

Those Left Behind

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Those Left Behind

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Summary

After everything, Ash and Pike meet up for a drink. And talk.

Notes

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Ash sits back and rubs his eyes. It isn't as if he expected fixing Section 31 to be easy, but he didn't expect it to be *this*. He has access to everything, now, information he didn't have as an ordinary operative, and the more he learns the more it dawns on him how much of an uphill battle he's facing. Section 31 is everywhere, involved in missions he's never even heard of. And with more than three-quarters of their agents massacred by Control, a lot of those missions are in jeopardy.

In his more cynical moments, Ash can't help but think the real reason Starfleet Command gave him this position is that no one else wanted it.

He takes a quick break to check his messages. Most of it is stuff that can be dealt with later or ignored altogether, but one sticks out.

*From: Captain Christopher Pike
To: Commander Ash Tyler*

If you ever want a break from putting out fires, there's a bottle of scotch with your name on it.

Ash stares at it for a long moment, then taps 'reply'.

*From: Commander Ash Tyler
To: Captain Christopher Pike*

Name the time and place, and I'll be there.

* * *

Which is how he ends up in the captain's quarters of the *Enterprise*, watching as Captain Pike – Chris – pours them both a glass of scotch.

Chris raises his glass in a toast. "To *Discovery*," he says. "And her valiant crew."

"To *Discovery*," Ash echoes. That's why they're here, of course. The reason Chris invited him, and the reason he came. To remind themselves that everything they went through not only happened, but *mattered*.

Chris downs his glass in one, and apparently it's going to be that kind of night. Not that Ash is complaining. He could use an excuse not to think for a while, and it's better than getting drunk alone.

He drains his own glass in two long swallows and pushes it towards Chris for a refill. "I hear the repairs are going well."

Chris nods. "They're estimating twelve to fourteen weeks before we can ship out again." He gives a wry smile and adds, "Though Command weren't exactly thrilled that I managed to break the ship twice in less than six months. If we hadn't saved... well, everything, they probably would've demoted me."

"It would've been their loss," Ash offers. "You're a good captain."

Chris smiles briefly. "I like to think so." He shrugs and adds, "Even if I did just spend four months commanding a ship that doesn't exist."

He tops up their glasses, and Ash takes another drink, feeling it begin to warm him from the inside out. He cradles the glass between his hands and stares down into the liquid, a sudden wave of loss washing over him and making him ache. "Do you think they made it?"

"I have to believe they did," Chris says.

Ash nods absently. He has to believe it too, but some days are harder than others.

"Do you wish you'd gone with them?"

Ash glances up in surprise at the question. "Sometimes," he admits. "But I'm – I think I'm needed here. I can do more good by staying than I could've done by leaving." And he has to. Has to make sure that their sacrifice – *her* sacrifice – wasn't in vain.

"The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," Chris says. "As Spock is fond of saying."

Ash nods, taking another gulp of his drink. "How is he?" Ash is an only child, he can't even imagine what it would be like to lose a sibling, but if there's anyone in the universe who misses Michael more than he does, he knows Spock would be it. At the end of the day, he and Chris chose to stay behind. Spock didn't.

"He's... coping." Chris looks pensive. "He spends every free moment watching the stars, waiting for her signal."

Ash goes to take another drink and realises his glass is empty. He reaches over to refill it. "I'd probably be doing the same thing," he admits, "if I *had* any free moments."

A faint smile plays around the edges of Chris's mouth. "You know, I don't think I ever congratulated you on your promotion."

Ash groans. "Don't." He takes another long swallow, still far more sober than he'd like. "I've spent weeks trying to get to grips with everything, and I *still* don't know how Leland did it, and I definitely don't know how to be better than he was. What if I just end up making the same mistakes?"

"You won't." Chris's expression is soft. "You're a good person, Ash. And Leland..." He shakes his head. "He didn't deserve what happened to him, but I'm not sure Leland was ever a good person. Not really."

"You knew him," Ash says, as Chris finishes his glass and begins pouring another. "Before."

Chris nods slowly, leaning back in his chair. "We were at the academy together," he says. "We were- friends. Once."

The alcohol must have loosened Ash's tongue, as he can't keep himself from asking, "Just friends?"

Chris goes still, and for a moment Ash wonders if he's crossed a line. But then Chris lets out a breath and admits, "No. Not 'just' friends."

Ash rolls the glass between his hands before taking another drink. "So what happened?"

Chris shakes his head, staring down at his glass. "He always was too comfortable in the grey areas. I should have seen it before, but I... well, I guess I didn't want to. When he joined Section 31 I was... concerned, but I stood by him. But the further he got into that life, the more I realised he wasn't the person I thought he was." He sighs. "Eventually it all blew up into a huge fight where I accused him of having no morals and he told me I was a naive idiot whose devotion to the rules would wind up getting me killed someday." He gives a half-smile and adds, "And that was it. He left, and the next time I saw him was when he sent you to be my liaison."

He leans forwards, eyes fixed on Ash's. "I know I wasn't entirely fair to you, when you first came aboard. I think part of me was taking my frustration with him out on you, and I apologise."

"It's okay," Ash tells him. "I wasn't exactly fair to you either."

Chris nods, conceding the point. He glances down at his glass, then says, "I'm not going to lie to you, Ash, I still don't trust Section 31. I don't know if you can make it better, make it something Starfleet can be proud of, but I'd like to believe you can. I think it's a worthy cause." He hesitates, then continues, "And I think Admiral Cornwell would have said the same."

Ash shrugs, managing a smile. "At this point I'd settle for making it something that doesn't put the entire universe in danger."

"Well, saving the universe is also a worthy cause," Chris replies, and frowns. "Possibly more so."

Ash laughs. It startles him, a little. He can't remember the last time he laughed. "Thank you," he says, almost without meaning to. "For this. It feels good to talk to someone."

Chris raises his glass. "Why do you think I suggested it?" His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, and it dawns on Ash that Chris needs this just as much as he does. The paths they've set themselves might not be easy, but they don't have to face them alone.

"Tell me about the *Enterprise*," he blurts, and Chris's eyebrows go up. "I mean, five years exploring uncharted space, you must have some interesting stories."

"One or two," Chris admits. "Some of it's still classified."

Ash stares at him. "You do remember who you're talking to, right?"

Chris snorts, shaking his head. "Right." He thinks for a moment. "How about the sentient trees of Arcturus III? That was a good one."

He launches into the story and Ash sits back to listen, allowing himself to believe, for just a moment, that things might actually turn out okay.

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