

## reparative (write another story, we're fine)

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## reparative (write another story, we're fine)

by [squireofgeekdom](#)

### Summary

Conversations with Christopher Pike during the Menagerie, and on Talos IV afterwards.

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"You know, there are some things you never really lose from being a test pilot. Being able to get into the cockpit of a new ship and figure it out quick, get something moving at full impulse and have it feel like it's an extension of yourself in - a day. But after what happened..." he shakes his head slightly. "It's like trying to fly a ship I don't know, that's not like anything I've flown, but the ship is filled with..."

"Fire and smoke."

"Yes."

-

"Why should I force myself through unnecessary pain just to fit? To interact with the world in a way someone else considers real and correct? I'm happy." She shakes her head. "I don't need to walk through their world in pain just to have them look at my body with pity. My body - that's not my self. My body walking away from here, through another world, onto your ship, even - that's not what makes me present. It doesn't mean I can be myself there."

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"Maybe it doesn't have to be a choice between limited interaction in our world full of pain," Una continues, "or less pain here but interaction that's ... limited differently. We can change it."

### Notes

Crossposted from AO3

Title based on taking early inspiration from a very loose interpretation of a reparative reading, and the parenthetical from 'Nowhere/Bloodlines' by Sir Sly

Any dialogue you recognize is borrowed from the Menagerie.

With enormous enormous thanks to my dear friend, who this fic exists for. Thank you for listening to so much of my rambling about Christopher Pike and the Menagerie and Spock and my hyperspecific reinterpretation, and for the extensive conversations about the interpretation and premise that became this fic. I deeply appreciate your insights and willingness to share your experience and perspective. And thank you for being my first reader and taking the time to make this fic better and clearer, and to be so kind as to let me know the parts you loved (and that made you cry). :) I'm so glad that, working on this over a year, I've managed to write something that you enjoyed and that, even in any small way, resonated with you. That's the best thing I could have hoped for. I guess other people can read it now, if they want. XD

## I.

There is no message sent. There does not need to be.

Spock excuses himself from the bridge. It is a calm day for the Enterprise. It will go unnoticed.

He returns to his quarters. He attempts to meditate.

Three hours, thirty seven minutes and twelve seconds later, his computer terminal gives him a notification.

In the past, these notifications have been flagged news reports regarding speeches Captain - Fleet Captain Pike has given, or accolades in his name.

He knows this one is not.

He reads over the report, the description of the accident on the training ship. The cadets saved. The two cadets dead. Fleet Captain Pike - Fleet Captain Pike alive, but in critical condition.

He sets the computer to flag further updates.

He extinguishes the flame on the candle meant to accompany his meditation. He has work to do.

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Number One knows what happened the moment she reads the first cadet's name.

*Dusty Swender.*

No matter how many years had passed, she had never forgotten the names Chris had read.

Dusty Swender was alive.

Ma'at Al Alcazar was dead.

As she reads through the report, she expects to find Christopher Pike's name in the list of the dead.

She doesn't.

Fleet Captain Pike alive, but in critical condition.

Her commbadge chimes. "Captain? You're needed on the bridge."

*Right.*

She takes a breath, directs the computer to route updates on Fleet Captain Pike's condition to her chair.

In those few moments, she makes her face ice again. She has work to do.

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He wakes up, and he is melting in fire.

He -

-

He wakes up, and he is melting in fire.

There is a surface, and there are voices, and -

-

He wakes up, and he is melting in fire.

"-ptain Pike - I'm sorr -- to speak -- work -- ative -"

-

He wakes up, and he is melting in fire.

He is on a bed, he can see and hear, though his mind is behind a wall of smoke.

How long passes before he recognizes the image reflected to him in the shine of metal as his own face, he couldn't say.

But when he does, he knows everything he needs to.

He has done the work he needed to.

And he is still melting in fire.

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Spock takes in the surface of Starbase 11.

He knows Captain Pike is here. He knows what will happen next.

He has spent much time planning. He can be patient as Captain Kirk speaks to Commodore Mendez.

“Commander Spock!”

He stops, turns. “Cadet.”

The cadet comes to a sharp halt and stands to attention. “Sir. I - ah - wanted to ask -”

“Proceed.”

“Are you here to see Fleet Captain Pike?”

A logical deduction. “Yes.”

“Oh, *good*. I’ve been trying to see him but nobody will let me and it’s been months and -”

“Cadet.”

“Ah. Right. My name is Dusty Swender. I. I was at the reactor accident. Fleet Captain Pike saved my life. Saved - saved our lives.” The cadet is turning over a data unit in their hands. “We - we really did try to get the door back open. We -”

“The engineering doors are programmed with safeguards specifically to avoid such overrides. If the door had remained open, more would have died or been severely injured.”

“I know that!” Swender says. “I know that. I - Maat and Kayla didn’t make it, just with that, and -” Cadet Swender shakes their head, clearly in distress. “But - we tried.”

Spock pauses. “Cadet Swender,” he starts. “No member of Starfleet would require thanks for sacrificing to protect others. Least of all Captain - Fleet Captain Pike. He has always believed, as sincerely as anyone, that Starfleet is a promise, to willingly sacrifice for each other.”

“You sound just like him, you know.”

Spock blinks. “That... is certainly a high compliment.”

“Yeah,” Cadet Swender says. “He talked about you a lot. Had a whole bit in his speech about how you were the best of Federation ideals. And half the stories he told ...” the cadet turns the data unit over in their hands again. “It was a whole bit in his speech, ‘Starfleet is a promise, I give my life for you, you give your life for me, and no one gets left behind,’ you know, all rah-rah.

“But he - he really talked about it. Sacrifice, and facing it, and - the choices we make every day, and the choices we make in the moment, the ones - the ones we might not know we’re ready for. He talked about it like it was something real to him, and not just - something on a page.

“And not just that - that side of it. He talked about what it meant to - to see others sacrifice for you. To lose someone to sacrifice. It was -” the cadet shakes their head. “And the training crew - he brought us over for dinner that week, in groups. I thought -” they laugh weakly. “Maat always says I can come up with a cynical explanation for anything, but he thinks Fleet Captain Pike hung the moon, and...” they trail away. “Thought. He thought that.

“But -” they shake their head. “I thought it would just be an excuse to - pontificate more, tell good old stories. And he did tell stories, but - they were mostly funny. And he let us ask lots of questions about the speech, and his work, even if they weren’t easy questions.

“Mostly he asked us questions about ourselves. And actually listened to the answers. He talked *to* us, not at us. It was - it was really thoughtful. Fleet Captains don’t *do* that for a bunch of cadets. But - but I guess Maat was right.

