

## when you're gone we won't say a world (but you know that's okay)

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/839) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/839>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Major Character Death</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Star Trek: Strange New Worlds</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Christopher Pike &amp; Spock</a> , <a href="#">Christopher Pike &amp; Tenavik</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Christopher Pike</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Suicide Ideation</a> , <a href="#">Bittersweet</a> , <a href="#">SNW S01E10: A Quality of Mercy</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-08-14 Words: 10,935 Chapters: 1/1

## when you're gone we won't say a world (but you know that's okay)

by [squireofgeekdom](#)

### Summary

“Time is, uh, is complicated. But the monks showed me something simple. Every time we change the path, he dies.” - alternate future Christopher Pike, ‘A Quality of Mercy’

“I wanted a voice that sounded like it had given up a little bit after lots of emotional turmoil. So I thought, what would my voice sound like if I had spent a lot of time sobbing and screaming? - Anson Mount, about playing the alternate future Pike in ‘A Quality of Mercy’

What took a Christopher Pike back to Boreth, and back to convince himself to accept his fate?

What did he see?

### Notes

Cross-posted from AO3!

Title from ‘That’s Okay’, by the Hush Sound. (Find it on my Chris Pike feels playlist here: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4RGapoc5Y6Snj1gRZddGuF?si=4a9c5732346645a9>)

Not on the playlist, but I can strongly recommend specifically listening to Beth Kinderman’s ‘Sisyphus’ with this fic, especially the first half of the fic. (And just in general) <https://soundcloud.com/beth-kinderman/sisyphus>

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

There’s a vidscreen playing old Earth television in the background as he fills out reports.

*‘War is war, and Hell is Hell. And of the two, war is a lot worse.’*

He mouths along to the last words.

He could probably quote large chunks of this episode - of many of these episodes. In theory, it’s easy habit, having something on he knows well while he does another task, like when he cooks.

But this choice. It has to be another kind of punishment he’s given himself.

*‘How do you figure, Hawkeye?’*

*‘Easy, Father. Tell me, who goes to Hell?’*

He stares down at the half completed report on the latest losses in the Romulan War.

*‘Sinners, I believe.’*

*‘Exactly. There are no innocent bystanders in Hell. War is chock full of them -’*

He doesn’t have to listen to the list, he sees it every day. He’ll see it again in a few moments.

*'In fact, except for some of the brass, almost everybody involved is an innocent bystander.'*

And now he is one of the brass.

The door chimes. He turns off the vid screen. "Come in."

"Admiral,"

The ensign is new, he doesn't recognize them.

They hold out a padd. "The casualty lists you requested, sir."

The casualty list.

The casualty lists -

He *knows* casualty lists. He has been a Captain for years, he knows what it means to lose members of his crew, to mourn one of their fellow members of Starfleet. He knows what it means to call someone's family and tell them that they would never see their loved one again. To share what had happened, what memories he had, to provide what comfort he could, and just to listen to what they needed to say about the person they'd loved and, now, lost.

"Admiral?"

"I'm sorry, lost in thought, Ensign -?"

"Ensign Quincey, sir."

He takes the padd. "Thank you, Ensign Quincey."

He looks down at the names as the ensign leaves.

The official counselor for the Admiralty had advised that he stop trying to make those personal calls after he rose to admiral, with more people under his command, as the number of calls grew and grew with the scope of the war. But he hadn't.

He'd sat on the other end of a call, watching as a young man - Mark, his name is Mark - had gathered his breath and his voice with tears still dripping down his cheeks, and told him that his sister Kara had always only the best things to say about him, that she'd admired him as an officer and trusted his leadership, trusted his conviction to always stand by everyone who served with him, and his belief in Starfleet. And Mark said that he always knew to trust his sister's judgment, so he knew that Kara would still be proud, and he knew Admiral Pike did everything he could.

He keeps remembering that conversation. Keeps remembering it, because he doesn't know if he can believe Mark is right. He doesn't know if he has done everything he could.

It's natural to doubt, when there are losses. It's part of trying to do better and learn, he's told trainees that countless times. But he also tells trainees to move past that doubt once they've learned what they can, to not let doubt stifle or eat at them. He's also said that countless times, because he's learned it himself, and this - this still gnaws at him, some entirely different beast, haunting every hollow moment.

If he had taken his fate, would this have happened?

He would never have been there, at the Neutral Zone. Would a different captain - ?

And now the casualty lists are something he doesn't *know*; black scrolling screens in Federation headquarters, and he stopped making personal calls for each loss after, in hour seven of calls after a fourteen hour day he'd called one of the casualties - Elliot, he tells himself firmly - by the previous name on the casualty list, Ellison.

But he still requests the lists for the casualties under his command. He still has to know.

(He can still hear the fresh sobs on the other end of the call, amidst his own frantic apologies and barely-open eyes.)

He isn't an innocent bystander.

If he had taken his fate -

If he had taken his fate, could he have saved them? Kara, Elliot, Ellison, Yuma, Tol, Lark -

That wasn't the real question. His fate was - was him. Something he could choose.

Something he had chosen when he had taken the crystal.

The others didn't have that choice. Not until he had written to them.

If he hadn't -

If he had sacrificed Maat and Kayla, would that have saved all the names on the list?

Number One had urged him to believe there could be a way to save all of them. She knew, always knew, that he wouldn't leave behind a

life he could save.

Spock hadn't questioned his apparent acceptance of inevitability, had encouraged him to let it make him more of his truest self.

Number One had supported him when he'd set out on this path years ago, when he'd half-believed it impossible, believed the words of the monks of Boreth, that taking the time crystal would mean he could not escape his fate. But he'd taken the steps anyway, and -

Spock hadn't known. Even though Spock knew so much, seemed to know him better than he knew himself sometimes, he hadn't known when he'd changed the path -

Now -

Now his crew is scattered to the four winds, reassigned as the admiralty had moved him away from the Captain's chair. No familiar faces to turn to, and little enough news about what Joseph, Erica, Nyota - what any of them are facing.

Now Number One is who knows where - who knows if Section 31 had decided they could bend Starfleet regulation again to have one more fighter against the Romulans, or if her penal colony had fallen under attack, or she'd been transferred - news traveled too quickly and too slowly all at once, he didn't *know* -

She couldn't help him. He couldn't speak with her, even though he'd give anything to - to -

And Spock is dead.

Spock is dead, and maybe if Chris had just listened to him -

Millions are dead, and he keeps coming back to Spock. Human brains aren't built to handle millions. Even the people he knows by name and face who have filled the casualty rolls cannot simply be multiplied in grief.

