingon wouldn't even bother to bandage it.

"I'm fine," he says, then, before he can think better of it, "Do you want to come in?"

Pike smiles again, widely enough to show dimples. "Sure."

"Hell of a day," he adds, as the door slides shut behind him.

Ash snorts. "That's one way of putting it." It's strange to be speaking amicably like this, without any sniping or passive-aggression. He wouldn't exactly call them friends, but working together like that, saving each other's lives, has formed a connection. Pike can be a dick, sure, but that's not *all* he is.

A soft babbling comes from the crib, and Pike turns, an odd expression crossing his face. He starts to move closer, and Ash strides over to the crib, hovering protectively as Pike looks inside. The baby waves his arms in the air, wanting to be picked up, and Ash tenses as Pike reaches out to brush a tiny hand. "Well, hello there," he says, his voice soft.

The baby grabs onto his finger, holding it in one fist for a moment before pulling it to his mouth to explore. Pike gives a surprised huff as he bites down, and Ash winces. "Sorry about that. I think he's teething."

"It's okay," Pike says with a laugh. "My friend's daughter liked to chew on me too. I guess all babies are the same in some ways."

He frees his finger gently, staring down into the crib. "He's kind of cute, for a Klingon."

He seems to mean it as a compliment, but the words sting. Ash scoops the baby up into his arms, holding him close. "He's not just 'a Klingon'," he says. "He's my son."

Pike raises his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "I know," he replies. "And I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

He looks genuinely apologetic, and Ash's indignation ebbs until he just feels tired. "That's always going to be the first thing people see when they look at him, isn't it? He could be the kindest, most gentle person in the universe, and all they'll see is a Klingon."

"Maybe," Pike says quietly. "But the people who matter won't stop at first impressions."

He rests a hand on the edge of the crib, frowning a little. "I realise I haven't exactly made things easier for you these last few weeks," he says, sounding as if he's choosing his words carefully. "I want to apologise for that. I thought you were making a mistake, bringing him here, but you were just doing what you thought was best for your son. I get that now."

"Thank you," Ash replies. "And you weren't completely wrong, this probably isn't the safest place for him, but I..." He trails off, swallowing, then continues, "I had the chance to give him up, leave him somewhere he'd be safe, but I just... I couldn't do it. Voq grew up without a family, without anyone who loved him, and it hurt him every day of his life. I couldn't let that happen again. I still don't know if that was the right choice." He sighs and glances down at the baby, who has shoved the fingers of one hand into his mouth and is sucking happily, oblivious to the conversation above him.

"I think that's what parenting is," Pike says. "Making the best choices you can and hoping they're right, or at least not too wrong."

"Yeah," Ash replies quietly. "Maybe."

The baby stops sucking on his fingers and makes a soft grunt, his cheeks darkening in a way that Ash has learned to recognise. "I, uh," he begins awkwardly. "Can we pick this up later? I think somebody needs a change."

Pike smiles. "Sure. I should get going anyway, or I'll miss my workout slot." He turns to leave, then turns back and adds, "I'd be willing to babysit sometime, if you ever want a night off. All you have to do is ask."

"I'll keep that in mind," Ash tells him. He hesitates, then adds, "Thanks."

With another smile, Pike leaves, and Ash presses a kiss to the top of the baby's head before laying him down on the changing mat. He smiles up at Ash gummily, and Ash can't help but smile back as he unfastens the baby's onesie. "Come on, you little monster. Let's get you clean."

* * *

Working with Pike gets easier, after. It isn't perfect; they still disagree on the best ways to do things, but Pike seems more willing to hear him out, and in return Ash makes more of an effort to understand where Pike is coming from.

He doesn't stop by Ash's quarters again, but he does make a point to ask how he's getting on, or offer a few words of support. It isn't much, but Ash appreciates it anyway, and it's enough to make him feel more warmly towards Pike.

