

A Sky Full of Stars

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A Sky Full of Stars

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Summary

Months after arriving on Talos, Chris gets a visitor with an offer that changes everything.

Notes

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I can't see Pike being happy spending the rest of his life in an illusion, and it really makes no sense for that to be the best 23rd century medicine can do for him, so this was my attempt at giving him a better outcome.

Chris swings his arm, sending another stone skipping across the water. He used to do this all the time as a kid, whenever they went to the lake. His personal record, set when he was sixteen, was eleven skips. He's been at it for ten minutes and has already managed eighteen.

Just another reminder that none of this is real.

His next attempt only manages two, and he gives a harsh laugh. They're overcompensating, trying to figure out what he wants.

It isn't the Talosians' fault, he thinks. They're just trying to make him happy. Or, well, they're trying to make Vina happy, and his happiness is part of that.

He can't help but wonder if this is a let down for her – after thirteen years with an idealised Christopher Pike, one with all the rough edges carefully sanded away, the real thing must seem like a disappointment in comparison. Especially as damaged and bitter as he's become.

It isn't a bad life, he supposes. When he first arrived, the sheer sense of freedom almost took his breath away. In many ways it's as if the injury never happened – he can run, jump, touch, speak. He could climb Mount Everest if he wanted to, or pilot a shuttle through a nebula, or stargaze under the stars of a thousand worlds. But none of it is *real*.

You saved the galaxy, he tells himself. It's become his mantra over the past months. *Billions of people, alive because of you. Because of your sacrifice.*

It helps, just a little.

He pulls back his arm for another throw, but is distracted by something in the sky. It takes him a few seconds to recognise it, but his heart speeds up as he realises it's a shuttle.

It's heading for a valley a short distance away, and Chris drops the stones and runs.

He isn't surprised to find Vina appearing beside him as he reaches the valley. He still prefers the illusion of physical movement, but she has no such barriers, popping in and out at will. "Were you expecting visitors?"

"No," Chris says shortly. "Were you?" It's a rhetorical question, of course – the only visitor she's had in ten years is him.

The shuttle looks vaguely familiar – Starfleet, but a design he hasn't seen before. It lands softly, and Chris swallows and descends into the

valley to meet it.

The door opens as he approaches, and a familiar figure emerges. Chris's eyes dart back to the shuttle; Starfleet, and yet not.

Section 31.

Ash hasn't changed much since the last time Chris saw him, shortly after the accident. He's a little thinner, maybe, a few more grey hairs. Chris sees a look of shock pass over his face as their eyes meet, and can only imagine his own expression is fairly similar.

"Are you real?" he asks.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Ash replies. He steps closer, reaching out to touch Chris's shoulder. "I knew they were powerful, but-

"He's really here," Vina puts in. "The shuttle, it's not an illusion."

"But this is," Chris says. He pulls away from Ash and gestures widely, encompassing his entire body. "None of this is real." He crosses his arms, trying to keep calm. "What are you doing here, Ash? How did you even find me?"

"I had some help from your former science officer." Ash gives a faint smile and adds, "You don't really expect a Vulcan to go rogue and hijack a starship. He must care about you a lot."

Something in Chris's chest twists at the thought of Spock. "You still haven't told me why you're here."

Ash meets his eyes steadily. "Because I think I can help you."

"No one can help me," Chris says bitterly. "The damage was too extensive."

"Not necessarily." Ash smiles briefly. "Being the leader of Section 31 does have some advantages. I promised I'd find an answer, and I have."

Chris remembers that, the look of desperation in Ash's eyes as he swore he'd find some way to fix things, to make him better.

Chris didn't believe him.

He swallows hard, tears pricking at his eyes. "You can fix me?"

"Not entirely. Some of the damage is irreparable, but a lot of it isn't. You could regain motor function. Eat, without being fed. Communicate fully, maybe even speak. You could have a life again, Chris. If you want to."

"He has a life," Vina puts in sharply. Chris had almost forgotten she was there. "Here. With me."

Ash's eyes flick to her. "Yes," he says. "And it's his choice." He turns back to Chris and adds, "It won't be easy. It'll be painful and difficult and there are still things we can't fix. I'd... understand if you'd rather stay here."

