

Know You Better Now

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/628) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/628>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Discovery
Relationship:	Christopher Pike/Ash Tyler Voq , Original Male Character/Original Male Character
Character:	Christopher Pike , Ash Tyler Voq , Original Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Section 31 , Mission Fic , Undercover as a Couple , Cooking , Horses , Hurt/Comfort , Getting Together
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-07 Words: 12,074 Chapters: 1/1

Know You Better Now

by [lah_mrh](#)

Summary

When an old friend of Chris's turns up as a person of interest to Section 31, Ash asks for his help with a mission. But there's a catch.

Notes

Written for Pameluke in the 2022 Fic in a Box exchange. Originally posted on AO3.

"So," Chris says, as the doors to the *Enterprise's* ready room lock behind them. "Are you going to tell me why you're here?"

Ash sighs, reaching into his bag for a PADD. "I need your help."

"I'm gonna need you to say that again," Chris tells him. He doesn't quite manage to hide his smile, and Ash gives him an annoyed look.

"I need your help with a mission. There's a smuggler by the name of Midas, recently decided to branch out into trafficking of sentient beings. We have a lead that might help us bring him down, but it won't be easy. Which is where you come in."

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable involving my ship and crew in Section 31 business," Chris tells him.

"No," Ash says, "you don't understand. I'm not here for the *Enterprise*, or the crew for that matter. I need *your* help, specifically."

"Why me?" Chris asks. "I know Section 31 were hit pretty badly by the..." -he searches for a safe term- "...events, but are you really that hard up?"

Another annoyed look. Chris idly considers counting them. Ash taps at the PADD briefly before setting it on the table between them. "Because of him."

The face on the screen is familiar, though it's been years since Chris last saw it. "Lucas," he says, and Ash nods.

"Lucas Layton. Our research shows the two of you used to be close."

That's one way of putting it, Chris thinks. "Yeah," he says out loud. "We worked together back when I was a test pilot, but he left Starfleet not long after I transferred to the *Enterprise*." He frowns and adds, "I don't know what you think I can tell you. It's been years since we've spoken, the last time I heard from him Robert April was still the captain here."

"Even so, you're our best option." Ash picks up the PADD again, fingers skimming over the surface. "'Lu', as he's calling himself now, has been working as a courier for Midas for around a year now."

"Why would he do that?" Chris cuts in. "That doesn't sound like the Lucas I knew." Lucas wasn't the best at following the rules, but he never seemed like the kind of person who would turn to smuggling as a way to make a living.

"Money," Ash replies bluntly. "Apparently your friend liked to gamble. He owed a lot of credits to the wrong people, and Midas offered to pay off his debts. For a price, of course."

To Chris's dismay, that actually sounds plausible. "He was always fond of a bet," he says. "But I never saw him get out of control with it. I

guess when he left Starfleet he stopped holding himself back."

"I know this must be hard to hear," Ash says. "But if it helps, he at least doesn't seem to agree with Midas's activities, and that goes double for this latest venture. Lu's behaviour lately has been erratic, disruptive almost to the level of sabotage. We think he's looking for a way out, but with someone like Midas that's easier said than done."

He pauses to let that sink in, then continues, "A couple of Section 31 agents have tried to make contact, but people like Midas have spies everywhere, so he's naturally suspicious of anyone new trying to get close to him. Sending in someone he already knows might be enough to break through that barrier." He smiles and adds, "Especially since you're about as far from one of Midas's spies as anyone could get."

Chris can just about follow the logic, but it still doesn't quite sit right with him. "So you want me to convince him to... what? Spy on Midas for you?"

"I mean, that'd be the ideal, but we were aiming more for a trade; protection and a new life in exchange for him telling us everything he knows. He's been involved in Midas's schemes for months now, and fairly deeply from what we can tell. If we can convince him to work with us it could give us the information we need to bring Midas down. Permanently."

Chris frowns. The idea of leaving the *Enterprise*, especially to work with Section 31, isn't exactly appealing, but neither is the thought of sitting by while sentient beings are being trafficked. If there's a chance he can help bring this Midas to justice, isn't he obligated to try?

"How long will it take?"

"No more than a couple of weeks. I've already cleared it with Starfleet, they've agreed that Commander Chin-Riley can take over command of the *Enterprise* temporarily while you're working with us. But the final decision is yours. I can't force you. More to the point, I won't."

Chris opens his mouth to say he'll think about it, but what comes out is, "Okay."

Ash eyes him warily. "You'll do it?"

Chris shrugs. "From what you've said, I'm basically your only shot, right? If I can help bring a trafficker down, I have to at least try. I couldn't live with myself otherwise."

Ash smiles briefly. "That's what I hoped you'd say. But in the spirit of cooperation, there's something else you should know before you sign up."

He skims his fingers over the PADD again, bringing up a new page. "I've had people working on this for weeks, figuring out a way for us to interact with Lu without Midas finding out, and, well, they found one. But there's a catch."

He turns the PADD so Chris can see the page he's looking at. There, in big bold type, are the words SCENIC RETREAT – COUPLES ONLY.

Chris reads it once, then again, but the words refuse to change. He glances up at Ash, who has adopted an impressively blank expression, and shakes his head. "You have *got* to be kidding me."

* * *

Time being of the essence, everything moves quickly, and it's less than twenty-four hours later that Chris and Ash board a basic Starfleet-issue hire shuttle and head out for the resort where they'll be staying. It's on Risa, on the southern continent, and more or less in the middle of nowhere – it's at least 200 km from the next settlement, and even further to the closest city.

According to intel, Lucas and his partner arrived last night – a shuttle registered in his name is currently parked at the shuttle port – but the retreat takes security seriously, so information is limited.

Ash and Chris are booked into a cottage on the east side of the complex, hopefully not too far from Lucas. Chris can't say he's looking forward to it, but needs must, and he supposes at least doing this with Ash is marginally better than trying to wrangle some random Section 31 goon.

"Right," Ash says, once they're underway. "Let's run through our cover story."

"Yes, dear," Chris says, and Ash gives him an annoyed look. Chris raises his eyebrows at him in response. "What, would you prefer 'darling'?"

"I'd prefer my name," Ash tells him. "And this isn't going to work if we spend the whole time butting heads, so could you please just let me lead for once?"