Which is why, when he finds himself struggling one evening, caught between a crying baby and a meeting with Leland, Pike is the first person he thinks of.

It won't be a long meeting – there isn't that much to report – but the baby is clearly in a mood and goes from sniffing to screaming every time Ash tries to put him down. Leland has made it clear that, while he's sympathetic to Ash's situation, the mission comes first, and Ash is pretty sure giving his report while his son cries his eyes out in the background is not going to look professional.

He jiggles the baby in one arm as he taps out a message on his communicator. *Hey, is the offer to babysit still open?*

A reply comes quickly. *Sure, when did you want me?*

Ash hesitates, but it isn't like he has a lot of options. *Now?*

I'll be right there. He doesn't know how it's possible for a plain text message to sound amused, but Pike manages it.

He shows up a few minutes later, dressed casually in black pants and a blue *Discovery* t-shirt. "You called?"

"Uh. Yeah," Ash says, as he steps aside to let Pike into his quarters. "Can you watch him for about twenty minutes while I talk with Leland? I wouldn't have bothered you, but he cries every time I put him down."

Pike frowns. "Taking care of your son so you can go tell Leland all my secrets? Not sure that's a fair deal."

Ash stares at him, his face heating, and Pike's expression softens. "That was a joke, Tyler. Of course I'll do it."

Ash mumbles a thanks and hands the baby over, trying not to feel like too much of an idiot. "It won't be for more than twenty minutes. Probably more like fifteen."

"No problem," Pike says with a smile, before turning his attention to the baby. He bounces him in his arms a little, rubbing his back as he sniffs and hiccups. "Grumpy today, huh?" he asks, dropping into the sing-song tone common to humans confronted with a baby. "How about we see if we can change that?"

He turns away, heading for the sofa, and Ash retreats to the other room to contact Leland.

As he predicted, the meeting doesn't take long. Leland doesn't seem happy at his lack of progress, but as it doesn't seem like the rest of Section 31 are doing any better on the 'finding Spock' front, he can't really complain too much.

"And how're things going with Pike?" Leland asks, once Ash has brought him up to speed. "Does he trust you?"

Ash glances instinctively at the closed door. "I think so?" he says. "He's been co-operating more with me lately." That's one way of putting it, anyway, and he can't help but wonder what Leland would think if he told him Pike is currently babysitting his kid.

The hologram smiles. "Good. Keep working at it." He looks off to the side, then adds, "Contact me when you have something. Leland out."

With that, he disappears. Ash stares at the space where he was for a moment, then sighs and heads back out into the main room.

He finds Pike lying on the sofa, the baby sprawled across his chest. He has one of his fingers in the baby's mouth and is singing softly; Ash can't identify the song but he thinks it might be something from the Beatles.

He can't help but smile a little at the sight. "You two seem to be getting along."

Pike startles, drawing an unhappy noise from the baby, then relaxes as he catches sight of Ash. "I just appreciate having someone who won't complain about my singing." He shifts, sitting up a little, and adds, "I might have figured out why he's so cranky. You were right about the teething."

He lifts the baby's top lip gently, just enough to reveal a flash of white against dark gums. Ash shakes his head, an odd emotion swelling in his chest. "He has a *tooth*."

"Looks that way," Pike agrees. "You might want to get him something to chew on. Besides me."

He rises carefully, cradling the baby against his chest. "How was your meeting?"

"Fine," Ash replies quickly. "Thanks for your help."

"No problem," Pike replies. Ash reaches out and he hands the baby over, making sure Ash has him securely before stepping away.

His shirt is dark where the baby has drooled on him, and Ash winces inwardly. "Uh, you've got some-" he begins, and Pike looks down, taking in the damp patch on his shirt.

"It'll wash," he says with a shrug. "Are you hungry?"

Ash frowns at the change in topic, shifting the baby to a more comfortable position. "Yeah, I guess, why?"

