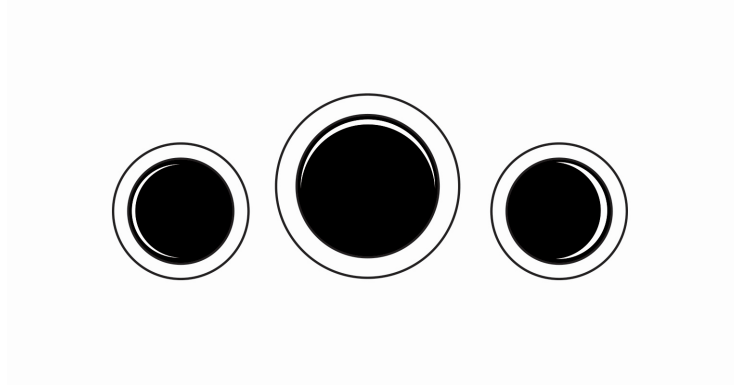


The Gold Archive #2
THROUGH THE VALLEY OF
SHADOWS



By Alasdair Stuart

THE GOLD ARCHIVE

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OVERVIEW

Episode Title: *Through The Valley Of Shadows*

Writer: Bo Yeon Kim and Erika Lippoldt

Director: Doug Aarniokoski

Original Transmission Date: 4 April 2019

Stardate: 1048.66

Running Time: 50m

Regular Cast: Anson Mount (Captain Christopher Pike), Sonequa Martin-Green (Michael Burnham), Doug Jones (Saru), Anthony Rapp (Paul Stamets), Wilson Cruz (Hugh Culber), Shazad Latif (Ash Tyler)

Guest Cast: Mia Kirshner (Amanda Grayson), Mary Chieffo (L'Rell), Ethan Peck (Spock), Tig Notaro (Jett Reno), Kenneth Mitchell (Tenavik), Rachael Ancheril (Nhan)

Uncredited Cast: Sonja Sohn (Gabrielle Burnham)

Antagonist: Control, Section 31.

Responses:

‘Things are heating up on *Discovery* now, and this episode once again successfully used **Trek**’s past to prime us for the future.’

[Scott Collura, *IGN Africa*, 6 April 2019]

‘This week’s plots prove interesting, even if Pike’s quest to get a time crystal consists mainly of fan service.’

[DeLuzio, JD, *Bureau 42*, 6 April 2019]

SYNOPSIS

A new red burst signal appears over the Klingon planet Boreth, a world sacred to Klingons on account of a monastery on its surface dedicated to **Kahless**, where Klingon monks guard 'time crystals', one of which was used to power the **Red Angel** suit. It is also the home of the son who **Tyler** and **L'Rell** have hidden away from Klingon society at large.

While Pike visits the monastery to retrieve a new crystal for the suit, **Saru**, in temporary command of *Discovery*, gives **Burnham** and **Spock** permission to investigate a mysterious Section 31 ship which failed to check at its allotted time. They find all of the crew of the ship dead bar one, **Kamran Gant**, an old colleague of Burnham. Although they initially believe his tale of his survival, it quickly becomes clear that he has been possessed by **Control**. He attempts to kill Spock and transfer Control into Burnham's body, but Spock stops Control with the ship's built in magnetism, and they escape and return to *Discovery*.

At the monastery Pike discovers that, due to the unusual nature of time there, **Tenavik**, Tyler and L'Rell's son, is now a fully grown adult. Tenavik explains that there is a price to taking a crystal - if Pike takes one, he will not be able to change the future it shows him. Pike proceeds, nonetheless, and sees a future where he is severely disabled in an accident on board a starship. He returns to *Discovery* with the crystal.

The Section 31 fleet arrives, and Pike is left with no choice but to order *Discovery* be destroyed in order to keep the **Sphere** data away from Control.

Chapter 1: The Prism and the Flight Plan

At the core of *Through the Valley of Shadows* is the search for a time crystal to power the Red Angel suit. In plot terms, this is so Michael Burnham can lead the *Discovery* into the future away from Control and save all sentient life in the galaxy. In structural terms, it's a little more unusual. Because the Time Crystal is the endgame for **Star Trek: Discovery's** second season, or at the very least opens the door to that endgame. Without it there can be no escape, albeit in wildly different forms, for either Burnham's crew or Pike. With it, the plots and themes of the episode and season are refracted both forwards in time and backwards, showing us how everyone and everything came to this point. That's reflected in the title of the episode and what it evokes.

