

One Foot in Front of the Other

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One Foot in Front of the Other

by [lah_mrh](#)

Summary

Ash hides that he isn't feeling well in an attempt to avoid ruining a horse riding date he knows Chris has been looking forward to, and winds up wishing he hadn't.

Notes

The promised longer fic! Written as part of the [Iddy Iddy Bang Bang](#) challenge.

Ash wakes to warmth, a body pressed against his back and an arm around his chest. He feels a little off-balance – faintly achy and nauseous – but he's quickly distracted by Chris kissing his shoulder and murmuring, "Good morning."

"Morning," Ash replies, twisting to look at him. Chris's hair is ruffled from sleep, tufts sticking out all over, his eyes soft and warm in a way that makes Ash's heart speed up.

"Part of me wishes we could stay like this all day," Chris says, his hand resting on Ash's hip. "But we'd better get moving if we want to get to the stables by ten." He gives Ash a quick kiss before moving away and preparing to get up. "You want the first shower?"

"We could shower together," Ash suggests, not bothering to move. "Save time."

Chris laughs. "The last time you suggested showering together to 'save time' we ended up ten minutes late for dinner."

Ash shrugs. "It was worth it."

"Maybe," Chris admits. "But I don't want to be late today."

Ash can believe that. Chris has been talking about this for days, visibly excited at the idea of teaching Ash to ride. They're too far from Earth to use Chris's own horses – though Chris insists he's going to introduce Ash to them someday – but apparently this stable he's found is the next best thing. Ash would be lying if he said he didn't have any misgivings about the idea, but he figures anything that makes Chris this happy must be worth it.

"You can go first," he says, resigning himself to the idea of showering alone. "I'll wait."

Chris smiles. "I won't be long," he promises, and disappears into the bathroom.

Ash settles himself further into the covers, enjoying the warmth and the distinct lack of crises that need his attention. It took a lot of planning, but this is the longest time he and Chris have had to themselves in over a year, and he's determined to make the most of it.

"Bathroom's free."

Ash is startled out of a doze by Chris's words and rubs his eyes before pushing back the covers and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Chris is shirtless, his hair still damp from the shower, and Ash allows himself a good look as he makes his way past and into the bathroom.

The nausea comes back while he's cleaning his teeth, and he spends a few long moments leaning over the sink and taking deep breaths, trying not to throw up. This happens sometimes, in the mornings; stress and anxiety and low blood sugar combining to make him feel like crap. He doesn't know why it's decided to hit now, given he isn't stressed *or* anxious, but hopefully it'll go away once he eats something.

He takes a quick sonic shower – Chris prefers water, especially since it's rationed on the Enterprise, but unless he's showering *with* someone Ash tends towards the option that will get him in and out as fast as possible – and brushes his hair back into a loose ponytail before heading back out into the bedroom in search of clothes.

Chris is over by the synthesiser, fully dressed now in jeans and a blue long-sleeved t-shirt. He turns as Ash enters, eyes lingering for a second as he smiles and gestures at the machine. "What do you want for breakfast? I'm thinking pancakes and bacon."

Ash's stomach flips at the thought of food, and he tries to ignore it as he crosses to the dresser and begins pulling out clothes. "Toast is fine. And a black coffee."

Chris nods and punches their orders into the keypad. "Sure that's gonna be enough? Riding burns a surprising amount of calories, especially if you're not used to it."

Ash shrugs as he pulls on his trousers. "Just trying to save room for those famous Pike family sandwiches you keep going on about." His stomach flips again and he takes a deep breath, hoping Chris won't question further. If he thinks Ash isn't feeling well he'll insist on cancelling so he can stay in and rest, and Ash isn't about to let that happen, not when Chris has been looking forward to this for weeks.

Thankfully Chris seems to accept his excuse with nothing more than a, "Well, if you're sure."

He busies himself with setting out the food, and Ash turns away to finish dressing. He probably just didn't sleep well enough, he thinks, that's all. It'll pass.

He'll be fine.

