

The Big Cheat

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The Big Cheat

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Summary

In his five years at Starfleet Academy, Jim Kirk learned five lessons from five people.

Let me tell you about them.

Notes

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My girlfriend and I were watching TOS, and when we got to "The Conscience of the King," she said that she didn't think the backstory fit with what we learn about Kirk in every other episode. Then we got to "Shore Leave," and she said the same thing about the backstory there. Because I am a very contrary person, I told her not only could I make those backstories fit both Kirk's chronology and his character, I could make them the key to every single thing that he does, up to and including the Kobayashi Maru. (Though, full disclosure, I totally ignored tie-in novels, the Abrams timeline, and deleted scenes/unused dialogue.) Now I guess you get to decide if I succeeded!

This fic is already written in full. Chapters will go up as I finish editing them, probably one every other day.

The songs for this fic are "Human" by Daughter and "A Real Hero" by College, although I cheated on them with "Dead Hearts" by Stars for chapter 4.

Year One: Marcus Finnegan

The first thing Jim learned in Starfleet Academy was that the other cadets didn't like him much.

That wasn't how he'd imagined it. In fact, when he'd imagined the Academy, he hadn't thought about the other cadets at all. But if he *had* thought about them, he'd have assumed that he'd be — well, maybe not popular, but that he'd get along with people. That he'd have friends. He'd had friends all his life, after all, in Iowa and San Diego and on... but no, he tried not to think about the other place he'd lived, so for now let's just say in Iowa and San Diego. It had never taken him more than a week or so, after moving to a new place, to make new friends. But a month into his first year at the Academy, Jim looked up from the interplanetary history textbook he was reading while he ate lunch, and finally realized that no one was eating with him.

Looked up from his book and finally realized that no one was eating with him. Do you buy that? That easy, elegant poetry? I don't, and I wrote it. Maybe that's the way Captain James T. Kirk, USS *Enterprise* would put it, but no. That's bullshit. What really happened was this:

Cadet Jim Kirk walked into the Academy mess hall, a tray of food in one hand and a tablet in the other. Ninety-nine-point-nine-nine percent of his attention was on his interplanetary history textbook, 0.01 percent was on not running into anything, and zero percent was on his fellow cadets. Which is why he didn't see it coming when someone reached out from one of the long, high-density polyethylene mess tables and flipped his tray into his face.

Jim stumbled back, dropping his tablet. For a moment, he just stood there, blinking through the protein-enriched vegetable soup dripping into his eyes, too stunned even to figure out what had happened.

The upperclassman who had done it sneered at him. "Get your nose out of your book, plebe."

Jim wiped the soup out of his eyes to get a better look at the guy. He had a wide, ugly face — not actually that ugly, really, but it was twisted into a smirk, as it would be almost every time Jim saw it, and well, you can forgive Jim this slightly skewed perspective, can't you? — and a languid posture, and although he was sitting down, he *looked* like the kind of guy who would be short when he stood up. His name, Jim would learn in the coming weeks, was Marcus Finnegan.

Right now, Jim knew only one thing, and he said it: "You can't do that."

"I can and I did, plebe."

"The Academy handbook forbids bullying—"

Finnegan and his friends laughed. "You think that's bullying, plebe? You don't know bullying."

Jim did in fact know bullying, right down to the verbatim definition given by the handbook, but before he could tell Finnegan that, Finnegan reached down, picked up Jim's tablet, dried it off on his sleeve, and handed it to Jim.

"You know what, plebe?" Finnegan said. "I think I'm gonna do you a favor. I'm gonna teach you what bullying is."

For the space of a breath, rage overcame Jim. His teeth ground. His fingers clenched around his tablet. He wanted to reach out and *smash it into this guy's smirking ugly face until his smile was crushed, until he begged, until he begged for mercy*

But then Jim counted to ten and breathed out, reminding himself that most of that anger had nothing to do with this guy, and that getting in fistfights over spilled soup was not in keeping with Starfleet principles.

"Give it your best shot," Jim said, and walked away.

Not bad, right? I bet you wish you'd been that cool when you were dealing with bullies in school. There were only two problems:

1. Most of Jim's fellow plebes weren't paying any attention to his badassery.
2. Finnegan did, in fact, give it his best shot.

#

Jim paced in front of Lieutenant Finney's locked office door. Finney was the Academy tactics instructor, Jim's advisor, and seven minutes late for his own office hours.

"Computer, time," Jim said to his tablet, for the third time in the last two minutes.

"The time is 16:07," the tablet said coolly.

"Well, you don't have to give me attitude," Jim said.

Someone behind him laughed. Jim spun around and saw Finney approaching, a briefcase in one hand and a half-eaten sandwich in the other.

"Lieutenant!" Jim sprang to attention.

"Oh, don't give me that nonsense, we're not in class," Finney said. He handed Jim his sandwich. "Here, hold this, I need to get my keycard."

Finney began patting his pockets in search of the card, while Jim stared, trying not to let any crumbs drop on his shoes.

“Um, sir...”

“I told you, we’re not in class, call me Finney.” Finney unlatched his briefcase and started to rummage through it.

“Finney, sir... I need to report a rules violation.”

“Hm?” Finney said, without looking up.

“I need to report a rules violation. Bullying.”

Finney looked up sharply, his hand still in the briefcase. For a moment, Jim thought he was going to be chastised — God only knew why — but then Finney sighed, his face softening, and pulled the keycard out of his bag.

“Why don’t you come inside,” Finney said.

Jim followed Finney into his office. He’d been inside once before, during his first week at the Academy, for his orientation interview. It had been a routine meeting — just an introduction, really, and an explanation of Academy rules and expectations that Jim had already had memorized from the handbook — and Jim had been too busy looking forward to his first classes to form any opinion of Finney, or to pay any attention to the man’s office.

Now, as he looked around for a place to put down half of a turkey club sandwich, Jim noticed the partially unpacked boxes forgotten in the corner, the digital photo of a pretty young woman with a wedding ring on the desk, the very recent diploma proudly displayed on a wall. It hadn’t occurred to Jim that Finney might be just as new around here as he was.

“Here, I’ll take that,” Finney said, holding out his hand. Jim dropped the sandwich into it, and Finney immediately took a bite. He sat down behind his desk, and gestured for Jim to take the seat opposite him.

“So,” Finney said after he’d swallowed. “You want to report bullying?”

“A pattern of repeated bullying, sir,” Jim said, echoing the language in the handbook. “Harassment.”

Finney nodded thoughtfully, because although he’d never personally read the Academy handbook, he could recognize the sound of official language. He put on a concerned face.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Jim felt the flinch coming, but couldn’t stop it. *Tell me what happened.* Firm, gentle, practiced. Did the Academy have a class on this kind of thing?

(They did have a class, Jim found out when he entered Command School. It was called “Social and Psychological Decision-Making,” and it was goddamn wrong about goddamn everything, but it was the best they could do.)

Finney noticed the flinch. “It’s all right, Cadet,” he said, firm, gentle, practiced. “You can tell me.”

This time, Jim dug his nails into his palms and his heels into the floor, and managed to stop the flinch. “You don’t have to talk to me like that.”

“Talk to you like what?” Finney said, surprised out of all gentleness.

“Like I’m a kitten you’re trying to coax out of a tree,” Jim said. “I’m not going to run away if you talk to me like a human being.”

Finney laughed, which drained some of the tension from Jim’s body. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You just told me you’d been bullied, and you seemed upset...”

“I am upset, but not like that.”

“Like what, then?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jim said, waving his hand like he could swat away the nightmares and the memories that made him flinch. “What matters is that it’s not right, and he shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it.”

“Okay,” Finney said. He looked Jim dead in the eye and shed every scrap of sympathy from his voice. “Tell me about it.”

So Jim did. He told Finney how, for the last month, Finnegan seemed to be waiting around every corner he turned, to trip him or dump water on his head or, once, pants him. How he’d had clothes go missing during athletics, the bolts loosened in his desk chair, ghost peppers slipped into his food. And always, just over his shoulder, Finnegan’s ugly, smirking face, waiting to see the results.

Practical jokes were not an uncommon occurrence at the Academy, but Finnegan’s campaign was personal and unrelenting, and even the most easygoing cadet would have found it hard to take. And as you’ve probably realized, Jim was not at all easygoing.

When he was done, Finney shook his head. “That’s rough.”

“Sure,” Jim said. “That’s why I’m reporting it.”

“James...”

“Jim.”

“Jim.” Finney sighed. “Can I give you a piece of advice that you won’t find in the handbook?”

“You mean, give me a line Starfleet didn’t feed you?”

“Yeah.”

Jim grinned. “Please.”

“What this guy Finnegan’s doing is definitely against the rules, but the rules aren’t gonna make him stop.”

“Not by themselves,” Jim said. “Someone has to enforce them.”

For the third time since he’d arrived, Finney laughed. Jim liked that. It felt like ages since he’d made someone laugh. Someone other than Finnegan, anyway.

“You’re a clever one, aren’t you, Jim?” Finney said.

“I think I have my moments.”

“Well, I’m not that clever, so I’m just gonna give it to you straight. I knew guys like Finnegan when I was in the Academy, and there’s not a thing that I or any other instructor can do that’ll make him stop, short of kicking him out. The only person who can stop him is you.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

Finney glanced around, as if looking for eavesdroppers, and lowered his voice. “Make peace, or... make war.”

It took a moment for Jim to realize what he was suggesting, and then it was his turn to laugh. “You want me to beat up another cadet? That really isn’t in the handbook.”

“Only if reconciliation doesn’t work,” Finney said, a little sheepishly.

Jim thought about it. He couldn’t deny that he badly wanted to punch the grin off Finnegan’s face. But...

“No,” Jim said. “I can’t.”

“You know that Starfleet isn’t actually a pacifist organization, right?”

“It’s not that,” Jim said. “Make friends, beat him up, it doesn’t matter. Even if it works, all it does is get him off *my* back. I don’t want Finnegan to stop bullying me, I want him to stop bullying. There has to be something the Academy can do. This is Starfleet.”

“Well, if you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.”

Finney nodded. “I’ll make the report.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jim stood up.

“Jim,” Finney said. “Anytime you want to talk, about anything, you stop by. Office hours or not. Consider it an order, if you like.”

Jim smiled. He liked Finney — liked that he had a sense of humor, liked that he didn’t make Jim feel like a kid. Mostly, liked that Finney seemed to like him.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Jim said. He walked out to the sound of Finney laughing behind him.

It was a big day in Jim’s fledgling career. In one short meeting, he’d doubled the number of friends he had at the Academy. From that moment on, there were two people on his side: Finney, and Jim’s girlfriend.

Oh, right. I probably should’ve mentioned Jim’s girlfriend.

#

To understand about Ruth, first you have to understand the exact nature of Jim’s unpopularity. People didn’t dislike him because he was mean, or awkward, because he wasn’t either of those things. They didn’t even dislike him because he got better grades than most of them, though he did. They disliked him because... Well, here’s an example.

The second day of Jim’s interplanetary history class, Professor Gill lectured on the establishment of the neutral zone between Romulan and Federation space.

“The Romulan Neutral Zone, though inconvenient, is probably the best outcome we could have hoped for,” Gill said. “It is, in some ways, a model of interplanetary conflict resolution.”

Jim’s hand shot into the air. His classmates shared a collective glance, some of them amused, many of them annoyed; after only two days, it was already perfectly clear to them that Professor Gill’s class was a lecture-*only* class, and that he disliked interruptions. Jim was also vaguely aware of that — he just didn’t care.

Gill cleared his throat and stared Jim down over his glasses, but Jim’s hand didn’t budge, so at last, Gill said, “Yes, Cadet...”

“Cadet Kirk,” Jim said, lowering his hand. “How can the neutral zone be a model of conflict resolution if we’re still in conflict with the Romulans?”

Gill considered this for a moment, then said, “It’s a nominal conflict. No shots have been fired in decades.”

“Because we haven’t seen each other in decades,” Jim said, not bothering to raise his hand again. “Is that really a resolution? ‘We won’t kill you as long as we can pretend you don’t exist?’”

This was the point when most of the class rolled their eyes and tuned out. They wanted to learn about the Romulan conflict, not endlessly rehash it.

But Gill, uncharacteristically, didn’t shut the conversation down. “You have a better solution, then? I’ll be sure to alert Starfleet Command.”

It was sarcastic, but underneath it was an honest question. Gill was, like Jim, an idealist — just an older one. Jim had been searching for a better solution for five years. Gill had been searching for ten times that.

“Contact,” Jim said. “Engagement, information, negotiation. It worked with the Vulcans, the Andorians…”

“The Romulans are not the Vulcans,” Gill said. “Context matters. The strategies that work in one situation won’t always work in the next. Study history for long enough, Cadet, and you’ll realize that some gaps can’t be bridged.”

That was Gill’s final word on the subject. He drew breath to continue his lecture, but Jim wasn’t done.

“How do we know?” Jim said. “How do we know the Romulans aren’t like the Vulcans? We’ve never even met them.”

Gill sighed. “We don’t know. We can never really know. We just do the best with what we have.”

And having argued his professor down to uncertainty, Jim finally let him continue with the lecture.

That right there? That last push, after Gill was so clearly done? That was why Jim’s classmates didn’t like him. Not because of that one argument with Gill, but because he did something like that in every class, with every instructor, on every subject. He was too serious, too intense, too eager, and he never let anything go — not even if it meant the entire class had to wait around biting their nails while he distracted the instructor with whatever his issue was today. There were smarter cadets than Jim (though not many), and plenty of cadets who were just as absorbed in the subjects, but all of them could give it a rest once in a while, and Jim couldn’t. So they made friends, and he didn’t.

Except that’s not entirely true, because like I said, there was Ruth. Ruth Falkner, a sweet, blonde, violently intelligent 17-year-old who joined Starfleet because she wanted to see the universe. Ruth was the kind of girl who had kept a diary since she was nine years old, dutifully writing in it every day even when nothing in particular happened, which was most days on Mars. She was the kind of girl who’d gotten obsessed with Greek mythology in sixth grade, and then Norse mythology in seventh, and then Vulcan mythology in eighth, absorbing all the drama and romance and memorizing all the names, and cheerfully glossing over the parts where the gods ate each other and the mortals burned in sacrificial fires. So Hercules died in agony, for no particular reason at all — what did that mean to Ruth, other than a good story?

Ugh, there’s Kirk’s poetry, again. The Hercules thing is from the end of their relationship, and to be fair, Jim never said it out loud. What I’m trying to say is that Ruth was smart and sheltered and a little ashamed of her idyllic upbringing, and when she looked at Jim, she didn’t see the annoying guy who was always holding up class. She saw a man possessed of knowledge and vision.