Spock hadn't been the first casualty of the Romulan war, but he was the one Chris kept returning to.

*'And who is that, Spock?'*

*'The Captain.'*

He had been Spock's captain, and he had failed him. More than that, he had been Spock's friend. Spock was - he was -

Spock was very important to him.

He closes his eyes. He sees Spock's face.

He opens his eyes. He sees Maat's face.

It's a photograph. Just a photograph; Maat and the rest of his cohort.

It's not just a photograph. It's a reminder.

He has to get out of his quarters. He needs - he needs to walk.

*'What are you going to do?'*

*'I don't know, but I have to do something, don't I?'*

He's not thinking straight, he knows that, not with a dozen conversations echoing in his mind, not with the corridor looking too much like the corridor on *that* station, the asteroid station where he'd met Maat in person, where he'd first decided to draft his letters.

He had to do something then. He has to do something now.

The crystal -

Taking the crystal was meant to keep him from changing his fate. And - and something had gone wrong. He had changed his fate.

He had saved the cadets - all of them. Watched Maat and Kayla take the first steps into becoming fine Starfleet officers, instead of finding themselves in the grave.

And then he had led the Federation into war.

(He wishes he could talk to Michael again, about the guilt they now shared. Wondered if the future she found herself in had a record of how this all would end now.)

Something had gone wrong.

Something had gone wrong.

If he could just fix the mistake at the Romulan Neutral zone, he could fix time. Fix the path they had gone down when - whatever had gone wrong with the crystal that allowed him to change his fate.

The time crystal.

*'Everything sounds cooler if you put 'time' in front of it.'*

Tilly's voice rings in his head, and he laughs to himself. A passing Ensign looks at him strangely.

He's not thinking straight.

Time isn't straight. Time is bent. He's bent it. Or the crystal has, the way they refract light.

He has to change time.

Whatever went wrong with the crystal - there will be a way to fix it. On Boreth, there will be a way to fix it.

There will be a way to stop the war. Stop the war, and still save the kids. All of them.

No more deaths.

*' Maybe there's a way to save all of you.'*

There *will* be a way to save all of them.

---

Once he allows for the possibility of changing time again, it's very simple.

He *knows* what went wrong at the Neutral Zone. He can fix it, and the war won't happen. Spock will still be alive.

That doesn't require changing anything about the accident. That doesn't require sacrificing Maat and Kayla.

He can't be too careful. He throws himself into a series of notes and plans and contingencies, reviewing the logs of the Neutral zone events over and over until he could recite them from memory, preparing with something beyond even the kind of detail-oriented ferocity he'd taken into Professor Gadling's history exams at the academy.

A Commodore whose name he has forgotten has commed him three times about delayed reports, he's missed messages from Captain Santoso and Captain Peri waiting for orders.

It doesn't matter. Either this will work, in which case none of this will matter.

Or it won't work, and he'll be drummed out of Starfleet and he'll deserve it and it won't matter - because he *can't do this anymore*.

---

He barely registers the cold.

"You have returned," Tenavik says.

"We told you you would not be strong enough," a monk in the higher levels says.

"I -"

"We know why you are here," Tenavik says. "We know what you have done. And ... we know that you did not do it to avoid your fate alone."

"And you are not yet ready to accept your fate," the other monk says.

Chris looks at Tenavik. "I know there's a way to save them and stop the war. I've planned everything - I can fix it. I know I broke it but I can fix it if you help me. Please, please let me. You have to believe me, I want to fix this. I know how to fix this. I can -"

"I believe you want to fix this." Tenavik looks at him solemnly. "And that *you* believe you know how to fix this."

"He has not accepted the fate he claimed," the other monk says. "There is no place for this -"

"I was his guide." Tenavik does not look away from Chris. "I have not forfeited that role."

"You'll -" Chris starts, stumbling over words in desperation. "You'll let me - you can -"

Tenavik lowers his head in a nod. "I will let you see where your plan would lead."

---

"You do have a way to use the crystals to change time?" Chris asks, as they make their way into the chamber. "Without traveling with a suit or - or will -"

"We do. This is not that. This will let you see where your plan will lead."

"But I -"

"You will be present to guide the events of the eddy you see."

“And if - when I see that it works, I can - I can go back and change time to - to follow those events?”

Tenavik pauses for a long moment. “If I told you you could not find a way for your intentions to succeed, would you believe me?”

“I -” he pauses.

“It could spare you a great deal of pain.”

“To accept the war?”

“To accept your fate.”

“And Maat and Kayla’s.”

“Yes.”

“No,” he says, finally. “Not now.”

He nods slowly, without surprise, with a kind of solemn resignation. “When you find a path that is... acceptable for you to walk, and has the acceptance of the order, we will aid you in changing time.”

“And if I find a way that saves us all - will the order accept that?”

“You will not. But,” he adds before Chris can interject. “If you did, I would persuade them.”

“Oh,” Chris says, stepping back from his immediate protest. “Thank you.” He looks at Tenavik. “If I changed time - what would happen to you? This you.”

“I am a monk of Boreth,” Tenavik says. “And - that is a question only if you reach that path.” Tenavik holds out a shard of crystal. “You are determined that this is what you will do?”

“Yes.”

“Then place your hand on the shard.”

It is not like a transporter beam; it is exactly like laying his hand on the crystal that had shown him his fate - one moment he is in the cavern lit by crystals, the next he is somewhere else.

This time, he is not in an engineering section with a failing reactor.

This time, he is on the bridge of the Enterprise.

His ship. With his crew.

And his plan.

Which goes off without a hitch.

For the first hour, at least. After that, the hitches come in droves.

He watches as everything falls apart, as war comes. As Spock dies.

“You have to let me try again. Please,” Chris starts immediately after snapping back to the chamber, meeting Tenavik’s eyes. “I had contingencies. Other plans. And I learned - please, you have to let me try again. I can fix this.”

He can fix it. He knows that. He has his contingencies and it’s - it’s - it’s more records. He knows he can fix it.

Tenavik nods, just as he had before, and Chris steels himself.

Next time it will work.

---

Next time it doesn’t work.

Or the time after that.

It changes. Sometimes it gets better.

But it doesn’t *work*.

He postpones the start of the war by a few hours - a few days - and he loses Crewman Kestis instead of Crewman Sevander, loses the Enterprise instead of the Farragut. Loses Erica, loses La’an, watches Captain Kirk die in a last stand twice -

And always, always loses Spock.

It’s not always during the battle - not always during the aftermath. Sometimes, as the attempts get faster, as time starts to blur a little, Spock’s death is a postscript, something later in the war.