Chris looks down at his hands. He let Spock bring him here because he thought it was the closest he'd ever get to having a normal life again. If there's even a chance that isn't true, that he could have a real life instead of an illusionary one, he has to take it. No matter the cost. "You really think this treatment of yours will work?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't."

Chris nods, straightening his shoulders. "Then I want to do it."

"Chris," Vina says from beside him, her voice high and tense. "What are you saying? Are you leaving me?" The word 'again' hangs in the air, unspoken.

Chris turns to her, then glances at Ash. "Can you give us a minute?"

Ash nods, waving a hand at the shuttle. "I'll be inside."

Chris waits until the door has closed behind him before speaking, but Vina beats him to it. "You're not... happy here," she says sadly. "You never have been, not really."

"I'm sorry," Chris tells her. "I wish I could be." Part of him aches because he does care about her. In another life, he thinks he could have loved her. But it's not enough.

She forces a smile, eyes bright with tears. "I don't suppose there's anything I can say to convince you to stay?"

He shakes his head. "This isn't who I am."

"No," she says, swiping at her eyes with one hand. "I suppose it isn't."

"You could come with me." He knows what her answer will be, but he has to ask.

Sure enough, she shakes her head. "You know I can't do that." She closes her eyes briefly, then opens them, staring at him. "They'll let you leave, if you want to. You're not a prisoner."

He reaches out to touch her cheek, fingers stroking gently across the skin. "I truly am sorry."

"I know." She covers his hand with hers. "Will this make you happy?"

"I don't know," Chris tells her. "But I have to try."

She surges forwards, kissing him fiercely, before vanishing with a sob.

Chris stares at the spot where she stood for a long moment, then turns and heads towards the shuttle.

Ash is sitting in the pilot's seat, but he jumps up as soon as he sees him. "Everything okay?"

Chris shrugs. "As well as could be expected."

Ash nods, then rubs the back of his neck. "We should probably talk. Before this goes any further." He sits back down, gesturing to the seat beside him. "Sit down?"

Chris does so, waiting for Ash to speak.

"So first of all, this whole thing isn't exactly... legal." Chris stares at him, and he adds hastily, "It isn't immoral or anything! Just... well, it's based on research from *Discovery*."

Something clenches in Chris's stomach. "We shut all that down for a *reason*, Ash."

"I'm pretty sure this isn't the kind of thing Control was interested in," Ash tells him.

"You can't know that."

"Well, so far no one from the future's arrived to scold me, so I'm assuming it's fine." More seriously, he adds, "Do you think I haven't thought about this? I've spent the past ten years making sure their sacrifice wasn't in vain. I'm not going to risk it all now. But I know Michael and the others would never have wanted anyone to suffer unnecessarily, least of all you. Not if there was a way they could help."

Chris can't argue with that. He sighs and changes track. "At least tell me you're not going to inject me with tardigrade DNA."

One corner of Ash's mouth lifts. "You have my word." He sobers quickly, and adds, "Does that mean you're okay with this? Because you have to know, whatever happens, you can't go home again. Section 31 has a lot of leeway, but there are some rules even we're not supposed to break."

"I already can't go home again," Chris tells him. "This was supposed to be a one-way trip." He frowns as something occurs to him. "Why was *Discovery* researching this to begin with?"

"They weren't, really. It was a side-effect of weapons research during the war. Though obviously we've changed things quite a bit."

Chris considers pursuing that line of discussion further and decides against it. "Anything else I should know?"

"The treatment, uh, it'll hurt. A lot. And because of the way it works, we can't sedate you. Or even give you any pain relief."

Unpleasant, but he's pretty sure he can bear it. "What else?" he asks, because Ash clearly isn't done.

"It won't be an instant fix. You'll need physical therapy, assistive devices, daily medication, probably for the rest of your life. It won't be easy."

Chris huffs a laugh. "You almost sound like you're trying to talk me out of it."

"I just want you to have all the facts," Ash says, his expression painfully earnest. "Even in the absolute best case scenario, I can't offer you anything like this." He gestures, indicating Chris's current form.