Part of Chris wants to make a retort, but he supposes Ash has a point. "Fine," he says, sitting back in his chair. "Our cover story. Go."

Ash stares at him for a long moment, before nodding and launching into the topic. "Lu's already familiar with you, of course, so your name, personal information, backstory, etc. will have to stay mostly the same, just tweaked a little."

"To add in our relationship," Chris says, managing not to add air quotes around the word.

Ash nods. "Apart from that, you'll basically be playing yourself. I can't really do that, so my cover identity is Tyler Roberts, an administration worker on a starbase."

"Is that where we're saying we met?" Chris asks. "Since everything about our actual first meeting is classified."

"That's what I was thinking," Ash says. "It wouldn't be impossible for us to have met somewhere, maybe at a bar, and hit it off. Spend a few days together, get to know each other. Nothing serious, because we both know you're going to leave again, but we're both a little lonely and it's

nice to have that kind of connection."

There's something in the way Ash says 'lonely' that makes Chris wonder if Ash really sees himself as lacking connections. It seems rude to ask, though, so he sticks to the scenario, turning it over in his mind.

"So we forge a connection, and then I leave," he says. "And then what? We keep in touch?"

Ash nods. "We weren't really planning to, but somehow one message turned into two and before long we were corresponding almost every day."

"We talked about our work, and our hobbies, and about all the things we'd like to be doing with each other if we were together," Chris says, warming to the subject. "Except that actually *being* together in the same place is virtually impossible when one of you works on a starship."

"We did our best, but communicating over subspace leaves a lot to be desired. So after a couple of hurried meetings that barely lasted a day or two, and several more that were outright cancelled, you finally snapped, booked a bunch of leave, and invited me here to spend some real time together."

Chris can't help but smile faintly, eyebrows raising. "I invited you?"

"It was mostly a joint decision," Ash allows. "But you were the one who suggested it."

"Well, they do have horse riding," Chris tells him. He flicked through the brochure on a PADD while he was packing, figuring he should have some idea what he'd be walking into. "Might be worth it just for that."

Ash actually snorts at that. "You and your horses," he says, before returning to the subject at hand. "Now for the awkward part, the physical stuff. People will notice if we don't touch each other, but I'm thinking we can get away with more minor gestures – handholding, sharing personal space, that kind of thing. If anyone asks why we're not kissing or whatever, just say I'm not comfortable with PDA. Which isn't entirely untrue, actually."

"I assume we'll have to share a bed?" Chris asks.

"Is that a problem?"

"Not unless you snore." He shrugs. "I've shared beds with people on missions before, it's not a big deal." It's how he knows Una is a secret cuddler, and that Spock sometimes sleeps with his eyes open – which definitely gave Chris a shock the first time he encountered it.

"We should have more freedom to be ourselves while we're in our own cottage," Ash says, "but we probably shouldn't drop the act completely in case someone stops by or sees something through the window."

"Makes sense," Chris says. He leans forwards, checking their time to arrival before turning back to Ash. "Well, 'Tyler Roberts'," he says, "if we're supposed to be partners, I guess you'd better tell me about yourself."

* * *

Chris sets the shuttle down lightly, checking all around before shutting down the engines. "Well, here we are," he says as the door unlocks with a click. "Our couple's paradise."

"Last chance to back out," Ash replies. "You ready for this?"

"No time like the present," Chris tells him, and gestures at the door. "After you, *darling*."

Ash logs them in at reception, and they grab their bags and go looking for their cottage.

"Thirty-six, thirty-eight, forty... there," Chris says, pointing. "Number forty-two."

All the cottages are built to a similar old-fashioned design, with grey stone and tiled roofs, but there are slight differences between them, such as the colour of the door or the size of the windows. Their own has a blue door and matching blue window frames, which Chris has to admit adds a certain aesthetic appeal. He's withholding judgement until he sees the inside though.

Ash taps their door code into the panel, unlocking the door, and Chris follows him inside. They step into a short hallway, with rooms on either side and a staircase straight ahead.

They glance at each other, then begin to explore the cottage. It's small but homey, containing a kitchen-diner and living room on the lower floor and a bedroom, bathroom, and study upstairs. The kitchen comes equipped with a standard food synthesiser, but it also has a small oven and stove, which Chris intends to put to good use as soon as he can obtain some decent ingredients.

He's unpacking his clothes in the bedroom when Ash wanders in with a handheld device that looks a little like a communicator. "We're all clear," he reports. "No bugs or listening devices that I can find."

"Good to know," Chris says, resisting the urge to tell Ash he's being paranoid. This isn't his mission, after all, and if sweeping the house for bugs makes Ash feel better, so be it.

"Nice toy," he says instead. "Standard issue?"

"Pretty much," Ash says. "There's still a few kinks to work out, but they're thinking of introducing them to the rest of the fleet in a year or two."

He slips the device into his bag and joins Chris in unpacking, dividing up the drawers and closet space between them.

"Huh," Chris says, watching as Ash pulls a grey shirt and light blue sweater from his bag. "I'm surprised you own anything that isn't black."

"Says the man who probably sleeps in his uniform."

"You joke, but after the dozenth or so time being dragged out of sleep by a red alert it starts to look appealing."

Ash snorts, a faint smile playing around the corners of his mouth, and something in Chris's chest seems to loosen. This situation might not be ideal, but maybe it won't be a *total* disaster.

"I'm going to take a shower," he says, kneeling down to shove his now empty bag under the bed. "Unless you wanted to?"

Ash shakes his head, busy shoving a bunch of socks into a drawer. "I'm fine, go ahead."

Chris feels much better once he's showered and changed. He doesn't know why, but long distance shuttle journeys always leave him feeling grimy and uncomfortable.

He finds Ash in the study, sitting at the desk under the window. He's surrounded by several PADDs and seems deep in thought.

"Knock, knock," Chris says, rapping his knuckles on the door frame.

Ash turns, and Chris crosses the room to join him. "Planning our next move?"

"Actually, yes." Ash taps the PADD in front of him. "According to the schedule there's a barbecue for all the guests tonight in the courtyard. Might be a chance to make contact."

"Sounds like a plan," Chris says. "What time?"

"It starts at six, but they say people can drop in any time. I think we should probably aim to get there early, though, since we don't know when Lu might show up."