But it always happens, and no matter where he is, the crystals show him.

The datapads, the contingencies, they don't *work*, and no matter what he learns from one failure there is something new in the next.

And he does try to learn - learn everything he can, talk to every member of the crew, understand every angle.

Once he told his crew something like the truth - that they were trapped in a time loop only he remembered, something that, in a testament to their shared adventures, they had believed quickly, though Joe had insisted on running a full diagnostic, the effects of temporal loops being unknown, as he said - and uses every minute they have to tell the crew everything he had tried, to gather every new idea and memorize them.

And none of it worked.

If this is like preparing for an exam, it's the Kobayashi Maru.

Except today, accepting failure wouldn't mean only fictional loss.

And he can't - won't - do that. Not like this.

No matter how much the voice in his head whispers that *you can't fix this* in the dark silence after his sobs and screams.

---

The closest he comes - the time when he almost thinks the war would really be avoided - is when he slips the closest to that voice, slips almost into fatalism and turns command of the joint mission over to Captain James T Kirk.

It only delays the war by a week - tensions escalating only because of the detection of the unique radiation signature from the Bird of Prey's damaged cloaking device, and then they are back on the border, and then it starts again.

But that week is the longest it has been.

That week -

That week had been a relief.

And then he had watched as the border exploded into conflict again, watched as Spock burned inside a shuttlecraft as it too exploded in the midst of an outpost skirmish.

*You can't fix this.*

But that didn't have to mean it couldn't be fixed.

---

*He* wasn't going to fix the disaster at the Neutral Zone.

No, he was going to let the timeline take care of that.

In the timeline the crystal had shown him, he wouldn't - couldn't - have been captaining the Enterprise along the Neutral Zone at that time.

In the timeline the crystal had shown him, the war couldn't have happened.

(Even if he hadn't said it - that had been Tenavik's implication.

And it had to be true. It *had* to be.

In the timeline the crystal had shown him, Spock *would* live.)

He would let the timeline the crystal had shown him take care of itself, and simply - carve out the parts that required him sacrificing Maat and Kayla.

The parts which would require *that* part of his fate.

Maybe it had been arrogant to think he could fix the situation at the Neutral Zone. Maybe he should have started this way - making the smallest changes he could.

He knows he wasn't Captaining the Enterprise when the accident happened - he knows he had taken a promotion when he had done the cadet training inspection.

So he would take that promotion when it was offered, following the timeline. Whoever was going to captain the Enterprise at the Neutral Zone would end up there.

He wouldn't sacrifice Maat and Kayla. He would send the same letters he had before, and they would get to live.

And he would resign the day before the accident. Go back to Montana.

He would move himself off the board, out of the way of stepping on a single butterfly.

That would *work*.

---

And Tenavik lets him try. Nods when he asks, voice stumbling and hoarse from sobs, to try changing things further back, like he knew Chris would ask eventually.

He hadn't realized what a relief it would be to return to Montana. He hadn't, in all the years of the war, been able to get back, and however much time he had lost in the loops of attempts - he'd lost count - it felt like twice that.

He breathes in the fresh air and laughs as Roci leans over the stall door and nibbles at the corner of his jacket.

He checks the newsfeeds for reports of the Enterprise's missions, watches the footage of events at the Academy where he can see Maat and Kayla with Dusty and Yuuto and their other fellow cadets -

He rides Roci and feels fresh snowfall on his face and laughs.

He also takes calls from Joseph and Spock, somewhat guiltily, feeling he's too close to treading on a butterfly's wing. But then again, maybe refusing calls would be what stepped on a butterfly, too much cause for concern.

(He doesn't know if Spock has figured out that he dodged his fate. Spock is brilliant; he's probably guessed - but Chris doesn't ask.)

He steps lightly around any suggestion that Spock visit, not even while on leave near Earth. That would be inexcusably likely to step on a butterfly.

He should have anticipated Spock's stubbornness; of course he would just show up.

He knows what week it is; knows how close they are to the events in the Neutral Zone. He should tell Spock to cut short his leave, to go back to the Enterprise.

But maybe, he tells himself, maybe Spock isn't meant to be there either.

His decision making is compromised, compromised by the image of Spock's body on a biobed, of Spock burning, of Spock bleeding in his arms -

He's compromised, and he knows it, but he'll tell himself Spock is safe here, even if it's just for now.

And it's hard to argue with that when he finds Spock sitting on a hay bale, cross-legged in meditation pose and absolutely covered in barn cats.

That, he thinks, is a memory worth keeping.

---

Of course, that's when it all goes wrong.

Next time, he tells Spock to go back.

Next time, he tries to slowly take the calls less and less frequently, in the hopes he won't come at all.

Next time -

It still goes wrong.

---

*'Maybe there's a way to save all of you.'*

He keeps hanging on to Number One's words like a lifeline, as he tries and tries and tries again.

He almost tells her what is happening, once, talking around the edge of the problem, coming back to that idea of a time loop. There's so much he doesn't need to say for her to understand, and so much she does him the kindness of not asking.

"Captain," she says. "Chris," she adds, more quietly.

"Joe's already checked me over," he says, which is kind of true; it just wasn't this timeline.

"This time loop - this is something to do with your future. The crystals."

"Yes."

"Does it - is it something that is going to save all of you?"

He could say I already have, and it would be true. Now he's trying to save everyone else. But - "I'm - I'm trying."

"Good." She lets out a breath. "Good."

He has to hope she's right.

"Well, quit being mad at yourself for not having solved this time loop already, I can hear you feeling guilty from here."

He snorts, just a bit of laughter at a hit too close to the mark.

"You've got plans to get through," she says.

He tries to smile.

"Chris," she adds. "You can do this. I believe there's a way to save all of you. You'll find it. Just - keep trying."

He does. Somehow, he does.

"Why do you keep letting me try?" he asks Tenavik, after he has caught his breath and wiped tears from his face, after another loop of watching Spock die.

Tenavik looks at him. "Would you accept anything else, after coming here?"

"No," he says, after a long moment. "Not until I've tried everything I can."

*But you still don't have to let me*, he wonders, but doesn't ask - the first question had been pushing his luck, he realizes, now that he's had a chance to gather himself.

"Why?" Tenavik asks. "You persist in trying to find a way to save these children - children who are not yours," he says, and there is something in his voice that is not his usual unflappable tone of inevitability. "Children you do not even know."

Chris thinks about it, for a moment. "For the same reason I tried to get them all out from the accident in the first place. I try to save everyone I can."

"But sometimes you must accept losses. You *have* accepted losses."