"You're offering me *reality*," Chris tells him. "Everything else is details." He glances away and adds, "Besides, if there's one thing I've learned over the course of my career, it's that nothing worth doing is ever easy." After all, that's kind of how he got into this situation in the first place.

Ash studies him for a moment, then nods. "Okay," he says. "Then we'll do it."

The choice of pronoun isn't lost on Chris, and he makes an attempt at a smile, aware that it isn't very successful. "In that case, I suppose I should show you where to find the real me."

* * *

He leads Ash through the caves silently, unable to focus on anything other than getting this over with. He doesn't know where Vina has disappeared off to, but part of him is glad she hasn't decided to accompany them. This is going to be hard enough as it is.

He makes it as far as the door to the medical chamber without faltering, but then has to take a moment to brace himself. Ash must notice his hesitation as he asks, "In there?"

Chris nods, eyes fixed on the door. He startles at the feeling of a hand on his shoulder, and turns to see Ash watching him, his eyes soft. "I can take it from here," he says. "You don't have to stay."

Chris feels like he should argue, but he just- he *can't*. "Thank you," he breathes, placing his hand briefly over Ash's in gratitude.

"No problem," Ash tells him. "I'll come find you when we're ready to leave."

Chris nods, giving him a wobbly smile, then turns and hurries away. Maybe it makes him a coward, but after everything he's been through he figures he's entitled to be selfish just this once.

He decides to go for a run, on the basis that it might well be the last time he'll ever be able to. It's an interesting example of mind versus matter – given that none of it is real he should be able to run forever, but he always ends up *feeling* tired and winded and having to stop, albeit after a longer time than he probably would have before.

He pauses by a grove of singing flowers, one of the few things on this planet that he's fairly sure is actually real, and so one of the few things he genuinely likes.

He isn't entirely surprised to see several of the Talosians appear, observing him with studied indifference. They project words into his head, *The illusion will only reach to the atmosphere.*

Chris knows from experience that their illusions can reach across light years, but he also knows that's not what they mean. It's a warning (or, taken less generously, a threat) intended to remind him how much he stands to lose by leaving. He may not be a prisoner this time, but that doesn't mean they're not still willing to manipulate him.

"Fine," he says, ignoring the lump forming in his throat. "I understand."

They study him for a few seconds longer, then, *You will always be welcome here.*

With that, they disappear, leaving him alone. Chris stands there silently for a long moment, then clenches his fists and starts running again.

* * *

Ash is waiting for him when he finally makes it back to the caves. "It's all done," he says. "Are you ready?"

Chris thinks briefly of Vina, but they've already said goodbye too many times. "Yeah," he says, clearing his throat. "Let's go."

He's quiet as they make their way back to the shuttle, trying to focus on the opportunity Ash is offering him, and not what he'll have to go through to get there.

His anxiety builds as they approach the shuttle, and by the time they're strapped into their seats in front of the console, is almost unbearable.

"You okay?" Ash asks, and Chris grimaces. So much for his poker face.

"Yeah," he says. "Just- can we wait here for a little bit?"

"Sure," Ash tells him. "Take all the time you need." He hesitates, then asks, "How long before you-"

"I have until we leave the atmosphere," Chris interrupts. "They won't hold the illusion any further."

And then he'll be-

He swallows hard, fingernails digging into his palms.

"I can sedate you, if you want," Ash offers. "Like I said, you'll have to be awake for the procedure, but I can knock you out for the journey. I thought it might be easier."

"Yeah," Chris says shakily. "I'd appreciate that." He closes his eyes briefly, letting his head fall back against the headrest.

They sit in silence for a few moments, before Ash asks tentatively, "Can I ask you a question?"

Chris looks over at him. "Sure, go ahead."

Ash shifts in his seat. "It's just- you look like you did before."

"That's not a question."

"No, but I mean-" He breaks off, frowning. "I don't know exactly how this all works, but from what I understand you could look like anything. You could be twenty again."

Chris snorts. "I don't want to be twenty." He knows what Ash is saying is true – Vina has barely aged a day since he first met her, all those years ago. But that isn't him. He glances down at his hands and adds, "I just want to be *me*."