* * *

Eating helps a little, but the nausea remains as they gather up their provisions for the day – food, water bottles, horse treats (Chris's idea, of course), first aid kit, and other necessities – and pack them into a couple of saddlebags before heading out to catch their ride to the stables.

The shuttlebus is pleasantly cool, and Ash rests his head against the window and drifts. The landscape flashing past is soothing at first, but quickly becomes nauseating, and he closes his eyes, trying to ignore the churning in his stomach.

Something nudges his elbow and he startles upright before he realises it's just Chris.

"We're here," Chris tells him, gesturing out of the window at a sign that says *Beechwood Riding Stables*. He studies Ash, brow creased with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Ash tells him, putting as much certainty into the word as he can. "Just didn't sleep well, I guess."

Chris still looks concerned, and Ash quickly changes the subject. "Come on, we don't want to be late."

He stands, grabbing the bags with their belongings, then looks expectantly at Chris, hoping he won't argue. Fortunately he doesn't, just gives Ash a searching look before turning and making his way down the aisle towards the exit.

Ash follows, the heat hitting him as he steps out into the open air. Even at this time of the day it's clearly in the high 20s, and he doesn't want to think about how hot it'll be by noon.

Their first stop is the equipment station, where they get kitted up with helmets, gloves, and other necessities. Ash struggles a little with the fastening to his helmet and Chris moves to help him, deft fingers brushing against Ash's chin and making his stomach twist with something that definitely isn't nausea.

"Feel okay?" Chris asks as he finishes tightening Ash's helmet.

"Yeah," Ash breathes, and Chris smiles in a way that makes Ash want to kiss him. They're in public, though, surrounded by riders and staff and people donning safety gear, so he settles for a brief squeeze of Chris's fingers before stepping away.

"Ready to meet the horses?" Chris says, and Ash gives a quick smile.

"Sure," he says, waving a hand vaguely. "Lead on."

* * *

The stables are around a five minute walk away, and Ash can't help but smile at how Chris grows more and more excited the closer they get, especially when they get close enough to hear the snorting and stamping of hooves from inside.

It only gets better once they pass through the doorway. Chris's face lights up like a kid in a candy store at the collection of horses. Ash follows after him, rolling his eyes good-naturedly, as he goes from stall to stall greeting each horse one by one, asking their names and stroking their noses affectionately.

Finally, after they've made a complete circuit, including a lengthy conversation with one of the stable hands, Chris picks out a grey horse named Apollo for himself and a smaller black and white one named Misty for Ash.

"Say hello," Chris says as the stable hand leads Ash's horse out of the stall. Under Chris's urging, Ash holds out his hand for the horse to sniff, then reaches out to stroke her nose gently. "It's soft," he says in surprise.

"They all are," Chris tells him. "Come on, we'll get them saddled up and then I'll run you through some basic commands."

The saddling up process proves to be kind of fascinating. The horses are surprisingly well trained – Ash can't help but think if someone was trying to put a saddle on him he'd be much less cooperative, but the horses just stand there seeming utterly unconcerned.

"Some horses have a habit of tensing their muscles while they're being saddled," Chris tells him, "so it's a good idea to walk them around a while afterwards to make sure it's on tightly enough."

"Oh yes," the stable hand puts in with a laugh. "Apollo here is fond of trying that. But don't worry," he adds, looking at Ash, "we won't let you go until we're sure everything's in order."

Ash refuses to get on his horse until they're absolutely certain the saddles are on tight enough, especially after Chris tells him a – in his words amusing – story about once forgetting that step early in his riding career and not realising until he found himself slowly slipping sideways as he rode.

"We won't be going fast," Chris tells him in an attempt at reassurance. "If something is wrong there'll be plenty of time to notice and correct it." Ash stares at the horse, measuring the distance he'll have to fall if something happens, and doesn't answer.

"Hey," Chris says quietly, "you trust me, don't you?"

His expression is soft and earnest, making some of Ash's nerves ebb away. "Yeah," he admits.

"Then relax," Chris tells him. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Ash takes a breath in and out, letting the words wash over him. "Yeah," he says, nodding slowly. "Okay."