"I was about to go for dinner when I got your message. I thought maybe we could eat together?"

Ash stares at him, trying to remember the last time someone volunteered to spend time with him. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I'd like that."

"Guh," the baby adds, waving an arm, and Ash smiles a little and corrects himself.

"We would like that."

* * *

Ash leaves Pike to organise the food while he changes the baby and finds him a teething ring to chew on.

"Wow, Captain," Ash says as he emerges from the bathroom. "You really go all out."

His desk has been cleared, the PADDs and baby detritus stacked neatly next to the wall, and two plates have been set out – fully, with glasses and cutlery and everything. Ash half-expects him to whip out a tablecloth.

Pike smiles. "You know," he says, almost idly, "my friends call me Chris."

"Are we friends?" Ash asks, before he can stop himself.

"Aren't we?" Pike counters. "I don't let just anyone's kid drool all over me."

"Well, when you put it that way," Ash replies with a brief smile. He sets the baby down carefully on a blanket and gives him a few toys, unsurprised when he immediately starts shoving them in his mouth.

Pike – Chris – has already taken a seat at the desk, and Ash sits down opposite, feeling a little awkward. He can barely remember the last time he had a conversation that wasn't either about work or half-conducted in baby talk. Chris, however, just smiles at him before beginning to eat.

They don't talk much at first, too focused on their meals. Ash keeps one eye on the baby, but he seems happy enough lying there on the blanket, testing out his new tooth on the toys.

"He'll be crawling soon," Chris says as the baby pulls himself forwards to grab a block that has rolled out of reach.

Ash groans. "Don't remind me." He's definitely not looking forward to baby-proofing his quarters.

"How old is he, anyway?" Chris asks. "I heard Klingon children develop faster than humans."

"That's true," Ash tells him. "The planet's so inhospitable that they have to mature quickly in order to survive. And I'm not sure how old he is exactly. Klingons don't really celebrate birthdays the way humans do." He frowns, taking a second to work it out. "Chronologically, I guess, he's about four Standard months, but he was gestated artificially so he seems younger."

"I didn't know the Klingons had that kind of technology," Chris says, looking intrigued.

Ash shrugs. "It isn't often used, but L'Rell thought pregnancy would interfere with her plans to infiltrate the Federation." He can't quite keep the bitterness out of his tone. "To be honest, I don't think she ever really wanted children. She left him to be raised by relatives, barely visited him... She never even gave him a name." He sighs. "Not that I'm doing any better on that last one."

"I've always been partial to Christopher," Chris puts in, and Ash snorts in spite of himself.

"You wish."

He's almost finished with his meal when the baby starts making unhappy noises, his face screwing up in an impending crying fit. "He's probably hungry," Ash says. "It's about time for his bottle."

"Want me to feed him?" Chris asks. "I don't mind, really."

Ash hesitates, but decides he might as well let Chris have a go. "If you're sure. Formula Supplement A, 36 degrees. It's already programmed in."

Chris scoops up the baby, jiggling him a little in his arms, then orders a bottle and sits back down at the desk to feed him. Ash continues eating, watching as Chris settles the baby into one arm and guides the bottle into his mouth with the air of one who's done this before. The baby latches on and begins to suck vigorously.

"Okay," Chris says. "Definitely hungry."

The baby's sucking slows as the bottle starts to empty, his eyes drifting shut. "I think somebody's tired," Chris says. "I guess growing teeth takes a lot of energy."

"You're good with him," Ash says. He feels like it shouldn't be a surprise.

"I like babies," Chris replies. "Everything's new to them, it makes things seem interesting."

"Did you ever want kids of your own?" Ash asks.

Chris shrugs. "Maybe, if I found the right person to have them with. Hasn't happened yet, though."

"You could be like me and find the completely wrong person to have them with," Ash tells him, and Chris gives a huff of laughter.