He looks up to see Ash watching him. "I'm sorry," Ash says abruptly. "That I didn't visit you more. I wanted to, but-"

Chris gives a huff of laughter, interrupting him. "Trust me, Ash, if this works, you are *more* than forgiven." Of the dozens of visitors he had over his months on the starbase, only two of them ever offered any concrete help, and one of them is the man sitting beside him. "I can't even tell you how much I appreciate this."

"No problem," Ash says. "Starfleet means no one gets left behind, right?"

Chris isn't sure whether he wants to laugh or cry. He settles for taking a deep breath in, then out. "I think I'm ready to go now."

"You're sure?"

Chris nods. "Yeah. No time like the present, right?"

Ash's fingers skim over the controls, the engines rumbling into life. "You can always come back," he says. "They got rid of the death penalty. It's still restricted, but that's another area where being Section 31 has its advantages." He frowns and adds, "Though while we're on the subject, I have to ask, what the *hell* did you put in your report all those years ago that made Starfleet think this place needed that level of protection?"

Chris gives a short laugh, shaking his head. "*That* is a very long story." He looks over at Ash and adds, "Maybe I'll tell you sometime."

"I'll hold you to that," Ash tells him, then seems to hesitate. "And, uh, the woman?"

"Vina," Chris tells him, with a faint pang of loss. "Part of the very long story."

"I see." Ash flips a few switches, then gives him a brief smile. "You ready?"

Chris nods.

"Then off we go."

The shuttle lifts off and then they're flying, into the atmosphere and beyond.

When Chris comes to, he's lying on a bed in what he assumes is the sickbay of Ash's ship. There's something across his chest, and he reaches up instinctively to touch it, only to realise he can't move. *Guess this is definitely reality.* Anxiety spikes and he closes his eyes, trying to calm himself. *You can do this. It's only temporary.*

"Chris?"

He opens his eyes to see an Indian woman wearing a medical uniform. "I'm Doctor Gupta. Blink if you can hear me."

He blinks, and she smiles. "Good. Okay, once for yes, twice for no. Captain Tyler tells me you're aware of what we're doing here?"

He blinks again.

"And you consent?"

And again.

She nods. "Okay. I'm just going to give you a few hyposprays, and then I'll go through how this is going to work."

Chris only understands about half of what she says, but from what he can gather, the treatment they've developed is a mixture of drugs and a specially designed machine, the purpose of which is to re-energise his cells enough to help them recover from the radiation damage. At least, that's the hope.

He also learns that the reason he can't have any pain relief is the risk of it interacting with the other drugs – at best, making the treatment less effective, and at worst, possibly killing him.

On that note, the thing covering his chest turns out to be a kind of life support, similar to the one in his chair only less cumbersome. The damage to his heart is actually one of the easier of his injuries to fix, but the doctors on the starbase were concerned he wouldn't survive the operation. (Chris would've told them to go ahead anyway, but it wasn't his decision.) Even Gupta states that it'll have to wait until he's stronger. "So we'll fix what we can now, and deal with that later."

"Right," she says, after she's injected him with about eight different things and taken a bunch of readings, "everything looks good, so just hang tight while we make the final preparations."

She disappears out of his line of sight, and Chris turns his attention to counting the panels in the ceiling.

He has time to count them all twice before he's moved and placed into some kind of machine. It's enclosed, all around him, the top only a few inches above his head.

A voice rings out; there must be a speaker of some kind. "We're turning it on now. You might want to brace yourself."

There's a soft hum as the machine starts up, and Chris becomes aware of a tingling feeling across his body. It's almost pleasant, but the tingling quickly becomes aching, then burning, pain growing and spreading until it's almost unbearable. If he were physically capable, Chris thinks he'd be screaming, but all he can do is lie there and let it happen.

He must pass out at some point, as the next thing he knows he's out of the machine and the agonising pain is gone, replaced by a dull ache that seems to go right down to his bones. Out of habit, he goes to rub his hands over his face, then pauses.

His hands have moved. They're scarred and shaking, and he can only hold them up for a moment, but they're *his hands* and he can *move them*.

The knowledge that it *worked* brings tears to his eyes, welling up and spilling down his cheeks.

