

## This Delicate Thing We've Made

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## This Delicate Thing We've Made

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### Summary

Ash understands why Pike had to confine him to quarters, really he does, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

### Notes

Written for Meatball42 in the 2021 Bulletproof exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

Ash fingers the tracking bracelet on his wrist as he stares out of the window. The sight of the stars helps a little, makes him feel less trapped.

His quarters are well equipped; he has food and washing facilities, a comfortable bed to sleep in, even limited access to the ship's computer systems. It's a long way from a bloodstained cell on a Klingon ship, but even a gilded cage is still a cage, and the bracelet is a constant reminder that he is, regardless of his surroundings, a prisoner.

He isn't sure how long he's been locked in here, the days blurring together in his mind. No one visits, and with his access to the computer restricted he has only the vaguest knowledge of what's going on outside his quarters. He doesn't know if *Discovery* has located Michael, or Spock, but he hopes they have.

He doesn't know what bothers him more; that Chris – no, he tells himself, not Chris – that Captain Pike doesn't trust him, or that he might be right not to. As much as he wants to believe that he didn't sabotage anything, that he didn't betray *Discovery*, he can't *know* that, not for certain. After all, there was a time he would have believed he wasn't capable of murder, either.

He's told himself it isn't like before – no blackouts, no missing time – but if Section 31, or someone else, really does have technology that could take over his mind and force him to their will, couldn't they also overwrite his memories?

He wants to trust in Section 31, believe that Leland wouldn't allow one of his agents to be used in that way, but he remembers trusting Lorca, once – completely, more than he trusted himself – and look how that turned out.

Sometimes he even thinks it would be better for everyone if it *was* him, because then at least the rest of them would be safe. He can't do anything, not locked in here, but if it isn't him then there's still a saboteur out there, and they could strike again at any time.

The thoughts go round and round and round in his mind, until he's afraid he'll snap with the strain of them. If he can't trust himself, and he can't trust Leland, who can he trust? He trusts Michael, but she's not here. And he trusted Pike, but- well. He isn't here either, is he? Even though he could be.

Ash tells himself it doesn't hurt. Whatever he and Chris – *Captain Pike* he reminds himself viciously – had, it didn't mean anything. A few hurried fumbles in stolen moments, just a way to let off steam. Stupid to think it could be anything else.

A good captain puts duty ahead of everything, after all, and Pike is nothing if not a good captain.

The sound of the door opening takes him by surprise; for a second he thinks he's imagining things. But he turns to see Commander Nhan entering his quarters, accompanied by the captain. Ash lets his gaze flick over Pike's face – he looks sad, tired – before averting his eyes. He doesn't know what Pike wants, but the presence of a security officer indicates that this isn't a social visit.

Nhan crosses to his side in quick strides. "Hold out your arm."

Ash doesn't know what he expects, but it isn't for her to unlock the tracking bracelet, removing it from his wrist before stepping away.

He glances from her to his now-bare wrist to Pike. "You're letting me go?"

"You've been cleared," Pike says quietly. "We found the spy."

The relief that rushes through Ash makes him dizzy for a moment. *I didn't do it. It wasn't me.* "Who was it?"

Pain flickers in Pike's eyes. "It was Commander Airiam. Control was... using her. Manipulating her through her augmentations. She sacrificed her life to stop it."

Ash feels a pang – he didn't know Airiam, not really, but he remembers her being kind – before the rest of the situation catches up to him. "Wait, Control? Section 31's command AI?" He remembers Leland mentioning it in passing, but he'd spoken of it like a tool, something to serve their interests. Not... *this*.

He stares at Pike, feeling like he's missed a few steps. "What the hell happened while I was in here?"

Pike's gaze flickers to Nhan, still standing silently by the wall. "Would you excuse us, Commander? I believe Specialist Tyler and I need to have a debriefing."

She nods. "Of course, Captain. I need to return this anyway." She holds up the tracking bracelet, then turns on her heel and leaves, the door swishing shut behind her.

Ash takes a breath, hands clasping behind his back. Just him and Pike, now. The silence between them is awkward, tense, in a way it hasn't been since before the shuttle. He'd thought they were past this, but then, he'd thought a lot of things.

"I'm sorry," Pike says into the silence. "I forgot how much you must have missed."