Let's start with the most well-known version of this phrase which is, of course:

'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou [art] with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.'¹

From the King James Bible, this line is one which has an unusually Starfleet-esque combination of compassion and pragmatism. The message is simple: you're going to be tested like you never thought possible. But you will never be alone through that testing. You will prevail. It's comforting and a little frightening. Rather like Captain Pike's 'This is Starfleet. Get it DONE'² from the season finale. Or perhaps more pertinently to him, his speech from earlier in the season:

"Starfleet... is a promise. I give my life for you; you give your life for me. And nobody gets left behind. Ensign Sylvia Tilly is out there, and she has every right to expect us. We keep our promises.'³

This speech, like the time crystal, resonates up and down the season and we'll be revisiting it more than once.

¹ *King James Bible*, Psalm 23, Verse 4, 1611.

² **Discovery**: *Such Sweet Sorrow Part 2* (2019).

³ **Discovery**: *Saints of Imperfection* (2019).

Then there's the small matter of Coolio, which is no small matter at all. Artist Leon Ivey Jr, aka Coolio, is best known for the track 'Gangsta's Paradise', released in 1995. The song is not only an acknowledged classic of the gangster rap genre, but builds a version of that first line so compelling it's difficult not to instinctively quote it:

'As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I take a look at my life, and realize there's nothin' left.'⁴

That combination of searing self-awareness and fatalism is, whether anyone ever wants to admit it, baked deep into Starfleet's DNA as an organisation. Duty, honour, compassion, curiosity and love are all there, but there's also the same sort of clear-eyed, straight-ahead view of death that everyone from first responders to the military to gangsta rappers to ships full of enthusiastic and only slightly militarised science nerds share. Because the thing about the final frontier is, to quote the best villain one timeline ever had, eventually it pushes back⁵.

So, that's the expectation when we see this phrase; that no one escapes the valley of shadows unscathed or without a price being paid for that freedom. Yet, as we see, the actual nature of the quote puts, if not the lie, then certainly a different context to that belief. Not to mention the fact that the 'valley of shadows' and 'the valley of the shadow of death' are very different places.

You Can't Go Home Again

Burnham's path through the episode is one of the most interesting. She spends the entire episode with her adoptive brother, Spock. In addition to continuing to smooth out their relationship, this also allows the pair of them to re-visit the organisation that has betrayed them both: Starfleet. Whether Section 31 is actively an adjunct of Starfleet or its own organisation is at this point unclear and, I'd argue, irrelevant. By contrast, their objectives could not be in sharper focus. For Spock, this is a relatively simple, if pleasingly tense, action episode, as he and Michael get to meet Control face to face. Looking deeper, this is also the episode where Spock gets shown the consequences of Starfleet unfettered and that, arguably, starts him down the road towards his charmingly individualistic view of regulations. We'll see later how Pike's experiences, and Spock's time as Pike's friend and colleague, further foster that quiet, eyebrow-raised sense of enlightened mischief.

All of which is heady and complex and, if anything, dwarfed by the luggage Michael hauls onto the shuttle she and her brother ride out to the B plot. For a start, she has to sell the expedition far less than she expected. Acting Captain Saru, the first of his people to come out the other side of the *vahar'ai* process⁶ that we know of, has evolved a viewpoint that balances his previous genetically conditioned caution with a direct, pragmatic command style. That means he has no issue authorising his friend and colleague to go into danger. In a sense, Saru is already exploring his personal valley of shadows and finding himself rather comfortable there.. In other words, Saru is exploring his own personal valley of shadows and enabling Michael to do the same thing.

Then, as previously stated, there's the fact she takes Spock with her. So much of season 2, especially through the lens (or prism) of this episode is about putting away the past and the show's relationship with it. Michael the renegade human sister has been replaced by Michael the experienced Starfleet officer; the rivalry with her brother has been replaced by a friendship of equals. This is new ground, and Michael and Spock are both boldly going, and clearly relishing having someone who knows them so well to spar with.

All of which sets Michael up for a sobering confrontation with the two constants in her life: Starfleet and her time aboard the *Shenzhou*. The former has always been the rock Michael has put her back against, the

⁴ Coolio, 'Gangsta's Paradise', 1995 (re-released 2011).