"I hope those are happy tears."

Chris looks up to see Ash standing a few metres away, watching him with the barest hint of concern. Chris is still very uncoordinated, unused to muscles that haven't moved in months, but he manages to flex his fingers, gesturing Ash closer. Ash's fingers slip into his and Chris squeezes, hoping his gratitude is clear.

Ash squeezes back, giving him a warm smile. "I told you it'd work," he says. "And this is only the beginning."

He doesn't get to say more before they're interrupted by Ash's combadge. "Captain Tyler? You're needed on the bridge."

Ash pulls his hand away with obvious reluctance. "I'll be right there," he replies, then, to Chris, "I'll come back and check on you in a little while, okay?"

Chris tries for a smile, and Ash smiles back, touching his shoulder briefly before turning and heading out of sickbay.

A soft cloth brushes across his face, wiping away the tears, and Chris looks up to see Doctor Gupta standing beside him. "The procedure went about as well as could be expected," she says. "You have the potential for movement, as you've seen, but the rest of it is up to you. The more effort you put into physical therapy, into learning to move again, the more you'll get out of it."

Exhaustion pulls at Chris, threatening to drag him under, but he manages a small nod.

She smiles. "Tyler said you were determined. Rest now, and when you wake up we'll get you set up with a screen so you can fully communicate."

Apparently talking is out of the question for now, but that's okay, Chris thinks. He can wait.

He closes his eyes and lets himself rest.

* * *

The next time Chris wakes up, he's alone. With effort, he manages to move his head side to side to look around, but the room is empty. After a second or two, he realises there's something in his right hand, and squeezes curiously.

A woman appears almost instantly, striding towards him with a smile. She's younger than Doctor Gupta, with long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. "Hi," she says. "I'm Doctor Phillips."

Chris tries for a smile, and she claps her hands. "Right, so, before we can set you up with a communication system, I need to check a few things."

She removes the call button from his right hand, replacing them with her fingers, then does the same with his other hand. "I want you to squeeze my fingers as hard as you can."

Chris does so, surprised by how much effort it takes.

"That's good, you can stop now."

She pulls her hands away and studies him. "You're slightly stronger on your right side, so we'll start there. Just give me a moment to set it all up."

She disappears and returns with a screen attached to some kind of control stick. She places the latter in his right hand, then turns on the screen, revealing a grid of letters and numbers.

"You move your hand to highlight a letter, then squeeze to select it." She smiles. "Give it a shot."

Chris concentrates, slowly picking out the word 'hello'. The system has obviously been programmed with a list of common words, as he only has to get as far as 'he-' before 'hello' comes up as one of the options. He selects it and is startled to hear the word read out in a slightly robotic voice.

"That's good," Doctor Phillips tells him. "It'll get easier as you start to get more control over your movements, but I wanted to get you started now as I know how frustrating it can be not to be able to communicate."

"Really," Chris replies. He intends it to be sceptical, but the computer voice just makes it sound flat.

She nods. "Not like this, but I got really ill when I was a kid, and aside from a host of other issues, it affected my vocal cords. Couldn't talk for nearly a year, and I'd only just started learning to read and write, so communication was... difficult. Lots of very silent tantrums, if I'm honest."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." She shrugs and adds, "It wasn't all bad, anyway. Learned a decent amount of sign language" -she makes a few signs with her hands- "and it made me a master at Charades. Point is, I know what a pain in the ass it can be to have no one understand you, so I hope this helps."

"It does," Chris tells her. "Thanks."

She smiles. "You're welcome."

* * *

It's slow progress, but as the days pass Chris can feel himself getting stronger, more accustomed to movement. He relearns how to drink, moving from water to nutrient shakes, and Doctor Gupta predicts it won't be long before he's ready to start on solid food. The dexterity in his hands improves enough that he's able to swap the control stick for a specially designed PADD, which allows him to write almost as fast as speaking. It also has a more natural sounding voice, allowing him to 'speak' entire sentences all at once instead of one word at a time,

something that Chris particularly appreciates.