Which is why, a week and a half into Finnegan’s war on Jim, Ruth became the only plebe to cross the neutral zone.

Ruth was walking with her friends when she spotted Jim across the quad, headed the other direction. She always kept half an eye out for him, because seeing him unexpectedly gave her a pleasant little thrill. He was often reading while he walked, and she liked to imagine talking to him about whatever book it was, impressing him with her insights.

Today, he wasn’t reading. He walked, as Finney might say, with his head on a swivel, on the lookout for something. Ruth scanned the quad, trying to figure out what that might be — which is how she happened to be looking at Marcus Finnegan, who was walking twenty paces behind Jim, at the exact moment that Jim’s backpack fell apart, dumping all of its contents on the ground.

Finnegan’s face split into a grin, and he hurried to catch up with Jim, who had knelt down to collect his things. He said something Ruth couldn’t hear, then ruffled Jim’s hair. Jim angrily swept it back into place; Finnegan ruffled it again.

Well. You didn’t have to be in science track to figure out what had happened to Jim’s backpack.

“I’ll catch up with you,” Ruth told her friends. They followed her gaze to Jim, rolled their eyes at Ruth’s obvious crush, and moved on. Ruth power-walked over to Jim and Finnegan, thinking (incorrectly) that it would be less conspicuous than running.

“I think your hair looks good like this,” Finnegan was saying, ruffling Jim’s hair for a third time. Jim was staring steadily at his ruined backpack, but Ruth could see murder in his eyes.

“Go away, Finnegan,” she said.

Finnegan turned around. His eyes lit up when he saw Ruth. “Aw, plebe, you have a girlfriend!”

Ruth blushed. Jim, who was taking advantage of the distraction to fix his hair again, muttered, “She’s not my girlfriend.”

That could’ve deflated Ruth, but she chose to see it as an act of gallantry, and let it bolster her courage. “Who fucking cares whose girlfriend I am?” she said. “*Go away*, Finnegan.”

Finnegan laughed, ruffled Jim's hair one last time, and left.

"Sorry," Jim said. He started picking his things up off the ground.

Ruth dropped to her knees and picked up his tablet. "Here," she said. "Let me help."

At that, finally, Jim looked up. He smiled. Ruth had never seen him smile before, and oh, it was really something.

"Thanks," he said.

There wasn't actually all that much in Jim's backpack — his tablet, his athletics uniform, a few protein bars — so it only took them a few seconds to gather it all together. When they were done, Jim picked up his ruined bag and looked at it forlornly.

"Looks like he split the seams and then trick-stitched them back together. Where does he even find the time?"

"He's probably failing all his classes."

Jim laughed; Ruth beamed.

"Property damage. That's its own separate section of the handbook." Jim sighed. "I guess I'm going to have to find a replacement."

"I have a spare backpack," Ruth said.

"You do?"

"I'm from Mars. My mom packed a spare everything."

She immediately regretted bringing up her mom — they were cadets, in *Starfleet*, she should at least *pretend* to be an adult — but Jim laughed again.

"I'm from San Diego," he said. "Well, Iowa originally, but San Diego most recently. I think my parents thought it would be easy to send stuff, but with all the Academy regulations, it might as well be Mars."

"Why don't you come by my bunk?" Ruth said, feeling very bold. "I'll give you my spare."

Jim grinned. "All right. Thanks, Falkner."

They set off back the way Ruth had come, toward her bunk. As they walked, Jim checked his tablet to make sure it hadn't been damaged.

"What are you reading?" Ruth asked, eyeing the text he was scrolling through.

"John Locke. *Two Treatises of Government*. It's one of the works that influenced the founders of the United States when they were writing their constitution."

"What's it about?"

"The inherent rights and equality of human beings."

Philosophy 101, basically, and a text that Ruth and Jim would both be assigned the very next semester, for their ethics class. But Ruth didn't know that. And she'd never met anyone who read philosophy in their spare time. She was about to ask him what, exactly, the inherent rights of human beings were, but he surprised her.

"What are you reading right now?" he asked.

"Oh," she said. "Um, *Pride and Prejudice*. It's a little silly, I guess."

"Oh, no," Jim said. "Jane Austen was supposed to be a genius, wasn't she? She was an early feminist. I haven't managed to read anything by her yet. I keep getting distracted by philosophy, but I really should read more novels. Is it as good as they say?"

"Better," Ruth said.

"Maybe you could give me a few recommendations."

He wanted her advice. He didn't think she was silly, he thought *he* should be more like *her*. Ruth could barely speak. "Definitely."

I told you, didn't I? Jim was not awkward.

By the end of their short walk, Ruth and Jim had agreed to study together the next day. Then they studied together the day after that, and the day after that, and within a week, Jim — who had realized very quickly that Ruth was interested in him — decided he was also interested in her, and kissed her, and that was that. Ruth's friends grudgingly made room for Jim at their mess table, Jim spent less time reading while he walked and more time chatting with Ruth about fiction and philosophy, and it became slightly harder for Finnegan to get the drop on him.

But not *much* harder.

#

Just so we're clear, I told the last few parts out of order. You got that, right? Jim showed up at the Academy, then he caught Finnegan's eye,

then a week later he started seeing Ruth, then a week and a half after *that*, he reported the bullying to Finney.

I'm just making sure, because for two weeks after Jim and Finney talked, nothing changed at all. Jim went to class and pushed everyone's buttons; Ruth paid rapt attention to every word he said, and he lost himself in admiration of her wit and her memory and her hair; Finnegan planted bowls of cold soup in Jim's bed. Every few days, Finney would suggest that Jim stop by for a chat, and they'd talk about almost anything: tactics (one of Jim's weaker subjects), how Finney and his wife were adjusting to life in San Francisco (Belle loved it; Finney was less convinced); what deep-space travel was really like (Jim neglected to mention that he'd already spent considerable time off-world). At the end of every meeting, Jim would ask whether there was any movement on his report; the answer was always no.

Here's a twist for you: Finney never actually made the report. What an asshole, right? But don't judge him too harshly. He didn't lie out of laziness or malice; he was acting in what he sincerely believed to be Jim's best interest. And considering what happened when a report eventually *did* get made, you could argue that he was even right.

Oh, fine, go ahead. Judge him harshly.

Anyway, Jim didn't and never would know that Finney was lying, so he assumed that his report had been lost, or that the bureaucracy was grinding its slow gears. He decided to speed things up a bit by reporting directly to Commander Grace Wei, the Director of Cadet Life.

Commander Wei was not Finney. She saw Jim at exactly his scheduled time, never wavered from her practiced gentle firmness as she heard his story, and definitely did not advise him to assault his fellow cadet. Instead she nodded, assured him something would be done, and sent him on his way.

A week later, something was done.

"Ahem," Professor Gill said, as the final cadet filed into his lecture. He had his tablet out, which piqued everyone's interest; Gill was usually the type to lecture unceasingly from memory. He didn't even prepare slides. "Cadet Life has a statement that they want read out during the first lectures today. I told them I'm teaching history, not homeroom, but they were... *insistent*."

The cadets leaned forward, intrigued. This was the first time they'd ever had class interrupted by a statement. (They would grow considerably less interested as their years in the Academy wore on, and their lectures were intruded on by statements about bunk cleanliness, talking during parade drills, how sure the Academy was that everyone would be on their best behavior for the visiting dignitaries, and, of course, the outbreak of the Klingon war.)

Jim didn't lean forward. He had a horrible, and correct, suspicion that he knew what this announcement was about.

"It has come to the attention of the Academy," Gill said, in an annoyed monotone, "that there have been recent incidents of bullying or hazing."

As one, all of the cadets turned to stare at Jim.

"Such behavior is against the Academy's code of conduct," Gill continued, unperturbed. "It is unbecoming of a Starfleet cadet, and unworthy of Starfleet's principles. Any cadet experiencing or witnessing bullying or hazing should report the incident to a commanding officer. Any cadet found to have engaged in bullying or hazing will be given a punishment tour."

Gill put down his tablet, and Jim immediately raised his hand.

"Sir," Jim said. "May I be excused?"

"What for?"

"Sick bay."

Gill eyed him suspiciously, but apparently he didn't find any evidence that Jim was faking. Not surprising. Jim really did *feel* sick, like his guts were burning and his lungs were about to quit in protest. He doubted sick bay would do him any good, though.

"Go on, then."

Jim slung his bag over his shoulder and walked numb-legged out the door, horribly aware of the rest of the class staring at him as he went. He didn't know exactly where he was going, just that he couldn't handle sitting through the rest of that class, so turned right, headed toward his bunk on autopilot.

"Jim!"

Ruth burst out the door of the lecture hall, jogging to catch up with him. She took his hand in hers, and Jim squeezed it.

"You didn't have to follow me," he said.

"I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I am," he said, which was a lie, but one that Jim mostly believed. "Just... *that's* what she meant, when she said they would do something? A *statement*?"

Ruth shook her head. "It's not right."

"Report the incident to a commanding officer.' I already did that. They should be talking to *Finnegan* about this, not making statements for the whole Academy."

“At least they left your name out of it.”

Jim laughed. “Everyone knows who it’s about. Including Finnegan.”

Which was absolutely true. Finnegan heard the announcement in his first lecture of the day, just like everyone else. It delighted him so much that he sought Jim out at lunch, to share his joy.

“Running to mommy?” Finnegan said, sliding into the seat across from Jim and Ruth, next to two of Ruth’s friends. He smirked and shook his head. “Tsk, ts. No one likes a tattletale, Jimmy.”

“Shut up, Finnegan,” Ruth said, while her friends hurriedly tried to look like they were just sitting *next* to her, not *with* her.

Jim stared at his sandwich. He wouldn’t look at Finnegan. He couldn’t. If he looked at Finnegan, he might punch him, and Jim was determined not to punch him.

“Come on, Jimmy, talk to me. You’re not gonna hide behind your girlfriend, are you?” Finnegan reached across the table, plucked the sandwich out of Jim’s hands, and took a giant bite. He smiled even larger, crumbs falling from the corners of his lips. “*Talk.*”

Jim launched himself across the table. Before his brain even had time to catch up, he’d tackled Finnegan to the ground. He was kneeling over him, one fist tight around Finnegan’s collar, the other drawn back into the air, poised to strike.

Now, Jim looked into Finnegan’s eyes. He saw fear. He liked it.

“Cadet!”

An instructor whose name Jim didn’t know grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him off of Finnegan. After the first moment of shock, Jim didn’t resist. Finnegan stayed on the ground until he saw that Jim wasn’t coming back for him, then he pulled himself up, trying (and failing) to look nonchalant about it.

“Come with me,” said the instructor. “Both of you.”

Jim and Finnegan followed the instructor and waited without looking at each other outside Commander Wei’s office while she was briefed on the incident. It was the first time in Jim’s life that he’d ever been called to the principal’s office. He didn’t love the feeling, but it wasn’t as bad as he’d imagined. After a few minutes, Wei called them in.

“Well,” Wei said, surveying them sourly, as they stood at attention in front of her desk. She didn’t bother to relieve them. “We have a situation.”

“Commander Wei—” Finnegan said.

“Did I tell you you could speak, cadet?”

Finnegan shut up.

“We have a situation. Cadet Finnegan, you were engaged in bullying, after a clear warning that doing so would result in punishment. Cadet Kirk, instead of reporting it, *you—*”

“I *did* report it!” Kirk said. “You didn’t do anything!”

“*Do not speak until I tell you to, cadet.*” Wei puffed out a breath — like a sigh, but angrier. “Instead of reporting the incident, you assaulted Cadet Finnegan. Which is also worth a punishment tour. So it seems to me that we have two options. I can give you both a punishment tour, and note this incident in both of your files. Or, you can agree to cancel each other out. No punishment for either of you. Nothing in your files.”

She eyed each of them in turn. “Well? Which will it be?”

“I’m fine cancelling each other out, Commander,” Finnegan said quickly. Finnegan already had plenty of marks on his file. He was worried that they were starting to hurt his chances for promotion.

Wei turned to Jim. “Cadet Kirk?”

Jim spared Finnegan a second’s glance, and saw that Finnegan was looking at him pleadingly. He realized that if he let this go, it would all be fine. Finnegan would never bother him again.

He lifted his chin. “No deal, Commander.”

Finnegan never did bother him again, nor did he bother anyone else. But Jim didn’t think it was because of the weekend they spent scrubbing every bathroom on campus, or the note in his file. Jim was pretty sure it was because of the look in his own eyes, every time Finnegan glanced over and saw him watching.

He was right about that.

Year Two: Sylvia Tilly

Chapter Summary

Time for some game theory.

Chapter Notes

Original chapter date: 08/04/2018

Original chapter notes:

It's absolutely criminal that there aren't a thousand fics that have Kirk and Tilly hanging out at the Academy, given that it's pretty clear they must have overlapped there.

I hope I have Tilly in-character. I don't have a CBS All Access subscription, so I can't rewatch *Discovery*, so I'm working off of memory and transcripts. I think I have her right at least in the broad strokes.

Jim started his second year at the Academy marginally more popular than he started his first year. It turns out that people like watching other people tackle bullies. Who knew?

(Finney knew. But enough on that.)

He still wasn't what you might call a "people person," though, which is why Finney called him to his office on the first day of classes, and made him an offer.

"I'd like you to TA for my first-year tactics lecture."

Jim blinked. "TA?"

"Grade papers. Help students who are struggling."

"I know what it means, I just thought it was something that upperclassmen did."

"It's at the instructor's discretion." Finney picked up the football that he kept on his desk and tossed it to Jim. "I discretion you."

Jim laughed, then remembered that he was, technically, talking to a commanding officer. "But tactics is my worst subject, sir."

"You were in the top five percent of the class by the end of last year. You're perfectly qualified to TA, probably even more because you know what it's like to struggle in the subject. And I want you to get experience in a leadership position."

"When you say 'leadership position'..."

Finney rolled his eyes. "Talking to people, Jim. You want to captain a starship someday, right?"

Until that moment, Jim had never actually said it out loud, but... "Yes."

"Well, 90 percent of being a captain is talking to people," said Finney, who had never captained a starship, or indeed served on one outside of his supervised field hours at the Academy. "So TA for me. Get some experience."

Jim considered being offended — he knew how to *talk* to people, for Christ's sake — but Finney was his closest friend at the Academy, other than Ruth, and Jim could see he was honestly trying to help.

"I'd be honored," he said, tossing the football back to Finney.