Getting up is a bit of a scramble, but he makes it onto the horse's back and sits there stiffly, trying to adjust to the sudden change in height.

Chris gives him a quick run through of how to control the horse; how to make it move and – more importantly in Ash's view – how to make it stop. At his urging, Ash squeezes his legs around the horse's sides and succeeds in making it walk forwards.

"Great!" Chris says as he trots along beside them, his head around level with Ash's ribs. "Lean to the left and loosen the rein, and she should start to turn."

Ash does so and can't help but feel a spark of pride as the horse obeys his instruction. Maybe he won't be entirely hopeless at this after all.

They make a few circuits, Ash gradually becoming more confident the longer he goes without falling off. Chris offers to teach him how to trot, but Ash isn't about to go that far. He's fine with walking, thank you very much.

"Ready to take this show on the road?" Chris asks, when Ash has circled the stable twice with minimum assistance. "I've picked out an easy route, should only take an hour or so."

The idea of doing this for another hour, with the sun bearing down and his stomach twisting menacingly, doesn't sound appealing to Ash, but he can't bring himself to argue. The whole point of coming here was to make Chris happy, after all, and Ash isn't going to be the one to stand in his way.

"Okay," he says, settling himself more firmly in the saddle. "Let's give it a shot."

* * * * *

Chris glances over at Ash, studying him with a frown. He's been unusually quiet, responding to Chris's attempts at conversation with short, bare-minimum answers. He could just be concentrating on riding, it being his first time and all, but Chris can't shake the feeling that it's more than that.

Still, he thinks, he this isn't an especially long riding trail; half an hour or so and they'll be back at the stables, and then they can find a nice spot to have lunch. One hand goes to the saddlebag holding the sandwiches and other things he brought, reassuring himself they're still there. *Yeah*, he tells himself, *a rest and some food, that's what we need.*

They ride for a while longer before Ash suddenly breaks the silence. "Can we stop for a minute?" His voice is quiet, with a hint of tension to it.

"Sure," Chris agrees, pulling his horse to a halt. "You okay?" He wonders if Ash needs to relieve himself; riding can sometimes have that effect on people, especially when they're not used to it.

Ash makes a non-committal noise as he focuses on bringing his own horse to a stop. Chris's assumption seems to be proven correct as Ash scrambles down hastily and begins making his way over to a patch of bushes. Chris is about to turn away and give him some privacy when Ash suddenly doubles over and vomits onto the dirt.

Chris is off his horse in an instant, hurrying over. He reaches out to steady Ash as he straightens up, wiping his mouth shakily. "I'm sorry," he mumbles. "I just-" He breaks off and doubles over again as another wave makes an appearance.

"It's fine, you're okay," Chris tells him. "Just get it out."

When it seems like Ash is done, Chris leads him over to sit under a nearby tree. Ash strips off his gloves and helmet before leaning back against the trunk, eyes drifting shut briefly. He's pale and sweaty, breathing coming a little too fast, and Chris curses inwardly as the symptoms of heat exhaustion run through his head.

He pulls off his own gloves and helmet then reaches out to touch Ash's cheek and forehead, frowning at the heat pouring off him. "You're very warm," he says. "Do you feel dizzy? Have a headache?"

"A little," Ash replies. "Mostly just nauseous." He blinks, staring past Chris, and adds, "I think my horse is trying to escape."

Chris turns, cursing as he sees what Ash means. Misty, freed from human supervision, has wandered about five metres down the path and is currently snacking on a patch of berries. He scrambles up and leads her back, tying her to a nearby tree before doing the same with his own – thankfully slightly better behaved – horse.

He retrieves a cool pack and a packet of rehydration solution from the first aid kit in his saddlebag, mixing the latter into a bottle of water before returning to Ash.

Ash isn't where Chris left him, but the sound of vomiting from behind some nearby bushes indicates he hasn't gone far. He emerges after a few moments, looking pale, and stumbles over to sit down again.

