

Not Alone

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Not Alone

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Summary

Joseph M'Benga, Chris Pike, and thoughts of Rukiya. Episode codas for Ghosts of Illyria and The Elysian Kingdom.

Notes

Cross-posted from AO3!

Chris isn't in uniform when he walks into his office, just a heather grey sweater that says he's Chris, not Captain Pike, as blurred as any distinction between the two was.

He's sure he could handle Captain Pike. He's not so sure about Chris.

"Number One told me about the buffer," he says. "About - Rukiya."

"I assumed she'd give you her report." His voice is flat.

Chris pulls up another chair, sits down across from him. "I thought she was in treatment on -"

He shakes his head. "They couldn't help. I told people she was still there so they... wouldn't worry. So you wouldn't worry."

"Joe," Chris reaches across the table, puts a hand on his arm. "You know you could have told me the truth. I would have helped."

"Number One told me about setting up the dedicated power supply," he says. "I suppose if I hadn't kept it from you, that could have been set up before, and I would never have put the crew in danger -"

"I'm not - I *know* you would never endanger the crew intentionally. I'm not worried about that. I'm just glad everyone is safe."

"Of course."

"I just - I'm trying to understand why you felt you couldn't tell me."

He shakes his head. "It's certainly not regulation, what I was doing."

"Come on, Joe, you know I wouldn't let that stop me from helping a -"

"Do I?" Bitterness slips into his voice.

"Of course." Chris looks wounded.

"I *know* things haven't been the same since your last mission. *You* haven't been the same." He shakes off Chris's hand on his arm, stands up. "I know there are things you aren't telling me."

"*Can't* tell you."

"And what were you just saying about not letting regulation stop you?" he says. "Maybe I didn't tell you the truth about Rukiya because I

didn't know whether helping her would have to be traded off for the secrets you're keeping for Starfleet, or the ones you're keeping for yourself."

For a moment, Chris just stares at him. Then - "you're right," he says. "I'm sorry, Joe. You're completely right." He sighs. "There are... there are things I can't talk about - really *can't*, for everyone's good. But - you're right. I haven't been the same, and I haven't talked to you about it, and..."

He takes a deep breath, sits back down across from Chris. "And?"

"I know you, Joe. I know how you are with... with your patients. And with 'impossible problems.'" He gives a chagrined smile. "You have your own already, after all," he tilts his head vaguely in the direction of the medbay transporter. "I just... I didn't want to give you one that really *was* impossible."

"Are you sick?"

Chris shakes his head. "No."

"How do you know it's impossible? How can you possibly -" He reaches out, puts a hand on Chris's shoulder. "How do you know if it's impossible if you won't let your friends try and help?"

Chris looks down, breathes slowly. "Some tradeoffs... are worth making. Have to be." He looks up. "'First, do no harm,' right?"

He shakes his head. "You're impossible. Didn't you just come to ask why I didn't tell you about -"

"Rukiya's different. And she's -"

"Chris -"

Chris says something, too quiet to hear.

"What?"

He lets out a small huff of laughter with no joy in it. "Maybe I am being selfish. I just - I just didn't want to have to think about it here, when..."

"Chris," he squeezes Chris's shoulder.

"But I still ... I shouldn't have just left you in the dark. I'm sorry. I should have said something, and not left you thinking you couldn't - couldn't trust me. Especially with this."

He pats Chris's shoulder. "I'll take that apology," he says. "Does Una know? Whatever this is that you're not telling me."

Chris takes a deep breath. "Yes."

"Right." He nods. "That's good. As long as you're not facing it alone."

"Joe," Chris says. "*You're* not alone anymore, either."

He nods again, throat too tight for speech.

Chris comes around the desk and wraps him up in a hug, and for a moment he rests his head on his friend's shoulder and can tell himself that everything will be alright. That nothing is impossible.

Chris always had a way of inspiring that, he thinks to himself, and a hiccup of laughter bursts out of his throat, and then -

Then it hits him, all at once, how close he came to losing her today. How close everything came to being lost. Everything he has to keep at bay to be Chief Medical Officer M'Benga.