Not all his injuries are as easily fixed, though. Besides the damage to his heart, which will have to be treated surgically, the spinal trauma he suffered from the blast is likely irreparable, meaning his chances of ever walking unaided are almost zero. And while some of the burns from the radiation have begun to improve and repair themselves, his hands and face took the brunt of it, and those scars will likely never fully heal. But then, he thinks, he always knew this wouldn't be a perfect fix, and it's still far closer to recovery than anything he ever hoped for.

He quickly loses track of the number of medications he's on. There's stuff to combat the radiation damage, to build muscle mass, to increase strength and dexterity, not to mention a course of boosters intended to repair the damage the radiation did to his immune system. Given all that, Gupta is reluctant to add painkillers unless he truly needs them, but Chris has mostly gotten used to the constant ache in his body and barely notices it anymore.

He also finds himself sleeping more than he ever has in his life. Some of it is an effect of the meds, some the exhaustion from physical therapy, and some, Gupta tells him, is just that healing takes a lot of energy, and he doesn't have much to spare.

Ash visits often, something that quickly becomes the best part of Chris's day. Sometimes he talks about the ship, about the parts of their missions that aren't classified. Sometimes he'll reminisce about events from their past, with Chris volunteering the occasional comment. Sometimes they sit in silence, reading or watching vids or just enjoying each other's company. And sometimes Chris will just rest, waking up from a nap to see Ash sitting beside him, or falling asleep to the sound of Ash's voice.

("Don't you ever sleep?" Chris asks one night when he wakes up to see Ash sitting by his bedside.

Ash shrugs, one corner of his mouth turning upwards as his fingers skim over a PADD. "One of the sacrifices of command," he says. "I'm sure you know what it's like."

"Yeah, and look where it got me," Chris shoots back, and is gratified when Ash laughs.)

Relearning how to speak proves to be one of the hardest parts of Chris's recovery. Doctor Phillips is helpful and supportive, but it's a struggle to get his mouth and tongue to move in the ways he wants them to, and progress is slow. If he concentrates and focuses on one word at a time, he's usually fine, but trying to speak at any kind of normal speed leads to him stumbling over the words and ending up sounding like he's drunk. And the fact that any kind of stress or frustration inevitably makes it worse doesn't help.

(Ash jokes that he should try *actually* getting drunk, and then it wouldn't bother him so much. Chris's response is that he'd love to, but alcohol is contraindicated for pretty much all of his meds, so it's probably a bad idea.)

It doesn't really hit Chris how much he's come to rely on Ash's company until Ash comes down with a cold and has to stay away for a few days. Chris understands the logic, of course – even with the immune boosters, a simple cold could put his recovery back weeks – but it doesn't take away the sense of loneliness. The only other visitors he gets are the medical staff, and while they're kind enough, at the end of the day they're just professionals doing their jobs. Ash is a friend.

It's strange, Chris thinks sometimes. If someone had told him, back when he and Ash first met, that there'd come a day when he'd appreciate Ash's company to the point of actively missing it, he'd never have believed them. And yet, in a way it doesn't feel strange at all.

Ash returns as soon as he's no longer contagious, bringing with him a PADD. "Got a present for you," he says, holding it out to Chris with a faint smile.

Chris takes it, giving him a questioning look.

"Enterprise logs," Ash tells him. "I know she's not yours any more, but I thought you might be interested in what they're up to."

Chris is definitely interested. He used to keep tabs on them himself, but he's been out of commission for nearly a year now, and he can't imagine how much he's missed.

"There's some fascinating stuff," Ash continues, as Chris begins scrolling through the files. "Though I'm half convinced this Kirk guy is just making some of it up. How well did you vet him?"

Chris gives him an unamused look, and sets the PADD down long enough to pick up his own. "*Starship captains do not make up their logs.*"

"You mean the good ones don't."

"Has anyone ever told you you're overly suspicious?" Chris asks, and Ash snorts.

"Yeah, well, it comes with the job." He nods at the PADD and adds, "And I have a meeting, so I'll let you get on with reading those."

"Thanks," Chris manages, out loud, and the smile that spreads across Ash's face makes him think Phillips is right when she says he needs to try talking more.

* * *

Chris has been on the ship for just over two months when Ash pokes his head around the door one afternoon and asks, "How'd you like to get out of here for a while?"