*And whose fault is that?* Ash thinks bitterly, but he keeps it to himself and just shrugs. "Tell me, then."

Pike gives him a quick rundown of everything that's happened over the past days. Ash suspects he's leaving some stuff out, but it's a startling story nonetheless.

"So Control's gone rogue?" he concludes when Pike stops talking.

Pike nods. "And if we can't stop it, looks to be in danger of taking over the galaxy."

Ash allows himself to consider that for a moment; a self-aware AI that has killed multiple people and is apparently just getting started, and which has intimate knowledge of all of Starfleet's weapons and defences.

"Shit," he says with feeling.

"Yeah," Pike agrees. "That's about the shape of things."

He takes a step closer, expression shifting into something softer, gentler. "I owe you an apology."

Ash shrugs, not particularly interested in Pike's apologies. "It's fine," he says shortly. "All the evidence pointed to me. Anyone else would have come to the same conclusion."

"Burnham didn't," Pike counters. "She told me I was wrong, that you were innocent. I should have listened to her."

The knowledge that at least one person believed in him brings a lump to Ash's throat. He can't understand why Michael would stick up for him like that, after everything he's done to her, to everyone, but he appreciates it all the same.

"Maybe," he says. "But I get why you thought it was me. I'd probably have thought the same thing, if the roles had been reversed." He snorts. "Hell, I knew I didn't do it and there were still moments when I wondered if you might be right."

"But I *wasn't* right," Pike presses. "Part of me knew it couldn't be you, that it didn't make any sense, but I let my distrust of Section 31 blind me to the truth. And I am so, so sorry for that, Ash."

The earnestness in his tone makes something twist in Ash's chest, and he looks away, rubbing absently at the phantom sensation of a tracking bracelet on his arm.

"Don't," he says, voice cracking a little. "Don't say my name like that, like you care."

"You think I don't care?"

Ash barks a laugh. "What am I supposed to think? You locked me in here, alone, away from everyone, and I get why, really I do, but you didn't even visit me."

He glances up in time to see pain flash across Pike's face. "I understand why you're hurt," he says softly. "But you've got it all wrong, Ash. I do care about you, more than I should. That's why I stayed away. If you'd been compromised, like I thought, they could have used that vulnerability against me. Against the ship." He hesitates, then adds, "Against you."

Ash crosses his arms, then uncrosses them again as he realises the gesture might be seen as defensive. "You can't actually expect me to believe you did this to protect me."

"To protect everyone!" Pike replies. He runs a hand through his hair distractedly. "I took an oath, Ash. To do whatever I can to protect the ship and crew under my command. The mission comes first, always, and I can't jeopardise that, no matter how much I might want to. And I *did* want to." One corner of his mouth curves upwards as he adds, "I missed sparring with you."

The words make Ash's chest ache, breath catching in his throat. Sparring never really meant sparring between them; not since that first time when Ash, high on victory and adrenaline after pinning Pike three times in a row, leaned down and kissed him. Even now the memories are bright in his mind; holding Pike down as he slips a knee between his thighs, the warmth of Pike's breath on his neck, the sudden rush of release. And then the shower afterwards, Pike's hands on his back, pulling him closer, his eyes soft.

"Yeah," he says roughly. "Me too."

He regrets the words the instant they're out – too real, too much vulnerability in them. Pike has that effect on people, he's found; there's a genuineness in him, an honesty that makes others want to be honest too. For Ash, more comfortable with shadows and half-truths, it's by turns admirable and terrifying.

Pike reaches out, fingers brushing against Ash's sleeve. "Ash, I-"

*"Captain Pike to the bridge."*

Saru's voice comes over the intercom, and Pike drops his hand with a sigh. "Duty calls." He hesitates, glancing over his shoulder at the door, and part of Ash wants desperately to ask what he was going to say.

He doesn't.

"I have to go," Pike says, and it sounds like an apology. "But I don't- Can we talk later? I don't want to leave things like this."

"Yeah." Ash nods. "Later."

Pike gives him a long look, as if searching for something, then turns and leaves without another word. Ash stands there motionless for a moment, then straightens his back and heads out of his quarters, managing not to flinch as he passes through the doorway. He still has a job to do, after all, and the mission comes first.

Always.

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