⁵ Krall, played by Idris Elba from *Star Trek Beyond* (2016).

⁶ **Discovery**: *The Sounds of Thunder* (2019).

foundation of both her excellence and her penance, as well as the foundation for much of the fan criticism of the character. However, in this episode and season specifically, Starfleet functions for Michael Burnham in much the same way as it does for Christopher Pike – as a moral compass. She is able to do what she does because she trusts her training to help her find the right, moral choice. With Captain Lorca, that was always a negotiation, with Pike usually a benevolent conspiracy of altruists, as they worked out how to stay inside the rules but help as many people as they could. With Saru, it's almost a sibling relationship. Both have world views formed by their time serving with Captain Georgiou, both are pleasantly surprised to find themselves on the same page and both are desperate to help. In fact that's pretty much her mission statement; Michael Burnham, Starfleet officer, here to help.

Section 31 challenges her view to its very core, but as earlier moments in the season (the rescue of Tilly⁷, the redemption open to Ash Tyler⁸) show her, the organisation has its place. However, even that moral reconfiguring is stopped when she and Spock discover the crew of the Section 31 vessel they were investigating, jettisoned into space and dead. This is the first strike against Burnham's view of Starfleet: that much like the Klingons, an unknown force has swept down out of space and casually ended hundreds of her colleagues' lives. This time she can't blame herself for it, but the effect is much the same.

Then they meet Kamran Gant. Kamran is a literal ghost from the past, a fellow *Shenzhou* officer who served with Michael and Saru. In short order, we discover he transferred to Section 31 and that Control murdered the crew by opening the airlocks. Initially, Gant claims he survived because he was able to get into an EVA suit before he lost consciousness, and Michael, faced with an old colleague who is eager to help, takes both at face value. Her past, her golden time aboard the *Shenzhou*, is secure and so is her view of Starfleet. They even chat about how he ended up there, and Gant talks, with frank honesty, about the doubts that led him to Section 31. Given Michael has inadvertently started a war⁹, discovered her mirror universe self¹⁰, fought an evil commanding officer¹¹ and discovered her past is intimately tied to the future¹², at this point she can't help but relate. Gant is a compatriot, someone who felt the same way she did. The isolation of excellence recedes and you see her relax.

That makes the fact Gant is a vessel for Control more disturbing. The entire thing has been a set up for Michael, and she and Spock barely escape with their lives.

Burnham and the crew being constantly on the back foot is a major theme of season 2, and this sequence is a great example of the tension it generates, as both she and Spock come within seconds of horrifying, personality-annihilating living death. But in vintage Starfleet style, the pair find two crumbs of strategic information in amongst the horror: magnetising the floor slows down the Control nanites, and Control needs Michael. It's not much, but that, at least, is something they can use.

Burnham and Spock spend most of the episode with Gant, in the literal shadow of their enemy, and almost fail to escape from it. It's worth noting the symbolism too of Gant being rendered into iron filings, or a shadow-like stream of amorphous malevolent matter. When you try to escape the valley of shadows, you have to fight your way out.

⁷ *Saints of Imperfection*.

⁸ Arguably this is the C plot of the season, with Tyler/Voq being brought in from the cold by Section 31 in much the same way Cold War espionage assets would be.

⁹ **Discovery**: *The Vulcan Hello* (2018).

¹⁰ **Discovery**: *Despite Yourself* (2018).

¹¹ **Discovery**: *What's Past is Prologue* (2018).

¹² **Discovery**: *The Red Angel* (2019).

Except When You Can

The same can be said of the episode's elegantly sketched-in C plot. By this point in the show, Doctor Hugh Culber has been briefly dead and reconstructed by the mycelial network through which *Discovery* travels. He is, understandably, disturbed on a cellular level by this, and ends his relationship with spore drive engineer Paul Stamets.