“His - his speech, his advice, it was - I know it’s helped a lot of us. I know it’s helped *me*. That someone who sacrifices for you is really - reaching out for you. That he -” They take a deep, shuddering breath. “I just - I didn’t think we’d be - be putting it into practice right - right -”

The cadet swipes a hand across their eyes. “I’m - I’m so sorry, Commander Spock. I’m rambling. It’s just - we’ve been trying for months to get to see him and we can’t, so - I know thanks aren’t necessary, and probably not logical, but - we wanted him to know the difference he made. Not just keeping us alive but. Helping us - find our way to actually living, not just...”

“Not merely surviving.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Am I correct in surmising that the data unit you are holding contains said message from you and the other cadets?”

“Yes! Yes. Sorry. I probably should have led with that.”

“That is ... fine, cadet.” He holds out a hand. “I will play this recording for Fleet Captain Pike, if he allows.”

“Thank you.” They set the data unit carefully in his hand, like it’s made of glass. “Really, I can’t tell you what that means to us. To me.”

Spock considers. “Captain Pike is ... very important to me. His support and his words have held great meaning for me, and I am ... gratified that they continue to do so for others.”

“Thank you. I...” they nod. “Thank you.”

The cadet turns away.

“Cadet Swender.”

The cadet turns back.

Spock holds up his hand in salute. “Live long and prosper.”

The cadet stares blankly, then blinks, stands to attention, and returns the salute. “Peace and - Peace and Long Life.”

Spock nods.

He holds the data unit carefully in his hand.

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As he enters the room, Spock knows with clarity that this is what Chris saw and felt on Boreth. The pain, not as much the sharp sudden shock as in the accident, does not reach through his control, but this close he knows the weight of what is there.

He hears Commodore Mendez make his introductions, hears ‘two flashes mean no’.

“I thought you might make an exception for them.”

*No.*

Captain Pike will have worked out his intentions in coming here, he will know the risks.

But Spock is not ready to turn away.

He hears Captain Kirk’s voice, “Chris, if there’s anything I can do for you -”

*No.*

Captain Kirk - cannot be put at risk by this plan. That is for him alone. But - he believes Jim will understand why he would take on this risk for Chris.

And he will not give up his chance.

“Captain Pike, may I remain for a moment?”

*Yes.*

Captain Kirk and Commodore Mendez depart.

“You know why I’ve come, Captain. It’s only six days away at maximum warp and I have it well planned.” *I know what I am taking on. I am prepared.*

*No.*

“I have never disobeyed your orders before, Captain, but this time I must.” *Let me do this.*

*No.*

“I know. I know it is treachery and it’s mutiny,” *I know the penalty it carries. I know the risk.* “but I must do this.”

*No.*

“I have no choice.” *Listen to me.*

*No.*

“I understand if you are saying no out of concern for the risk I am placing myself in, but this is -”

*No. No. No.*

“Captain,” he says. “Chris. Will you allow me to attempt a mind meld? To try to understand -”

No.

"I will not attempt a mind meld if you do not consent. But if you are concerned about the effects of the experience on my mental state, please remember that I have had a range of challenging experiences from melds, and have successfully recovered from all of them. I am much more practiced at control than I was years ago. And," he adds, "if your concern is solely for me, please know that I have weighed the risks, and I am much more concerned about being without the ability to understand your experience and state of mind. But it is your choice."

A long pause.

Yes.

He splays his fingers, resting his hand on Chris's temple as lightly, as gently as he can.

*"My mind to your mind."*

It is like - smoke, trying to breathe through smoke, trying to see through smoke, to hear over the roar of fire -

"Captain?"

He can feel the presence of Captain Pike in the mind meld even as the smoke hides him from view.

"-ey'll kill you."

It's Captain Pike's voice, hoarse, breaking, struggling to be heard over the roaring of flames.

"I know the risk," he repeats.

"-nt die, Spock - Spock -"

"Captain -" he keeps trying to move through the smoke, even as it catches at his throat, even as it feels as though his skin should be melting in the heat.

He has used mind-melds to communicate with those seriously injured, officers fevered or life forms in severe distress. This - this steps beyond those experiences in how punishingly oppressive, how all-consuming the environment of pain and fatigue is. The techniques that would normally allow him to assist in stabilizing, calming another's mind appear to falter - even steadying his *own* mind from absorbing the pain is a test of his training.

" - knew." There is a muffled noise, between a scream and a sob, before the voice manages to resume, hoarse. "I knew ... had... to happen -"

Finally, he sees Captain Pike -

- Teeth gritted against another scream of pain, flesh melting away in the heat, slumped against a wall -

Spock moves towards him quickly. "I know. I know that you knew. But - "

"Knew - the end. Not - to fix -" Chris grits out.

"This may have to be a part of your life. But it is not the end." Spock reaches out, lays a hand along the side of Chris's face, against bubbling flesh, and focuses with all the dedication he has on drawing some of the pain away. "It does not have to be the end. *I refuse to let it be.*"

Chris takes in a deep breath of air that is momentarily free of smoke. "Not - you. Not ... not if you die."

"Chris -" he can feel the effort draining him, reflex overtaking training as he gasps for air and catches only the rapidly returning smoke.

He can see the toll the effort is taking on Chris, as well; even with the moment's breath Spock could give him, he is slumping against the wall.

He can feel the mental space closing in on them, smoke and fatigue pressing in until the space will be impossible to hold.

"I know you would not, do not ask me to do this," he says, pressing his forehead against Chris's, pressing in as if he can shield him from the encroaching smoke. "But I asked you once, to believe that I would sacrifice for you freely. For any part of you that survived." he says. "This choice is not a debt. Nor a duty. Simply something I must do, or I would not be - Spock."

Chris looks at him, and he can still see fear and concern in his eyes, but there is no time left to say anything as -

- his face is damp. Sweat and tears, both.

It appears he has briefly lost consciousness after the mind meld had broken. He lifts himself back to his feet.

Captain Pike also appears unconscious, but there appears no alarms from the medical monitoring equipment, and he can sense through the lingering connection that he has simply drifted into unconsciousness from the exertion.

He still has the data unit, from the cadets. But it can wait.

He has to move forward.

He cannot, will not, leave Captain Pike to what he has experienced.

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The first thing Captain Pike's illusory form does is sit down on the rocks next to where his wheelchair had just been sitting - where his wheelchair is, in actuality - and then lies back against the rock.

Spock sits down next to him, cross legged, and waits.

"She was right," Chris says, eventually, then lets out a chuckle.

"Captain?" Spock starts, and then adjusts. "Chris?"

"The pain... is gone."

Spock lets out a sigh of relief.