"I agree," Chris replies. "So, eighteen hundred exactly?"

Ash nods. "That gives us about three hours to prepare."

Three hours until they have to go out there and try to convince everyone – including Lucas – that they're madly in love. Chris takes a second to remind himself why he signed on to this, then puts on a smile. "Maybe we should go for a walk," he suggests. "Scope out the place." And hopefully work out any kinks with their cover story before they have to perform for an audience.

"That's actually not a bad idea," Ash replies. "Let me just check in with Command, and we can go."

* * *

They take a right out of their cottage, heading in the opposite direction from the one they arrived in. The resort is expansive, and their walk takes them past dozens of other cottages – most are in the same style to theirs, but Chris notices the occasional bungalow or larger house set out here and there.

"I've been to colonies that were less extensive than this," Chris says, after they've walked for a good five minutes without seeing anything but cottages. "It's like a small town."

"According to the brochure, they have space for one hundred and twenty couples," Ash tells him. "But this isn't the busy season, so it'll probably be less than that."

After a few minutes longer, they run across a pair of women walking a dog and exchange a few words of greeting. The women are openly affectionate; hands clasped and body language focused towards each other, and while they don't seem to notice anything off about him and Ash, Chris can't help but wonder if they should be being more obviously intimate.

He decides to try it after the women have walked off, reaching down and taking Ash's hand. Ash doesn't react physically, but he does give Chris a questioning look.

"Just trying to get into character," Chris tells him. He was worried it would be awkward, but the feeling of Ash's warm, calloused fingers against his own is almost pleasant.

They take a circuitous path around the resort, passing the store and restaurant, several hiking trails, and the stables, which Ash insists they can explore *later, when we're not on a deadline*, and drags him away despite his protests.

They interact with a few more people; a couple in their fifties who are sharing a drink in front of their cottage, a man and a woman riding bikes who wave at them as they pass; and Chris can feel himself relaxing a little with each successful encounter. There's no way to know how their act will bear up against someone who actually knows him, of course, but at least it seems like they're getting off on the right foot.

* * *

They arrive promptly at six that evening to find a few guests already present, congregating around the drinks tables or chatting to the staff.

Lucas isn't there, but Chris didn't expect him to be. Chris and Ash deliberately arrived early, after all, and the gathering runs until nine. Lucas could show up any time, or even not at all. (Chris has his doubts about the latter though – the Lucas he knew would never turn down the

chance of free food.)

He pastes on a smile as a middle-aged Indian woman breaks off from a group nearby and comes over to them. "Hi there," she says with a smile, holding out a hand. "I'm Surinda. Just in case you didn't know, my husband Adam and I are the owners here."

Chris reaches out to take her hand. "Nice to meet you," he replies. "You have a beautiful place here."

"Thank you," she says. "We like to think so. The hiking trails are particularly aesthetic, if that's to your interest. The flowers are beautiful this time of year."

"We'll keep that in mind," Chris says. "I'm Chris, by the way, and this is Tyler."

Surinda reaches out to shake Ash's hand. "How long have you two been together?"

Chris is about to answer before it dawns on him that he might be monopolising the conversation. He waits, and after a few seconds Ash answers. "About a year. How long have you and your husband been married?"

"Oh, it's been almost twelve years now, if you can believe it." She looks like she's about to say more when someone calls her from the barbecue area. "Duty calls," she says. "But I hope you have a good time tonight, and that you enjoy the rest of your stay."

"Thank you," Chris says, and she smiles and leaves.

"I think that went pretty well," Chris says, once they're alone again.

"What were you expecting? That she'd denounce us as fakers and throw us out?" Ash sighs and gives himself a little shake before adding, "Come on, let's get a drink and pretend we belong here."

They mingle with their fellow guests for a while, doing their best to play the loving couple. After the second or third retelling of how they – supposedly – met, Chris starts embellishing a little, giving Ash his best overly besotted looks and talking about how he "just knew he was the one".

"I notice you're leaving out the part where you thought I was a spy, or possibly a murderer," Ash murmurs during a brief moment alone.

"You are a spy," Chris points out. "And don't blame me, you're the one who came up with this backstory. I'm just trying to make it interesting."

He keeps an eye out for Lucas – and assumes Ash is doing the same – but six turns to six thirty and there's still no sign of him. The crowd has built up now – Chris estimates there must be at least fifty people – but none of them is their target.

"Relax," Ash murmurs in his ear as he passes Chris a drink. "He'll show up when he shows up." Chris knows he's right, but part of him just really wants to get it over and done with.

As a distraction – and because they're both getting hungry – he and Ash join the line for food over by the barbecue. Then, plates piled high with burgers, hot dogs, brisket, coleslaw and potato salad, they pick a table where they can easily keep an eye on the crowd and sit down to eat.

The food is amazing – Chris is half-inclined to ask for a recipe for the brisket – and he's starting to feel more positive about the situation when Lucas finally appears.

Chris stops in mid-chew, eyes fixed on their target. The Section 31 file included several photos, including one as he looks now, but it still feels strange to realise how much he's changed since Chris last saw him, body rounder and brown hair streaked through with grey. He's accompanied by a tall man with long dark hair; his partner, Chris assumes.

The two of them begin heading towards the drinks table, and Chris swallows his mouthful hastily and leans in to murmur in Ash's ear. "He's here."

Ash's eyes flick over the crowd briefly before he turns back to Chris, resting a hand over his to indicate the message has been understood. "I could go for a refill," he says out loud, indicating his almost empty glass. "Would you mind?"

They agreed that, since Lucas already knows him, it would be best to let Chris make the first contact alone. Chris's stomach twists, but he manages a smile. "No problem," he says, and stands. "Be right back."

He picks up both his and Ash's glasses, taking a second to steel himself before making his way through the crowd to the drinks table.
Showtime.

Lucas has moved away by the time Chris gets there, but he can still see him out of the corner of his eye, talking to the dark-haired man and apparently completely oblivious to Chris's presence. Chris orders a beer for Ash and a cider for himself, then turns, taking a few steps in Lucas's direction before stopping dead and putting on his best look of surprise. "Lucas?"

Lucas stops in mid sentence, turning to look at him. "Chris?" He looks stunned for a moment before a smile spreads across his face. "It's been forever. How are you?"