#

Jim held his first office hours the very next day, in Finney's office. (Finney was home with Belle.) He didn't expect anyone to show up — there'd only been one lecture so far, and Finney hadn't even given out an assignment — but someone did.

"Cadet Tilly." He almost didn't recognize her with her hair down, which was saying something. It was hard to forget the girl who'd asked and answered more questions than any three other cadets combined, in Finney's first lecture.

Tilly sprang to attention. "Oh, is this a 'cadet' situation? I'm still figuring that out, you know, when to use titles, when to leave things more casual. I'm the first one in my family to join Starfleet, so, you know, no one really briefed me on this kind of thing." Then, as an afterthought: "Um. Cadet Kirk."

"Call me Jim. At ease, cadet."

Tilly instantly slumped into the chair by the desk. Jim smiled. He'd never told anyone to "at ease" before. He couldn't believe it had worked.

"Sylvia," Tilly said. "Or just Tilly, that's what everyone mostly calls me here. What is it with Starfleet and last names?"

"Tilly. What brings you to office hours?"

"Oh, wait!" Tilly bent down and pulled a plastic container out of her bag. She set it on the desk between them and pried off the lid, revealing a small pile of chocolate cookies. "My dad sent them. I know it's the first week, why send things the first week, but he worries. They're gluten-free. He claims that he makes them himself, but I suspect supermarket involvement."

Jim stared. Finney's brief instructions on office hours ("Be patient, don't give them the answers, and if anyone mentions suicide you have to report it") had not covered the scenario where a student brought cookies.

"Are they for me?" he asked.

"Not all of them, but I wanted to offer you a few, if you're interested. I've been giving them out to all my TAs. You know, as a kind of thank you for doing office hours."

"You've been to other office hours?"

"For history and ethics. Xenobio and physics aren't until Thursday, and athletics doesn't have them at all." Tilly looked disappointed at that last fact.

"Did your history and ethics TAs take any?"

Now it was Tilly's turn to stare. "They're cookies. Everyone takes cookies."

"Right." Jim took a cookie.

"I was hoping you could clarify what Lieutenant Finney said about the four tactical functions. I understand firepower, mobility, and security, but shock action doesn't seem like its own thing, more like an application of the other three. What distinguishes it?"

Jim's mouth was full of cookie. He swallowed too quickly and inhaled a few crumbs.

"Oh! Oh, no." Tilly ran to the water cooler in the corner. She'd never used a water cooler before, and the sound of Jim choking in the background made the process very stressful, but she fumbled around until she figured it out. When the reusable plastic cup was full, she shoved it into Jim's hands, spilling half of it in the process. He drank until the coughing stopped.

"Are you all right?"

Red-faced and teary-eyed, Jim nodded.

"We're not getting off to a good start," Tilly said. "I promise, future office hours are going to go a lot better than this."

#

Tilly did show up at future office hours, as promised. In fact, she showed up at *every single* office hour. Twice a week, every week.

"I don't get it," Jim said to Finney one night, as they were playing poker. Belle had invited him over for dinner, and now she was working in her greenhouse while Jim and Finney talked shop.

"What's not to get?" Finney said. He laid half his hand down on the table. "I'll take three."

Jim dealt him the three, and took one for himself. Five, six, seven, eight, jack. Crap hand. "She's the top of the class. She understands all the material. Why does she keep coming in for help?"

"Maybe she has a crush on you." Finney pushed a toothpick into the center of the table. "Ten."

"No, I asked the other TAs. She does it with all of them. Call your ten, raise you fifty."

Finney eyed Jim thoughtfully, then pushed five more toothpicks into the pot. "You're bluffing hard."

Jim turned over his almost-straight, and groaned as Finney revealed his three queens.

"How do you always know when I'm bluffing?"

"You look guilty," Finney said, grinning and sweeping the small toothpick fortune into his stash. "Every time."

Yes, yes, it's a poker metaphor. How quaint. But that's how it happened, okay? James Kirk was a poker player. He learned tactics from a poker player. He might play chess, but he thought in poker. That's how he conceived the world. Chess players think in sacrifice plays and branching outcomes and familiar scenarios; poker players think in bluffs and odds and acceptable losses. Frankly, Jim might've been happier if he'd been taught by a chess player.

Worse at tactics, though.

"Look, Jim." Finney squared the deck and started to shuffle. "Tilly doesn't want help. She wants reassurance."

“What do you mean?”

“She wants everyone to like her. She wants to excel. Just reassure her that she’s on the right track.”

“And then she’ll stop coming to office hours?”

Finney laughed. “Not a chance.”

#

Tilly came into office hours the next week with research.

“I looked into what Lieutenant Finney was saying about strategy games,” she said, by way of greeting.

“That was more of an aside,” Jim said. “It’s not tactics, technically. It won’t be on the test.”

“So?”

Jim decided that he didn’t have a good answer to that. “So you looked into what he was saying?”

Tilly pushed her tablet across the table and pointed at an article that she had up on screen.

“Lieutenant Finney—”

“You can just call him Finney, I won’t tell on you.”

“Finney, he was talking about the prisoner’s dilemma and Nash equilibriums, and it seemed off to me, so I did some research. Did you know that even just among humans, the likelihood of your partner betraying you varies wildly across cultures and historical eras? Imagine how different it must be across species!”

“But the point of the prisoner’s dilemma is that it doesn’t matter what your partner does. You’re always better off betraying them.”

Jim was right about that, but it was only by luck. Finney’s remarks on the prisoner’s dilemma had not been in the lesson plan, and Jim was as yet only passingly familiar with game theory. He wasn’t about to let Tilly know that, though.

“Right,” Tilly said, “but there’s an *iterated* version of the prisoner’s dilemma. The same people, faced with the same choice, over and over. And in the iterated version, over time, the best outcome isn’t always betraying, because if *you* always betray, your partner will always betray. In the iterative version, you get the best outcome by doing what your partner did in the last round. Only actually you have to throw a little noise into it, and sometimes you don’t betray your partner when they betrayed you, because that prevents everything from falling into some endless blood feud. It’s called ‘tit-for-tat with forgiveness.’ The strategy is.”

It was a lot of information to take in at once — Tilly didn’t really believe in small doses of information — and Jim spent a moment chewing on it. When he thought he’d got it well digested, he said, anti-climatically, “What’s your point?”

“The point is, everything Starfleet *does* is just an iterated prisoner’s dilemma! The Romulans, the Klingons, all those new civilizations we keep finding that have barely left their planets — we’re all players in this massive strategy game, and if we can figure out how everyone else is writing their rules, we can figure out how to handle interstellar relations. The best practice for first encounter. Everything!”

Tilly was alit with enthusiasm, practically giggling. She hadn’t bothered to take her hair down from its uniform code bun today, but it was coming loose of its own accord, like even it couldn’t handle the excitement.

Jim frowned. “But we can’t leave interstellar relations up to game theory.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re Starfleet. Ethics should matter more than strategy.”

“This *is* ethics,” Tilly said. “Your first-year course covered utilitarianism, didn’t it?”

“It also covered the huge *flaws* in utilitarianism, if you haven’t gotten to that yet.”

Tilly rolled her eyes as respectfully as it is possible for a human being to roll their eyes. “There are flaws in every ethical theory.”

“What I’m saying is that the prisoner’s dilemma shouldn’t even enter into the question. You don’t betray your partner because betrayal is *wrong*, not because it’s gonna bite you in the ass later.”

“I know what you’re saying,” Tilly said. She was no longer bothering with respect. “What *I’m* saying is that when you’re Starfleet, and you have billions of Federation citizens to look out for, whether or not something is going to bite you in the ass later *is* an ethical concern.”

“So if game theory said to blow every alien we meet out of the sky, you’d say that’s what we should do?”

“I’m pretty sure I’m the one who was just arguing for not blowing people up even if they’ve blown *us* up!”

“You also said that only applied to humans!”

“In theory!”

“It’s never just theory!”

“It’s *Starfleet!*” Tilly said. “Nobody’s going to blow everyone out of the sky! We’re not even actively hostile with anyone!”

“We could be! There are some things you just don’t do! No matter how many people you think you’re saving, there are things that are just *off-limits*.”

It was at this point that Jim and Tilly each, independently, realized that they were standing up, and also that they were probably being loud enough to be heard from the corridor. Neither of them remembered exactly when it was that their discussion had turned into a full-blown fight, but it definitely had.

(For the record: It was when Jim said the thing about blowing aliens out of the sky.)

Jim counted to ten, evened his breath, and sat down. “Did you have a question about tactics, Cadet?”

Tilly scoffed — literally, audibly scoffed — grabbed her tablet, and stormed out of the room.

Belatedly, Jim remembered that he was supposed to reassure her.

#

Jim wasn’t big on parties, but Ruth was, and Jim liked to make Ruth happy, so every once in a while he’d go to one with her.

“It’ll be fun,” she always said, and usually she was right. The parties were fun. Just not for Jim. The problem was that he didn’t have many friends, which meant he didn’t really have anyone to talk to, which meant that the only things to do were dance and drink. Jim was a competent but unenthusiastic dancer — he’d taken ballroom lessons on the-~~place-he-didn’t-think-about~~, and that had been all right, but no one walzed at a party, and anyway, he didn’t think about that place. And drinking when you weren’t talking or dancing was just sad.

The night after Jim and Tilly’s disastrous office hours, Jim went to a party with Ruth. It was his first party of the new year, and weirdly, it wasn’t that bad. Because there were plebes at the party, and to them, Jim wasn’t the asshole who always interrupted class. To them, he was their slightly older, and therefore slightly cooler, TA, who was always patient during office hours and who sometimes made faces at Finney when his back was turned.

Context, as Tilly’s captain would one day say, really is for kings.

“Jim!” Hank Morrison, a plebe who was the second-most-common face at Jim’s office hours (and who needed the help much more than Tilly did) ran up to Jim and Ruth as soon as they walked in. He hung a glow necklace over each of their necks.

“Hank,” Jim said. “How’s things?”

“Oh, I’m almost done with my homework.”

Jim laughed. “That’s not what I meant. Just. You know. How are you? What’s up?”

“Well, I’m at a party! Hey, you want one of these?” Hank lifted a small, clear glass filled with glowing liquor. “Decker’s making them over there. They tingle when you swallow!”

“Oh, yeah, those look good.”

Hank brightened. “Great! I’ll go get you one.”

“No, wait...”

But Hank was already gone.

Ruth poked Jim in the ribs. “*I’m almost done with my homework, sir,*” she said, in a tone that made it perfectly clear that she was making fun of Jim, not Hank.

“He didn’t say ‘sir.’” Jim broke into laughter as Ruth poked him again. “He didn’t!”

The situation had progressed to full-blown tickling by the time Hank came back. Jim dusted himself off and took the drink with thanks. Hank had brought one for Ruth, too.

“All right, well...” Hank looked back at the other end of the room, where a small but exuberant group was doing something between a jitterbug and moshing. “I’m gonna go dance.”

“Have fun,” Jim said.

Ruth grasped his arm with both hands. “Let’s go with him.”

“Do we have to?”

“Hmm.” Ruth looked from Jim, to the dancers, and back, and handed him her shot. “Drink this. Yours too.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll make you tipsy, and then you’ll enjoy dancing more.”

Jim doubted that — he didn't even enjoy *drinking*, let alone dancing *while* drinking — but it was very hard to say no to Ruth when she was looking at him like that. He tipped his head and threw back the glowing shots, one after another. They did, in fact, tingle on the way down.

"All right," Jim said grimly. "Let's dance."

To Jim's surprise, after a few minutes (and a few more shots), he did start to enjoy the dancing. Hank and a couple of the other plebes from his office hours were in the group, and after a while some of the other TAs showed up. They were all people Jim knew and liked, and Ruth was there, and for about ten minutes, the alcohol and the movement and the company all melted together into a kind of numbing agent. Jim felt his mind gently detach from his body and float up to the ceiling, and he looked down at himself dancing with a sense of transcendent, electric peace.

He was drunk for the first time. If you've ever been drunk for the first time before — and you remember it — you know it's kind of intense.

Then Ruth's friends showed up, and Ruth went off to talk with them for a bit, and the buzz of the shots faded a little, and Jim started to feel his body again, all the more strongly for the break. He backed out of the growing cluster of dancers and looked for a place to be alone.

The party was in a four-person dorm, and the two bunk beds had been pushed against one of the walls. It was too dark to really see what was going on over there, but Jim knew better than to try his luck. One of the four desks had been turned into a mixed drinks station, one repurposed for an already-depleted snack bar, and the remaining two had been pushed together to form a small stage that people were doing ill-advised stunts off of.

Jim found a mostly isolated corner over by the closet and leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against the plaster. It was cool. If it weren't for the loud music and laughter, he could've fallen asleep standing up.

The sound of Ruth's laugh opened his eyes. He squinted into the darkness, trying to find her. It was hard to see anything except glow sticks, really, but there, over by the snack bar, he saw Ruth's hair. Unmistakeable. She was licking tortilla chip crumbs off her palm, talking to one of her friends and laughing.

A beat later, Jim realized that Ruth's friend had huge, wild, curly red hair. It was Tilly.

He hadn't known they were friends. Or maybe they weren't. Maybe they'd just met tonight. Ruth made friends easily. He wouldn't have thought Tilly did.

Once he had his eyes on her, it was easy to keep track of Tilly; her hair was just as distinctive as Ruth's. Jim watched as Tilly made her way from the snack bar with Ruth over to Hank and the plebes on the dance floor, where she gyrated wildly and apparently unself-consciously. Then it was over to the bunk beds, where Jim lost the plot a little, but it seemed like she was teasing another girl. Then the mixed drink station, where she showed off for Decker, downing two shots at once. Then back to the dance floor. She looked like Jim had felt half an hour ago. Was she drunk? Did she feel that way all the time?

He didn't realize she was headed for him until she was almost there.

"Hey, are you okay?" Tilly blinked, as she realized who it was that she'd found melting into the corner. "Cadet Kirk?"

"Cadet Tilly," Jim mumbled.

"Oh, shit," Tilly said. Unlike Jim, she was very aware of how drunk Jim was. "I'm gonna get Ruth."

Time seemed to segment into short, distant bursts after that, like a strobe light slowed way, way down.

Tilly was pulling Ruth over, and Ruth was saying, "I thought you left!"

They were all three in the corridor, and Ruth was holding Jim up, and Tilly was ahead of them, peering around the corner like a spy in a bad hole.

They were in a bathroom, and the light was very, very bright, and the tile was cold, and Ruth's arms were warm around him while he vomited. He looked up at her, and she rubbed his back.