Chris stretches out his limbs, experimentally. "There's no fatigue in my ... body." His expression is a bit wry, like he's aware of the strangeness of referring to this as his body. "But I suppose even the Telosians can't pull mental energy from where it ...doesn't exist."

"I..." Spock starts, and then clears his throat. "I believe I may have glimpsed some ... small idea of what might have caused such ... mental exhaustion."

Chris chuckles, not unkindly. "You know, there are some things you never really lose from being a test pilot. Being able to get into the cockpit of a new ship and figure it out quick, get something moving at full impulse and have it feel like it's an extension of yourself in - a day. But after what happened..." he shakes his head slightly. "It's like trying to fly a ship I don't know, that's not like anything I've flown, but the ship is filled with..."

"Fire and smoke."

"Yes." Chris says. "Exactly." A pause. "I'd say I'm sorry you had to see that, and... I am, but you did put yourself there, Spock."

"And I would do so again."

Chris looks at him. "... Spock, when I thought they might execute you after we got here -"

"Yes, you made that very clear. With the limited means you had, 'No.' is still obvious."

"...You know the only damn reason I voted for conviction was because stopping the trial before we crossed into Talosian space would mean you were only court martialed and not -"

"Executed, I know," Spock says. "Very - logical."

Chris lets out a huff of laughter.

"Now that Starfleet has seen fit not to execute me, and - you've arrived on this planet." Spock tilts his head. "Would you prefer not to stay? To return to the Starbase?"

"Go back into that ship filled with fire and smoke, trying to operate it while on fire, with my teeth, after being awake for a week and recovering from Tarkalean fever?" Chris says. "I'd do it in a second to keep you from execution."

"Chris," Spock starts. "I - hope you have never been given reason to think I would not do the same for you. Without hesitation."

"Well, I think if I didn't know that before, I would now. But time seems to have decided ... which way that's going to go," Chris says, and then pauses. "I do know, Spock. Thank you. And," he adds, "now that you're safe ... no. No, I don't want to go back to that." He shakes his head. "I don't even know if that way of describing what it was like makes any goddamn sense. Like I said, I'm very tired."

"Of course, Chris." Spock says. "I am only surprised that you did not use a horse related metaphor."

At that, Chris actually laughs. "No horse has ever been as damn mean to me as that chair," he says, and leans his head back against the rock. "You know, I think I'll be able to sleep. Really sleep."

"You have not been able to?"

Chris shakes his head. "Snatches. Half-sleep. I don't know how it makes sense to be... numb and in pain at the same time, but it doesn't help sleep. And when you get back, tell Starfleet to put a head rest on the next iteration of those chairs."

"Mm. I will."

Chris looks at him. "You spent a lot of time planning this, didn't you?"

He contemplates the question for a moment. "I have been considering it for some time. But only since finding out the details of the accident you foresaw," *after it happened*, as Chris had deliberately held back the details before, "was I able to begin to put the pieces together."

"You might have tried to prevent it," Chris says, like he's heard the unspoken words. "Or... spent time wondering whether you could have."

“You had said it was unavoidable and necessary.” He does not say *and you implied that if you were to avoid it I would take your place*, but they both know. He also does not say *I would not have considered trying to prevent it, I would not have wondered*, because those would be lies and they are far past that.

“Still.” Chris doesn’t have to say *I wanted to spare you any pain*, that has always been the truth of Spock’s experience at his side.

He dips his head in acknowledgement. “The Talosians and Vina believed they would be able to give you an experience that minimized your suffering, while maintaining your freedom.” Spock considers. “I did not know if you would accept it, upon reaching here. But it was necessary to me to try.”

Chris tilts his head, looks at him. “I wish you hadn’t risked yourself. But... knowing that the Talosians helped you, having spoken to Vina... even just experiencing this - and knowing what the alternative is...” he trails away for a moment. “Do you remember Ash Tyler?”

Spock nods.

“Back on Discovery - he said something about how I was pushing myself to try and prove my bravery. He wasn’t entirely wrong. But now... I’ve faced this. I’ve done... what I needed to do, because I know who I am. I don’t need to prove something to myself by making this harder. I just want to be able to sleep.”

“You will.”

Chris lets out a long breath. “I think ... I think I can *live* here. Not just survive.” He turns to look at Spock. “Spock, are - are you happy? Or - I guess that’s probably not the right question.”

“I understand. You are asking about my well being, and my - satisfaction with my life and work, on Enterprise.” *Without you captaining it*. He nods. “I am well, Chris.”

“You don’t just need to say that to keep me from worrying, just - I know I can’t do much, but you can talk to me.”

“You are still, technically, Fleet Captain.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. And - it’s not that I don’t want to be able to help, but - it’s more important to me that you can talk to me, if you want.”

“Vulcans cannot lie,” Spock teases.

“Oh, of course.” Chris says. He looks at Spock. “You really are well, aren’t you?”

He considers. “Yes,” he says. “I think I am.”

“Good.” Chris is looking at him, something slightly strained in his expression.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m happy for you. Just thinking. You know,” he adds, “I’ve always thought he was a good man, Jim Kirk.”

“I know.”

“He talked to me, back on the Starbase, and back on Enterprise. I wasn’t sure ... Not everyone does that. He listened to me, and advocated for me to be treated as - as an officer.”

*As a person*, Spock hears. *As Fleet Captain Christopher Pike*.

“*You* didn’t listen to me, when it came down to it,” Chris adds more wryly, “but I know that had nothing to do with my physical situation, *you’re* just stubborn.”

“Stubbornness would be... illogical,” he deadpans in return, and Chris smiles. “And I was not the first officer to disobey orders in order to come here.”

Chris chuckles. “I can’t argue with that,” he says. “I had a feeling he would make a good Captain for Enterprise. Jim, I mean.”

“He is not you,” Spock says. Chris is - Chris is not replaceable.

“Well,” Chris says. “I’ve always been of the opinion that no Captain - including me - actually *deserved* you as an officer. We were just lucky enough to have you, for a while,” he smiles, a bit sadly, even as his voice trails away. “Well, maybe Number One as Captain might. Do you know - how is she?”

“Serving as Captain with the highest of honors, still.”

“Of course.” Chris looks away, as if that could hide the downcast eyes above his smile.

“Chris,” he asks, “Do you believe you will be - happy here?”

Chris smiles, a little sadly. “Well, I suppose only time will tell for sure. But... I think I can be. I think there’s a much better chance that I will be than before. And... thank you for that. Even though -”

“You wish I hadn’t risked myself.”

“Yes,” he says, ducking his head before looking back up at Spock. “I am a bit of a broken record.”

Spock looks at him. There is still that same strain in Chris’s expression. “Chris. There appears to be something else you wish to say.”

Chris chuckles. “Can’t get anything past you, Spock. You know me too well.”