Chris abandons the book he's reading, eyebrows shooting upwards. "Really?"

Ash nods. "Yep. Gupta says you're doing well enough, and I'm sure you must be ready to climb the walls by now, so I thought I'd show you around a little. Unless, of course, you don't want to?"

Chris just looks at him, and Ash smiles and goes to get a nurse.

"So, where are we going first?" Chris asks as they settle him into a wheelchair, being careful not to jostle the machinery strapped to his chest. (He should be ready for surgery in another few weeks or so, but Gupta wants to wean him off a few of his medications first.)

"That's a surprise."

"I don't like surprises."

"You'll like this one," Ash tells him. "C'mon, let's go."

It's the first time Chris has been outside of his room since he got here, and he can't keep from looking around everywhere, trying to take it all in. The black and metal colour scheme isn't entirely to his taste, but he supposes it has a certain aesthetic quality.

They don't pass many crewmembers, and Chris suspects Ash specifically chose a time when the corridors would be reasonably clear.

"I'll have to give you a real tour sometime," Ash tells him. "But for now there's something I wanted you to see."

They go up two floors in the turbolift, then head down a corridor to a door at the end. Chris's eyes catch on the label: *Observation Deck*, and something twists in his chest. Then Ash passes his hand over the sensor next to the door, opening it, and the sight takes Chris's breath away.

The back wall of the room is completely transparent, and through it he can see the bright, swirling colours of a newly forming nebula.

"Welcome to reality," Ash says, and Chris can hear the smile in his voice. "Like it?"

Chris can only nod.

There's a bench in the centre of the room, and Ash manoeuvres him over to it before sitting down next to him. Chris doesn't take his eyes off the view – in his time in Starfleet he's seen dozens of sights more objectively striking, and yet none of them touched him quite the way this one does.

"Do you miss it?" Ash asks suddenly, and Chris blinks in confusion. "Talos, I mean."

Chris frowns, finally turning away from the view. "Parts," he admits. He still thinks of Vina sometimes. And, he has to admit, part of him misses how easy everything was there. No tripping over his words, no pain, no constant low-level exhaustion. No scars.

"Do you want to go back?"

"No," Chris replies immediately. This might not be easy, but it's *real*, and he wouldn't change that for the world.

Ash seems to relax a little. "I was hoping you'd say that," he says. "I would've taken you back if you'd asked, but-" He shrugs. "To be honest, I'm glad you're here. I've been 'Captain Tyler' for so long I'd forgotten what it feels like to just be myself."

Chris can understand that. "Command... can be... lonely," he says carefully. His speech is getting better with time, but anything beyond single words is still a struggle.

Ash seems to appreciate the effort, though, as he gives Chris a brief smile. "Yeah," he replies. "Sometimes."

His hair is falling into his eyes, and Chris reaches up to brush it aside before it fully dawns on him what he's doing. Ash goes still, studying him, then, very slowly, leans forwards and kisses him.

Chris kisses back, fingers tangling in Ash's hair. It isn't a perfect kiss – Ash's teeth catch on his lip, and his beard is scratchy against Chris's skin, but the imperfections somehow make it better.

At least until Ash pulls away, looking concerned, and says, "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

Chris gives him a look that he hopes conveys his complete lack of agreement with that statement, and Ash sighs. "I- Just, if you're going along with this out of gratitude or something, you don't have to."

"That's not-" Chris blurts, before breaking off in frustration and grabbing his PADD. "*That's not why. I want this. You. Don't get me wrong, I am grateful, but it's more than that. People always ask, what's the worst that could happen, well I lived it, and I don't want to waste any more time.*"

A thought occurs, and he continues quickly, "*What about you? Wouldn't you rather have someone less broken? I don't want pity.*"

"You're not *broken*," Ash tells him fiercely. He reaches out to touch Chris's cheek, fingertips running lightly over the scars. "You're one of the strongest, bravest people I've ever met, and I can't imagine being anything but proud to be with you."

Warmth rushes through Chris's chest, and he reaches up to cover Ash's hand with his own.

This time, when Ash leans in, neither of them pulls back.