"I know," he says. "After I saw - what the first crystal showed me. I looked up the kids in the accident; the ones I had saved. They really were just kids, back when I was looking, and - and kids deserve to be protected. They - they all deserved more than having their lives cut short at twenty-two. I thought - staying the course, that my loss would be worth it, to protect them. But then I met Maat, and - he was just a kid, too. And I didn't - I had to do something to protect him too. To keep his father from losing his son.

"You're right, they're not my kids. But - Starfleet is its own sort of family, in a way. We make a choice," he looks at Tenavik, "to protect each other. And," he continues. "I - I got to see those kids - all of them, Maat and Kayla included, grow up into exceptional officers. Exceptional *people*. I have to fight for that. I can't abandon them to a fate they never signed on to without trying everything else I could."

"I suppose you can't," Tenavik says, and he wonders if he imagines the slight stress on *you*. "And your own fate?"

He takes a breath. "I won't lie and tell you that the pain I felt in that future isn't something I want to avoid," he says. "And - there are people I love who would want me to try and save myself too, if I can. So - I'll try to find a way to save all of us," he echoes.

"So you will continue to try." Tenavik nods.

*And you'll continue to let me*.

"But," Tenavik adds, "you are coming to - certain limitations of how far you can go. How much of the eddies you can remember, as someone not raised with the time crystals. I will try to make it so you can try and see everything you need too, without - going too far from yourself."

*Far from himself* doesn't sound like a bad place to be; and yet - he's already beginning to understand what Tenavik means.

"I will continue to let you try," Tenavik looks at him, meeting his eyes for a long moment. "Tell me when you are ready to stop."

He thinks it might be the gentlest thing anyone has ever said to him.

The way to make it avoid his limitations, apparently, is no longer letting - or making - him live through the paths he chooses in what feels like real time, skipping through at higher and higher speeds, experiencing each point that changes like it was forced into him before rushing along to the next as soon as he makes a choice.

He doesn't feel chill air in early snowfalls in Montana, doesn't experience those moments at all. But he also doesn't really feel the heat of blood, dark and green, sinking in to the skin of his hands as he presses them down onto a wound he knows will bleed out. Tradeoffs.

At least he has the memory in the barn. At least that he had lived in full color, down to the smell of straw and manure, the small, rhythmic motion of Spock's hands petting whichever cats had found space in his lap, the fluffy, triangular tail of the last kitten climbing onto Spock's shoulder by way of his scarf, the warmth and fondness that had kept any chill away from the blooming smile on his own face.

He keeps holding on to that.

Spock *will* live.

So each time, he tries. He keeps trying. Each time, another way.



He's never felt a greater understanding with Gabrielle Burnham. To try at saving and fail so many times, to always, always be pulled away. Not for the first time, he wishes he'd had more time then, the time to really talk to her.

More time. Hah.

"Doctor Burnham," he starts, in between loops, as Tenavik watches him catch his breath. "She saw the future. Went to the future. And - and Spock. She showed him the future. And -"

Tenavik looks at him.

"She came back. She - she was able to change things. A little at a time. And Spock did too. And we - we prevented that future."

Tenavik nods.

"So it's possible -"

Tenavik shakes his head. "That - was a different way to interact with the flow of time." He has a slight frown, like he's been asked by a toddler to explain why butterflies are different from birds and is trying to frame it in the simplest possible terms. "Gabrielle Burnham saw the flow of one stream using the power of a crystal to travel, but she did not see *through* the crystal. *She* did not take the crystal, she did not make that commitment."

He closes his eyes. "Right."

"That flow of time was not in the crystals. Not as your fate is." Tenavik almost sounds apologetic.

"It's - sorry. It was a bad question."

"You were not raised here. It is not your duty to understand."

*Duty.*

He could ask if Tenavik ever wishes he wasn't raised here. He could ask if the monks feel like a shared family, like Starfleet does.

Something in Tenavik's face tells him not to.

"I'll try again."

Tenavik nods. "You'll try again."

After all, he thinks, Gabrielle Burnham hadn't changed the future alone.

---

"I'm going to tell you something," Chris says. "And it's going to sound like I'm crazy. But it's true."

Spock stops, looks at him, and then sits down. "Proceed."

*I love you*, he thinks, because this is one of those moments that reminds him of that fact.

He's seen Spock countless times, across years of service, across loops he's lost count of which - which must amount to years by now, he's seen Spock covered in blood too many times, and in kittens only once. That fact is constant.

There are moments when that fact is the breath of air that brings an easy smile, times when it is hot blood unstaunched from a wound. Now it is as weighty and solid as the bulk of the Enterprise below his feet.

He's not sure who he is, if he can call himself Christopher Pike anymore, compared to the man who took the crystal, compared to the man who met Maat, even compared to the man who went back to Boreth. Tenavik may be trying to keep him from going too far from himself, but still, already - there is too much memory in him, too many visions of death, and it's torn apart what's inside, what's left held together in the shape of that person.

But that fact is constant.

So something is left.

He loves Spock; he loves his crew, he loves his ship, and what's left of him is still in the shape of a Starfleet officer.

He will find a way to make this better, and he will start with the truth.

So he speaks, and Spock listens.

"I don't know why you're the one who keeps dying," he says eventually, his voice shaking at the end of it all. "But - it seemed you deserved to know."

Spock looks at him, and he knows, he knows how this all sounds, can't even pretend in the slightest that he's relayed this narrative with a steady voice. He can't imagine he looks anything like a Captain now.

"Captain," Spock starts, after a long moment. "If you would allow me to attempt a mind meld -"

Chris shakes his head immediately. "No." He pushes his chair back, cold horror flooding his bones. "No - I don't want you to see that."

"Chris." And there's an essay on the precise implausibility of the story he's just told, the need for medical evaluation, on the function of Vulcan mind melds, his ability to verify the truth, and even their potential stabilizing effects, and on everything Spock himself has experienced regarding the nature of time, of horrors witnessed in mind melds and without, and Spock leaves it all unspoken, for which he is grateful. *I love you.*

And Spock gives him silence while he realizes the way his breathing has gone fast and unsteady, while he catches his breath. *I love you.*

"It's not - it's not about trying to avoid a repeat of the 'Spock's brain came unstuck in time' incident - I know it's a reductive way to put it, but -" he shakes his head. "What's in my mind - it's not meant to be in *anyone's* mind."

Spock looks at him.

"Do you know I've lost count of the number of times I've seen you die?" he asks rhetorically. He drops his head. Stares at the floor. "Sometimes they just - show me. Even though I wouldn't have been there."