“I disagree,” Spock says. “I believe I know you precisely the right amount for eleven years, four months, and five days of shared service and friendship.”

“I love you,” Chris beams. “You know that, right?”

“I do.”

“I didn’t - huh. Don’t,” he corrects the tense, “say it enough.”

Spock doesn’t say *the last time you said those exact words was two weeks and three days before your accident, and you must have known*. Instead, he says, “I believe that one can convey the sentiment without saying the precise words. By that measure, you have said that far more times than could be counted as ‘enough’.”

Chris smiles, a sad tinge to it. “Just thinking about how I probably won’t get many other chances to say it, from all the way out here.”

“That does not change the fact that I will know it to be true. Just as I know the same is true for my part.”

Chris takes a breath, just looking at him for a long moment. “I’m - glad. Even...” he trails off. “I really am happy for you, that you’re well. I’m glad. It’s ... good to know.” He smiles. “It’s a relief that you’ll be alright after bringing the ship here, but I don’t expect that Starfleet will change its mind and start allowing travel to Talos IV willy-nilly. I signed that report, after all.”

Spock nods, slowly. “But you will always be able to reach me.”

Chris tilts his head. “The Talosians’ telepathy only reaches so far, Spock. You’ll be off to strange new worlds on *Enterprise*,” he says, wistful, “well beyond that.”

“That distance does not matter. If you are - in distress, and trying to reach out, I will know.”

A pause. Chris blinks. “I’m sorry, did I miss something?”

“...” Spock says.

“...?”

“...” Spock continues. “... Do you remember the events on Illus?”

He blinks. “That was the colony dispute, right? It was on the verge of a shoot out, and then there was the rockslide - you were there.”

“You sustained a serious head injury and several major injuries to your spine and lungs as well as several major breaks in your legs and right arm in removing several civilians from the path of the rock slide.”

Chris nods. It wasn’t a particularly pleasant memory, rocks colliding into him as he’d pushed a group out of the way of the disaster, but he’d take it over being back in that chair. “And you managed to keep me stable long enough to get us both transported up to medical. Joe said it was something of a miracle that I pulled through.”

“It was not.”

Chris looks at him.

Spock continues. “When we were young, my sister was severely injured in an attack. My father transferred a portion of ... the energies of his katra, to restore her life and stabilize her. It created a lasting connection. That event was how I knew such a process could work for a human recipient.” Though he had held a shred of doubt that it would work from someone who was only half Vulcan - it had not stopped him trying.

“That - that’s what you did? To save my life?”

He nods.

Chris smiles. “Well. I knew I had you to thank for getting me out alive, but ... I guess I didn’t know how much.”

“No thanks are necessary.” He had no regrets about his choice, indeed, the connection and knowledge it allowed was something he harbored a great deal of gratitude for.

“I know that - that sort of thing is very private, but you could have stood to mention it to me before.” Chris sounds amused. He pauses, leans back, and a shadow crosses his face. “That was - was that even two years ago? It wasn’t that long before I left the *Enterprise*.” He frowns. “Spock - did you - did you think that was what I saw on Boreth?”

“I did not ... consider it to be out of the realm of possibility. As the only details I had on the event were that the ‘nearly a decade’ from when you told me, the vagueness of the year range did not indicate that it could be ruled out, and the experience suggested that the range may have been ‘rounded up’ with the intent of not causing undue distress.” Spock says. “As it has only been seven years, two months, and four days since you told me, that assumption was not inaccurate.”



Chris chuckles fondly. "I suppose that's true. If it helps... I think I kept rounding it up after I heard it for my own sake."

"I understand. I did not consider it to be an... ill-intended deception. Though perhaps the possibility that you would ... avoid the exact details to avoid troubling me with the possibility of preventing your fate."

"You tried to save me. Hell, you *did* save me." Chris says. "With part of your soul, which I think counts as something of a miracle."

"I made a choice." Spock says. "The same choice I would have made had I known nothing of what you had seen on Boreth."

Chris smiles wryly. "So I wouldn't have been wrong in thinking you would have tried to prevent it."

"Mm." Spock does not comment.

After a long pause, Chris starts, "So..." he says, contemplative, "so if something happens here to me, you would know? That's - that's what you were getting at."

"Yes."

"I suppose," and the level thoughtfulness of his tone cannot quite hide a wistful note of sadness. "That goes both ways. If you run into trouble out there with the Enterprise... will I know? Not," he adds, sadness more thoroughly permeating his voice, "that I'd be able to be much help."

"I ... believe that Michael was once able to sense Sarek's distress upon - a serious injury he sustained." He had never asked Michael for more details of the experience. Now he never could. "It is... possible. It is a lasting connection."

"A lasting connection... huh." There's a sudden sharp intake of breath. "Spock - you - you felt the accident?"

He pauses for a moment, but - there is no way to temper his answer. "Yes."

Chris looks down. "I'm sorry."

"It is not something you need to apologize for."

"I ..." he shakes his head. "I'd never wish that pain on you."

"I know." Spock says, and then adds. "This would always have been my choice, Captain. Chris."

Chris looks at him, and Spock can see *This is why you didn't tell me* almost ready to be spoken, but he doesn't. They both know.

"With regards to the accident," Spock continues. "Upon arriving on Starbase 11, I encountered one of the cadets you saved during the accident, Cadet Swender. They provided me with a recorded message that they and the rest of the surviving cadets wished to share with you." He holds out the data unit to Chris. "A small module able to play this recording has been beamed down as well, if and when you choose to view it."

"They..." Chris's eyes are damp. "You - you saw Dusty?"

"Yes. They expressed ... great gratitude," Chris's head drops. Spock continues, "for how your advice and counsel had aided them and their fellow cadets in recovering from this tragedy. They indicated that giving you this message was of great importance and meaning to them."

"I wish I had been able to save them all."

"I know."

"Thank you. For bringing this to me." He gives something of a chagrined smile. "I'll watch this later, I already can tell," he wipes the corner of his eyes, "that I'll end up crying. But - I deeply appreciate it."

Humans shed tears for many illogical reasons. He may not fully understand this one, but he can certainly appreciate the weight it carries.

"If you see them - tell them that, please?"

"Of course."

Chris lets out a long breath. "You'll have to go back to Starbase 11 eventually."

"Yes."

That leaving will mean not seeing him again hangs over them both.

After several long moments, Spock says, "I can comm Captain Kirk. Ask him to transport down."

"No. Not... right this minute."

"I know you are tired. I could depart."

"No - no. Let's just ... stay here for a little while, if you can."

"Of course."

"I might end up falling asleep for a bit. I could use a nap."

"I will stay here with you."

Chris reaches towards Spock, pats the back of his hand. "Thank you, Spock."