At the time, this seemed to be the show veering into the very worst elements of the Bury Your Gays trope. To be clear, this is a narrative technique identified by website TV Tropes as one of the laziest drama enhancements in the toolbox: if in doubt, kill your gay characters – and that's exactly what **Discovery** did. At least for a while. This caused understandable, persistent, and vast ructions in fandom as, yet again, it seemed gay characters were being sacrificed for cheap drama, something which happened a frankly astonishing 27 times in 2016, shortly before **Discovery** itself launched¹³. This is where Anthony Rapp and Wilson Cruz really took the hit, as both knew how the plot would develop and spent the layoff between seasons, Cruz especially, holding the line. Both are prominent gay men in their fields, both are painfully aware of how LGBTQ+ characters are so often treated, and both were insistent the story wasn't over. It wasn't, and isn't, and the show has continued to do its most interesting work with the pair, but it also asked a lot of both cast members. Culber and Stamets are essentially the moral centre of the show; a familial unit, later joined by an adoptive child, who fit into the future world of the third season arguably better and faster than anyone else.

But here, both are very much in the Valley of Shadows, and neither has any idea of the way out. Culber is mechanically conducting his job, Stamets is burying himself in his work and the only thing that connects them is the blinding light of compassion, annoyance and impatience that is embodied in the hang nail of Chief Engineer Jet Reno. Like the blazing torch of an unusually annoyed and magnificently gay Lady Liberty, Reno's hangnail illuminates the way into the valley of shadow Hugh has shut himself in and politely, but firmly, informs him it's time to get the hell out.

This scene is interesting, and very funny, because of the way it explores the commonalities of the characters, and yet exposes them both in utterly different ways. Tig Notaro's Reno is a strong contender for Most Valued Player of **Discovery**, an amiable force of chaos who sometimes seems to have just wandered on set mid-filming and everyone else is just running with it. This scene though puts the lie to that, however, as we see her do three things in short order: complain (it is Reno, after all), bond with Hugh over their fussy partners, and then do something she has never done before or since – show a moment of real honesty and weakness. The conversation about how fussy their partners are turns on a dime as Hugh asks her where her wife is and Reno replies, 'She passed. In the Klingon War.'

The Klingon War is what *Discovery* spent much of the previous season fighting. Not only has it been over for, at most, a year or so, but this quiet admission also tells us that Reno, who we meet for the first time this season, wasn't just one of the only people to escape from the USS *Hiawatha*. She was also marooned, for months, with no apparent hope of rescue, in the home she'd made with her wife. And, presumably, had to bury her.

If you must Bury Your Gays, and in almost every case you must not, this is the sort of weight it needs to have attached to it. Conversely, this is Reno's own private valley of shadows; living inside her work instead of inside her life because it's easier. And more fun. This way she gets to mess with Stamets.

Just as we see who Reno truly is through this exchange, we also get a sense of who Culber has convinced himself he is: a different man. The sheer science-fictional body shock of remembering being murdered and then waking up in a new body is one of the few beats that **Discovery** underplays, and Culber's need to get

¹³ Thom Geier, '#BuryYourGays: 27 LGBT TV Characters Killed Off in 2016, From 'Empire' to 'Game of Thrones'.

away from anything that reminds him of his actual **murder** is entirely understandable.

But Reno's all alone in the shadows, while Culber doesn't have to be. In that moment of absolute honesty, and courage, Reno does the exact thing that Starfleet always does and Pike puts so well¹⁴: no one gets left behind. She starts Culber down the road back to his husband and to the familial unit of season 3. No one goes through the valley alone. Even the people who think they are.

In this way, we see how the Red Angel mystery, and specifically the need for a time crystal, reflects and refracts every element of the title, and the characters, and the choices that they made to get here. As we'll see later, this meta-fictional superstructure, a concept that readers of my previous Black Archive¹⁵ will be familiar with, runs under the surface of the **Star Trek** franchise as a whole, all the way from *The Cage* (1965) to the future *Discovery* flees to.

All of this brings us to Christopher Pike. But to understand him, we need to talk about Neil Armstrong.

Near Misses

On 6 May 1968, Neil Armstrong, the first man on the Moon, almost died. Training for the Apollo flights was exhaustive and exhausting, and the ethos established then continues to this day, with NASA training astronauts in null gravity swimming pools to simulate zero-g and countless hours of simulations. But simulations can only get you so far, and so anyone who was going to the Moon, has to train to land on the Moon, while still on Earth.