"Good," Chris replies. "You?"

"Oh, you know. Some good, some bad," Lucas says with a shrug, before turning to his companion. "Sebastian, this is Chris Pike. We were fellow pilots when I was in Starfleet, before he left for a cushy starship job. Chris, this is Sebastian Key, my partner."

Sebastian is about Ash's height, with light brown skin and freckles. He smiles a little shyly and holds out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Chris replies, shaking his hand. "How long have you been together?"

"Almost five years now," Sebastian tells him. "It's actually our anniversary next week."

"Congratulations," Chris says. "My partner and I are coming up on a year." He gestures vaguely in Ash's direction, careful not to spill anything, and adds, "He's over at one of the tables. I just came to get us some drinks."

"I wouldn't have thought this was your kind of place," Lucas tells him.

"I could say the same of you," Chris replies. "But things change."

Lucas gives a brief smile. "I guess they do." He takes a gulp of his drink and adds, "Speaking of, I assume you're still with Starfleet. You must have made captain by now with how hard April was pushing you. Or did you just jump all the way to admiral?"

"Captain," Chris confirms. "And not planning to get promoted any time soon, thank you very much. What about you? What are you up to nowadays?"

"I'm a courier," Lucas tells him. "Got my own ship, though I'm sure it's much less impressive than yours."

"Yeah, but you get to be your own boss," Chris says. "That's got to have some advantages."

Lucas frowns. "Not as many as you'd think." He changes the subject before Chris can respond. "So are you still with the *Enterprise*?"

They talk for a while, catching up. Chris tries, once or twice, to probe for more information about Lucas's job, but it's obvious he doesn't want to talk about it. Chris does learn that Sebastian isn't involved, though, or at least not obviously – apparently he works as an engineer on Alpha III.

Eventually Lucas and Sebastian excuse themselves to go and get food, and Chris makes his way back to Ash.

"Finally," Ash says jokingly as Chris passes him his beer. "Did you have to brew the hops yourself?"

Chris slips into his seat beside him. "Sorry," he says. "Ran into an old friend and we got to talking."

"Really, here? That's a coincidence. You'll have to introduce me." He glances around, checking they're alone, and adds quietly, "Did he say anything?"

"He didn't want to talk about his job," Chris says, equally quietly, "but I got the impression he's not happy. It's just a hunch, but I think we have a good chance here."

Ash nods. "We might as well leave it for tonight," he says. "We've succeeded at step one, and if we move too fast we're just going to scare him off."

"My thoughts exactly," Chris tells him, and steals a piece of Ash's brisket. "Dear."

* * *

Chris rises early the next morning. Sharing a bed with Ash is slightly more awkward than doing so with Una or Spock or Phil, but not tremendously so. Ash doesn't snore or kick or anything, and while he mentioned sometimes suffering from nightmares, Chris didn't see any sign of them. The situation isn't exactly ideal, but he figures it'll be bearable for the brief time they're stationed here.

He pulls on a sweatshirt over his pyjamas and shoves his feet into a pair of slippers before heading downstairs to make breakfast. He's heard there's a couple of stores on the resort where people can buy real food – not to mention a restaurant and a cafe – but for now he'll have to make do with synthesised ingredients.

He's finished making batter for pancakes and is frying up some bacon when he hears footsteps on the stairs and Ash appears. "You're cooking," he says, blinking at Chris.

"Thought I'd make us some breakfast," Chris replies. "Hope you like pancakes."

"I do like pancakes," Ash says. He yawns, stretching, and adds, "I also like coffee. Do we have any?"

"Only synthesised," Chris says. "But apparently there's a couple of stores over the other side of the resort so I'm planning to go shopping later and pick up some better stuff."

Ash shrugs. "Honestly, as long as it has caffeine I don't really care."

He gets a cup of coffee and leans against the wall, watching Chris. "Do you want any help?"

"No, I've got it." Chris finishes with the bacon and begins pouring batter into a pan. "You could set the table if you want," he adds. "I'm almost done here."

Ash sets out plates and cutlery as Chris finishes making the pancakes, and it isn't long before they're sitting down to eat.

Chris has always enjoyed the way people's eyes tend to widen when they taste his cooking for the first time, and Ash is no exception.

"These are great," he says, scooping up another forkful of pancakes. "I didn't know you knew how to cook."

"My dad taught me," Chris tells him. "Cooking was sort of our thing."

"That's nice," Ash says.

"Yeah, I guess," Chris replies absently. He hesitates, prodding his pancakes with a fork, then adds, "We had a... complicated relationship when I was growing up. Didn't always see eye to eye. Cooking was one of the few things we could do together that wouldn't lead to an argument."

"Okay," Ash says. "So not *that* nice."

Chris smiles in spite of himself. "Were you close with your parents?"

Ash shrugs, swallowing a bite of pancakes. "I was with my mom," he says. "Never knew my dad. Ran off as soon as Mom told him she was pregnant."

"Asshole," Chris says with feeling.

"I guess. But my mom was amazing, so I never felt like I was missing anything." He pauses, staring at his plate, then adds, "Well, at least until she died. I missed a lot then."

"I'm sorry," Chris says.

"It's okay," Ash replies quietly. "It was a long time ago." He's silent for a moment before adding, "And Voq never had a family, so I know how much worse it could have been."

Chris hesitates, wanting to reach out and offer comfort but unsure whether Ash would accept it.

Ash moves before he's made a decision, seeming to shake himself off as he picks up his cup and rises from the table. "I'm going to get some more coffee," he says. "Do you want some?"

Chris shakes his head. "I'm fine, thanks."

He watches Ash head over to the synthesiser. If they were a real couple, he thinks, they'd already know all this stuff instead of having to make it up as they go along. He wonders what other things they're going to discover about each other before their time here is through.

* * *

After breakfast, they head up to the study to work out their plan of attack.

The resort has an impressive array of activities, from hiking, to horse riding, to fishing and archery. Through Chris's knowledge and some judicious sleuthing, they manage to narrow down the activities Lucas is likely to be interested in, and sign up for as many of them as possible.