"I'll keep that in mind." He glances up at Ash with a smile, expression softening. "I know it must be hard," he says, "doing it on your own like this, but you're a good parent. He's lucky to have you."

Ash swallows, the words touching him more than he would have expected. "Thanks," he says.

* * *

Pike starts stopping by more often after that, to check in, or play with the baby, or sometimes just to talk. Ash finds himself looking forward to their time together; it's nice to have someone to talk to, and the baby clearly adores him.

There are some things Ash has to do on his own, though; a thought that is brought home to him one afternoon when he finds himself in the familiar situation of walking up and down his quarters with a crying baby in his arms. He's been cranky and restless all day – more teething, Ash assumes.

A look at the clock tells him it's time for his afternoon feed, and he jiggles the baby gently in one arm as he orders a bottle from the synthesiser. At least this should buy him a few minutes of peace, he thinks tiredly.

But as it turns out, he's wrong. The baby only takes in a few mouthfuls before he pulls away and starts to cry again.

"Shh, shh," Ash murmurs, rocking him gently as he tries to figure out what's wrong. One thing he's learned about his son over the past weeks is that he has a very healthy appetite, gulping down his formula as if it's the last food he'll ever have. He's *never* refused a feeding before, not like this.

Ash tries the bottle again, and again the baby sucks for a few seconds before pushing it away and burying his head in Ash's chest.

Ash puts the bottle down slowly, brows knitting together. "What's going on with you, huh?" he asks softly, stroking the baby's head. It's warmer than usual, and he frowns and touches his fingers to one cheek.

Definitely warm. Ash doesn't have a thermometer, but when combined with the crankiness and sudden lack of appetite it's enough to set alarm bells ringing in his head. "You not feeling so well?"

The baby makes an unhappy noise and presses closer, tugging on his ear. Ash tries to fight down a spike of anxiety, various possible illnesses passing through his mind. *Relax*, he tells himself. *It's probably just a cold or something.*

There's only one way to find out, though, and he holds the baby close and heads for sickbay.

* * *

"It's an ear infection," Doctor Pollard reports after a quick examination. "They're not uncommon among young children, and unfortunately Klingon ears aren't different enough for him to escape it." She makes a few notes on a PADD and adds, "I'm prescribing some painkillers, as well as a course of antibiotics. They can cause digestive upset, so I recommend giving them with a feeding if you can."

"I tried giving him a bottle before I came down here," Ash tells her. "He wouldn't take it."

"That's not unusual. The sucking and swallowing motion puts pressure on the ears, which causes pain. The painkillers should help."

The baby raises his arms tearfully in Ash's direction, and Ash scoops him up, rocking him gently as Pollard organises the medication.

"Dosage is written on the side," she tells Ash as she hands him the bottles. "If he isn't any better in a day or two, or if he starts getting worse, bring him back here."

"Thanks," Ash tells her, and she smiles briefly.

"Don't worry," she says. "I know it isn't fun to see him in pain, but this is perfectly normal. A few days and he'll be good as new."

"I hope so," Ash murmurs, holding him close.

* * *

He doesn't get much rest that night. The painkillers do help, but the baby still can't eat much and so wakes up multiple times in the night, hungry and miserable and in pain. The little sleep Ash does get is filled with nightmares – some of his past, some of terrible things happening to his son – and when his alarm goes off in the morning he feels like he might as well not have slept at all.

He zones out in the meeting that morning in favour of watching the baby's life signs on his PADD. The crib's monitoring system is set up to alert him if they go outside of normal parameters – and in an emergency to alert sickbay as well – but it's still comforting to see the steady heartbeat on the screen.

"Mr Tyler?"

Ash snaps back to reality to see Pike looking at him expectantly.

"Has Section 31 come up with any new information?"

Ash straightens, coming to attention. "Not so far, sir. They're still working on it."

Pike nods once before turning away. "Ensign Tilly, how are you getting on with the sphere data?"