---

There is a gentle rustling behind him.

"Oh..."

Vina has a gentle smile on her face when Spock turns to look at her. She is looking at the sleeping Chris, and when she turns to look at Spock, she raises a finger to her lips and nods - a common human indicator for silence. She will not disturb Chris while he sleeps.

She sits next to him, and asks in a low whisper. "He ... decided to stay?"

Spock nods.

"I'm glad." She says quietly. "I am sorry for what he's been through, and what he will have to leave behind. But - I felt his pain, and I am glad he no longer feels it." She looks at Spock. "Thank you for bringing him here. I know it was a great risk for you."

"No more than what he has already risked for me," Spock says. "And far less than what I would freely risk for him, regardless."

"He will miss you," she says. Spock does not reply. "I look forward to getting to know the real Christopher Pike, as you have."

*Elven years, four months, five days.*

Chris has much longer than that left to live.

He nods. It's important that she appreciates the real Christopher Pike.

"You're sure they will not allow you to return here?" Vina asks, as though she has picked up on his illogical grief and even more illogical jealousy.

He nods.

"Federation rules. And Starfleet."

"I will know if he is not well here."

"Even far away, on your ship." She smiles, a little wistfully. "Do you need to return? To your ship?"

"I will stay," Spock says. "I informed him that I would be present when he woke."

There are duties that remain. He cannot stay until he is ready to leave - he cannot imagine how long that would be.

But he will stay until Chris wakes, and he can say goodbye.

## II.

It's fair to say that Spock is one of her favorite crewmates, past or present. As someone who'd been referred to as more of a computer than a person, it was easy to have some empathy for someone else criticized for not being 'normal' enough. On top of that, after she'd been able to be out about being Illyrian, they'd talked about their shared experience of being non-humans in Starfleet. Spock is logical, and deeply curious, and she likes both of those things. Loyal - she could always count on him to have her back, and *always* Chris's - and dependable whether it was a routine day or a crisis. Reliable.

Well, most of the time.

And the 'most of the time' made it easy to forget the fraction of the time that Spock would go and do something absolutely *batshit insane*.

"You left him," she says, in furious disbelief, "with the people who *held him captive* - who tried to force him -" she can't even say it, she's too angry.

Spock dips his head in acknowledgement. "They've changed. They have kept to their word upon our departure. That has been consistent in my communications with Vina and ... in my own experience with them, upon returning to Talos IV."

Like that makes it any better - Chris had risked his life by going against Starfleet's order - the order he had helped write - with *Discovery* to get Spock back from that. And now Spock had risked his own life - pardoned or not, the risk had been real, and quite frankly she's sure the official report was glossing more than a few details, she was so angry she didn't even have time to go into her anger about *that* risk - to *put* Chris back there.

"And you believe that? After what they did? You think you can trust anything from - even putting that *aside* -" she adds. "You took him to a planet so close to total civilization collapse it was kidnapping people and *left him there*?"

Spock's expression is entirely flat. "I have been there, and I have been in communication with them. They have had the medical and nutritional resources for Crewman Vina and they have confirmed that they have the resources for Captain Pike as well."

She waits for a moment, expecting more explanation. Silence. "And you just *believed* them? At their word? Spock, you are a *science* officer, for the love of -"

"The Captain," Spock starts, and then pauses. "I will know if the Captain is not well."

She takes a breath. "*Please* tell me that means you've set up stable communications with Talos IV."

"It involves ... Vulcan telepathy."

She stares at him. "I thought that was mostly - contact based?"

"Not ...in this case."

She stares at him.

He stares back, and finally cracks. "It involves... Vulcan katras."

She blinks, and then, after a moment, sighs deeply. "Not all of us have Vulcan psychic soul bonds with Captain Pike, that we *somehow didn't tell anyone about*, Spock," she says, her voice forcibly restrained. "You want me to count on - what if something happens to *you*? No," she continues, finally resolved. "We're finding a way back. I don't care how many Starfleet arms I need to twist."

---

"- yes, this is the Captain."

He hears Spock's voice first, and then -

"Number One? What are you doing here?"

"What am *I* doing here? What are *you* doing here?"

Chris looks between her and Spock. "Uh -" *Did you not tell her?*

"When I found out Spock had brought you here, I thought he'd lost his mind - and frankly, the jury's still out on that. Though I suppose I have to trust at least his telepathy to confirm this is really you and not just a Talosian trick."

"It's me. Though the fact that I'm like this -" he gestures at all of himself - not really something - that can encompass the lack of crushing pain - technically counts as a Talosian trick."

"Chris -"

"Una - what are you *doing* here? Starfleet -" he looks at Spock - if *both* of them had risked themselves for - what -?"

She waves a hand, "We wheedled out approvals ahead of time, Chris, I didn't go haring off like this one. But you -"

"Captain," Spock says, "I will leave you and Number One to this discussion."

He shoots Spock a look. *You're just dropping in and then leaving me like this?*

Spock looks at him, not a crack in his level expression.

Fine. "Sure, Spock. Vina's just over the ridge, if you wanted to talk to her."

He nods. "Number One and I are going to take a walk this way. I have something to show her."

---

When Spock comes over the ridge, he sees Vina, sitting on a tree branch.

She looks over her shoulder at him, surprise dawning over her face. "Spock! I - you found a way back. Is everything alright?"

"Number One... had concerns about Captain Pike's situation. She managed to find us a way back here."

"Well," Vina says, "I am sure Chris is happy to see you back - you both back. I hope we can allay those concerns. Given... what happened when she was here last, I suppose no one could blame her."

"There are some... indications, that her concerns have merit. A closer investigation from orbit of power and related resources suggest that they may not be sustainable for the lifetimes of you and Captain Pike."

She frowns slightly. "That wasn't my field of study. And I suppose things have substantially advanced since I've been gone from Starfleet. I suppose it's possible."

"I take it you haven't been given reason to have concerns about your situation." Spock says. "No... returns to any similar situations to when Number 1 was here last."

"No." She shakes her head. "Everything's been - well, it's been *different* since Chris returned," she smiles a little. "But we've been well. There've been no problems with the Talosians." She looks at him. "I said to bring Chris here, I didn't leave then. I didn't leave before that, even. Or when you were first here. It was worth it."

"All is as well as it appears, then?"

She gives a little laugh, without much humor. "'It feels as good as it looks.' It means I feel like I'm in a human body that's not reassembled with joints grating against each other, organs squeezed and spine out of place. It doesn't hurt to move, or laugh, or sleep."

"Chris explained something similar."

She smiles. "I know."

"Chris... has been well?" He starts. She nods. "The last time we spoke, you said you were looking forward to getting to know the real Christopher Pike."