"Captain."

He looks up at Spock.

"You said that ... I deserved to know. But... if I understand your situation correctly, and I do not presume incorrectly, you are also telling me in the hopes that this... loop, you are experiencing, goes better than previous attempts. In the hope that this knowledge will allow me to help."

Slowly, he nods.

"Chris," Spock says. "Let me help."

"Spock," he says, and his voice is rough to his own ears. "You don't have to - not - not like that -"

"Let me help," Spock asks again.

He could tell himself that he's taking Spock's suggestion as the logical course, as something he hasn't tried, that it might allow Spock to catch something he couldn't relay verbally.

But he simply can't bring himself to refuse.

He nods.

Spock waits a moment, giving him a chance to change his mind. Even then, he raises his hand slowly, towards Chris.

He reaches up to Spock's hand. "Promise me. Just - promise me - you -"

"I will... tread lightly."

He shakes his head. "Not - not just that." He hopes treading lightly will be enough to keep from sinking into too many repeated memories of death and blood. "But - if it's too much, if it's - don't let it hurt you. Leave."

"I have improved my control since the 'Spock's brain came unstuck in time' incident, as you put it."

"I know, Spock, I'm not - I'm not doubting *you*. Just - promise me."

"I -"

"Promise me. Please."

Spock takes a deep breath. "I promise I will avoid undue damage to my own psyche, to the best of my ability."

His shoulders relax a fraction as he exhales, and he nods.

Spock touches his face as though it could shatter in a breeze. *Tread lightly* indeed.

Somehow, the first memory called to mind is the one of Spock in the barn with the cats.

Well, mental effort to try and shield Spock from the worst of it paid off, apparently.

Spock is sitting on the haybale, covered in kittens, and Spock is standing next to him, and Chris can feel a mixture of surprise, amusement, and delight like it was his own.

"A loop memory, I take it." Spock's mouth quirks. "A... pleasant one."

"Yeah," he says, his voice hoarse.

"I am sorry," Spock says. "But we cannot stay."

"I know."

They still stand there for several moments longer.

“So,” Chris says eventually. “The beginning.”

Spock nods, and the memory shifts.

It is hard to keep the memories apart; the true first time he wrote the letters, and all the times he revisited, rewrote those moments. The true events at the neutral zone, and the many, many times he tried to make it go differently.

The first time he watched Spock die.

*and then again and again and again -*

He is watching the same thing and he is in a hundred different places and it all shakes with a dull roar that will send everything crashing down.

“Captain,”

The roar subsides, but he still can't look away.

Spock moves to stand in front of him. “I am not dead, Captain.”

Echoes are still ringing around him, but they are still standing.

“Right,” he says. “I'm sorry. You shouldn't have -” *had to see that.*

“I was adequately warned.” Spock says, dryly, but there is still a cold tremor in the air.

The memory shifts, moving to what happened next. To the war. To the desperate point where he *couldn't do this anymore.*

And somehow, the pain is tempered. That measured presence reaches out and steadies him, and -

- and he is just a little bit more Captain Christopher Pike.

He hopes the gratitude and love is felt across the mind-meld, as they arrive in his memory of Boreth.

Spock is intently focused on the details of Boreth, on the crystals, on each of Tenavik's words.

And it takes every ounce of focus to keep the memories apart now, as here, where he has experienced each of them, they fall together without any order so easily.

But they do. Thanks to Spock, they do.

And he even feels steadier now, seeing memories again for the second time. It doesn't stop the ache in his chest, but he can even find himself smiling when he sees Spock covered in kittens.

Spock pauses as they return to Boreth, revisiting his questions about Gabrielle Burnham and Spock, and changes to the future. It's not quite a frown on his face as he listens intently.

And then the loop completes.

“Did you - did you see everything you needed to?”

Spock nods. “You do not need to revisit it a second time. Thank you,” he says, a slight catch in his voice, “for letting me help.”

“Spock, I -” He finds he doesn't have words. He nods.

“I did not -” Spock starts. “I did not realize how many times you had tried. You have been through a great deal. It may be somewhat difficult to return, but - it will pass.”

“Okay.”

Spock nods.

He feels the space fade, distantly, feels Spock's hand leave his face.

There is a tremor running through him, a hitch in his breath as he sinks back into his own body, the absence of another presence in his mind a cold pit, and -

He crumbles, knees hitting the floor as sobs wrack through him.

When he pulls himself to sit upright, there is a deep exhaustion running through him. But still, as though some echo of the mind meld is still there, something steadier runs through him, like a deep current, as he catches his breath.

A hand on his shoulder.

“Ending a prolonged mind meld can require... some time to recover. Particularly when one has revisited... emotional memories.”

He looks up at the sound of Spock's voice, hoarse.

There are tear tracks running down from Spock's eyes.

Guilt would knock the wind out of him, if he had any wind left.

"Spock -"

"This was my choice, Captain. Chris. Allow me that."

And Chris -

He nods.

"I believe - I will need time. To meditate, and consider the problem." Spock looks at him. "Will you -"

"I'll be alright, Spock. I just -" need to rest. Need a break. "I'll be fine."

He will. He has to be.

They'll find a way.

But it is hours later, after Spock's meditation - a break that passes seemingly in a matter of seconds - and after long discussion - when the hammer blow finally drops.

"I don't see other ways to minimize changes to the timeline, and still achieve your goals," Spock says. "But I will meditate again, and further consider the matter."

There's a mixture of fresh despair and horrible relief at hearing that Spock had no new ideas - despair at nothing new to try, relief that he had not somehow missed something obvious in all his trying, in all the death he'd witnessed.

But that doesn't mean he can sleep. Or perhaps it was just that sleep wasn't allowed when he was tripping through the time he was playing and witnessing in one.

*still achieve your goals*

What were his goals?

To save all of them, like Number One had said.

But he had sent the letters because he had met Maat.

He had decided at first to stay the course because he would save the kids' lives.

He had decided to change the course because it wouldn't save those two kids' lives.

Their lives were the goal, the only goal that mattered.

He had chosen to take the crystal. They hadn't had that choice.

He had accepted his fate.

He could accept it again.

That - that would leave the timeline less changed.

Spock had given him the solution, even if he didn't know it.

---

He writes two letters. Just two.

He goes and walks through the engineering room, performing a play he has already seen, only missing two of the supporting cast.

And he gets the rest of them out. Maat and Kayla aren't here, and he gets the rest of them out.

He puts his hand on the glass, and he feels himself burn, feels the radiation eat away at his flesh, pain clouding his mind like smoke, and knows that it will never go away.