Tilly immediately begins babbling about the latest information she's uncovered, and Ash sits back in his seat, trying to push away his exhaustion.

The meeting breaks up not long after. Ash stands, picking up his PADD, only for Pike to call him back. "Specialist Tyler, a word?"

The rest of the officers file out, leaving the two of them alone. Pike leans back against the desk, studying him. "Long night?"

Ash grips the PADD behind his back, gaze focused on the wall behind Pike's shoulder. "I apologise for my inattention in the meeting. It won't happen again."

"Relax, Ash," Pike says gently. "It wasn't a rebuke. I'm just asking – as a friend – if you're okay."

Ash's shoulders slump, tiredness washing over him again. "I'll be fine. He just isn't feeling well right now, so neither of us got much sleep."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

Ash shakes his head. "Doctor Pollard says it's an ear infection, and he should be fine in a few days. I just hate seeing him so miserable."

Pike – Chris, Ash thinks, this is more of a Chris conversation – nods slowly. "I don't mind if you want to take some time off," he says. "Get some rest, spend time with him..."

"I have work to do," Ash tells him, and Chris shrugs.

"I won't tell if you won't." He studies Ash for a moment before adding, "It's not going to do anyone any good if you collapse from exhaustion. Trust me, I speak from experience."

Ash smiles a little in spite of himself. "It sounds like there's a story there."

"You could say that." He runs a hand through his hair. "I might have been a little... overenthusiastic... when I first got promoted. I was one of the youngest captains in history, in command of the flagship, and I pushed myself to my limits, trying to prove to everyone – including myself – that I was up to the challenge. Which worked great, right up until I passed out on the bridge a few weeks in."

"Really?"

"Oh yeah. Stood up to look at something, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor. I'm lucky I didn't hit my head." He smiles sheepishly and adds, "My CMO was not impressed. He pointed out to me that not only was I hurting myself, I was setting a terrible example

for the crew. If they saw their captain refusing to slow down and take some time off when he needed to, they weren't going to do that either, and then we'd really be in trouble."

"I really doubt anyone's looking to me as a role model," Ash tells him.

"Your son is. Do you really want him to see asking for help as a weakness?" Chris's tone is gentle as he adds, "He's sick, you both need rest, and we're basically in a holding pattern here anyway. *Take the day off.*"

Part of Ash feels like he should argue, but he has to admit Chris has a point. "You'll contact me if anything changes?"

"You have my word," Chris promises.

A few weeks ago that wouldn't have sounded convincing, but Ash has seen how much Chris's word is worth, and he trusts him to keep it.

"Okay," he says, giving in. "But only for today, and only as long as nothing happens. I know you don't always like it, but I was put on this ship for a reason. I still have a job to do."

"I promise, if something happens you'll be the first to know," Chris tells him. "Now go rest." He smiles and adds, "And tell your son I hope he gets well soon."

* * *

Ash spends a good portion of the day dozing, lying on the couch with the baby curled on his chest. He sleeps better when Ash is holding him, and while Ash has to get up a few times to feed him or change him, the chance to just lie there and rest for a while does them both a world of good.

By the afternoon he's recovered enough to do more than laze around, so he spreads out a blanket on the floor and he and the baby spend some time playing the 'moving toys around while he grabs at them' game. He seems happier now, his fever down and his eating closer to normal, so Ash hopes they're past the worst of it.

The door chimes just as the baby is in the process of shoving a triumphantly-seized orange ring into his mouth, and Ash rests a hand on his back for a second before rising to answer it.

It turns out to be Chris. He's still dressed in his uniform – judging by the time, Ash figures he must have only just gotten off shift – and is carrying a foil-wrapped package.

Ash stands aside to let him past, and Chris hands him the package as he steps inside. "I figured if you weren't sleeping enough, you might not be eating enough either."

Ash's stomach grumbles, reminding him that he did in fact skip lunch. "Something else you learned from experience?" he asks as he unwraps the package. It's a sandwich, turkey and cheese. His favourite.