Chris kneels beside him and drapes the cool pack around the back of his neck. "Here," he says, pressing the bottle into Ash's hands. "Drink this. I think you might have heat exhaustion."

Ash shakes his head, stifling a groan. "It's not the heat. I mean, it's not helping, but I've been feeling off since I woke up."

Chris takes a second to process that. On one hand, the knowledge that Ash's symptoms are more likely to be from food poisoning or a stomach bug than the heat makes the situation less urgent, but it leads directly to a new question. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ash shrugs. "I hoped it'd pass. Plus you were so excited about coming here, I didn't want to ruin it for you. Though I guess that ship has sailed."

Chris suppresses a sigh, feeling a rush of exasperated affection. "I was excited about coming here with *you*. I wanted you to enjoy riding the way I do, and you can't enjoy it if you're feeling like crap."

"I enjoyed parts of it," Ash says. "But yeah, it'd probably be more fun if I wasn't trying not to throw up. Or, uh, failing at that."

"We can try again when you're feeling better," Chris replies. "I mean, assuming you still want to."

"I do want to," Ash tells him. "I liked sharing this with you."

"Me too," Chris says, before tapping the bottle in Ash's hands and adding, "You're supposed to drink this, by the way."

Ash frowns, eyeing the bottle like it's some kind of venomous animal. "Is it that rehydration solution from the medical kit? My mom used to give me the grape flavoured one whenever I was sick as a kid. Eventually she had to stop because the taste just made me throw up more."

"This one's supposed to be flavourless," Chris tells him. "And it's hot as hell out here and you've lost a lot of fluids, so please drink something before you turn into a desiccated husk?"

Ash sighs, but obediently twists open the bottle and takes a sip as Chris pulls out his communicator.

"What's that for?" he asks.

"To call for medical assistance."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Unless you want to ride all the way back," Chris tells him. Ash shakes his head, grimacing, and Chris nods as he flicks open the communicator. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

It takes a minute or two to get through to the medical centre, but once he does the process of requesting assistance is straightforward. He gives a quick explanation of Ash's symptoms along with their location – helped by them having stopped near a trail marker – and the man on the other end promises to have someone out to them as soon as possible.

"ETA fifteen minutes or so," Chris says as he snaps the communicator closed. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great," Ash tells him, wrapping an arm around his stomach.

"Like you're going to be sick again?"

"More the other end." He shifts uncomfortably for a few moments then shakes his head. "It's no good, I'm going to have to..." He waves a hand expansively at the bushes. "Do we have any paper?"

Chris grabs some wipes from the saddlebag, which he takes with a murmured thanks before disappearing into the foliage.

Chris takes the opportunity to check on the horses, giving them – and himself – some water and stroking their ears affectionately. He can't keep his mind from returning to Ash, though, wondering how he could have missed that he wasn't feeling well. It makes him feel like a bad partner, enjoying himself obliviously while Ash suffered, and even the knowledge that Ash is a spy and consequently very good at hiding things doesn't make him feel less guilty.

He's reorganising the saddlebags when Ash returns, looking somewhat the worse for wear.

"Any better?" Chris asks, but without much hope.

Ash shakes his head, sitting down heavily and wrapping his arms around his middle. "I think my body might actually be trying to turn inside out. Don't get too close," he adds as Chris approaches. "I'm probably contagious. And believe me, you don't want to catch this."

"I'll take my chances," Chris replies. "Pretty sure I already have all your germs anyway."

He sits down next to Ash, pressing their shoulders together. "You feel up to drinking anything?" he asks, holding out the bottle.

"No," Ash says, but he takes it anyway. He manages one sip, and almost manages another, but then freezes and lurches to the side as it comes up again.

Chris reaches out to steady him as he retches, one hand rubbing his back in what he hopes is a soothing way.

"Ugh," Ash groans as he slumps back. "No more, please, I can't." He shoves the bottle towards Chris as if trying to get it out of his sight.

"Okay," Chris agrees, setting the bottle aside. It isn't as if it's doing much good, anyway, and he doubts Ash is going to die of dehydration in the next quarter of an hour. "No more. Just try to rest."