The solution to this problem was the Lunar Landing Research Vehicle, a device which looked halfway between a Harrier jump jet stripped naked and an exploding mattress. Astronauts would train on this to get used to the daunting three-dimensional navigation and piloting they'd need when riding the Lunar Excursion Module to the surface. It was a complex, ornery beast for a complex, ornery job. And on Armstrong's flight that day in Houston, it was also dangerous. A propellant leak meant that, 30 feet above the ground, Armstrong lost all control. As the vehicle fell, he had two choices: try to save it or bail out. He bailed and history remembers that as the right choice and him as something very different to a NASA casualty statistic¹⁶.

What's especially impressive, and chilling, is this was Armstrong's third brush with death.

During his time as an X-15 test pilot he picked up the record for fastest, longest flight thanks to miscalculating an angle and 'bouncing' the X-15 off the atmosphere. Barrelling along at '10 football fields a second', Armstrong was heading for Los Angeles before ground control pointed out his error. With no fuel, and no propulsion bar kinetic energy he ran through all his possible landing options and realised there was only one: a return to Edwards Air Force Base where he had launched from. The dry mud of the riverbeds at the base was perfect for the X-15's metal skids, in the exact way a runway would not be. Armstrong made it too, although his chase plane pilots reported he was flying so low in the final seconds he was level with the trees at the edge of the base.

Even outside the atmosphere, Armstrong's job tried very hard to kill him. As well as the fact *Apollo 11* landed with almost no descent fuel left, Armstrong was part of one of the first near disasters in orbit¹⁷. As Command Pilot of *Gemini VIII*, he and colleague David Scott were responsible for the first docking of two spacecraft in orbit. This was a vital process to perfect if *Apollo* was going to be viable. The complex elements of the mission

¹⁴ *Saints of Imperfection*.

¹⁵ Stuart, Alasdair, **Black Archive** #50: *The Day of the Doctor* (2020).

¹⁶ Ronald D Moore's **For All Mankind** (2018-), references and revisits this issue to tragic effect in its season 2 episode *Nixon's Women* (2019).

¹⁷ Granath, Bob, 'Gemini's First Docking Turns to Wild Ride in Orbit'.

all went very well, until a short-circuit in a thruster on one of the vehicles caused it to fire constantly. This put the entire 'stack' of orbital hardware into a bank and led to Armstrong and Scott undocking from their target vehicle to try to regain control. Instead, the spin accelerated until one full revolution was taking place a second and the astronauts were on the verge of blacking out. Armstrong ultimately saved them by turning off the thrusters altogether and using the Reaction Control System (smaller thrusters designed for precision work) to stop the spin.

After the LLRV crash, Armstrong finished his day at the office and went home. After the X-15 incident, Armstrong was recruited into the Astronautics Corps. After the *Gemini VIII* incident, he would be made commander of the first mission to land on the Moon. In each case, the outcome was only successful, he only lived, due to the quick thinking, point of clarity approach and willingness to put themselves in harm's way that defines good test pilots.

Armstrong's brushes with death are a stark reminder of just how terrifying working as a test pilot was. Even the most famous test pilot of them all, Chuck Yeager, wasn't immune. A controversy lightning rod in the history of crewed spaceflight, Yeager attempted to break an altitude record set by the Russians in 1963¹⁸. It did not go well and is memorably, and horrifyingly, depicted in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*¹⁹. The poster for the movie even features actor and playwright Sam Shepard, staggering away from the blazing remains of his plane, parachute behind him and shattered helmet under one arm, his face a mask of blood²⁰. Absolutely none of this was an exaggeration. Yeager's extraordinary courage, extraordinary idiocy and extraordinary injuries are all exactly as presented. As was his methodical, dogmatic return to work.

The test pilot mindset of 'push the envelope, try extremely hard not to die, repeat' is alive and well in Christopher Pike, and you can see it slowly be absorbed into the DNA of Starfleet across the various shows and eras. The not-quite NASA jumpsuits of **Enterprise** still hark back to the test pilot era. Kirk's two-fisted machismo is the exact sort of thing Yeager would nod approvingly at, while by Picard's era, Starfleet has become a more Utopian, even urbane organisation. One that, as **Deep Space Nine** and **Voyager** show, has far less of an issue with putting people of colour or women in positions of command, thus removing it as far from Yeager's time as possible. Finally, by the 32nd century of Admiral Vance's time, Starfleet has become less an envelope-pushing military science organisation, and more an FTL Pony Express. Given his western upbringing, deep seated altruism and love of horses, Pike would have fitted right in.