There's an archery session that morning, so they decide to start there. Chris has always been an excellent shot with a phaser, but he realises quickly that that kind of skill doesn't map on at all to a bow and arrow. He can just about hit the target, but hitting the bullseye is another matter. Ash, on the other hand, turns out to be a natural, hitting the bullseye on his third try, and Chris can't help but feel a little jealous at how easy he makes it look.

Still, despite Chris's lack of skill, it's surprisingly fun, and it isn't until they're packing away afterwards that he realises Lucas and Sebastian never showed up.

* * *

Living with Ash proves to be much easier than Chris anticipated. He's actually an excellent roommate; clean, quiet, considerate. Chris has certainly shared with worse. The more time they spend together, the more Chris starts to see a different side to him, something other than the Section 31 front he puts on around others.

They make a surprisingly effective team, and several days in are making good progress with their mission. Their 'try all activities' approach doesn't always work, but they've managed to make contact twice with Lucas and Sebastian; once during a tennis tournament – where they're mostly separated and only get to exchange a few words – and once during a guided hike in the hills around the resort which proves much more fruitful. Chris finds himself enjoying catching up with Lucas, remembering all the fun they had in the past, and can only wish it were under better circumstances.

"You should come over for dinner sometime," Chris says as they're heading back to their cottages after the morning's hike. "We're always down for company."

"That sounds nice," Sebastian says. He's not the kind of person Chris would've expected Lucas to go for, being quiet and serious and a far cry from the more brash and outgoing people he dated in the past, but it's obvious they adore each other. The more Chris gets to know Sebastian the more sure he is that he isn't involved in Lucas's dealings with Midas, in fact Chris gets the feeling he isn't entirely happy with the amount of time Lucas spends flying around the sector as a courier and would be happier if they could settle down somewhere together.

"Works for me," Lucas adds. "When were you thinking?"

"How about tonight?" Chris suggests. "Assuming you don't already have plans."

Lucas and Sebastian exchange glances before nodding. "Sounds great," Lucas says, and Chris celebrates inwardly. "We'll bring the wine."

"Then it's settled," Chris says. "See you around eighteen thirty?"

"We'll be there."

* * *

"Anything I can do?" Ash asks, coming into the kitchen just as Chris is setting out the ingredients for vegetable lasagne. It's always gone down well during crew meals, so he hopes Lucas and Sebastian will like it too.

"You can chop the vegetables," Chris tells him. "I need thumbnail-sized chunks."

Ash nods, slipping past him and picking up a knife. "Do you think Sebastian knows about Lu's activities?" he asks as he slices into a zucchini.

"I don't know," Chris replies. "My gut says no? But I really doubt he's involved in it at all."

Ash nods, still slicing carefully. "Yeah, that's what I thought too. Kind of seemed like Lu's job is a point of contention between them, to be honest. Might be an angle we can work with?"

"It's definitely worth exploring," Chris agrees. "Can you pass me the butter?"

Ash proves to be an excellent helper, and it isn't long before the lasagne is assembled and ready to go in the oven. Chris whips up a quick fruit salad for dessert, then sets it in the cooling cabinet and heads upstairs to change while Ash sets the table.

The doorbell chimes just as Chris is taking the lasagne out of the oven. Ash goes to answer it, returning a few moments later with Lucas and Sebastian. They exchange greetings as Sebastian places a couple of bottles of red wine on the counter, giving Chris a shy smile.

"I hope this will do," he says. "There wasn't a lot of choice."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Chris tells him with a smile. "We're not picky."

Ash opens the wine and begins pouring everyone a glass as Chris dishes out the food. Then the four of them sit down to eat.

They chat a little as they eat, exchanging stories and small talk. After what Chris judges is an acceptable amount of time, he starts subtly trying to steer the conversation in the direction of Lucas's work.

"Do you ever find it hard, spending so much time apart?" he asks.

"Sometimes," Lucas says. "But I like to think it makes the time we do spend together more meaningful."

"Do you have any advice?" Ash puts in. "We've been struggling a little."

"Communication," Sebastian says. "Communication is more important than anything else. If you have that everything else becomes... not easy, exactly, but bearable."

"How do you keep in contact when you're apart?" Chris asks.

Lucas fields that one, and they talk for a while about communication strategies and how to keep a relationship strong despite long distances. It isn't obvious, but Chris can see Sebastian frowning at a few points, as if he disagrees with what Lucas is saying, and can't help but wondering if their relationship might not be quite as solid as they're implying.

Overall, it's actually a fairly pleasant evening, and if this were a real dinner party and not a mission, Chris thinks he'd be enjoying himself.

"This was great," Sebastian says as they're tucking into their fruit salad. "Thank you for inviting us."

"We should return the favour," Lucas adds. "But it'll have to wait a day or two; tomorrow's our anniversary."

"Congratulations," Ash says. "Five years, right?"

"That's right," Lucas replies. "Best five years of my life." He smiles at Sebastian, who smiles back briefly.

"Are you doing anything to celebrate?" Chris asks.

"We thought we'd head over to the city," Lucas says, glancing at Sebastian. "Make a day of it."

"Sounds nice," Chris says. "I hope you have a good time."

"Yeah," Lucas says, laying a hand over Sebastian's. "Me too."

The four of them chat for a while longer before Lucas and Sebastian decide it's time for them to leave.

"We'll definitely have to have you round for dinner sometime soon," Sebastian says as they say their goodbyes. "We'll set up a date after we get back."

"I look forward to it," Chris says. "Enjoy your anniversary."

With a final wave, Lucas and Sebastian leave. Chris waits until the door has closed behind them before turning to Ash. "That went pretty well."

Ash nods slowly. "Seems like they're starting to trust us, which is good." He begins gathering up the discarded glasses and Chris moves to help him.

"Guess we have the day off tomorrow," he says, stacking up bowls into a pile. "Unless you want to gatecrash their romantic day out."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," Ash replies with a smile. "Anything you want to do with the time?"

"Well, there is one thing..." Chris begins, and Ash rolls his eyes.

"Let me guess, it involves four-legged animals with hooves."

Chris gives him his best hopeful look, and Ash sighs. "Fine, but don't be surprised if I'm terrible at it. I think the closest I've ever gotten to a horse was a petting zoo when I was six."

"You'll be fine," Chris says. "I'll take care of you."

Surprise flickers across Ash's face. "Yeah," he says quietly. "I'm sure you will."