They sit for a while, Ash gradually leaning against him more and more until his head is resting on Chris's shoulder. Whatever this illness is, it's clearly worn him out, and Chris stays as still as he can so as not to disturb him.

Eventually the sound of hooves cuts through the air and Ash stirs, raising his head tiredly.

"Sounds like we're about to have company," Chris tells him. "I think the cavalry's here."

The cavalry, when it comes into view, proves to be two women on a horse and cart. Chris frowns inwardly at their low tech appearance, but as they dismount and come closer he's reassured to see they're equipped with a modern tricorder and medical kit.

"Sorry about the transport," one of the women says with a friendly smile, as if reading his mind. "It's hard to beam in and out accurately because of the rocks, and most powered vehicles are too big for the tracks, so unfortunately this is the best we've got." She gestures at her companion and adds, "I'm Anna and this is Fatima. We heard someone needs assistance?"

Chris gestures to Ash, though he figures it's probably obvious which of them is the sick one. Anna kneels down in front of Ash and starts running scans as Fatima asks him a few questions about his symptoms and how long he's been feeling ill.

"Looks like viral gastroenteritis," Anna announces after a pause. "It's making the rounds right now; went through my kid's school like wildfire a few weeks ago. It should pass in a day or two, but I know that's not much comfort when you're right in the middle of it." She studies the readings and adds, "You're showing signs of dehydration, which concerns me, especially with the heat. Have you been drinking fluids?"

"Can't keep anything down," Ash tells her.

"I see. Well, don't worry, we can help with that."

Beside her, Fatima slots a capsule into a hypospray and presses it to Ash's neck, then does the same with a second capsule. "I'm giving you something for the nausea, as well as a dose of fluids, which should hopefully help you feel a little better. We can do more at the medical centre though, if you're up to moving? We do have a stretcher, but I'd rather not use it unless it's necessary."

"I can walk," Ash says firmly, pushing himself upwards. He wavers slightly as he gets upright and Chris reaches out to steady him. "I'm okay," Ash says, his hand gripping Chris's shoulder. "Just-" He breaks off, swallowing, before adding quickly, "Gonna throw up."

With the speed of one who has clearly dealt with this situation many times, Anna whips a sickness bag out of nowhere and holds it under Ash's chin as he starts to retch again. Chris holds him steady, a little shocked that he still has anything left to bring up.

"Sorry," Ash mumbles once he's finished.

"Don't worry," Anna tells him, waving a hand dismissively. "Happens all the time, we're used to it. Trust me, just not getting sick *on* us puts you ahead of a lot of people."

"The meds should kick in soon," Fatima adds, resting a hand on Ash's back. "Come on, let's get you over to the cart and you can rest for a while."

Chris keeps hold of Ash as they make their way over to the cart. He half expects Ash to shake him off, but he must still be feeling unsteady as he barely protests. It isn't long until he's settled on the stretcher with a cool pack across his forehead and a couple of extra sickness bags in easy reach.

It's clear there isn't going to be room for anyone else, and Chris gives Ash's hand a squeeze before stepping back.

"We'll meet them at the medical centre after we take the horses back," Anna tells him. "Don't worry, I know a short cut."

She checks Ash is all settled in as Fatima climbs up into the driver's seat. "Yell if you need anything," she calls, then commands the horse into action and sets off down the path with Ash in tow.

Chris watches for a few moments, wishing he could go with them. "He's in good hands," Anna says, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, the sooner we get going, the sooner you can see him again."

Chris follows as she makes her way over to where the horses are waiting, stroking Apollo's nose before untying him and pulling himself up onto his back. Anna does the same with Misty, and Chris can tell she's an experienced horsewoman from the ease with which she commands her.

"Right," she says, nudging Misty into action. "Let's go."

The path is too narrow for them to move at great speed, but even at a fast trot the return journey is much quicker than the one he and Ash took to get there.

"The medical centre's just on the other side of that building," Anna says, gesturing as they arrive at the stable. "I can take the horses back if you want to get over there."