" Sylvia went to get water," she said.

Then Tilly was back, holding a plastic cup to Jim's lips, and he drank. Her hair got into his mouth.

"Tilly," he said.

"That's right," Tilly said. "Just keep drinking. Hydrate. Hydration is key. You're still talking and mobile, and your breathing is steady, so I don't think we need sick bay, but you really have to hydrate. You should probably be drinking more water anyway, almost everyone should. Isn't it kind of funny that I keep giving you water?"

Jim finished the water in the cup. Tilly stood up, and from his perspective, she filled the entire doorway of the stall. She looked gigantic. Powerful. *Awesome*, in the Biblical sense.

"Tilly," he said again.

"What?"

"You're doing real... really well in tactics."

Tilly smiled. "I know."

#

"Five, no help." Finney dealt a card onto his own hand. "And a pair for my jack. You'd better have another queen in your pocket, Jim."

Jim couldn't remember what he had facing down. He was too nervous to focus on the game.

Ah, the hell with it. He set his cards aside. "I should tell you something, Lieutenant."

Finney raised an eyebrow. "I thought we were past that 'Lieutenant' business." Then he frowned, taking in Jim's demeanor. "What is it, Jim?"

"I got drunk at a party last weekend."

"Oh, is that it?" Finney laughed. "Relax, Jim, everyone drinks at the Academy. It's not even against the rules, technically."

It was, actually, *technically* against the rules to be publicly drunk, and Jim thought about mentioning it, but he was starting to realize, if only subconsciously, that Finney didn't give a shit about the rules.

"Really drunk," Jim said. "In front of one of the tactics students. I just didn't want you to find out from someone else."

Finney laughed again. "I'm not going to punish you for drinking with your classmates at a party."

"I guess I know that."

"Honestly, I'm a little proud."

Now Jim got to raise an eyebrow. "Proud?"

"I told you I wanted you to TA to get better with people. It sounds like you're doing that. Who were you with?"

"Hm?"

"Which of the tactics students saw you?"

For reasons he couldn't even begin to figure out, Jim blushed. "Tilly."

"Ah, Tilly." Finney folded his own cards. "I wanted to talk to you about her."

"What about?"

Finney bit his lip. "Her most recent paper bore some... striking similarities to Hank Morrison's."

"She wouldn't cheat," Jim said, shaking his head. "She wouldn't have to."

"Do you think she'd let Hank cheat off her?"

The answer was *maybe*, but Jim couldn't bring himself to say it. He wasn't certain he liked Tilly, but he was pretty sure he owed her.

It didn't matter. Finney saw the answer in Jim's face, just like he always did.

"I want you to talk to her," Finney said. "See if you can get to the bottom of it."

"I'm not really comfortable with that."

Finney clapped a hand on Jim's shoulder. "No one likes interrogations, Jim. No one likes suspecting their crewmates. But you're closer to her. You can make it less difficult, get a more honest answer. It's your responsibility, as her superior, to get to the truth. For her good, and for Hank's."

You have to hand it to Finney. The man understood people.

"All right," Jim said. "I'll do it."

#

Tilly arrived to their meeting ten minutes early. Jim resented her for it. He'd been banking on those ten minutes to psych himself up.

"How are you?" Tilly asked kindly, as the door shut behind her.

"I'm fine." Jim gestured to the chair in front of Finney's desk. "Have a seat."

"Oh, this isn't a good meeting, is it?" Tilly sat. "I thought it was about game theory, or you had a question about my paper, or, well, it's kind of embarrassing to admit it, but maybe you really *liked* my paper and wanted to congratulate me. But this isn't that kind of meeting."

Jim swallowed what felt like bile, but was actually spit. Was this command? He hated it.

"You don't need to be nervous," he lied.

"I'm not nervous," Tilly lied back. "Why would you think I'm nervous? I'm not nervous."

"You talk when you're nervous."

Tilly opened her mouth several times to speak, then determinedly shut it. Jim almost laughed.

"Your most recent paper," he said, figuring he might as well cut this short for both their sakes, "is suspiciously similar to Hank Morrison's."

Tilly sized him up. "How similar?"

"A linguistic algorithm turned up very strong parallels in syntax, word choice, and punctuation in 40 percent of the text. And both papers make heavy use of the iterated prisoner's dilemma as an example."

It only took Tilly a moment to process the implications. "I didn't copy Hank's paper."

"I know," Jim said. He swallowed again, and forced himself onward. "But I need to ask you whether you let him copy yours."

Jim didn't have Finney's gift for reading people, but he could see immediately from Tilly's reaction that she hadn't. She had no poker face.

"I see," he said. "But you let him borrow your tablet sometime last week, didn't you?"

A silent *yes*, this time.

"Okay. Then we have an answer."

"No, we don't," Tilly said. "I didn't say that. I didn't answer you. I'm invoking my right not to answer you."

"Tilly, you didn't copy Hank's paper. And you didn't let him copy yours. You don't have to answer me. I know."

"Okay, but... but you don't have to *tell* anyone, right? We can just let it go. I want to let it go."

"We can't let it go."

"Why not?" Tilly said, and then, honest to God, she jutted her chin, like an obstinate child in a Victorian novel. Not for the first time, Jim wondered how this person could possibly be real. "It's *Hank*. He's sweet. He's science track, he hates tactics, and he was scared."

"There are better options than cheating, for people who are struggling."

"I know that, and he knows that, probably, but sometimes it's hard to see the options when you're scared," Tilly said. "I think he was doing the best he could."

"He cheated off you," Jim said. "Lied to you, stole your work, and tried to pass it off as his own. And did it all so incompetently that you got wrapped up in this mess."

Tilly pushed her chin out even further. "What's your point?"

"You care too much about getting along with people."

"You know what?" Tilly crossed her arms. "I think you don't care *enough* about getting along. You can act like you're better than everyone all you want, hiding in the corner at parties, but you're not better, okay, you're just sad."

Jim had never in his life been quite so effectively verbally flayed. He couldn't even come up with a response. Was that what everyone thought about him? Was that why they didn't like him? Because they thought *he* thought he was better than them?

He wasn't better than anyone. Jim lived by that.

"Oh, shit," Tilly said, realizing for the second time in a week that Jim was really not okay. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that, I just get... really strong opinions sometimes. I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did," Jim said mildly.

"It's just... Hank. He should get a second chance. He should get help."

"He'll get it," Jim said.

"Will he?"

It was possible. It was in the handbook. The Academy could respond to a first plagiarism offense by voiding the plagiarist's grade and setting them up with academic support.

Or they could expel them.

"I don't know," Jim said.

"Please. Just let it go."

"They can't let it go. They need to clear your name, and they need to make sure Hank understands tactics. I have to report it."

And, really, it was out of Jim's hands. He was just a cadet, acting on orders, and his superior already knew the situation. One way or another, someone was going down for plagiarism. But Jim wasn't going to throw Finney under the bus like that. He wasn't going to pretend that he didn't have a hand in this.

Tilly took a deep breath, then another. There was something very regular about the way she did it. Jim wondered if she, like him, had once sat in a counselor's office and been firmly, gently, practically told to count out her breaths.

She hadn't. It was because of her laryngotracheal stenosis. But Jim wouldn't know about that for years and years.

"I guess you'll do what you have to do, Kirk." She stood. "May I be excused?"

"I'll tell them that you want leniency," Jim said.

"Great. Can I go?"

Jim nodded. Tilly left.

As promised, Jim told Finney that Tilly wanted Hank to be given a second chance, and Finney, more for Jim's sake than Tilly's, passed that on the line up to Commander Wei. In the end, Hank wasn't expelled. He was suspended for the rest of the semester, and came back in the spring to an extensive academic support team and a lot of judgment from his classmates. He dropped out the next year.

Tilly never came back to Jim's office hours.

Year Three: Ruth Falkner

Chapter Summary

Jim learns about work-life balance.

Chapter Notes

Original chapter date: 08/05/2018

Ruth kind of fell out of that last chapter, didn't she? I mean, she was in it, but she wasn't *in* it. You could remove her entirely, and it would be almost the same thing. That makes sense, though, doesn't it? Jim and Tilly weren't friends, they didn't hang out socially except for that one drunken party, so why would Ruth be a major part of their story?

But Ruth was still there in Jim's life, every day. In very many ways, she was the center of his world. They ate together, studied together, walked to classes together, and often slept together.

Yes, in both senses of the phrase.

The shine had come off of Ruth's hero worship a little. Of course it had. She was 19, now, and had spent two years away from home, thinking and learning and talking constantly. She'd returned to her middle-school love of mythology, but lately she'd been reading feminist updates of the stories of Medusa and Persephone, and devouring every translation she could find of Surak's writings. She was even trying, haphazardly, to learn ancient Vulcan, and had a decent grasp of the alphabet. She'd read Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* for class, and then read *A Critique of Pure Reason* and confidently declared herself a Kantian. (She would not remain one.) She'd done a year-long independent study in interplanetary history with Professor Gill, and at the end of it had produced a 50-page, thoroughly researched, searingly argued paper on the necessity of renewing relations with the Romulans that put Jim's classroom disruptions to shame.

She'd also gotten drunk, gotten high, and had once gotten so lost while coming back to campus from a play that she and her friends had ended up walking the Golden Gate Bridge at 3 am, shouting and flashing the few boats they saw on the water.

But Jim was still kind, still thoughtful, still fascinating to talk to and funny in unexpected ways, so even if Ruth no longer hung on his every word, she was, in her third year at the Academy, even more in love with him than she had been in her first. And he, of course, was desperately in love with her.

Well, I say "of course," but you never really saw Jim fall in love with Ruth, did you? We skipped over that part. So let me reassure you: He was *desperately* in love. He loved Ruth's passion, her intellect, the way she drooled on the pillow when she slept. He loved the way she made friends with absolutely everyone she met. And he loved the intimacies of being in a relationship: Waking up next to Ruth. Watching her brush her teeth. Running to sick bay to get medicine for her when she had a headache.

The first two years they spent together at the Academy were the happiest of Ruth's life, and the the happiest Jim had been in a long time.

And then they went on their supervised field hours.

Every Starfleet cadet had to spend four months on board a starship before graduating, and most cadets did their field hours in the first semester of their third year. It was the Academy's biggest wash-out period, even deadlier than a plebe's first month; on average, 30 percent of cadets dropped out after field hours.

Jim did his field hours on the *Endeavour*, and he loved it. He loved hanging out in the rec room with the other cadets, who liked him a lot more on board a starship than they did in a classroom. He loved talking to the lieutenants and ensigns supervising him, who had stories from real field experience and were absolutely delighted to have an audience for them. Most of all, he loved the ship: the long corridors; the smooth, chiming turbolifts; the walls that shook with unexpected turbulence. The bridge. God, the *bridge*.

Once, he was on the bridge when an unplanned encounter with an alien ship turned hostile. Torpedoes were primed. Shields were raised. The room held its collected breath. And then the captain... she *talked them down*. She was prepared to fire, Jim could see that, she would've if she'd had to, but she held off just long enough, and no one died that day.

Jim had no idea how she'd done it, but he knew he wasn't going to stop until he'd learned how to do it too.

Ruth did her field hours on the *Farragut*. She hated it.

#

On the first day back on campus after field hours, Jim met Ruth under the adolescent elm tree by the parade grounds. She was stunning. She was always stunning, but after months of only seeing her on grainy vidscreens, Jim was struck by her beauty all over again.

She stood up when she saw him, and he ran to her, literally ran across the grass and swept her up in his arms. It was super gross, if you were an innocent bystander. It was pure necessity, if you were Jim and Ruth.

“God, I missed you so much,” Jim said into Ruth’s neck.

“I missed you too,” Ruth said.

Something in her tone made Jim look up. “What’s wrong?”

Ruth sighed and averted her eyes. “Let’s sit down.”

They sat on the bench under the elm. Jim instinctively wanted to settle his arm around Ruth’s shoulders, but she pulled away, angling in so that they could see each other while they spoke.

“I’m transferring out of the Academy,” she said.

Jim laughed, not because he thought she was joking, but just because that was what his body did. He certainly didn’t want it to.

“Why would you do that?”

“I don’t want to serve on a starship. Field hours *sucked*.”

“They’re not all like the *Farragut*,” Jim said. “The *Endeavour*—”

Ruth shook her head. “It wasn’t the ship. It was just all of it. I don’t want to have a commanding officer, or live in quarters, or just... any of it. Space was fun for a few weeks, but I want to live on a *planet*.”

“Starfleet has planetside—”

“I don’t want to be in Starfleet, Jim.”

She looked him in the eyes and spoke very calmly and firmly. In return, Jim displayed one of his best qualities: He took her at her word.

“Where are you transferring?”

“UCLA. I like California, and... and I want to stay close to you, obviously.” Ruth looked down, picking at a hangnail, all her confidence from the moment before gone. “If that’s something you want.”

Jim looked at this girl that he loved, tearing her cuticles to shreds. He’d gotten up in the middle of the night to go to sick bay for her. He’d gone to awful parties for her. He’d do anything to protect her from pain. There was only one answer he could possibly give.

“Of course that’s what I want.”

Oh, Jim.

#

Ruth left for Los Angeles the next Friday. Jim saw her onto the train. She kissed him lingeringly on the platform, and it felt faintly old-fashioned, like he was seeing her off to war, even though it was kind of the opposite.

Afterward, Jim wandered. Classes didn’t start until Monday. He had nowhere to be, and nowhere he wanted to be, except on the train with Ruth. And he didn’t even really want to be there.

He trekked across the Mission, ducked into a corner grocery and looked at the samples but didn’t try any, let the natural slope of the streets ease him down to the oceanside. After a while, without really thinking about it, he boarded a bus headed for Finney’s neighborhood.

Ben’s neighborhood. I should call him Ben. That’s what Jim was calling him, by this point.

Belle answered the door. “Jim!”

Normally when Jim came over for dinner, Belle was painstakingly made-up, but today she was wearing loose, faded jeans, an old T-shirt with dirt ground into the hems, and no bra. It suddenly occurred to Jim that dropping in unannounced was very rude, and when the person you were dropping in on was your commanding officer, potentially inappropriate.

“I was just in the neighborhood,” he said, not totally inaccurately. “I’m sorry, I’m intruding, I’ll go...”

“Come in!” Belle grabbed his arm before he could turn around and pulled him into the house. Ben was in the kitchen, cutting into a small chocolate cake. “Ben, look who’s here!”

“Jim! Just in time!”

“What am I just in time for?”

“We’re celebrating!” Ben turned to the wine fridge. “Three glasses of champagne, coming right up!”