* * *

They set out early the next morning, arriving at the stables just before 0900. Chris stays long enough to get Ash set up with protective gear and watch him make a few hesitant circles of the beginners' area on the back of a sedate brown mare called Cinnamon, before heading off to organise his own equipment.

The horse he's assigned is a black and white mare called Lightning, and apparently has a bit of a reputation as a 'handful'. Chris has worked with some pretty recalcitrant horses in his time, though, and he's sure he can tame her.

He walks her around for a few minutes, getting them used to each other and making sure the saddle is tight enough, then ties her to a post and goes to see how Ash is getting on.

He finds him still walking the horse slowly round the pen. He doesn't look to be especially enjoying the experience, but from what Chris can see he's doing perfectly well for a beginner.

"Ready to take this show on the road?" Chris asks when he gets close enough.

"Is no an acceptable answer?" Ash responds, and Chris laughs.

"Relax," he says. "I've picked an easy route. All you have to do is stay upright and let the horse do the work."

Despite Ash's qualms, he manages well enough, and the morning passes without incident. Chris has packed a picnic, and they pause for an early lunch next to a field of wildflowers. Surinda was right, they're beautiful this time of year.

"See," he says, lying back to watch clouds pass by above them. "This isn't so bad."

"This part maybe," Ash tells him. "I'm not sure I'm cut out for riding."

"You're doing fine," Chris replies. "Relax." He squints at the sky, pointing upwards. "Do you think that cloud looks like a T-Rex?"

"Remind me how you convinced them to give you command of a starship?" Ash asks, but he's smiling.

"Two," Chris corrects amiably. "Though I'm not supposed to talk about that." He reaches out and tugs on Ash's arm, encouraging him to lie down. "Come on, we spend all our time in space. Don't you ever just want to look at clouds?"

Ash rolls his eyes, but obediently lies down with his head next to Chris's. "Fine," he says with an exaggerated sigh. "Show me your T-Rex cloud."

For all Ash complains, Chris has to admit he actually gets into the spirit of cloud-watching a lot more easily than Spock or Una would have. They spend a good twenty minutes watching the sky, occasionally arguing about the shape of a particular cloud.

("That one's a cat.")

"No, it's an owl. See, that curved bit is its wing."

"No, that's the cat's tail. Because it's a cat."

"Fine, have it your way. What about that one?")

"I guess we should head back," Chris says finally, stretching as he sits up.

"Ugh," Ash groans. "More riding. You know, I don't think that horse likes me much."

"I'm sure that's not true," Chris tells him. "But if you feel like resorting to bribery, I have something that might help."

He produces a couple of carrots out of his bag and shows Ash how to feed one to Cinnamon before they start making their way back.

Carrots or no carrots, Ash insists on returning Cinnamon to the stables as soon as they get back, stating that he's done enough riding for one day. Not wanting to push him too far, Chris agrees, though he does catch Ash stroking her nose before she's led away.

He's content to stick around and watch, however, so Chris decides to check out the showjumping course behind the stables.

It's a fairly simple course, and Chris's first time round isn't bad, but he knows there's room for improvement. He decides to try again now that he's familiar with the jumps, and his second attempt starts off much better – he makes it through the first three jumps perfectly. He's feeling positive as he approaches the final, most difficult fence; one good leap and he'll be home free.

He realises what's going to happen a split second before Lightning balks, skidding to a stop and sending him flying. The world blurs around him and Chris curls in on himself, preparing to tuck and roll. It isn't the first time he's been thrown off a horse, and it usually doesn't lead to more than bruises.

Unfortunately, luck isn't with him this time. Pain explodes in his left arm as he hits the ground, sharp enough to tell him it's probably broken. He looks around urgently, making sure he isn't in danger of being stepped on by a horse, then slumps back and tries to breathe through the pain.

He's staring at the sky, trying to summon the strength to move, when a familiar face appears in his line of sight.

"A-" Chris begins, before his brain kicks in and he corrects himself. "Tyler?"

"Just stay still," Ash tells him. "The medic's on her way."

Chris opens his mouth to tell him not to worry, he's fine, but what comes out is a groaned, "Ow," as the pain in his arm flares.

"Yeah, that looked like it hurt," Ash says. "Remind me again why you think this is such a fun hobby?"

It hurts to breathe, let alone speak, but Chris braces himself and manages a quiet, "Lightning?"

Ash gives him an exasperated look. "That's your main concern? The damn horse?" Chris just stares at him and he sighs. "She's fine, unlike you. One of the other riders has her. I think they're leading her back to the stables."

The medic arrives at that moment, dropping to her knees at Chris's side and pulling out a scanner. "No sign of neck or spinal damage," she reports. "That's good. No signs of concussion either, though if you weren't wearing your helmet it'd be a different story." She runs the scanner over his body, studying the results. "There's some pretty extensive bruising, but it looks like the only major injury is a break to your left forearm."

She puts the scanner away and pulls out a hypospray and ampoule, fitting the latter into the former before pressing it to his neck. "This should help with the pain," she says, "but we need to get you to the medical centre. Do you think you can stand?"

It takes both the medic and Ash helping him, but Chris manages to get upright and stay that way long enough to make it the thirty or so steps to her vehicle. He lets himself fade out a little during the journey to the medical centre, unable to focus on much besides the pain in his arm and Ash's presence beside him, keeping him steady.

An examination reveals the fractures to his radius and ulna to be severe enough as to make the standard bone-knitting process unfeasible, so he has to be sedated while the bones are realigned and set into position.

Ash has to leave before the procedure, but he's there when Chris wakes up, sitting in a chair by his bed. Chris blinks at him drowsily, his thoughts still fuzzy from the sedative.

"Hey," Ash says with a smile. "How do you feel?"

"You have a nice smile," Chris tells him, and Ash gives a soft laugh.

"Yeah, they warned me you might be a little confused until the sedation wears off."

"M not confused," Chris mumbles, but it just makes Ash look more amused. He rubs his eyes, then glances down at his left arm, which is covered from wrist to elbow in a blue cast. "Hurts less now."

"Yeah, they fixed it up pretty well. You'll have to wear the cast for a few days, but they said it's mostly just a precaution to make sure you don't damage it again. But it means you'll have to lay off the horse riding for a while. Thankfully."