"Thanks," Chris tells her. He dismounts quickly and grabs the saddlebags, waiting just long enough to make sure Anna has both horses in hand before heading at a jog in the direction indicated.

Sure enough, the medical centre soon comes into view; a large white hut topped by a red cross with the words "FIRST AID" written in large capital letters above the door. Chris hurries over, a wave of cool air hitting him as he pushes the door open and steps inside.

The scene inside is busy but not chaotic, people sitting or lying on beds or being treated by medics. He can see a young boy who appears to have twisted his ankle and a woman with a rash across both arms, as well as a few people with less obvious issues. And there, on a bed near the back of the room, is Ash.

Chris heads over, briefly waylaid by a medic making sure he's not there for medical assistance. Chris waves him off with a smile, assuring him that he's just visiting as he continues making his way over to his partner.

Ash blinks tiredly at him as he sits down in the chair next to the bed. He's still pale, a rehydration cuff around one elbow and a sickness basin resting in his lap.

"Hey," Chris says softly. "Feeling any better?"

Ash shrugs. "A little, I guess? I think the meds might have kicked in." He picks a cup off the table beside him and adds, "They gave me some ice chips to suck on. They're supposed to be easier to keep down than liquid water."

"Is it working?"

"So far, at least." He gestures at the cuff on his arm and adds, "They said I can go once I've finished rehydrating."

"That's good," Chris says.

"Hmm," Ash replies non-committally, taking a sip of his ice chips. Chris glances over at the screen next to the bed, scanning the list of Ash's readings. Blood pressure slightly low, mild fever, no serious pain... *huh*.

"Your stress levels are pretty high," he comments. "Is something wrong?" Ash gives him an 'are you kidding me' look, and he adds, "Aside from the obvious."

Ash shrugs and glances away, picking at the edge of the cuff. For a moment Chris thinks he isn't going to answer, but then he says quietly, "I don't like hospitals."

Chris isn't sure their current location actually qualifies as a hospital, but he figures now isn't the time to split hairs.

"Bad memories?" he asks, and Ash huffs.

"Well, let's see, there was the time I nearly died, the time I had to be restrained to avoid hurting people, the time I killed someone--"

"*You* didn't kill anyone," Chris cuts in.

"Maybe," Ash allows, "but it was my hands, and I can still remember how it felt to--" He breaks off, swallowing, and for a moment Chris thinks he's going to be sick again. After a few seconds he seems to recover, continuing, "Bottom line is it's bringing up stuff I'd rather not think about, and I'll feel better when we can get out of here."

"That's understandable," Chris says, reaching out to touch Ash's hand. "I'm sure it won't be much longer, and then we can go back to the hotel and rest."

"Mmm," Ash replies, tilting his head back against the bed. "That'd be nice."

He grimaces, then sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. "Ugh. Bathroom. Excuse me."

He disappears through a nearby door, leaving Chris alone with his thoughts. He can't help but feel somewhat out of his depth; his usual approach to comforting people who are sick or hurt is to offer food, and that's obviously not going to work here. Though he does have some soup and broth recipes that might help once Ash is feeling a little better.

Ash is gone for long enough that Chris starts to get concerned, and is on the verge of going to check on him when he finally emerges. "You okay?" Chris asks as he settles back on the bed.

"Well, I didn't throw up," Ash tells him. "But that's about the best I can say about it." He wraps his arms around his stomach and adds, "Talk to me, please? I need something to take my mind off this."

Chris casts around for a topic and settles on retelling a story of one of the *Enterprise's* recent missions involving a sacred grove, a rainstorm, and a particularly slippery path. The whole thing was a massive pain in the ass while it was happening, but right now it almost seems worth it for the way Ash relaxes as Chris talks and even manages a laugh or two at his description of being carefully scraped down by the grove's acolytes to remove all the sacred mud.