But Maat and Kayla will live.

And Spock will live.

And so if part of him is always fading away in smoke, always being weighed down by the pain - that is worth it.

It will always feel like this. That is his fate.

And then there is no feeling at all. There is nothing.

He is not in the caves on Boreth. He is watching. He is being forced to watch.

He knows what is going to happen. He can't close his eyes as Spock dies, can't leave until the last, shaky breath rattles out of him.

He screams.

His scream echoes around the cavern, rattling off the crystals.

He screams until the pain no longer registers, until his breath catches and rattles and turns to sobs.

And, in the end, he pushes himself upright, exhausted, voiceless, but still there. Still, somehow, there.

And Tenavik is still there. Is he shaken, or is he as steady and measured as ever? He can't tell.

Tenavik hands him a mug of something steaming.

It's a steadying presence in his hands. As he slowly sips it down to dregs, his voice eventually returns.

"What - what was my mistake, then? That should have - that should have worked. I knew -"

"Some time in the future, another Starfleet captain will say 'It is possible to commit no mistakes and still lose. That is not weakness. It is life.' In your case, however, it is the consequence of the time crystal, and breaking your commitment to it. Whether that is weakness is not for me to say."

Another wracking sob; like choking, like drowning.

Finally, he recovers his breath. "If time wants this, why - why -" he shakes his head. "Why - this? Why - why could I change it at all? Why not just - make it so no matter what I did, that - that happens? Why let me change it and then - and then -"

"That may be the nature of some fates; but not the crystals'. Not a crystal taken knowingly." Tenavik says. "You made a... decision. A commitment. The consequences for breaking that are not simply to enforce its fulfillment."

"It's punishment."

"To take what is precious to you. What you would most regret not protecting," he says, with a small frown. "On every path."

"Every time..." a lump creeps up his throat again. "Spock - am I creating new timelines where he -" *dies*?

*Have I been killing him each time, over and over -*

He chokes off a sob, he can't finish the sentence.

Tenavik looks at him for a long moment. "No. The crystals do not have that power. You are seeing what would happen; not creating."

A sob of relief; one he doesn't bother to choke back. That was right, that was right. The faded memory, layered under all the others - Tenavik had told him, he would only be seeing what would happen -

But -

"But I - I spoke to -" he shakes his head slightly, "Back - at the start - I told the crew what I was trying to do. About the fact that I was changing things. I told them it was a loop, but - that wouldn't - that wouldn't have happened if it was just playing out - if I had just taken that path first."

"No, it did not." Tenavik says. "But you see the path that goes the same way as those choices create."

"I don't understand."

"You made those choices given those conversations. You could have made them under other circumstances. You see the consequences." Tenavik looks at his befuddled face, and changes tack. "If a rock lands the same, the water flows the same, regardless of what came before, or the hand that threw it."

He still doesn't understand. "But I - the - the time before this one - Spock was there. I spoke to Spock. I told him the truth. Are you saying that didn't happen? Who - who was that Spock?"

*Who was that Spock that died?*

"That was Spock." Tenavik looks at him. He feels like the universal translator must be missing something.

Or his brain is just too fried from having so much crammed inside it to understand cryptic monk speak.

"Your presence in the timeline is real to you, as it isn't real. That Spock is real, and isn't."

Nope, he definitely doesn't understand that, universal translator or no.

"What happens to him?"

"That Spock is gone when you leave, just as you are gone from that picture of the flow of time."

“And the others -”

“They only ever existed in the picture. Had their timeline come into existence, they would cease to exist as the flow of time that led them to exist stopped, just as you would.”

“The picture... what I’m seeing ...”

“If you know the shape of a hill, and how water flows, you could create a picture of how the stream would flow if rocks shifted in its path, or if a tree had fallen at a different angle. You do not need to change the stream to do so.”

He’s fairly certain he’s being walked through Time Monk Kindergarten-Level Explanations.

“So the stream... hasn’t changed since I came here.”

“No.”

“But when I avoided the accident - when we all lived - ”

“When you sent your letters, you changed the stream. As with - falling twigs, small changes set it on a vastly different path.”

“And what the crystal showed me - that was the ... the creekbed it was meant to be in.”

Like the desert without rain, the wash still remained.

And if piled debris sent a monsoon flood where it wasn’t meant to go, over its banks -

Destruction.

“The time crystal showed you your future, and you accepted it.” Tenavik’s tone is only slightly accusatory. Or maybe that’s just his own head.

“The stream hasn’t changed since I came here. You’ve showed me different paths. But -” he starts. “Time travel - it’s possible. You told me if I found a path I could walk, I could -” he looks up at Tenavik. “If it was changed - if I didn’t send those letters - would that *actually* change the creek’s path?”

Tenavik actually gives a small, almost sad smile, and he realizes - Tenavik’s been moving through a play, watching when he already knows the end. And Chris knows that doesn’t take away the pain of it.

“I told the Elders you would eventually come to understand.” Tenavik says at last.

“What do you mean?”

“You must actually go back and change time - not in the ways you have seen. But to restore it to its proper place. To what the crystal showed you.”

That’s it.

There really is no other way.

*There’s no way to save all of us.*

He’s tried everything.

The only way to set it right, to unbend time - is to set straight the path the crystal showed him.

He realizes as sound echoes back to his ears that he’s been laughing, or sobbing, something of both.

“Alright,” he says as he catches his breath. “Alright.”

Tenavik nods, watching him, patiently, as his breath steadies. “The war will not happen, in this timeline,” he says, consoling, as if he’s trying to soften the final blow that *this is the way it has to be*. “Spock... will eventually be the one to create the opportunity for lasting peace with Romulus.”

“He’ll live?”

“And have an enormous impact on the galaxy,” Tenavik says. “His future... is of great importance.”

“Alright,” he says. “Alright. I’ll do it.”

“The Elders have a plan -” Tenavik starts.

“Wait -” he interrupts - there’s another future he needs to know about. “One more question.”

Tenavik looks at him.

“This path - the way this future is supposed to go, when I first saw it. Is that - will letting that stay make the future Michael and Saru and - that Discovery went to - will that make it better - will they be -”

“No time is safe,” Tenavik says. “But it will keep their future -” he frowns in concentration for a moment, clearly considering once again how best to express a concept to someone who hadn’t been raised by time monks “- stable.”

Chris looks at him, and Tenavik looks back, and gives him the smallest nod.

“Okay.” That’s as good as a time monk will give him. “Okay. Alright.”

“You will replace the Captain Pike who is about to disrupt the timeline, and you will ...”