Her smile widens. "I have been glad to," she says. "It has been... different, to have someone else here. It was just me and the Talosians for so long, and only a few years, really, where I was... free."

He tilts his head, considering her. "You mentioned your choice to stay, each of the times Starfleet vessels have reached Talos 4." She nods. "When I brought Chris here... I asked him whether he wished to stay. I did not ask you."

She laughs "I would not have said that you should bring him here if I thought ... that this was a place I would want to leave. If I had wanted to try and leave, I would have asked," she says. "I know I am isolated from the rest of the world... from the rest of the galaxy here. But I still chose this. I have my own world here."

He looks around. The scenery around them appears thickly forested, sunlight dappling through the trees.

She shakes her head. "Why should I force myself through unnecessary pain just to fit? To interact with the world in a way someone else considers real and correct? I'm happy." She shakes her head. "I don't need to walk through their world in pain just to have them look at my body with pity. My body - that's not my *self*. My body walking away from here, through another world, onto your ship, even - that's not what makes me *present*. It doesn't mean I can be myself there."

Spock nods, thinking of how he had caught only fragments of Chris's thoughts as Chris had pushed through pain on Starbase 11. Thinking of how Vina had been projected to speak with him on Enterprise, and, he was sure, Chris on Discovery. "I do not mean to dispute your decision. Merely to be sure I know and understand it."

"You might not, but..." She trails away. "Is Number One going to try and convince him to leave?"

"She wants to be certain that he is well, wherever he is. As do I," Spock says.

"You convinced Starfleet to let you come back here for that," she says, considering. "To break the isolation."

"We have discussed some of her concerns, and ... possibilities I may not have considered."

"Well," Vina says. "I suppose we'll see what she has to say."

---

When they make their way to where Chris knows his physical body sits, he waves a hand. "You can let us see."

As his body - what little of it is visible outside of the surrounding metal - appears, Number One stares with the implacable expression that shows nothing.

She waits a moment, as if expecting something else, and then turns to him. "So you're in a wheelchair, Chris, I knew al -"

"It's not *that*."

"Then what is it? What is it that I'm not seeing? The communications technology could be improved beyond -"

"You *can't* see it, not -" Not without Spock's telepathic abilities, "but - in there is just. Pain. Like constant fire and smoke. It's not just the technology of the chair that's limiting. It doesn't matter how many lights or switches there are if just reaching one takes all the strength I have. I don't even know if I would have *had* the energy to reach more switches. Now? Now I can have a conversation with you and I could have a conversation with Spock after this, and then maybe even do something else, and I'd still have the energy to think afterwards. That's what this is. It's letting me *live*."

"Under the control of people who *abducted* you -" she waves an arm around. "This isn't the real world, Chris! This isn't -"

"And I got to be a part of the real world from my hospital room?" Chris snaps. "At least now I can sleep."

That gives her pause. "You couldn't sleep?"

He shakes his head. "Only snatches. That, or thoroughly drugged unconsciousness."

"If they knew - if Joe knew - they could have found a way -"

"They *didn't*."

"But they *can*," she insists. "Chris, come back to Starfleet. You know you don't need to be dependent on this -"

"I *am* dependent on this. *Me* -" he waves a hand up and down. "Being able to be - to have any kind of life - any kind of self that you can recognize -"

"I don't believe that's true."

Chris looks at her, and he drops his head. Of course there had been a part of him. A part of him that had tried to protect Spock. He had been there, it had just - "You're right," he says. "It's not all this. But what there was before - that was a - it felt like being a shadow of who I was. I can't *be* anything close to all of myself when so much is being eaten up by pain, when it costs that much just to say *no*."

"And you are here? Yourself?"

"More than I could be as I was. Much more." He shakes his head slightly and admits, "I'm not the same as I was before. There's the neuronal damage, and - it's not the same kind of fatigue as before, but they can't give me mental energy, or repair the brain. I have to sleep and rest more, and sometimes I forget words, or lose track of memories. I have a good idea of most of my limitations now. Some things that would be part of getting old anyway," he says, and she chuckles. "But they've - separated me from the bulk of the pain. I *can* sleep. And when I'm not fighting through that pain, I can do more with the energy I have. Like talk to you." He smiles.

She looks at him, considering. "And that's -" she pauses, for just a moment, "- that's worth being dependent on these *people*? Not even tryi-"

"Do you think I didn't know what I was choosing when I chose to stay?" Chris shakes his head. "I know what they did to me, what they did to you." He can practically hear Number One's teeth grinding. "I know what they're capable of better than anyone but Vina. But I know what Starfleet has, and what they tried - and they did *try*, Number One. Being dependent on this wasn't a hard choice to make."

"Even when it means leaving all of your friends? Not being able to see any of us again?"

"There's a lot of people I won't be able to see again," he says, almost too quietly to hear.

"Being cut off from the rest of your life?"

"There's surviving, and then there's living," he says. "I was already cut off from living any kind of life - from all of you, in any meaningful sense."

"You didn't let any of us *know*. We didn't have a chance to visit you -"

"I knew what was going to happen," he says, and Number One winces. "I knew. And I wanted you to remember me as me. Not as a shade."

"And now - this is you."

"Yes. By luck and Spock's stubbornness," he says, spreading his hands.

There's a pause. Number One shakes her head slowly. "Do you really think that? Surviving, and living. Do you think you couldn't have -"

"I -" it's an easy answer, but years of respect - love, friendship, and *trust* with Number One mean she deserves his fullest consideration. He thinks about it again. "I can't say for *sure*. Maybe. But - the life I have here, the ability to -" to really sleep, to not be forcing himself through pain every single moment. He trails away, waves a hand. "I decided it was worth it."

“It wasn’t a hard choice to make.” She repeats his own words back at him.

“I - I should have let you know. I should have let you visit me, before.”

“I... well.” She shakes her head. “I can understand.”

“Still. I’m sorry.” He shakes his head. “I’m glad you’re here now. And - I made this choice, but if you think I don’t miss you every day -”

“Chris, I don’t know if I’ll be able to make it back here. If either of us will. What we had to jump through to get here...” She stares at him. “You can’t really just expect us to leave you here, at the mercy of these -” she waves a hand, “- these - manipulative bastards,” she tacks on, sounding as though she couldn’t come up with anything sufficiently derogatory to satisfy her.

“I do,” he says. “I’m sorry, Una. But the past months, compared to the months before - this is a life I’m happy living, as much as I miss you all.”

“Just you and Vina.”

“And the horses and barn cats.”

“That aren’t *real*.”

“I know. But they do make for a nicer life,” he says, and they are suddenly walking into a barn. He crouches down to pet a barn cat.

“You can just - you did that?”