Belle cleared her throat pointedly.

“Right,” Ben said. “Let’s make that two glasses of champagne, one of sparkling cider.”

He poured the drinks. Jim reached automatically for the cider, but instead, Ben handed it to Belle.

Never let it be said that Jim couldn't take a hint. "You're pregnant?"

Ben and Belle's faces split into identical grins.

"We just found out today!" Ben said. "You're the first person we've told."

"They say not to tell people before 12 weeks, but I can't keep it a secret!" Belle said.

"Congratulations," Jim said, and really meant it. For a moment, he totally forgot that Ruth was on a train bound very quickly away from him, and he was just quietly, deeply happy for his friends.

Because Ben was Jim's friend, the closest one he had. And although Jim didn't quite realize it yet, he was Ben's closest friend, too. Maybe that seems a little weird, and okay, it *was* a little weird, but keep this in mind: Ben was only 24. Jim was very nearly the age Ben had been when they first met at Jim's orientation.

Weird, right?

Anyway, Jim spent the rest of the afternoon with his best friend and his wife. They talked about the baby mostly, of course, but they also spent a lot of time just catching up. Jim told Ben and Belle about his field hours, and then, more reluctantly, about Ruth transferring.

"It happens," Ben said wisely. "Some people love the academic side of Starfleet, but when it comes time to actually serve on a starship, it's just not for them."

"I'd heard about it," Jim said. "I just never thought that would be Ruth. I thought she wanted this as much as I do."

"Nobody wants this as much as you do," Ben said.

"Was that a joke?"

"Not even a little."

"Speaking of serving on a starship," Belle said. "The baby's not the only news we have."

Jim looked from Belle to Ben. "Did you get an assignment?"

"On the *Republic*. I ship out next week." Ben cuffed Jim on the shoulder. "Sorry to abandon you."

"Forget about me, what about the baby?"

Belle's smile took on a slightly strained look, and Jim regretted bringing it up. But Ben didn't seem perturbed.

"I'll get paternity leave," he said. "And regular shore leave."

"It's part of the deal when you marry a Starfleet officer," Belle said. But she still sounded strained.

When Jim finally got up to leave, Ben walked him to the door, then went out with him, shutting the door behind him.

"Jim," he said. "Before you go. I have a favor to ask."

"Anything," Jim said.

"While I'm gone, could you look in on Belle? She's putting on a brave face, but this is my first assignment. I think she'd like having someone in Starfleet she could talk to. A friend."

In case you were wondering, that was when Jim realized that he was Ben's best friend.

"Of course," he said.

#

For the first few weeks, Jim and Ruth's long distance relationship kind of worked. Maybe it was because at first it felt like it was just an extension of the temporary distance they'd had during their field hours. Maybe it was because they both wanted it to work so badly. Whatever the reason, things weren't terrible. Jim and Ruth talked every day, and they saw each other every weekend. The trip from San Francisco to LA wasn't that long, just a couple of hours. They still loved each other. It was not an insurmountable obstacle, the distance.

Still, they started to find it hard to surmount.

"So what are you learning in your Vulcan history class?" Jim asked one weekend, lying next to Ruth in her dorm bed.

"We're learning about IDIC."

"Infinite diversity in infinite combinations," Jim said.

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Someday I'm going to study something you've never heard of."

She traced her fingertip over her and Jim's intertwined knuckles. She liked the pattern of interlaced fingers. It reminded her, in a visceral way, of IDIC. It was what she thought of when her professor talked about it.

She didn't say that to Jim.

"How's your strategy class going?" she asked instead.

Jim brought their hands up to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "It's fine."

It was better than fine. After struggling with tactics in his first two years, Jim had come out of his time on the *Endeavour* with a blossoming passion for the subject. He'd reread all of his textbooks on the trip back to Earth, and now he was a regular fixture in office hours for his strategy class, annoying his TA by bringing in recent academic literature that the TA hadn't heard of. Sometimes when he found a new article, he thought of Tilly, and laughed at himself.

He didn't say that to Ruth.

"Can I come up to San Francisco next weekend?" Ruth asked. So far, it had always been Jim visiting her — never the other way around.

"I don't mind the trip," Jim said.

"I'd like to see everyone," Ruth said. "Catch up with the campus."

"I thought you'd just want to put it behind you. Since you hate Starfleet so much."

It did not come out the way that Jim intended it. But it did come out, and there was no taking it back. Ruth pulled her hand out of his.

"Are you mad at me?" she said, not a little mad herself.

"No!" Jim said. And he wasn't, really. Not in a way that he believed, or trusted, or wanted.

"You sound like you're mad at me."

"I'm not. I just really didn't think you'd want to be back on campus. But of course you can come up, if you want."

So from then on, Jim and Ruth traded weekends.

#

Because his weekends were spent in Los Angeles, Jim made Thursdays his day to drop in on Belle Finney. Belle knew what he was doing, and Jim knew that she knew — it wasn't like he had any good excuse to visit once, let alone every week — but neither of them ever mentioned it. They didn't talk much at all, really. Belle was a horticulturist, which was a profession that Jim could muster a vague academic interest in, but didn't have anything like the passion or knowledge necessary to make conversation about. After the first week, he tried — he took some time out of his strategy research to look up a few articles about new cross-breeds of roses — but when he casually mentioned his reading to Belle, she just laughed and told him to turn on a holo. And Belle was so singularly uninterested in all things Starfleet that Jim started to wonder how she and Ben had even started dating.

(Belle told him, months and months later, on a slow, sleepy night just before the baby was born. They'd met at a bar, and talked about how their names came right after each other in the alphabet. It was almost quaint. Like something out of a 21st-century movie.)

So mostly, they watched holos. Jim did his homework while Belle sorted seeds. Sometimes they played poker — Jim was surprised to learn that Belle liked it as much as Finney did, and had only sat out their games the previous year because she didn't want to listen to them talk about tactics. Jim won more with Belle than he did with Finney. He wasn't sure if it was because he was improving, or Belle wasn't as good as Finney. He thought (and he was at least a little bit right) that maybe it was because they both felt guilty when they bluffed.

Often, they went on walks. Jim hadn't spent much time out and about in San Francisco — sometimes he would go with Ruth to a play or a club, but he certainly hadn't been around for the incident on the Golden Gate Bridge — and he enjoyed letting Belle show him the city. She loved it in a way that Jim hadn't realized that a person could love a *place*, and the city, already objectively fascinating, was made precious through her eyes.

Now I'm going to tell you something that's going to make you think a mostly-wrong thing, if you weren't thinking it already:

Jim didn't tell Ruth about his visits with Belle.

See? You're thinking it. But come on. James Kirk would *never*. It was, and remained, an entirely chaste relationship.

Which doesn't mean it was on the up-and-up, but Jim was 20. He'd never heard the *phrase* "emotional affair," and he certainly didn't understand what it meant. He really, truly believed it to be an entirely innocent friendship.

Still, he didn't tell Ruth.

#

"Why don't you talk to me anymore?"

Jim looked up from his tablet. He was at his desk, studying ethics, and Ruth was perched on the edge of his bunk, studying him.

"Do we have to do this now?" he asked. "I have a paper due Monday."

"You always have a paper due Monday."

“So do you.”

“And yet, I manage to talk to you.”

Jim tossed his tablet down on the corner of the desk. “Fine. Let’s talk.”

It was not a reaction designed to cool tensions. Ruth crossed her arms. “So you don’t *want* to talk to me. That’s it.”

“You never like what I have to say.”

“That’s not true. That’s not true at all.”

But Jim had seen the look that crossed Ruth’s face when he talked too much about Starfleet. Before she’d left, she used to love it when he got passionate about the prime directive, or principles of interstellar engagement, or even the inner workings of an engine room. She used to get passionate about those things too. But now, she just listened, and changed the subject as soon as she could. So he stopped bringing those things up.

And if he couldn’t talk about Starfleet, what was left to discuss?

What Jim never really understood was that Ruth had not stopped being interested in Starfleet. But she had regrets. Leaving had been the right choice, but it had still meant giving something up, and she was mourning the life she wasn’t going to live. Every time Jim mentioned the engine room, he sparked a fresh grief.

But she could never tell Jim not to talk about Starfleet.

Ruth slipped off the bed and padded softly over to sit on the corner of the desk. She reached down and threaded her arms around Jim’s neck. With the light behind her, she looked like a solar eclipse, the fluorescents making a glowing halo of her hair, while her face was shadowed.

“Talk to me, Jim.”

There were so many things he wanted to say. He loved her. He was in the middle of a fascinating article about language barriers in first contact situations. He loved her. He was only two credits away from completing all the prerequisites for Command School, and as soon as he had those he could begin collecting letters of recommendation. He loved her. He was so, so angry at her for leaving. He loved her.

“I love you,” he said.

The arms disappeared from around his neck. The eclipse ended, and the light flooded back in, as Ruth stood up. Jim almost laughed, because he’d been right; she didn’t like what he had to say.

“You’re holding back,” she said. “You’re always holding things back, ever since I met you.”

Ruth left.

Jim went to Belle’s.

She didn’t mention that it was a Saturday, and he wasn’t supposed to come over for another five days. She didn’t ask what he was doing there. She just let him in, sat him down at the kitchen table, and gave him a cup of coffee. It almost seemed like she was expecting him. (She wasn’t, and she was. We’re past the point in the story where anything is just one thing.)

For a long time, they didn’t talk.

“You seem upset,” Belle said, when the coffee was almost gone.

“I had a fight with Ruth.”

Belle took the mug from Jim, refilled it, gave it back to him. Their hands touched. It was an accident, and it wasn’t.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

He did.

When the story was over, Belle frowned. She was leaning against the microwave. It looked casual, but it was actually because she was having some pregnancy-related vertigo.

“Is that true?” she asked.

“Is what true?”

“What she said about you holding things back.”

Jim traced the rim of his mug with his index finger. “I think I know what she meant.”

“What did she mean?”

She meant the nights that Jim woke her up with a nightmare, and told her it was nothing and to go back to sleep. She meant the way that he’d looked at Finnegan, when he was about to throw the punch. She meant the three years of his adolescence that he never, ever mentioned.

She'd asked him, once, in a faltering, awkward way, after a particularly bad nightmare. *If there's anything you want to talk about... You know, I can handle it, whatever it is.* He'd waved her off. He didn't want that subject to be any part of his relationship with Ruth. Besides, he didn't think she could understand. She was so *innocent*, in a way that Jim hadn't been in years, in a way he almost hated sometimes.

It had been a very long time since Belle asked her question. She was still looking at Jim, calmly and curiously. There were bags under her eyes, but her face was full and glowing with pregnancy. She didn't need anything from him. Not really. She was only a few years older than Ruth, but she *felt* much older to Jim. She was married. She was going to have a baby. She must know things.

"When I was 13," Jim said, but the rest of the words wouldn't come out. He tried again. "Have you ever heard of..."

"You don't have to tell me," Belle said, when the second try trailed off and no third try was forthcoming. "It's okay."

Gingerly, she put all of her weight back on her feet, closing her eyes to ride out the vertigo. When it passed, she sat down at the table across from Jim.

"I want to make her happy," Jim said.

"I think she just wants you to be present. I think that would make her happy."

"I'm present. I'm here. I see her every weekend."

"That's not the kind of present I mean."

"You think I need to stop holding back from her. You think that would fix things?"

Belle smiled. It was an answer, and it wasn't.

#

Jim skipped classes that Tuesday and took the train down to Los Angeles. He didn't tell Ruth he was coming. It seemed like the thing to do. He was pretty sure he'd seen it in a holo: Unannounced visit. Grand romantic gesture. Followed, of course, by a long, serious talk, because Jim understood that grand romantic gestures were not actually the foundation on which solid relationships were built.

He should've watched a few more holos. If he had, he might've predicted what he saw, when he arrived at Ruth's dorm: Ruth was in the courtyard, sprawled out on the grass with a tablet in her lap, chatting with a boy.

The boy was dark-haired, straight-nosed, stupidly skinny. He leaned a couple of inches toward Ruth and said something to her. Ruth laughed in a way that Jim recognized. It was the way she laughed when she was licking corn chip crumbs off her palm, silly, unself-conscious. He hadn't heard that laugh in months.

Jim turned around. There was a 3 pm train back to San Francisco, and he took it. When he arrived, he headed straight to Belle's house, without even stopping at campus to drop off his bag.

She opened the door in her bathrobe. Her eyes and nose were red, so it was obvious that she'd been crying, although there were no actual tears on her face; Jim suspected they were on the sleeve of her robe.

Thoughts of talking to her about Ruth flew out of his head. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Belle said. "I'm fine, you should just... maybe come back tomorrow."

Jim rested his hand on the terrycloth resting on her shoulder. No real contact, but contact all the same. "Please, Belle."

Belle's face crumpled. "It's really nothing," she said. "I just wish Ben were here."

Then she was crying into Jim's collarbone. He pushed her gently into the house and shut the door behind him.

Jim stayed the night on Belle's couch, with Belle sitting beside him. First she cried, then he brought her herbal tea and the mashed potatoes that she always took second helpings of at dinner, then they watched a holo. Then they watched another.

They didn't talk.

#

In the morning, Jim took another train down to San Francisco. This time, he didn't stop until he'd reached Ruth's door. The real, surprised happiness on her face when she saw it was him almost killed him.

"I'm so sorry I left on Saturday," she said. "And I'm so sorry I didn't call. I just didn't want to fight again."

"It's all right." Jim sat on her bed, and Ruth sat beside him. She reached for his hand, and they interlaced fingers.

They sat like that for a moment, and then Jim said, "I've been angry at you for leaving."

Ruth halfway laughed, a sardonic puff of air that Jim felt on his neck. "You don't say."

"But I'm not anymore."

"No?"

Jim rubbed a circle on the back of her hand with his thumb. He'd done it thousands of times; he hardly noticed it was happening.

"You're happy here," he said. "And I know you weren't happy at the Academy, and that's all I want, really, is for you to be happy."

"I want you to be happy too," Ruth said.

"I am."

"Are you?"

Well, not entirely. But is anyone?

"I'm... where I want to be," Jim said, after some thought. "And you're where you want to be. And I don't think that's the same place."

"You don't mean physically," Ruth said.

Jim squeezed her hand. He leaned down as if he were going to kiss it, but in the end all he did was press it to his forehead, and hold it there for a long time, almost as if he were praying over it. When he sat up, he was ready to say what he needed to.

"I don't make you happy. I don't think I can. And I think the longer I'm in Starfleet, the worse it's going to be."