Despite his discomfort, Ash finishes his cup of ice chips and has even managed to keep down a few sips of rehydration solution by the time a medic comes over to remove the cuff on his arm. She makes a quick check of his vitals before announcing, "Right, you're free to go. Stay out of the heat, rest and keep hydrated, and you should feel better in a couple of days."

"Thank you," Chris tells her, and Ash echoes the words as he pushes himself up and off the bed.

The medic gives them some anti-nausea meds and a couple of sickness bags for the road, and then they're stepping out of the medical centre back into the heat. Ash pauses in the doorway, bracing himself, and Chris glances at him in concern. "You doing okay?"

Ash gives himself a shake, taking a step forwards. "Yeah," he replies. "I just forgot how hot it is out here."

"We won't be out in it for long," Chris tells him. "Come on, I'll order a taxi to meet us at the gate."

They drop their helmets and other kit off at the equipment station, then head towards the exit. "Do you need to stop by the bathrooms before we go?" Chris asks.

"No, I think I'm okay for now," Ash replies. "Let's just get back to the hotel."

He dozes off on the ride back, head resting against Chris's shoulder, and doesn't stir until Chris nudges him to tell him they've arrived. "Hey, come on, wake up. We're here."

Ash starts awake, blinking in confusion before coming to enough to follow Chris out of the taxi and into the hotel. He's quiet as they take the elevator up to their floor, leaning listlessly against the wall. Chris hopes he's just tired, but as soon as they get to their room he makes a beeline for the bathroom and is sick again.

Chris kneels beside him, brushing back a few strands of hair that have escaped from Ash's ponytail before pressing a hand to his forehead. "I think your fever's up."

"Mrff," Ash replies miserably, resting his head on his arms.

Chris rubs his shoulder. "Come on, you'll be more comfortable in bed."

Ash shakes his head. "Need to shower first. I smell like sweat and puke and hospital-" he lurches forwards, gagging, but nothing comes up "-and horse and who knows what else."

Chris takes a quick sniff of his own clothing and has to admit Ash has a point. "Okay," he says. "Shower first, then bed."

He usually likes hot showers, but he doesn't want to risk making Ash's fever worse so he sets the water to just above lukewarm before stripping off his clothes.

"Figures you'd take me up on showering together when I'm too sick to do anything about it," Ash grumbles as he moves to join him.

Chris realises quickly that he doesn't have the same problem. His body is well aware of what having Ash wet and naked like this would usually lead to, and it's difficult to keep it from reacting as he washes Ash's back or massages shampoo into his hair.

It isn't a long shower, but Ash is still falling asleep on his feet by the time they're finished. Chris helps him dry off and get into a clean t-shirt and sweatpants, and it isn't long before he's curled up in bed, a trash can on the floor next to him in case of emergencies.

"Sorry I ruined our day out," Ash mumbles, already partly asleep.

"You didn't ruin it," Chris tells him. "It's not your fault you got sick." He pauses, then adds, "I was worried about you, you know."

Ash stirs, looking at him. "You were?"

"Yeah. I know it's just a bug, but I've never seen you that ill before. It made me feel... I don't know, helpless."

"Must be a rare feeling for you."

"You'd be surprised," Chris tells him. Then, because he figures now is as good a time as any, he adds, "I love you."

Ash comes fully awake at that, blinking at him uncertainly. "You do?"

"Yeah," Chris says. "It's okay, you don't have to say it back, I just-"

"I love you too," Ash interrupts. He hesitates, then adds, "It- I don't have a lot of people I can rely on. I got used to being alone, to being independent, to looking after myself because no one else was going to. But today... I didn't have to, because you were there. You stayed, even when you didn't have to, and that means a lot."

"I couldn't have done anything else," Chris tells him, and Ash smiles briefly.

"I know," he says. "And that's why I love you. Even with your ridiculous horse obsession."

Chris snorts, though a warm feeling spreads through his chest at Ash's words. "Love me, love my horses," he says, before leaning in to kiss Ash's forehead. "Get some sleep. I'll be here."

"Mmm," Ash replies as his eyes drift shut. "I'll hold you to that."

"You'd better," Chris tells him, and lets him rest.

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