“Well, the Talosians did, at my request.”

“A good way to persuade you to stay.”

“They haven’t done anything I haven’t asked for.” He stands up. “I know, you’d have to be crazy *not* to be suspicious. But - it has changed here.”

Una looks around, and finally leans back against a stall door, reaches up and lets one of the horses sniff her hand. “And yet, but of the fact that Spock and I already knew - and about a mile’s worth of favors and paperwork - we’d be dead for coming here.”

“I made the choice knowing that you couldn’t -”

“You made the trade-off between that pain and being cut off from the rest of the world. From the rest of us.”

“Talos IV being cut off - that was the agreement from our report.”

“Reporting on the Talosian’s beliefs.” There’s a furrow in her brow.

“You’re getting at something.”

“Why are we taking them at their word that their illusion technology would destroy every other civilization? You’ve already proven that humans are ‘uniquely resistant’ or whatever other bullshit they offered up as an excuse. And honestly - we’re on the verge of comparable technology anyway.”

He chuckles. “If we were, that would solve a lot of problems for me.”

She frowns. “Not - what they can do for you. But at the very least, I don’t think gaining the power to live in fantasy is so unique to them. Or so inherently destructive. The Talosians ... losing themselves in their mental powers to the point they lost their ability to manage their technology, to survive - it’s a tragedy, yes. But it’s one that happened after a horrific nuclear war that drove them underground in the first place. That’s its context.”

“So you’re proposing...?”

“You shouldn’t have to make the trade off. Remove the Federation restrictions on Talos IV. That we still have the death penalty in place for anything is already barbaric enough.”

“On that, we agree,” he says. “But I already got Starfleet to change its mind once, on genetic manipulation. I don’t know if I can ask -”

“*Not* genetic manipulation. Me. And the handful of others who managed to make a case that fit the precedent they set for me. *I* got asylum, because they were forced to see how my context fit *that* law, and not the law I broke.” Una says. “In that future, that Discovery was sent to - we don’t *know* that Stamets’ genetic modifications aren’t considered illegal in whatever Starfleet exists in the future -”

“Starfleet allowed -”

“Starfleet gave him a pass at the time because they *needed* him - because they were forced to pay attention to the context in the middle of a war! Context that they’ll ignore *unless* forced to. I know that perfectly well.”

“Una -”

“Do you think he was prone to becoming a world-conquering megalomaniac? Stamets.”

“... No.”

“And if he had stayed, would Starfleet have seen that, or would they have seen Khan Noonien-Singh?”

“If he had stayed, I would have -”

“I know you would have fought for him. You would have done everything in your power to get him help that would give him the best chance. And that might even have won the day, too. Just like you did for me. But you know how close a call that was. And La’an could tell you how prone Federation citizens are to seeing Khan Noonien-Singh where he’s not.”

“What point are you trying to make?”

“The Federation ...” she shakes her head. “The Federation is right about a lot of things. But they have a tendency to take a horrible tragedy, pick one prominent element of it, and think that should no longer happen ever, to avoid another tragedy. Sometimes they’re right. But sometimes they jump at something without taking into account whether there truly is an underlying pattern, much less causality, or how that case is shaped by its context.”

“That seems like a bit of an oversimplification.”

“Is it? Khan Noonien-Singh’s existence was shaped by a horrific period of Earth’s history. The horrific actions he took made him a monster, not his DNA. La’an proves that. She’s not a monster. Neither am I. Neither is any Illyrian. And neither is Paul Stamets.”

“And it took hundreds of years and *significant* risk for Starfleet and the Federation to accept me. It saved *me*, but a colony *died* trying. How many other Illyrians missed their chance? How many are missing their chance now, and suffering for it? And how much does the Federation lose by keeping us isolated?”

“It’s the same here, on Talos IV. We’re forgetting that its context was the largest part in making it a tragedy.” She looks at him. “If you believe that this place has really changed - if you’re going to spend the rest of your life here - why shouldn’t that ruling be changed?”

“People can come here. Visit you. You shouldn’t have to have to trade communication with the rest of the world against - against something you need. You don’t have to be cut off from the rest of us. And -” she adds, with mounting energy. “We can make it so this option isn’t closed to only you. I didn’t - I didn’t understand why this was so important to you, why this was something you were willing to depend on, but now - if I was in your position, I don’t know if I wouldn’t make the same choice.”

“I -” he starts, and finds he doesn’t know what to say. “I’m glad you understand.”

“I wish... I wish I didn’t have to. I can’t ask you to change your choice any more than I’d - disallow Commander Nhan’s medical implants, so she’d have to work while struggling to breathe.”

*Wouldn’t ask a human to go to the Vaultera Nebula system without an oxygen mask. Or -*

“Or disallow holoconferencing, so she couldn’t make a call from an environment where she could breathe normally. But - Chris - maybe it doesn’t have to be that choice.”

*Maybe there’s a way that saves all of you.*

But there hadn’t been.

This - this is different. The crystal hadn’t shown him anything of what Spock had done - hadn’t shown him anything beyond making it clear that the pain of fire and smoke and melting flesh would go on and on -

This is different. And if anyone can find a way, it’s Number One.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be a choice between limited interaction in our world full of pain,” Una continues, “or less pain here but interaction that’s ... limited differently. We can change it. There’s no good reason other people shouldn’t be able to be a part of this world, or that others in similar positions shouldn’t be able to choose to - to interact with the world differently. Obviously,” she adds, a bit more wryly, “we can’t count on everyone having a friend who’s willing to go off-rails and steal a starship and risk their life to come here. What next? Making people exchange *currency* for assistive technology and medical treatments?”

He snorts.

“And if we let research teams come here - let them try to understand how this technology, how their telepathy works, we could -”

He frowns sharply. “I don’t want to have to be a guinea pig.”

“And I didn’t want to have to be a shining hero with a perfect narrative to justify my existence, but sometimes we don’t get what we want.”

Her voice is harsh. He stares at her.

“I’m... sorry. That went too far.”

“No, I - I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“How could you? I never told you.”

“I ... I never meant to make you feel that way. If I did...”

“It doesn’t matter.”

"I think it does."

"Oh, Chris." She smiles, and shakes her head. "You're too hard on yourself."

He isn't so sure.

Thinking about the Vaulteran Nebula... well. Number One would understand trade offs regarding isolation, and pain.

"I wouldn't let you be a guinea pig," she says, changing the topic, and - well, he lets her. It seems only fair.

"I know you wouldn't," he says. "You certainly didn't the last time I was here."

She shoots him a crooked smile. "The Talosians, on the other hand... well, they could stand to help support some good intentioned Starfleet research. And they might not have a choice, from the state of things. At the very least, they need some support to keep you alive for the rest of your natural life; at this rate, they'll run out of resources."