Ruth bit her lip. "I don't want to... Maybe I'm putting this the wrong way, but you could leave Starfleet."

Jim shook his head, but Ruth kept going.

"They haven't been great to you. I know you love the ideals, but they're not always there. You hated the way they dealt with Finnegan. And Hank. Maybe it's... maybe there are better places to do what you want to do."

She looked at him, so hopefully, but she knew what his answer was going to be.

"It's where I want to be," Jim said.

Ruth was crying. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah."

Year Four: Adrian Kodos

Chapter Summary

Jim tells Belle a story.

Chapter Notes

Original chapter date: 08/07/2018

Original chapter notes:

There's already a warning for violence on this fic, but I feel the need to elaborate here: This chapter contains a graphic, first-person account of a genocide.

The baby didn't have a name yet.

Belle was eight and a half months pregnant. Ben was a week's trip away from Earth, currently headed in that direction to be there for the birth. With Jim's help, the spare room had been converted into a nursery, with a crib and a changing station and cheerful decorations on warm yellow walls. Belle had to pee approximately every 38 seconds.

Belle was eight and a half months pregnant, the baby didn't have a name yet, and Jim was in her kitchen at two in the morning.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I just needed to be with someone. And Janice..." He grimaced.

Belle didn't need him to go on. She had recognized for some time the signs that Jim and his new girlfriend were not good to each other.

"It's okay," she said. "I was already awake."

"You're just saying that to be polite."

Belle cut her laughter short, because she could see that Jim wasn't in any fit state for laughter. "I'm really not." She studied Jim for a moment. She'd seen him almost like this, once before. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." But that was at least half a lie, because then he said, "My friend Tom called me today. He's getting married. He wants me to be there." The next sentence took its time coming.

"Is that bad?" Belle asked.

"No. I don't talk to him much. He has some... scarring on one side of his face. A nonfunctional eye. He was supposed to get surgery to fix it, but it didn't take. He told me that, too."

"When was the last time you two talked?"

"Three... no, four years ago. Before I entered the Academy."

Belle frowned. There was some center, some linchpin to the mystery of why Jim was in her kitchen at 2 am because of a call from an old friend, but it kept spinning out of her grasp.

"I lost touch with a lot of my school friends, when I went to college," she said.

And she lost touch with most of her college friends when she married Ben, but that's not what this conversation was about, except to the extent that it was what every one of Belle and Jim's conversations was about.

"We weren't friends from school."

"How did you meet, then?"

Jim studied her, and Belle studied him back. She was not a woman prone to repeating herself, so she didn't tell him that he could tell her anything, or not tell her, if that was what he wanted. She knew that he knew that, the way that she knew that he would never, ever tell Ben about all of the fears she'd spilled to him about raising her baby with a father in Starfleet.

Belle was studying him so closely, she saw the exact moment he decided to tell her.

"Have you ever heard of Tarsus IV?"

The exact words that Jim used to tell his story to Belle are important, and you'll get to see them. But Jim's story is not *the* story. There were things he didn't know at the time, some things he wouldn't understand until years later, and some things he would never find out. And those things are important too. I can't tell Jim, but I can tell you.

The first thing you should know: It didn't start with the famine.

It never starts with the famine. Don't let anyone ever tell you it does. The crime on Tarsus IV started years before the food supply dried up.

Tarsus IV was initially settled by a complement of 4,000 people. From the start, the plan was for the first colonists to finish the terraformation and set up a functioning, self-sufficient society, and then to gradually expand. From the start, there were problems with that plan.

About half of the original 4,000 colonists were scientists, explorers, or simply people for whom life on Earth wasn't working out particularly well, who wanted a fresh start on a fresh world. The other half of the original colonists were what you might, from a 21st-century perspective, call survivalists. They went to Tarsus IV in hopes of finding a world where they could be truly *human*, which to them meant that they were untethered to the artificial trappings of 23rd-century life. They wanted to grow their own food, build houses out of stone, drink water from streams. They wanted to prove their worth against the universe.

The survivalists on Tarsus IV tolerated the scientists and explorers, but they were always opposed to the expansion of the colony. They believed that new colonists would inevitably ruin the purity of the planet, bringing technology and building infrastructure that would eventually turn Tarsus IV into just another Earth. They resented the idea that newcomers could come in and benefit from their hard work, without proving that they had what it took to survive on a real planet.

But the colony did expand, over the survivalists' objections. After the first two years, 2,000 new colonists arrived, and the year after that, 2,000 more. The survivalists were outnumbered 3-to-1. But as original settlers, they had a disproportionate presence in the colony's fledgling government. One of them, Adrian Kodos, was the lieutenant governor. Several more were councilors. Tarsus IV's tiny police force was 90 percent survivalists. And they made it perfectly clear, in any way and at any time they could get away with it, that they didn't think the newcomers should be there. They passed laws delaying further expansion. They passed laws granting living space and garden allotments based on seniority in the colony. By the time people started starving, the groundwork had long since been laid.

It never starts with the famine. Remember that.

Okay. Now you can see what Jim said.

#

Tom and I both lived on Tarsus IV. He was older than me, I think 20 when I was 13, so we didn't really know each other well. But we did know each other a little. There were only 8,000 people on Tarsus IV, so everyone knew each other a little.

It was an Earth colony. I was 10 when we started living there. My mother was a geologist in the first wave of settlers. My father and I joined her after the first two years. Then when I was 13, a fungus attacked the food supply. *Broathanistais morganis*. Do you know it? Okay. Then you know what it did. People were starving. I mean, truly starving to death. They sent out a distress call to the Federation, but the ships were months away. We thought, anyway. I remember my mother found this bark and made a kind of soup out of it. I'm sure it didn't have any nutritional value, but it filled you up, kind of. God, it tasted awful, though.

Someone died, eventually — an old man, one of the first-wave settlers. One of the other first-wave settlers was the lieutenant governor. Kodos. When the first man died, Kodos overthrew the governor. He thought that there was only enough food left to feed half the colony. He decided to kill the other half, the new settlers. The first wave was 4,000, so he decided to kill everyone who came after. It was a first-come, first-serve kind of thing. I think the idea was that the original settlers were harder, you know? They'd roughed it.

So one day the police come to my house. My mother didn't want to let them in, but they broke down the door. My father was off-world, visiting my brother, so they just took me. They didn't say why they were there, they just said I had to go with them. They had phasers. My mother tried to come with me, but they wouldn't let her. She ran after us, and they stunned her. She must have suspected what they were doing, to run after me like that. She was screaming. I don't know. We don't talk about it.

They took me to the shuttle landing pad. That's where they put us. There are already a thousand people when I get there, inside a fence. They put me inside the fence. I tried to leave, and another man with a phaser pushed me back in. They were all around the perimeter. I waited there for hours while they brought more people. Toward the end we're just packed in, you can't even walk around. Everyone's trying to figure out what's going on. I didn't realize that we were all second- or third-wave settlers until someone told me. I didn't keep track of that kind of thing. Some of the people knew, I guess. They were crying. A couple people tried to jump the fence, and the police shot them.

Then Kodos shows up. I barely knew who he was. I'd seen him, but you know, when you're a kid, you only have a loose grasp on politics. I knew who the colony governor was, but I didn't know the lieutenant governor. But I knew he was important. He read a statement. I know it by heart. I wrote it down, later.

"The revolution is successful, but survival depends on drastic measures. Your continued existence represents a threat to the well-being of society. Your lives mean slow death to the more valued members of the colony. Therefore I have no alternative but to sentence you to death. Your execution is so ordered. Signed, Kodos, governor of Tarsus IV."

I think I may be the only living person who remembers the exact words he used to sentence us to death. Maybe not. Maybe someone else wrote it down.

Then they start shooting into the crowd. It was madness, just chaos. People were screaming and running, but they couldn't really run because of how many people there were. Afterward they said that some people didn't die from the phasers. They were trampled. I didn't realize at first that the phasers were set to kill. I'd never seen one on that setting before. But then a woman goes down right in front of me. She had a hole in

her chest. That's when I realized they were killing us. I ducked. Stop, drop, and roll, like I was on fire.

I thought about it later, and I don't know why they didn't set their phasers higher. They could've vaporized everyone. Maybe they were low on energy, too.

I guess I got lucky, because after a while the phaser fire stopped and I was still alive. Not entirely stopped, though. You know when you're making popcorn, and it's just pop-pop-pop-pop-pop all over the place, and then it slows down, and you'll hear a couple pops, and then silence, and then a couple more pops? Like that. So I look up a little bit. They're going around checking the bodies on the ground, shooting survivors. I didn't want them to see me move, but I knew I had to take a chance, or they'd get to me and realize I was alive and kill me. I waited until I couldn't see any of them looking in my direction, and then I crawled under one of the bodies beside me. Donald. He lived down the street from me. He used to give me begonias from his garden to take home to my mother.

The whole time I'm trying not to move, but then I see Tom. He's lying right in front of me, and at first I thought he was dead. The whole left side of his face was almost gone. But then I realized he's bleeding, and I remembered that you don't bleed when you're dead. I thought they were going to come around and see him bleeding, and then they'd shoot him again and he'd die without ever even waking up to know he'd been alive. So I pulled him under me.

I stayed there for... I don't know how long. I heard the police walking behind me and I held my breath. I could feel Tom breathing under me, but I guess they couldn't see it, because they moved on. But I could still hear them, and the phasers. And then after a long time, they stop, but I still didn't want to move. I didn't know if there was still someone there, watching. I thought maybe they were going to do something with the bodies, and I was trying to figure out what to do if that happened. But they just left them there.

It was a day, I think. I stayed there for a day. I remember what I was thinking about. I was thinking about what Kodos said. I was replaying it so I wouldn't forget. I knew it was important, and someone needed to remember it. If I can remember those words for the rest of my life, that means there'll *be* a rest of my life.

I don't know what I would've done if Starfleet hadn't shown up, because Tom needed a doctor, but I couldn't go find one because they would've killed me. But then I heard the starship landing. It can't set down on the landing pad, because that's where we were, so it lands a half a mile away. I knew it was a starship, but I still didn't get up. Kodos said I'd been sentenced to death, and I thought maybe the Federation would kill me if they found me. It seems ridiculous, but I could barely think. I was starving, literally.

But then the Starfleet officers show up, and they're looking for survivors, and I keep hearing them shout to their commanding officers. "I found one!" And they're not shooting anyone. So I stand up. And half a dozen of them came running over to me, and there was a doctor examining me, and I kept saying, "No, Tom needs help," but I don't think they understood what I was saying, so I just pushed the doctor over to Tom, and then they realized he was alive.

They asked me what my name was, and I said Jim, but then they asked what my full name was, so I said James Tiberius Kirk. And then they took me to my mother. She was... I'll never forget what she looked like when she saw me.

They gave us food, and then this officer takes me and my mother to a quiet room and says he's sorry, but he needs me to tell him what happened, so I told him. And then he says that they found Kodos and his people. When they realized Starfleet was coming they retreated to the Colony Center, and Kodos set it on fire. They were all dead. And all the people on the shuttle landing pad were dead. There were 4,000 of us, and less than a dozen of us survived. And two more people had died of starvation.

My family went back to Earth after that, and Tom went to Cygnia Major, but he kept in touch. Someone told him what I'd done, I guess. We don't talk about it, any of it, so I don't know. I don't talk about it with anyone. My parents sent me to counselors, obviously, but I couldn't even talk about it with them. You're the first person I've told the story, since the Starfleet officer. That's how I know Tom.

#

The story Jim told Belle had a profound impact on his life, obviously, but the telling of it didn't. It did not exorcise him. It made him feel a little better, on that night, to be with someone who knew what had happened. To share what was in his head, and make it real and finite with the telling. But it was still in his head. It had been since he was 13; it would be all his life.

I'm supposed to be telling you about one person who taught Jim something in every year of his education, and maybe this seems like a cheat. Adrian Kodos didn't teach Jim anything this year.

But of course, Kodos taught Jim something every year. He taught him fear. He taught him rage. Mostly, he taught him ethics, in the most brutal way possible. No trolley problem proposed to Jim by any professor was ever *just* a theoretical problem. He knew what it was to be on the tracks, staring down the trolley. He knew the stakes.

So no, telling Belle his story did not change Jim's life much more than than living the story already had. After he left in the morning, he boxed the events of Tarsus IV back up. Talking about them once had been, perhaps, cathartic. Talking about them regularly would have been hell. Better, Jim thought, to let it fall into the background of his life, to grit his teeth through the nightmares when he had to and think about it as little as possible the rest of the time.

He'll get no judgment from me on that. Let Jim live with it however he could.

But although the telling of Jim's story did not really affect Jim's life, it deeply affected Belle — and through Belle, her daughter.

Jame Finney had found her name.

Command School: Benjamin Finney

Chapter Summary

Jim learns to bluff.

Chapter Notes

Original chapter date: 08/07/2018

Original chapter notes:

And so we reach the end! I had enormous fun writing this fic, even if parts of it are just unreasonably depressing--I feel like I stretched my boundaries with it, and it also *surprised* me, which is also great. I hope you enjoyed reading it just as much.

Now, to sit back and wait for season two of *Discovery* to joss it to smithereens.

EDIT: I can't believe they jossed it in the FIRST EPISODE, you guys.

Two very important things happened in Jim's final year at the Academy. Actually, something like 12 important things happened that year, and we'll get to most of them. But in the life of Jim Kirk, two items in particular stand out.

First, there was the thing with Ben.

Command School was a year-long program split in two parts: For the first half of the year, ensigns took advanced courses in strategy and operations, engineering and medicine, psychology and management; then, for the second half of the year, they boarded a starship and performed regular duties there while shadowing command.

It would be misleading to say that Jim sailed through his coursework only because Jim was never content just to sail; he had to fly. Even in this final, most advanced phase of his formal education, he was always twelve books ahead.

When the second half of the year came around, Jim was rewarded for his extreme dedication with an assignment to the Constitution-class USS *Republic*. It was a prestigious posting, but Jim had another reason to be happy about the assignment: The *Republic* was where Ben served.

Jim arrived on board bearing gifts for Ben, in the form of a handwritten letter from Belle and a baby shoe that Jame had just outgrown. It didn't take them any time at all to resume their friendship, because it had never stopped. They'd called each other frequently during Jim's third and fourth years — Ben had been the person who finally talked Jim into breaking up with Janice Lester — and of course, they'd seen each other a lot during Ben's paternity leave. Jim had been there at Jame's birth, for God's sake. He'd held her at her christening.