Tenavik keeps talking, and it doesn’t really register. After a minute, he catches up. “Replace?”

Tenavik looks at him, then says, dryly. “Other Klingons would perhaps say that an honorable warrior would kill with a Batleth, but the Elders have determined to allow you to use a phaser at maximum setting. Less contamination.”

“Wait wait, no, I’m not - I’m not killing him. The other - me. Captain Pike.” He shakes his head.

“You are the one who understands that there is no other path. The necessity of facing your future. He will pursue the path you did -”

“But I can’t replace him - that would replace the path *I* came from, that timeline. You - you said that would erase me.”

“You could be fixed in his place with the crystals’ power. If - *if* it was to fulfil the path of the crystals.”

He shakes his head frantically. “No - no. I can tell him - if he knows what I know, if he knows the galaxy is at risk, he won’t take that path, he would never -”

“He may try to find another way, as you did. He may not believe. You are the one who understands. We must -”

“You can - you can show the possibilities, right? The way the creek could flow with another branch falling in?” he says. “Can you show what happens if I talk to him? Just talk to him?”

Tenavik looks at him doubtfully.

“Wouldn’t it be - wouldn’t it be less - less ‘time contamination’ if the - the right timeline kept *their* Pike - not - not me. I mean, I don’t even look the same anymore -”

“The flow of time around aging can be altered in this place. Observe.”

In the reflection of the crystal, he watches his face change, appear as it had years ago. As it had all too recently in different loops.

“But -”

“But I... understand your point.” Tenavik looks at him, inscrutable, and the reflection of his face shifts back to the one from the present. He still doesn’t quite recognize it. “You would find that acceptable, then? To be erased as your timeline is.”

Yes. “As an alternative to killing? Certainly.”

“Let us test your theory, then.”

---

“*I’m you.*”

“*I’m you.*”

“*I’m you.*”

Each time, he looks around the Captain’s quarters, like he’s trying to memorize it, as if he can re-learn enough details, hold enough of the artifacts of this life in his hands, he can remember what it is to be Christopher Pike, at least well enough to play the part.

It may just be a - a simulation, he thinks of it, for want of a better word or familiarity with the time monk’s concepts of eddies in the stream of time. But it -

He lifts the paring knife sometimes, traces his hand along the relief in the wall others. It feels real.

(He tries not to think of other things not-quite-real and yet feeling real. Even if he knows this is different, even if he chooses this ... still. After the repetition, it gets easier not to think of Talos IV.)

He traces the sculpture on his desk, lifts the photo of himself and Robert, set and solid.

Can he remember what that had felt like, standing next to him.? Will the weight of the memento in his hands remind him?

Can he remember what it meant to be the Pike he was speaking to?

“- *starts with a silly name.*”

“- *a silly name*”

“- *name*”

"I knew you were -"

" - knew you were -"

" - you were going to say -"

The words become more and more practiced, more of a script - and yet, each time he sees *that* Christopher Pike, trades words back and forth, it feels easier. Like as he familiarizes himself with the stage, the lines, his scene partner, he's able to put more of himself into it - or some Christopher Pike that had been, that is. He can more easily play a smile from somewhere that might be in a stone's throw of genuine, more easily improvise a joke that sounds like a Captain he used to be.

And it works.

For the horror that is watching another version - an eddy, a simulation, whoever it was - of himself see the horrors of his first attempt - there's a distance. Part of it is what the Time Monks give him, he's not present in the way he has been in the times he has tried to make the change. Part of it is that this first struggle and horror has been separated by time and further horrors, and though that does not leave it powerless, it dulls the impact in a way.

There is an entirely different kind of impact of watching the painful acceptance he had gone through visited on another Christopher Pike. Whatever kind of reality he is in, watching himself sob still hurts, no matter how many times he has wracked his own throat with sobs.

But each time he does. Each time, he doesn't send the letters.

And this is far, far less suffering to face before finally accepting their fate. His fate.

It will be worth it, for this other Pike to survive.

It will work.

---

And the time monks agree with him.

They will let him go back, truly step back into the timeline.

One time. One perfect loop.

Before they go, Tenavik gestures to a time monk holding one of the time crystals. "The time manipulation inherent in the crystals can restore your appearance to that of the Captain Pike you are returning to."

"Don't." he says, as the time monk lift the crystal. "Let me ... let me look like the man who walked in here." Not *myself*. Not anymore. "If I'm not going to - " kill him "- replace him, if I'm going to explain -"

"It may be a contingency -"

"Every time I've shown you it would work, I've looked like - something like this. Not like him," He shakes his head. They've insisted he carry a phaser; he's made sure it's on the lowest setting. "He should know I'm from the future. A future. I should - I don't need to look like him."

"You understand that if you do not replace him, afterwards, it is you who will end." Tenavik reiterates, again. Chris doesn't know if there is sorrow on Tenavik's face, or if it's just the shadows from the crystal's light.

"Yes." To end, to cease, simply by being erased - after everything he's faced, after everything he's seen, what was that to him?

Let the universe have a Christopher Pike who could carry on with only one unacceptable alternate future shown to him. Let him face their fate, and all the trials that will come before it. He is the one who should continue, the one still whole enough to be what their crew deserves. Not one who carries so many memories of suffering and death that -

Being erased will be an escape of its own.

He's always had a fondness for centuries past, the history, the literature. He thinks he understands Frodo's decision to leave for the Undying Lands better than he ever could have, before.

Simply ... no longer existing in the timeline will have no white shoes, no far green country. He does not even know if any atom, any particle of him will remain to, as another novel of the twentieth century had put it, be a part of everything alive again, even after drifting apart.

But the ripples of his actions can carry through those other lives, even without them knowing, and isn't that another way to be a part of everything alive?

And whatever no longer existing in the timeline means - being gone - it is the same thing that happened after the end of the loop to the Spock he had told the truth to - and to the crew, when he had told them something of the truth - if he understood Tenavik correctly. And he would never ask his crew to go through something he would not himself.

"I hope you are right, Admiral Christopher Pike."



*Hah.*

That was something. His name would still be spoken, he thinks, his mind bouncing between novels of the twentieth century, even if it referred to a different Christopher Pike.

Him? He is dozens of Christopher Pikes in an Admiral's uniform, and somehow feels far less than the sum of his parts.

Like he's more the sum of their tears and screams; and only echoes of everything else.

That crew, that Spock - they were real and not real, according to Tenavik.

And himself, Christopher Pike and not Christopher Pike. Real and not real.

It fits.

He smiles at Tenavik, and doesn't know how real it looks.

(It's after he steps back into time he realizes he had forgotten to ask again what would happen to Tenavik.)