"Unfortunately," Chris replies. "But I think I've hit my quota of embarrassing stories for one day."

He kneels down on the floor next to the baby, who waves the ring at him and smiles widely. "Ki!"

"Well hello to you too," Chris says, smiling back. "Feeling better?"

"He seems to be," Ash puts in. "I think the medicine's working."

"That's good," Chris says, glancing at him before turning back to the baby. "Now I know you're a little too young for sandwiches, so I got you something else." He digs in his pocket and produces a small stuffed rabbit, which he holds out in front of the baby. "This is a bunny. It's an animal from Earth. They're usually not purple, admittedly, but there weren't a lot of options in the replicator."

The baby grabs the bunny from his hand and begins chewing happily on one of its ears.

"And in a single move, the mighty warrior slew the fearsome lagomorph, and the villagers rejoiced."

Ash raises an eyebrow. "Are you teaching my son to hunt rabbits?"

"Only ones that are bright purple and can be defeated by chewing on their ears," Chris tells him. "It's a very specific niche."

Ash gives a huff of laughter, a warm feeling settling in his chest as he looks at Chris. "Thanks," he says. "You didn't have to do this."

"I wanted to," Chris tells him. "I would've gotten him a Klingon animal, but there wasn't a lot of choice. I had enough trouble with the bunny."

"Yeah, I'm, uh, not sure they make Klingon stuffed animals." He supposes a stuffed targ *could* be cute, in the right circumstances, but the creator would have to work at it. "But I didn't just mean that. Thanks for everything."

"It's no problem," Chris says. "I like spending time with him. With both of you, actually." He glances up at Ash with a smile.

Me too, Ash thinks. He almost voices the thought, but Chris turns his attention back to the baby and the moment is lost.

"You should eat," Chris says over his shoulder. "I don't mind entertaining him for a while." He picks up a block and the baby grabs for it with the hand not clutching the bunny.

Ash watches them play for a few seconds, before his stomach rumbles again and he gives in and begins to eat.

He listens with amusement as Chris and the baby have a long conversation involving the baby babbling baby talk, and Chris responding with phrases like "Is that so?" and "Then what happened?"

"He's going to be really annoyed when he realises you can't actually understand him," Ash muses as Chris responds to a particular burst of babble with a shocked, "You're kidding!"

"Who says I can't?" Chris replies with a brief grin. "By the way, he wants you to shave your beard."

Ash snorts. "Judging by how much he likes to grab onto it, I doubt that."

He finishes his sandwich and disposes of the wrapping, then joins the two of them on the blanket. The baby greets him with a big smile and waves the bunny at him.

"Guess he has a new favourite toy," Ash says. "You've got good instincts."

"I try," Chris replies, but he sounds a little distracted. He stacks up a few of the blocks into a tower, smiling a little as the baby reaches out to knock it over. "Timber!" he says, then, barely stopping to pause, "Do you want to have dinner with me?"

His attention is still on the baby, so it takes Ash a moment to realise he's talking to him. "Yeah, I guess," he replies, before something occurs to him. "When you say 'dinner'...?"

"I meant like a date," Chris says bluntly. "He can come too, of course, but I... I've liked this, spending time with you, and I thought maybe it could be more than that."

Ash doesn't answer for a few seconds, long enough for him to see Chris's expression start to stiffen. "It's fine if you're not interested-"

"No," Ash interrupts. "I mean, I'd like that. I think." He can't quite believe that *Chris* would want that – that he's seen what a mess Ash is and wants to try anyway. But he also knows Chris would never say something like this if he didn't mean it.

His mouth feels dry, and he swallows before continuing, "I don't- He has to be my first priority. But I'd be willing to try it. With you."

A little hesitantly, he reaches out and takes Chris's hand, feeling a rush of warmth as Chris's fingers curl around his own.

It feels like a new beginning.

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