But on the *Republic*, where Ben and Jim were more-or-less equals, their friendship reached perhaps its fullest form. You might even go so far as to say that they were the social center of the ship. In fact, let's go ahead and say it: They were the social center of the ship. Ben had been popular at the Academy and he was popular here, and Jim, who was still on somewhat cool terms with his classmates, once again found that he became well-liked the moment he stepped onto a starship.

Together, the two of them were everyone's friend. They were, simply, incredibly fun to be around. They held court in the rec rooms and the mess hall. They couldn't walk a meter down the corridors without being cheerfully greeted by someone. They were everyone's first choice for advice in any conceivable social situation: if you wanted to throw a party, you talked to Ben; if you wanted help with a problem, you talked to Jim.

Then, with only three weeks left on Jim's tour, it happened.

Ben had the swing shift watch in engineering that day. Jim had the night watch. Often when that happened, whichever one of them had the second watch would come by early, bringing the other dinner and playing as many hands of poker as Jim could take. (He still never beat Ben.) But that particular evening, Jim had a date, and Ben didn't begrudge him at all for showing up at 22:00 on the nose.

"You could at least do the woman the courtesy of running a little late," he said, as Jim logged in.

"Ha," Jim said. He was, of course, physically incapable of being late to duty. Ruth had taught him that.

Ben gave Jim a friendly punch on the shoulder and left. Jim began the usual start-of-watch checklist, taking note of each item as the computer read it off: Engine thrusters functioning normally. Coolant flow unimpeded. Atomic pile circuits...

One of the atomic pile circuits was open.

Jim threw himself across the room to close it. How long had the circuit been open? If the atomic pile was exposed to air for more than ten minutes, the it became highly volatile. The whole ship could've blown up. How could Ben possibly not have noticed it was open?

(The answer was that Ben was not particularly great at his job. He wasn't *bad*, but he thought he had all the answers, and didn't see any need to, for instance, have the computer read out the checklist at the end of his watch, as Jim did. He was sure he could remember everything on his own. He couldn't.)

When Jim's watch ended, he spent a very long time composing his log. He didn't want to implicate Ben. For all he knew, there were extenuating circumstances. But facts were facts, and the safety of the ship and crew came first. Jim reported the open circuit and closed out his log.

Ten minutes later, he was called to the captain's ready room.

He entered uncertainly. Jim had spoken to Captain Okoro, taken orders from her on the bridge, even shadowed her on the job a few times, but he'd never been called to her ready room. He'd never done anything that would have merited it.

Okoro didn't look angry. She didn't smile, but she didn't look angry.

"At ease, Ensign."

Jim relaxed, but only because he'd been ordered to.

"Have a seat."

Jim sat.

Okoro leaned forward, hands clasped. "I just received your log."

"Yes, Captain."

"I know you're good friends with Lieutenant Finney."

"Yes, Captain."

Okoro fixed him with a steady stare that Jim had come to associate with all and only starship captains. She leaned even a little further forward. "Are you sure you want to turn in this log, Ensign?"

Jim did not yet have the stare of a starship captain. But he was working on a pretty good one.

"Extremely sure, Captain," he said. Sylvia Tilly had taught him that.

For three more seconds, Okoro studied him. Then she nodded sharply. "Very well, Ensign. Dismissed."

Jim slept badly that morning, imagining what would happen when Ben found out about the log. He didn't have to wonder long. Ben confronted him in the mess hall at lunch.

He didn't do it quietly.

"Jim!"

Ben stormed toward Jim, who quickly stood to meet him.

"Ben..."

But Ben wasn't in the mood for calm reconciliation.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he demanded. "You reported me!"

"I was just—"

"I was up for promotion soon! They moved me to the bottom of the list!"

A drop of doubt bubbled up in Jim's gut. He hadn't thought the consequences would be so severe. "I'm sure you'll make it up soon."

Ben scoffed. "*You'll* be a lieutenant commander before I am!" He paused, his eyes turning nasty. "Maybe that's what you wanted, huh?"

Jim had never seen Ben like this. Belle had mentioned a temper, once or twice, and of course he'd believed her, but he'd never really been able to picture it.

He could picture it now.

Maybe you can't. If you weren't already aware, from the moment that Ben Finney walked into this story, what he was going to become, maybe you feel like this is a very sudden, angry turn. After all, this is the first *you've* heard about Belle mentioning a temper. *You've* never even seen Ben raise his voice.

All I can say is that the signs were there. They were small, they were easy to miss, maybe — Jim certainly missed them — but they were there. Go back and check, if you don't believe me. Ben was good at hiding the sloppy, suspicious, vindictive side of him, but he wasn't perfect.

The signs were there, and now Jim could see what they'd been pointing to.

“Of course not!” Jim said. “Ben, I—”

“How could you do this to me? After everything I’ve done for you! How could you do this to me?”

If a good answer to that question existed, Jim didn’t know it. So he went with a true answer.

“Ben,” he said, “you left the circuit open.”

Ben almost punched him. Jim could see his fist clenching, and more important, he could see it in Ben’s eyes. But although Ben Finney was an angry man, and a sloppy man, he was not a stupid man. Punching Jim would feel good now, but it would certainly worsen his promotion prospects, and might even result in demotion or discharge, if Jim made a fuss. He could wait.

Jim didn’t have the time or the clarity to think of it now, but later, he would remember Ben’s advice to him, on that first day in his office: “Make peace, or make war.”

Ben made war.

But he’d been Jim’s teacher for too long. He couldn’t quit the habit all at once. So before he turned away from him for good, Ben gave Jim one last lesson, disguised — even to himself — as a parting shot.

“You know what your problem is, Jim? You don’t know how to bend.”

#

Jim had quite a bit on his plate, but he made time to visit Belle his first week back on Earth. He called first, which he hadn’t done in years, but he thought it was only fair to give her some warning. Plus, he didn’t think he could handle it if she slammed the door in his face.

She didn’t. Her voice wasn’t happy, but she told him to come over.

Belle opened the door with Jame in her arms. Jame was nearly two years old, a beautiful, talkative child. She reached for Jim as soon as she saw him.

“Want Jim!” she said, in the garbled toddler voice that only parents understand.

Jim looked to Belle, who nodded and handed Jame over to him. He bounced her in his arms while she giggled.

“Hi, Jame,” he said. “I brought you a present.”

Jame couldn’t quite say the word “present” yet, but she knew what it meant. Her eyes got huge. “Give, give!”

“It’s not a toy starship, is it?” Belle asked.

“No, I think she’s got enough of those.”

He pulled the gift out of his pocket. It was a long, bright, almost photo-realistic rosebud made of plastic, deceptively sturdy for how delicate it looked. Holding it in front of Jame so she could see what he was doing, Jim pressed the base of the bud, and the rose bloomed.

Jame gasped and grabbed the rose from his hands. She pressed the base over and over, watching the rose transition from bud to flower and back again.

“What do we say?” Belle said.

“Thank you!” Jame said, her eyes still on the toy.

“She’s learned so many words,” Jim said.

“They do, at this age.”

Belle and Jim looked at each other for a moment, sharing a pause that could only, alas, be described as “pregnant.” Then Belle stepped silently aside to let him in.

They sat at the kitchen table, where Jim had told Belle about Tarsus IV and Belle had cried about Ben, and they didn’t talk. Jim bounced Jame on his knee, and Jame babbled and laughed. After a while, she got bored of the game and wandered to the living room to play, gnawing on her toy rose as she went.

Jim watched her go, then got down to the ugly business.

“I assume Ben told you.”

“He did.” Belle didn’t sound angry, just solemn.

“Belle, I am so sorry.”

“I don’t blame you,” Belle said. “I’m sure you were right.”

It wasn’t a remark meant to placate. Belle really was perfectly sure that Jim was right. She’d heard the version of the story Ben told, and had seen right through the justifications and conspiracy theories to the truth of the matter. Belle and Ben had married young, and at the time she

hadn't known him very well. But she was learning more about her husband every day.

"Still, I know what a promotion would've meant to you and Jame."

"We can live without the promotion." Belle picked some dirt out from under her thumbnail, regretting her decision not to make some coffee before this conversation. It was so much easier to have something to fiddle with. "Jim... I don't think you should come around anymore."

"What?"

"Ben's... He's not in a good place. He thinks you sabotaged him to try to make yourself look better to me. He accused us of having an affair."

Jim didn't have a cup to bang on the table, so he stood up, letting the chair scrape against the floor.

"That's absurd!"

Belle looked at him coolly. She didn't say, "Is it?" She didn't have to.

Jim sat down.

"You know how important you are to me," Belle said. "I want you in my life. But if Ben found out we were seeing each other..."

She didn't have to say that, either. Jim had seen it in Ben's eyes.

Ben never hit Belle. He might have hit Jim, if he had the chance, but he never hit Belle or Jame, so don't worry about that. He just became so controlling and invasive and unpleasant that eventually, Belle breathed a sigh of relief every time he left Earth. Maybe you think that's better.

Jim gazed past Belle, to where Jame was pretending to plant the toy rose in the living room carpet. "What about Jame?"

Belle turned to look at her daughter for a long moment. When she turned back, she was crying.

"I'll send you pictures," she said.

#

The second important thing that happened in Jim's final year happened before he was assigned to the *Republic*, while he was still on Earth, finishing his classes. It didn't happen on Earth, though, and it had very little to do with Jim. What happened was this:

The Klingon Empire declared war on the Federation.

#

Most of the exams that Jim had to take before he graduated were written. A few were traditional psychological assessments, conducted by a counselor. He wasn't worried about either of those, having had a great deal of experience in preparing for both exams and counselors, and indeed, he passed easily.

There was one test, though, that Jim couldn't prepare for. He knew that he would have to complete a command simulation, but ensigns were never told what the simulation was, or what outcome would signify success. There were rumors, of course, but no one really knew what to expect on the *Kobayashi Maru*.

Oh, you've been waiting for that, haven't you?

Forget "on time" — Jim showed up for his appointment with the *Kobayashi Maru* 37 minutes early. The secretary who took his name smirked at him when he arrived.

"I was worried I'd get lost," he said.

He waited his 37 minutes, then 12 more, before the secretary called his name and ushered him into the room where his test was to take place.

It was a small annex, with the far wall constructed almost entirely out of a two-way mirror. Through the mirror, Jim saw what appeared to be a scale replica of the bridge of a Constitution-class starship. The posts were all manned. All but the captain's chair.

Commander Wei stood in front of the mirror.

"Ensign Kirk," she said. "Apologies for the delay. I was on a conference call about... well, it was of vital importance."

"The Klingons, Commander?"

"Yes. But you don't have to worry about that."

Jim didn't have to worry about that *yet*. The war with the Klingons was heating up every day. Three of Jim's classmates had already completed their *Kobayashi Maru* and graduated; they had all been assigned to starships on the frontlines. Over 8,000 people had died on the Federation side; no one knew the number of Klingon casualties. No one but the Klingons, that is.

"If you say so, Commander," Jim said.

Commander Wei nodded. "This is the *Kobayashi Maru*. I'm sure you've heard rumors about it. Forget them. The test consists of a simulation of a life-or-death situation of the kind that you might face, if you ever captain a starship. There is no time limit on the test, and you may take it

as many times as you like. You tell us when you've completed the one you would like us to grade you on."

That got Jim's interest. "You tell us" was not a common phrase in Starfleet. "Will I be docked points for taking it multiple times?"

"Maybe." Commander Wei smiled. Jim got the sense she answered that question a lot, and enjoyed it every time. His sense was not wrong.

"Is there anything else I should know?"

"Not that I can tell you."

"Then let's do this." He took half a step, then froze, remembering himself. "Commander."

"Let's, Ensign."

Jim walked through the door next to the two-way mirror, nodded to the officers manning the posts, and took his seat in the captain's chair. It felt a little bit like wearing his father's suit to a fancy party, but it also felt *right*.

Commander Wei spoke through the intercom. "Captain Kirk, your simulation begins... *now*."

I'm not going to write out the *Kobayashi Maru* for you. You know how it goes: The ship receives a distress call from a civilian vessel, the *Kobayashi Maru*, which has been stranded in enemy territory, and is in imminent danger of destruction. The ensign taking the test must decide whether to attempt a rescue, risking confrontation with the enemy, or abandon the civilian ship to its fate. No matter what they do, there is significant loss of life.

When Kirk took the test, the territory was the Romulan Neutral Zone, and the imminent danger was a black hole pulling the *Kobayashi Maru* into its orbit and interfering with its life support, but that hardly matters. What matters is that he tried to save the ship. But you knew that too.

Jim's first attempt at the test ended with the *Enterprise* destroyed by cloaked Romulan ships he never even saw coming, and the *Kobayashi Maru* sucked into the black hole. He stumbled out of the false bridge in a haze, certain that he had failed.

But all Commander Wei said was, "Well, Ensign?"

Jim wiped a bead of sweat off his forehead. "When can I take it again?"

#

I assume I also don't have to tell you that Jim tried to save the ship the second time, too.

#

It was a nasty August. It wasn't hot — it never really got hot in San Francisco — but an intractable fog lay over the city, chilling it thoroughly, like a blanket in reverse. Every building looked grimy, and Jim never remembered to bring a sweater.

He spent a lot of time wandering the city that August. There wasn't much else for him to do. His third appointment with the *Kobayashi Maru* was weeks away, and he'd already finished every other graduation requirement. All of his classmates were already gone, making their way to the battle lines. Some of them were even in orbit around Earth, preparing to defend it should the worst happen.

In civilian academics, they sometimes call graduate students who have done everything but the grand finale "ABD" — "all but dissertation." Ruth would spend four years of her life ABD while she finished her archaeology PhD.

Jim was ABK. All but *Kobayashi Maru*.

Of course, he could have stopped it at any time. All he had to do was tell Commander Wei that she could use his second test, and he would be graduated. She'd broken down, the last time, and hinted to him that he would pass, if he chose to. The Federation badly needed soldiers.

But that would have been admitting defeat. Before he took the first step on his journey to the captain's chair, Jim needed to know that he could save the *Kobayashi Maru*. He suspected that the tactic he was *supposed* to take was to abandon the ship, but that was out of the question. Jim could not doom those people to death to save himself, not even in theory. It was never just theory. Adrian Kodos had taught him that.

Perhaps — he'd never have known it, let alone admitted it — he was also glad of the delay in his deployment to the frontlines. Jim was no coward, and no deserter, and he knew full well why they were fighting, but he wasn't built for war. It certainly wasn't why he'd signed up for Starfleet. He could have fought, would have if ordered to, but it would have utterly destroyed him.