---

He stands in the Captain's quarters and holds the handle of the knife. It's not a weapon, not to Christopher Pike. However the monks have left him, they have left him with the muscle memory of chopping vegetables.

The Captain's quarters are the same as every time he's seen them, and he knows that somehow they are still more real. He has really stepped into the stream of time.

He's been here before, seen this conversation, seen these details. He knows it well enough that he can give the speech to convince a Chris Pike that he is his future self without even thinking about it.

But now - now it's not skipping through, pressed into his mind at double, triple speed, a clip show of a life. Now he can feel every moment.

He hovers over the photo of him and Captain April. Does it mean more this time?

He doesn't know.

Captain Pike is considering the time crystal.

He's never left the Captain's quarters in any simulation, any eddy in time before.

He wants to see Spock. Una. His crew. He wants it desperately. But he cannot imagine a world where they do not know nearly immediately that he isn't *their* Pike. Even if he changed into this Pike's Captain's uniform - hell, even if he *had* let the monks change his appearance - he can't imagine a timeline where they don't see through any uniform or face he wears to the painful, fragile amalgamation of shells below. Maybe that is just the curse of knowledge, but - but he doesn't want that. Not for them, not for him.

But Spock had seen. Spock had offered nothing but compassion.

But that loop was gone. The Spock, the Number One, the Joseph - all of them here, now, in the flow of time. They're going to live.

They don't - they don't need to carry that pain.

*They're going to live.* He tells himself. *They're going to live.*

Just one more glimpse of a possible future, one more eddy, one more simulation of their pain, and then -

And then he can know they won't suffer. Won't ever have to watch them suffer again.

*They're going to live.*

And it is only one more time.

It does work.

He faces this Captain Pike and his questions, at the end of this eddy, ten years in an envisioned future.

"Time is, uh," cruel. "It's complicated. But the monks showed me something simple. Every time we change the path ... he dies."

That's the end of the conversation. He knows that.

No version of himself on any timeline close enough to reach this point would consider Spock's death acceptable, no matter what horrors he had to face to avoid it.

He would know, he had the memories of ... how many of them?

And yet - and yet, even after seeing only one - *only one* - possible path to death, this Pike believes it. He can see it in his face. It shouldn't be surprising, he's seen it before, known it would work - but now that he's stepped into this for real, he could almost laugh, but it would

hurt to do so.

(Was there something wrong with him?)

Of course there was. An absurd question.

But when *he* walked into that temple - had there been something wrong with *that* him, something wrong with that Christopher Pike that wasn't wrong with *this* one. Something that kept him from believing the truth upfront, kept him trying and trying and watching Spock die again and again and again.

Was it a man broken by war? Or the stubbornness of a man who had seen two more cadets live, seen Maat and Kayla grow?

Does he even remember enough of who that Christopher Pike had been to tell?

And can he even trust himself to understand this Pike?)

He walks away. He doesn't need to see this Pike's face anymore. He knows his choice.

(He understands that much.)

But he also knows those memories well enough to know that even though he'll follow the path, knows everything he's thought every time he's *tried*, every time he's questioned himself - that this Captain Pike - he'll second guess himself, painfully. Not the trade of his life, as he knows it, for Spock's life, but the two cadets. He'd second guess himself, whether he was being selfish, trading these two lives *he* knows only from files and a few moments' conversation, two cadets *he* didn't get to see grow up, for someone he knows. Someone he loves.

Even knowing that the weight of the war is also in the balance, something in him is bound to keep coming back to that even more than he's bound to his fate.

This Pike - he'd wrestle with the pain, the guilt, the questions - before going on and facing his fate anyway.

And he's seen enough of that.

So he goes on.

"And he has things to do. Fate of the galaxy type things."

And he hopes that lightens the weight of guilt, and makes the balance easier to bear.

---

He's almost amused at how accurate the simulations, the past eddies in the timestream have been, that the chime at the door comes within moments of when he would have expected it.

He knows who it will be. He knows a few ways it could go, but the time, however far it stretched into the night, had always been ... *positive*, before.

He leaves this Captain Pike to answer the door.

And somehow -

He hadn't known what to expect this time, when he was stepping back into the stream of time proper.

But he didn't disappear immediately.

He watches, distantly, as this Chris Pike takes the time crystal.

And he doesn't vanish. Not just then.

The way he had seen horrors play out before him so many times, rapid fire clip shows of possibility, now he sees the stream of time ahead of him.

It's not without pain.

But he gets to see them live.

Nyota, comfortable and joyful, at home in Starfleet. Erica, without the closed off mistrust he had seen so often in possible futures. La'an, *Number One*.

Joseph, continuing to serve on the Enterprise with Spock.

He gets to see Spock *live*.

He sees Talos IV, and he sees what Spock was willing to sacrifice to make it so the fate Chris had accepted would not be the end of his story. Sees the people he loves find a way to come and visit him, sees the way the planet changes, the new openness.

He sees Spock refuse to kill needlessly, sees him burn signal flares like an old test pilot would. Like *he* had.

He sees Spock die, sees his hand against the glass like his own. And he sees the people who love him willing to sacrifice just as much to make sure that isn't the end of his story. He sees Spock live again.

He sees Spock, on Romulus, reforging old bonds - not just the concentrated, bone shaking deep impression of *the best hope for lasting peace* - but the way he spoke to young Romulans. The way he carried himself with his over a century of life, carried hope to them.

He sees Michael, letting out a scream of joy and triumph as she finds life in the future. Saw the future as she viewed it, the reunified Vulcan and Romulus, saw that same image of Spock, preserved through the centuries. Saw how Discovery, how all of them - Saru, Owo and Detmer, Tilly, his whole other family - had helped to begin to reunify the Federation. How much they had *tried* - and how much they had *mattered* .

You can go a whole life not knowing if you've made a difference. Just trying, trying to help others, try to bring something good in this world in the time you were given, hope it could last, that it could mean something to someone.

That trying - that was worth it.

To know that he had succeeded, this one, last time? That was simply a gift.

And, at the last as he feels his ties to the stream of time fraying away, one last thing the crystal gifts him, is Spock's death.

His Spock's death, in a distant universe.

A death that is peaceful, carrying with it hope for yet another Spock, the Spock of that universe.

And as his Spock fades away, so, at last, does he.

## End Notes

Come join me in my tears for alt Future Pike...

Dialogue from the show Pike is watching at the beginning is from M.A.S.H. ep 5.20. I love that Pike is an old Earth fan, it's very fun (and occasionally heartbreaking) to reference books and tv with him.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!