But now he's just Joe, and he's crying on his friend's shoulder as Chris rubs gentle circles into his back.

"It's okay, it's okay. I've got you. It's going to be okay. I've got you."

Chris doesn't let go, not for a second, not until it feels like he's been wrung dry of tears, as impossible as he knows that is. Even when his breathing steadies, Chris doesn't let go, not until Joe squeezes his shoulder and leans back.

Chris passes him some tissues from the desk.

"Thank you."

"Of course." Chris looks at him seriously. "Anything you and Rukiya need, anything I can do to help - you have it. I want you to know that."

"I know, Chris." He tries to smile, and finds there's something genuine there. "I'm sure she'd like to see you."

"I'd love to," Chris says, with a returning smile.

"I've been reading the Elysian Kingdom to her, while she's out of the pattern buffer every week." He grins. "She always does like it when

you do the voices.”

Chris laughs. “Alright, I’ll break out my best Ser Routh. You just tell me when.”

“You’ve got it.”

Chris stands up, steps towards the door. “Joe?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For letting me help.”

Joe smiles, and Chris smiles back.

And somehow, he finds he feels better.

The door chimes.

He doesn’t get up.

The door chimes again.

He stays on his bed. In his quarters. In his quarters, where -

She just wanted to see where you lived.

Out of the whole ship, that was where your daughter wanted to be.

She just wanted -

The door chimes again.

“Joe? It’s Chris.”

He forces words out, before Chris has to break out *I don’t want to use the Captain’s override, but*, “Come in.”

Somehow, the thing that strikes him is the fact that Chris is wearing the same heather-grey sweater he had when they’d first talked about Rukiya being on the ship.

“I brought food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Have you replicated anything for yourself?”

“Mm.”

“You need to eat. You know that better than I do, Doc.” Chris holds out a box. “I made travel bars.”

“Of course you did.” Chris had brought pounds of them when they travelled, and he had to admit they were good. And right now, the thought of eating them didn’t make him feel awful, at least.

And it would probably cheer Chris up.

He takes a begrudging bite, and then another, less begrudging bite.

After he’s made his way through a bar, Chris asks. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He doesn’t. And he does.

Chris looks at him patiently, and he finds words coming to his lips without even thinking.

As he comes to the end of the story, he shakes his head.

“... And I got to see her again. I *know* she’s okay. I don’t have to worry that something could have gone wrong, or the entity could have turned out to not be kind to her. I know she’s ... she’s happy.” He rubs at his eyes. “So why am I not happy? Why do I feel awful? If I was ...” *a better parent.*

Chris puts a hand on his arm. “All it means is that you’re a person, and you’re missing someone you love.”

“Hm.”

“It was all very sudden,” Chris says. “We could... now that we know about the entity, we could go back to the nebula safely. There’s no reason you couldn’t see her again.”

“She grew up in a matter of seconds, Chris. She had lived *so much* .” He says. “Now... who would she be, now?”

“I don’t know,” Chris says. “But she’d still be your child.”

“What if ...” He can barely make himself say it; forcing out the memory. “What if she doesn’t remember me?”

“Oh, *Joe*.” Chris leans over, wraps an arm around his shoulders, and pulls him closer.

“She’ll have hundreds of years worth of memories by now, at least. And I’m just... a tiny fraction of that, now. Far away.”

“Joseph M’Benga, you are not that forgettable. Certainly never to your family.” Chris says. “Trust me.”

He wants to. He really does. He doesn’t want to question it.

So he sits, propped up on pillows, Chris’s arms wrapped around his shoulders.

And slowly, it starts to feel a little more okay to let some small part of him believe it. Not all of him. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

But it’s a little easier.

He leans into Chris’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” Chris says. “Thank you for letting me help.”

He smiles. It’s so very *Chris* of him.

“So,” Chris adds, after several long moments, “how was my Ser Routh in person?”

“You were dreadful. So, spot on.”

“Oh, good.”

Chris smiles, and he manages one, small, real smile back.

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