On a particularly cold evening in mid-August, Jim stepped into a bar on Divisadero. The place was a favorite of Starfleet officers on shore leave, being close enough to the Academy to walk, far enough that most cadets wouldn't get in your way, and loud enough that your commanding officer might not notice if you weren't on your best behavior. Jim didn't particularly want to talk to Starfleet officers, nor did he want a drink, but he'd been walking all afternoon, and he needed somewhere to rest his feet and warm up.

He ordered a beer to be polite and took it to the darkest, most remote corner of the bar, where there was a cramped little table that everyone seemed to have simply forgotten the existence of. He watched the Starfleet officers and a few confused civilians enjoying their night out, remembering with something like fondness the last party he'd watched from a corner, when Tilly and Ruth had had to sober him up. Jim had been to better parties since then, parties he'd actually participated in and enjoyed, but there was a simplicity to the memory that he liked. He'd gone to a party. He'd gotten drunk. That was a thing stupid college kids did. It had felt complicated at the time, but it hadn't been, really.

"You aren't drinking."

Jim looked up, shaken out of his thoughts. The man who had spoken to him was dressed in a Starfleet uniform, a lieutenant's by the look of it.

"Neither are you," Jim said, gesturing to the man's empty hands.

"Vulcans are denied that pleasure," the man said. "May I sit down?"

When the man was seated, Jim could see that his ears and browline were, in fact, Vulcan. Remembering something Ruth had once told him about Vulcans and handshakes, Jim opted instead to hold up his hand in the Vulcan salute. The man returned it.

"Well then," Jim said, "who am I not drinking with?"

"My name is Spock."

"Ensign James Kirk. Jim."

"You haven't answered my question, Ensign Kirk."

Jim grinned. "You never asked one."

Spock's face took on a look of pained annoyance that Jim thought might be the Vulcan equivalent of a laugh. "Why aren't you drinking your beer?"

"I never drink when I'm unhappy," Jim said. "It's too close to drinking *because* I'm unhappy."

"May I ask why you're unhappy?"

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Is listening to strangers' problems in bars fun for you?"

Spock raised an eyebrow back. He was much better at it. "Ensign, I am surrounded by inebriated humans. Listening to the problems of the one sober man seems by far the more interesting option."

Jim laughed, and then, because he liked this Vulcan and because he had driven everyone else he could talk to out of his life, he told Spock about the *Kobayashi Maru*.

"Your conclusion is incorrect," Spock said when he was finished. "You are not supposed to abandon the ship."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"You are not 'supposed' to do anything. There is no possible good outcome. The *Kobayashi Maru* is a test of your ability to deal with failure — the so-called 'no-win scenario.'"

Jim's fist tightened around his full beer bottle. "It's *rigged*?"

"Not rigged, Ensign. Simply not designed to test what you thought it tested."

Not command style. Not ability to think under pressure, or even to plan strategically. *Failure*. Or, to put it another way, acceptance. Starfleet wanted him to accept the senseless deaths of the civilians aboard the *Kobayashi Maru*. Starfleet wanted that.

Did he really care, Jim wondered, what Starfleet wanted?

"The mutineer," Jim said. "Burnham. Do you think she was right?"

Spock thought for a moment, then said, "Her actions didn't produce her desired effect, so I cannot conclude that she was right."

In case you're wondering why Jim would think of Michael Burnham, of all people, at that moment, you should know that everyone in Starfleet was talking about Michael Burnham constantly at that time. Mutineers were big news, and mutineers who got out of jail and served on a starship again? Unheard of. As an example of possibly unethical defiance of Starfleet's wishes, she was an incredibly obvious choice.

If you're wondering why Spock didn't mention that Burnham was his sister, I can't help you. He was a private guy, I guess. For all Jim ever knew — for all I know — he could've had dozens of siblings running around.

"Forget what happened," Jim said. "She wanted to prevent a war. So she mutineered. Is that ethical? Logically?"

"Logic cannot decide ethics." A human might have leaned forward into their speech, but Spock sat back, his eyes drifting toward the ceiling. "Once you have determined what is right and wrong, logic can determine how to achieve the former and avoid the latter. But logic cannot tell you right from wrong. There is no empirical truth to the matter. If there were, we Vulcans would never disagree on a course of action. Each person must decide for themselves what is right, Ensign Kirk."

Jim sat with that for a long time. Spock didn't seem to mind.

"I have to go now," Jim said, at last. "Thank you, Lieutenant Spock."

"Peace and long life, Ensign Kirk."

Jim didn't need his ex-girlfriend to tell him how to respond to that one. "Live long and prosper."

It was very late when Jim left the bar. He walked back along Divisadero, seeing San Francisco through Belle's eyes: Lovely, and full of

infinite potential. He passed through the Academy gates, and saw the campus through Ruth's eyes: Oppressive, and horribly limiting.

Jim sat down on the bench under the elm tree by the parade grounds and closed his own eyes.

Starfleet was an imperfect organization. Jim loved it, he did, and he loved its ideals, but it could not, or would not, always live up to those ideals. Starfleet would not save him. Marcus Finnegan had taught him that.

You know what your problem is, Jim? You don't know how to bend. Jim had given up a lot for Starfleet, or more precisely, for its principles. He'd endured months of Finnegan's torment; he'd lost Tilly's respect; he'd said goodbye to Ruth; he'd destroyed his friendship with Ben; he'd given up Belle and Jame. In return, Starfleet had asked him, over and over again, to bend. Deal with Finnegan yourself, Jim. Overlook Hank's plagiarism, or we'll destroy his career. Are you sure you want to turn in this log?

And now, a final request: Condemn the *Kobayashi Maru* to its fate. *Accept it.*

No.

The rage that Jim had been suppressing, with greater or lesser success, for nearly a decade was suddenly, shockingly accessible, and it had a single target: Starfleet.

How dare they? How dare they ask him to do that? It was possible, Jim thought, that there was such a thing as a no-win scenario. But he would not be forced into one by an organization that so often didn't even *look* for another option. He would not go off and fight a war for them. He would not be that person.

You don't know how to bend, James Kirk.

Jim bent.

#

The secretary was used to Jim showing up early, although he was a little surprised when Jim showed up *three hours* early for his third and final appointment with the *Kobayashi Maru*. That was okay, though. Jim was fine with waiting. In fact, he waited right through the secretary's lunch hour.

When the secretary left, Jim casually walked through the door into the testing annex. There was no one inside. The *Kobayashi Maru* was not a state secret. There were no guards or complicated locks protecting it.

The computer that controlled the simulation was in plain view along the left side wall. Jim stuck a drive into it, uploaded a program he'd created in advance, and wrote a few lines of code to integrate it into the existing simulation. That was it. He was back in the waiting room before the secretary had decided what to order at the cafe.

When two o'clock rolled around, the secretary sent him into the annex. Commander Wei was waiting for him. She looked him up and down for nerves, but Jim was not in the least bit nervous. Some things are just too outrageous to be anxious about.

"You know the deal, Ensign," she said.

"I do, Commander."

Wei sighed. "Then let's get started."

Jim walked into the mock bridge and took the captain's seat. It felt more right than ever.

"Captain, we're getting a distress call from the *Kobayashi Maru*," the communications officer said.

Jim ordered the ship into the Neutral Zone. The navigator waited until she was turned away to roll her eyes.

"Captain, two Romulan ships approaching."

Jim told the communications officer to hail them.

"They're not—" The communications officer did a double-take. The Romulans *were* accepting the hail. He'd never seen that happen. It wasn't supposed to be able to happen.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

The communications officer glanced helplessly at the other bridge crew. They shrugged.

"Uh, Romulan ships responding. Captain."

"Play message."

"Federation Starship," the message said, "you are encroaching in the Neutral Zone. Leave, or you will be destroyed."

"This is a rescue mission," Jim said. "I repeat, this is a rescue mission, *not* an offensive one. A civilian ship has gone off course, accidentally, into the Neutral Zone, and is now being destroyed by a black hole. Our only aim is to rescue the ship. Then we'll be out of your hair."

"How are we to believe you?" came the response. "If we let you live, you could go anywhere. You could cross into Romulan territory."

“Come with us. Accompany us to the civilian ship, and then escort us out of the Neutral Zone. If we put a toe out of line, you can blow us out of the sky.”

There was a pause. Jim didn't need to put a pause there — it wasn't like any of this *mattered* — but the man had a dramatic streak. You love that about him, don't you?

Anyway, if this was the last time Jim was ever going to sit in a captain's chair, he was going to do it *right*.

“Your offer is acceptable,” the Romulan said. “We will destroy you, if you misstep.”

Of course, Jim didn't misstep. He directed the *Enterprise* to the location of the *Kobayashi Maru*, aided by an extremely confused bridge crew and tailed by two imaginary Romulan ships, rescued the civilian vessel, and guided everyone safely out of the Neutral Zone.

When the simulation powered down at last, Jim walked out of the mock bridge and was confronted by a very displeased Commander Wei.

“There, Commander,” he said. “You can use that one.”

Like I said. Dramatic streak.

#

For two weeks, Jim was in limbo. He was not promoted. Nor was he discharged, though he was constantly sure that he was about to be. Nobody quite knew what to do with him.

You see, *technically*, reprogramming the simulation had not been cheating, in a “there's no rule that says dogs can't play basketball” kind of way. (If you think *Air Bud* didn't survive into the 23rd century, I don't want to know you.) The official rules for the *Kobayashi Maru* were that the ensign took the test as many times as they wanted, and when they stopped, they were evaluated based on how they had handled the no-win scenario. There was nothing that said they couldn't handle it by, well, winning.

Among the people who were deciding Jim's fate were a certain number who liked his ingenuity. At another time, those people would probably have carried the day, because no one wanted to discharge an ensign who had completed five years of demanding schooling and was ready to begin contributing to Starfleet. But this was wartime. And in war, there was no room for insubordination. Definitely no room for mercy.

So for two weeks, they put off the decision. It wasn't hard. There were 20 more important things to worry about every hour. And then the war ended, so abruptly it left their legs spinning in the empty air of all the free time they suddenly had to make decisions.

In the new peace, Jim's insubordination seemed more charming than dangerous. They were rewarding mutineers now, for God's sake. They could promote someone who didn't technically break any rules. Jim passed, with a commendation for original thinking to smooth things over, and Starfleet added a line about not reprogramming the simulation to the official instructions for the *Kobayashi Maru*.

Jim received his commission a week later in Paris, at the office of the President. It was all very official and exciting, but what matters most about that trip is that he ran into Tilly in the hall, just after her promotion and just before his.

They both stopped short when they saw each other.

“Ensign,” Tilly said.

“Ensign,” Jim said.

Tilly laughed, and like that, the tension was gone. Their issues were too small, and too long past, to matter. They had both lived through far more important decisions than the one that had divided them.

“I hear you're a cheater,” Tilly said cheerfully.

“I hear you ended a war,” Jim said. “Using the iterated prisoner's dilemma, I'm sure.”

“You know what? Kind of. Although it's sort of a misstatement to say that *I* ended the war. I mean, I helped, I was there, but I didn't just go in alone and say, ‘Hey, tit-for-tat with forgiveness, guys,’ you know, I mostly carried a suitcase.”

Jim laughed. “You haven't changed at all.”

“I think I've changed. *You* haven't changed.”

“I've definitely changed. I cheated!”

“I guess we've both changed,” Tilly said, thoughtfully.

Yes. They both had.

“I should say thank you,” Jim said. “Thank you.”

Tilly blushed. “I told you, it wasn't just—”

“Tilly. If the war hadn't ended, I wouldn't be here. I would be packing my bags for San Diego, trying to figure out what to do with 95 percent of a Command School degree. Or I'd be off killing Klingons somewhere. Either way, I wouldn't be... I wouldn't be *me*, in any way I recognize. So can you please let me say thank you?”

The pleased, reluctant smile that forced its way onto Tilly's face was pretty endearing.

"You're welcome."

"Now, if you don't mind," Jim said, pointing to a heavy wooden door a few meters ahead, "I have to go through there and get promoted, now."

He was almost to the door when Tilly spoke again. "It's not fair. The next time I see you, I'll have to call you Lieutenant, and you'll still get to call me Ensign."

Jim smiled. "Oh, I'm sure you'll take care of that in no time."

She did, too. Tilly and Jim spent their entire careers greeting each other by the same rank, all the way up to "Captain," "Captain." And laughing every time.

But that was years away. Right now, in this moment, Jim — still an ensign, for another ten minutes — waved, turned around, and walked through the door to graduate.

#

You know by now that I've seen these people's futures, and after all the time we've spent with them, it only seems fair that I tell you what I know.

Marcus Finnegan graduated without honors, and was assigned to the *Glenn*, where he worked in engineering. Luckily for him, he had personality clashes with several of his crewmates, and was soon transferred to the *Antares*, and from there to the *Defiant*, and finally to the *Polaris*. Every ship he served on was destroyed shortly after he left. His attitude ensured that he never advanced far through the ranks, but it did save his life several times over.

Ruth Falkner became a highly respected archaeologist, and was responsible for several breakthroughs in the understanding of women's role in early Andorian politics. Jim did not turn her off men, but it might be argued that he turned her off humans. She was married twice: Once to a Vulcan man she met in graduate school, and then to an Andorian woman, Elis, whom she met on an expedition. She and Elis had two children, and co-wrote 17 academic papers.

Adrian Kodos left his ID on the burned body of one of his followers and sneaked off of Tarsus IV in the cargo hold of a relief ship. He changed his name to Anton Karidian, founded a theater company, and had a child with one of the actresses. The actress left him shortly after Lenore was born. When Lenore was nine, she found a box backstage containing a dried flower — the first to bloom on Tarsus IV, though she never knew that — inside a leather-bound diary. She thought they were props at first. Then she read the diary, and the knowledge changed her.

Sylvia Tilly, well, your guess is as good as mine what her future holds. I've already told you the only thing I know for certain: She sure as hell becomes a starship captain.

Ben and Belle Finney divorced, right around the time that Jim was first assigned to the *Enterprise*. Belle remained in San Francisco, and eventually became a professor at UCSF, where she once collaborated with Dr. Thomas Leighton in his attempts to create synthetic food. (She never told him she knew who he was.) As promised, she sent pictures of Jame to Jim every year. Jim would not see Jame again in person until a decade later, when she came to the *Enterprise* to visit her father, and Jim bumped into the two of them in the corridor. As far as Jame knew, she was meeting Captain Kirk for the first time.

As for the captain himself? The war came for James T. Kirk in the end. But between then and the doorway in Paris, there were decades of peace, more or less. Decades of exploration, of friendships, of difficult decisions made the best way he knew how.

It was worth it. It had to be.

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