But Pike has other qualities which he imprints on those under his command and his compatriots alike, all of which are thrown to the fore by his time on *Discovery*, both show and ship. Test pilots were, and are, by definition, military officers first and scientists second. The first gets them to 'the show', as it were, and the second gets them the ability to change it. This is one of the reasons why in *Brother*, the season 2 opener, Pike's cheerful honesty about his F grade is so refreshing Pike's profession brings with it an expectation of arrogance and machismo, yet the first thing he does is show the clearly traumatised command crew of his new vessel where he failed. It's a moment where he recognises the *Discovery* crew are all brilliant, flawed people and gently, and kindly, shows them that he's just the same.

Pike's confidence in his skills is absolute; his willingness to protect others, doubly so. But what truly makes this episode fascinating is the way it plays on two of his darker qualities and shows how, in a way, they are either assets to his work or, at the very least, propellant.

The most obvious is his survivor's guilt. Again we'll discuss this in more detail later, but Pike is furious at missing

¹⁸ Paniagua, Ed, 'When Angels Fall from Heaven: Chuck Yeager Shoots for the Stars'.

¹⁹ Wolfe, Tom, *The Right Stuff* (1979).

²⁰ *The Right Stuff*.

the Klingon War. Not because he wanted glory but because he wanted to **help**. More interesting still, that need borders on the desperate and, again and again across season 2, we see Pike think clearly until someone else is in trouble. The discovery of the *USS Hiawatha* in *Brother* is one of the best early examples of this; Pike is so intent on rescuing survivors that Burnham needs to simultaneously reassure him and steer him back to the challenges of the situation.

In this episode, that same need manifests when he volunteers to go to Boreth to retrieve the crystal. He does this superficially to save Ash and L'Rell the pain and danger of their son's existence being exposed, and that's clearly a major reason for his decision. But it's not the only one. Fundamentally, he sees a chance to do something while everyone else is doing science. Remember the F grade.

Pike is a man of action in every sense, and here he sees a chance to push the envelope. Those old test pilot instincts, the desire to poke the bear, raise their head once again. The word is no. He is therefore going anyway. It's a trait that he shares with his successor in the captain's chair and that may, as we'll see, be crucial to his decision to accept the future he's shown.

Speaking of that future, you could almost argue the time crystal has an agenda in what it shows Pike. The events that form the backstory to his present-day appearance in *The Menagerie* (1966) are replayed here in a series of headline images uniquely designed to be the sort of thing Pike focuses on. Saving children from a reactor leak, the officer in full dress uniform going down with the ship. The horribly burned remainder of a man, trapped forever inside himself.

Now, if you're breaking out in hives at the horrific ableism of this then, well, yes you should be. Machismo is a justifiably dirty word these days, and the way the sixties' show all but says 'He may as well be dead!' when Pike's fate is revealed leaves a nasty aftertaste 50 years later. We'll see how that's recontextualised here and talk about the reasoning behind the decision later on. We'll also talk about what the time crystal does **not** show Pike and what that might mean, as well as his possible reasons for accepting his fate.

Ultimately, it boils down to Pike wanted to be tested some way because he knows that's how envelopes get pushed, and he knows he's very good at it. That leads to a very intriguing read of his decisions which we'll get to later on. But, fundamentally, Chris Pike really is looking for a mission, and for his sins, he receives one. One that continues his chaotic, post-modernist flight plan in and out of **Star Trek**, each time with a different face but each time, as we'll see, edging ever closer to that complex, stark future.

Pike's flight plan shows us everything from the cost of duty to the blueprint a thousand Starfleet officers will follow. The crystal shows us how every event prior to that moment has led to this one. This episode not only resolves Pike and resets his course, but also explores how he's become connective tissue between every era of **Star Trek**. This is where the two metaphors collide, the crystal reflecting and refracting every single element of Pike's deeply eccentric flight path in and out of the franchise's established timeline. A flight path that, with its exploration of the events on Telos IV, *Discovery* at times mimics.

But to go further, we're going to need to talk about *The Cage*, *The Menagerie* and what both reveal about Pike's ideas as a captain and an officer. In other words, to understand his future, we need to return to his past, and his initial ending. All of them reflected through the prism of the Boreth time crystal.