"Wait, really?"

She looks at him with a frown. "That's another reason we need to let other people onto this planet. You don't know what they're keeping from you. You and Spock might believe they've reformed, but I don't. They asked Burnham to relive one of her worst memories with Spock as payment for helping him. How do you know you're not just soap opera to them? Just a different kind of -"

"I live here, Una. You don't need to patronize me by saying I don't know what's -"

"I am not trying to - it is not your fault, it is not *anyone's* fault but the Talosians if things are being deliberately kept from you in order to exploit you," she says. "You deserve - you deserve to have access to enough information and perspectives to make your own decisions, and if you're - relying on the Talosian's power, you deserve to have oversight and advocacy on your behalf. Wouldn't you ask the same for anyone else?"

"Vina -"

"God, Chris, look what happened *to* Vina! She's a case study in why these people shouldn't be trusted. I wouldn't have thought you'd need the reminder."

"What do you think is going to happen -"

"I don't know! But I know we *lose* when we isolate people out of fear. And that's what we're doing," she says. "You - you *and* Vina - shouldn't be alone in this. We shouldn't - needlessly cut off anyone here. Leave them isolated, or restricted. We wouldn't do that to anyone else who - who needed some other form of technology to interact. We don't just - shove people out of sight instead of giving them what they need to live. And if what you need to live is here - then we shouldn't be keeping that isolated."

He smiles. "You've really come around on this technology."

"I was your first officer for years. I know how to listen to someone else's perspective and realize when they have a point." She smiles in return.

"And you've never been afraid to tell me when I'm wrong." His smile widens. "It's what made you a good first officer. The best."

"Maybe we can never replicate the technology. Maybe there isn't technology or another species out there that can reach through and give you an - an experience of life without chronic pain, and everything. But at the very least we could let other people be a part of your life here, even if they only visit."

"I... I would like that."

"Me too." She says. "I miss you. We all do." She puts a hand on his arm. "You fought for me, Chris. Let me fight for you. Let *us* fight for you."

"I'd say something about picking fights you can't win..." he says with a grin, and she rolls her eyes, "But I don't think I could stop either of you." He laughs. "I tried to stop Spock, and that's a fool's errand..."

"Chris."

"You're right," He says. "And I don't think there's anyone better to make the case to Starfleet than you. I'll do whatever is needed to help."

She smiles at him. "That's what I'm trying to do for *you*."



## epilogue

*i.*

Joe hugs him so tightly.

“If I hadn’t been in the middle of a public health crisis on Ganymede, I would have been -”

“I know,” Chris smiles.

“You said it about a hundred times, while we worked on the case,” Una says, also smiling. Spock has no comment, just a raised eyebrow.

Joe shakes his head slightly and chuckles. “It’s good to finally be here.”

He hugs Joe again. “It’s good to have you. I’ve missed you,” he adds, quieter, and feels Joe hug him back tighter.

When he looks up, Una adds, “They’re still being fairly restrictive, and there are a lot of hoops, or more people would be here, but -”

He turns and sees new faces coming out of the shuttlecraft.

“Who -” Vina inhales sharply, one hand flies over her mouth. “No - those - those aren’t my cousins?”

Una smiles and nods.

“They were so tiny when I last saw them... but they look so much like their parents.”

“They’re very excited to see you.”

Vina stares up at her. “Captain Chin-Riley - *Una*. Thank you.”

And Chris smiles.

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*ii.*

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Spock is *alive*.

Not the fresh messages from Starfleet, even from Spock himself - not months of hoping -

None of that compares to seeing him here in the flesh.

‘In the flesh’ carries its own ironies, of course. *He* is not in the flesh as he looks at Spock. He knows where his body sits; knows from the last time he saw it that it carries the marks of how he’s aged. He knows he looks the same as he looks at Spock, while Spock’s face carries his own lines of age.

He wants to absorb every detail that tells him that Spock is really here, really alive.

“I am here, Chris.”

“I felt it ... I knew you were reaching out.” Chris reaches out, rests a hand on Spock’s uniform, over his chest, where he can feel his heartbeat. Not the cold press of glass. “They told me what you did - to save everyone on *Enterprise*. They told me you were gone. But,” he puts a hand over his own heart. “I thought I could - could still feel it. Different, but not - gone. I was so sure I must be fooling myself with wistful thinking -”

“You were not,” Spock says, placing one hand over Chris’s on his own chest. “I am here. My body was dead, but ... Dr. McCoy carried my katra.”

“Spock, I - I’m just so grateful you’re *here* .” He grips Spock’s uniform and pulls him into a desperate hug.

It is a relief when Spock hugs him back tightly.

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*iii.*

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Lying out in the grass, the vista of Montana sky his mind has conjured up above him, Chris looks over at Spock.

He can't muster the energy to think through standing up, it's an effort even to bring Spock's face into focus, keep his eyes open.

But he wants to see Spock.

"You came," he says. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Of course." Spock is - well, Spock. And something - something at that point where he had felt - had felt Spock's pain in his death, had felt that continuing presence even afterwards, he can feel that this is Spock, that Spock is here.

He is grateful, relieved, when Spock sits down next to him. He knows there is not a lot of time left; he wasn't sure if the Talosians would be able to help him hold on for long enough, if Spock would be able to come at all.

"Thought you would be busy, Commander - no, it's Ambassador now, isn't it?"

"Leadership does allow me to - delegate." He sits down beside Chris. "I do not consider any of my tasks at hand to be more important than my presence here."

He smiles. "You have things to do."

"And you are very important to me." Spock adds, "As I believe I have said before, Chris."

His smile widens. "I remember." There are more words he wants to say, but they're a jumble. He knows that once, he'd had no words. He's been trying to think about these. There are enough farewells he hasn't had a chance to say. He echoes, "you are very important to me."

He takes a deep breath. He is very tired.

Spock is here. Just ... "Could you... give me a hand?"

Spock understands, and he feels a gentle hand brushing away hair from his forehead and resting on his temple.

There is more clarity, space for his words now. There is also grief, in the touch.

"Hey," he manages to lift a hand, rest it on top of Spock's. "I'm okay. I've had... so much good. Thank you. For everything. You've been... I'm so glad you've been in my life."

"As am I."

He takes a breath. None of the words could possibly be enough. "I'm glad you're here."

"As -" Spock's voice catches. He nods.

"Can you..." he trails away before coming back to himself. "Can you stay here for a little while?"

"Of course."

"I might end up falling asleep for a bit." He smiles, small, wry; Spock clearly recognizes the echo. Knows that this is not the same. "I could use a nap."

"I will stay here with you."

"Thank you, Spock."

*fin.*

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