"Thankfully?"

Ash gives him a disbelieving look. "You know that thing about getting back on the horse is just an expression, right? You got thrown over a fence, Chris. You're lucky you only broke your arm." He shudders suddenly, gaze shifting to the wall behind Chris's head. "I swear, when I saw you go flying like that-" He cuts himself off and shakes his head, looking tired.

"What?" Chris asks, and Ash meets his eyes briefly before looking away again.

"Just- be more careful next time? I don't want to have to go back to Starfleet and tell them I lost their most decorated captain in a stupid horse riding accident."

It isn't the first time someone's asked him to be more careful. Chris has heard that particular plea many times over the years, from his parents and Una and Phil and even Joseph, but hearing it from Ash feels different somehow.

"Okay," he says, before he has a chance to think. "I'll try."

He reaches out a hand, and feels something settle inside him as Ash reaches back, his fingers curling around Chris's.

"When can I get out of here?" he asks, and Ash smiles briefly.

"Not too long," he says, and Chris decides to be content with that.

* * *

The medical centre transport drops them just outside their cottage. Ash hovers close by as Chris makes his way inside and up the stairs to the bedroom. The painkillers they gave him haven't worn off yet, but there's enough of a residual ache that his current plan is to lie down somewhere soft and remain stationary for as long as possible.

He shuffles his way into the bathroom to take care of the necessities, then climbs under the covers and settles in with a deep sigh.

"Do you need anything?" Ash asks. "It's about dinner time, I could make you something?"

Chris is still a little nauseous from the sedatives, but he knows he should probably eat something. "Maybe some tomato soup and crackers?" he suggests. It's been one of his comfort foods since he was a kid, and he figures he could use some comfort right now. "Please."

"No problem," Ash tells him, and disappears back downstairs.

Chris shifts, getting himself as comfortable as possible, then turns on the screen on the wall, searching for something soothing and mindless to watch.

He's partway through a nature documentary when Ash returns with a tray, setting it down carefully on Chris's lap. Along with the promised soup and crackers, it contains a glass of water and a cup of herbal tea.

Chris stirs the soup slowly, then raises a spoonful to his lips and takes a sip. He's expecting the usual food-synthesiser soup that tastes exactly the same as every other bowl of synthesised tomato soup he's had in his life, but instead it's thick and rich with a faint undertone of herbs.

"This is good," he says, and Ash gives a soft huff.

"You don't have to sound so shocked," he says. "I might not be as good a cook as you, but I'm not actually completely hopeless."

"I didn't think you were hopeless," Chris tells him. "I just didn't expect you to go to this much trouble."

"It wasn't much trouble," Ash says. "I just made a couple of tweaks to the synthesiser recipe."

Chris stares at him, feeling a warmth that isn't from the soup. "You know," he says, "I've gotten kind of used to us eating together. Why don't you get something for yourself and come watch this with me?"

Ash's gaze flicks from Chris to the screen and back. "Yeah," he says, as if coming to a decision. "Okay."

* * *

Chris doesn't sleep well that night, having trouble finding a position that doesn't aggravate his many bruises. Several times he drifts off only to turn or shift awkwardly and wake himself up again.

It seems like he isn't the only one having a difficult night. He's startled more than once by Ash suddenly letting out a cry in his sleep or jerking awake with a gasp.

"You okay?" Chris asks, as Ash pushes back the covers and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

Ash gives a slightly strained laugh. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

"I'm all right," Chris says. "Just having a hard time getting comfortable. Now answer the question."

"I'll be fine," Ash tells him. "It's just the nightmares I mentioned."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Ash says. Chris supposes he can't blame him; he's never liked talking about his own nightmares either. "I'm going to go get something to drink, do you want anything?"

"No thanks," Chris replies, and Ash nods.

"Ash?" he adds as Ash heads for the door. "If you ever do want to talk, I'm here."

Ash pauses briefly, not looking around. "I know," he says, his voice soft. "Thanks."

* * *

Ash declares the next day a day off from the mission to give Chris a chance to recover. Part of Chris wants to argue – he's all too aware of time slipping away – but he's tired and in pain and the idea of spending a day doing nothing but resting is too appealing.

The good news is his arm is recovering well, it barely even aches any more. Unfortunately, that's not the case for the rest of him. Everything hurts – he's pretty sure his bruises have bruises – and it's hard to find a comfortable position. He spends a good portion of the day in bed, alternately dozing, watching random documentaries, and playing games on a PADD. Ash brings him food and drink and occasionally sits with him for a while – including a slightly embarrassing half-hour when Chris's lack of sleep catches up to him and he dozes off against Ash's

shoulder – but he spends most of the time in the study working on Section 31 stuff.

The doorbell rings late in the afternoon and Ash answers it, returning shortly with a visitor. It's Lucas, and Chris sits up a fraction, forcing his mind back into mission mode. He sent Lucas a message telling him what happened, but he didn't expect him to turn up here.

"Just came to see how you were," Lucas tells him.

"I'm okay," Chris replies. "Just sore. How was your day in the city?"

"Good," Lucas replies. "I recommend it, if you've got some extra time."

"I'm not sure we will," Chris says, "but it's something to think about."

"Definitely," Ash says, before stepping in the direction of the door. "I have to take a call, but I'll leave you two to talk."

He leaves, shutting the door behind him.

Lucas glances after him. "I have to say, he's not the kind of person I would've expected you to end up with."

"It was a surprise to me too," Chris tells him, making sure to keep his expression blank.

"He obviously loves you though," Lucas continues, and Chris's mind briefly stutters to a stop. "The way he looks at you, it's the way Sebastian used to look at me."

"Used to?" Chris asks, deciding he'll deal with the first part of that sentence later.

Lucas sighs. "He's- we're-" He stops, frowning. "It's complicated."

"You're having problems?"

"Something like that." He shakes his head. "It's- I got mixed up in something, and it's put a strain on everything. Including our relationship."

"Anything I can help with?"

Lucas doesn't answer for a moment, and Chris risks pushing a little. "It might help to talk about it. And I'm always willing to listen."

He can see Lucas hesitating. "Not here," he says finally. "But maybe I could meet you for lunch tomorrow? If you're recovered by then."

Part of Chris wants to press further, but he knows it'll just risk pushing him away. "Sure," he says instead. "Tomorrow. Count on it."

Lucas nods. "I should go," he says. "I hope you feel better soon."

"Thanks," Chris tells him.

He watches Lucas leave, caught between hope and frustration. On the one hand, it seems like they're making progress, but on the other hand he can't help but wish he didn't have to wait almost a day to find out what Lucas wants to tell him.

Ash comes in as Chris is settling back against the pillows, trying to avoid aggravating his bruises. "Did he say anything?" he asks.

"No, it seemed like he was about to, but then he stopped himself. But we're supposed to meet for lunch tomorrow, so I'm hoping he'll say more then."

"Sounds like a plan," Ash says. "I'm going to the store, do you want anything?"

Chris reaches for his PADD. "Hang on, I'll make you a list."

Once Ash has gone and he's alone, Chris finds his mind returning to Lucas's comments. He knows Ash is a good actor, and the whole point of this act is to convince people they're madly in love with each other, but the way Lucas described the situation makes him wonder. *The way he looks at you...*

A memory of the night before enters his mind; the two of them sitting together on the bed, their shoulders bumping together companionably as they ate. Chris helped himself to a couple of Ash's fries, and in return Ash stole one of his crackers. It was... nice. Comfortable. The kind of thing he could get used to.

Could Ash want more than just a fake relationship? Does *he* want that?

Eventually the thoughts swirling around Chris's head become too much for him and he gets up, ignoring the lingering pain, and heads for the kitchen to look for a distraction.

The doctors were very clear about the need to avoid putting strain on his arm, so Chris rules out anything that will require a lot of force or effort. He isn't planning to make anything complicated or difficult, just something that will get him out of his own head for a while.

He settles on a basic chocolate chip cookie recipe, and gets to work weighing and measuring out ingredients. He has to synthesise a few items – he'd prefer the real thing, but that would mean waiting for Ash to get back from the store, and the whole point of this is to try and *avoid* thinking about Ash.

He's just setting out dollops of mixture on a baking tray when he hears the door. Ash appears a few seconds later and stops dead as he sees

Chris.

"You're supposed to be resting," he says with a frown.

"Cooking is restful," Chris tells him, and Ash snorts.

"You're a terrible patient, you know that? When this is over I'm sending a letter of condolences to your CMO."

"Why do you think my last one retired?" Chris asks.

Ash actually laughs at that, shaking his head. "I'm going to unpack," he says. "You finish making your cookies or whatever, and then I'm sending you back to bed before you do something stupid."

Chris almost asks if that's a promise, but he stops himself. He still hasn't quite figured out what he wants from Ash, and questions like that feel too much like heading into dangerous waters. So instead he just smiles and nods and goes back to his cookie dough.

And if he's far too aware of Ash moving around him as he unpacks the bags, no one but him needs to know.

* * *

He sleeps better that night, despite his confused feelings. His aches and pains are starting to heal, and while he's still a little stiff, he's able to meet Lucas for lunch with a minimum of wincing.

They meet at a cafe, but Lucas suggests they take their food and go somewhere more private. Chris agrees readily, following him to a hill a short distance away. He can just see the stables behind some trees, and wonders how Lightning is getting on.

They spend a few minutes making small talk about the weather and what they've been up to, before Chris's patience runs out. "You said you had something you wanted to talk about," he says, and Lucas sighs and sets his sandwich in his lap.

"Yeah," he says. "I guess I did." He swallows, glancing down at his hands before staring out at the view. "I think I'm in trouble, Chris, and I don't know what to do about it."

"What kind of trouble?" Chris asks, as if he doesn't already know.

Lucas's hands tighten around the sandwich. "The bad kind." He sighs. "Have you ever heard of a man called Midas?"

"Doesn't ring a bell," Chris lies. "Unless you mean the mythical king."

Lucas snorts. "I wish. No, he's a smuggler. I've..." He trails off briefly before appearing to steel himself. "I've been working for him."

"You?" Chris asks, hoping he's projecting the correct amount of surprise. "Why?"

"Because I'm an idiot?" He shakes his head. "I gambled with money I didn't have; borrowed from people I shouldn't have borrowed from. Midas said he could help, that he'd heard good things about my couriering skills and pay off my debts if I did some work for him in exchange."

"What kind of work?"

"Moving stuff from place to place. Food, drugs, animals, stuff like that. I wasn't happy about it, you have to know that, but I figured I'd do it for a few months until I'd paid him back, and then get out. But then he-" He breaks off and swallows. "He started wanting me to transport *people*. I tried to refuse, said I wasn't comfortable with it, and that's when he got angry. He told me I owed him, and then he started making threats. Against me, against Sebastian... He said if I didn't do what he said he'd make sure I paid for it. And I know he can do it, too, he has people everywhere." He shakes his head. "I've been trying to fight back, to help people when I can, but I'm so afraid all the time and I don't know how much longer I can do this."

"Does Sebastian know?" Chris asks.

"A little, but he doesn't know how bad it is. He just knows I'm unhappy. He thinks I should just leave, give it up and say to hell with it all, and I can't figure out how to explain to him that Midas won't let that happen. It's driving a wedge between us." He gives a harsh laugh and drops his head into his hands. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"I think you need to tell him the truth," Chris says gently. "He deserves to know the whole story. And then I think the two of you need to go to the authorities."

Lucas scoffs. "Midas would find out. Like I said, he has people everywhere. Besides, my hands aren't exactly clean. I did a lot of stuff for him I'm not proud of." He sighs and adds, "I shouldn't even really be telling *you* all this, but I... I guess I had to talk to someone."

"I'm glad you told me," Chris tells him. "And I think I might be able to help you."

"Really?"

Chris nods. "I have a lot of connections in Starfleet. I'm sure I can find someone who'll hear you out. If Midas is as big a criminal as you say, amnesty would be a small price to pay for information that might bring him down. I assume you do have information on him?"

Lucas nods. "I don't know if it's enough to bring him down, but I'd be willing to tell whatever I know if it meant there was a chance he could be stopped and Sebastian and I could be safe."

"Let me make some enquiries," Chris tells him. "I'll see what I can do."

He's surprised when Lucas darts out a hand, gripping his forearm tightly. "Thank you," he says. "Even if you can't do anything, thank you for listening."

"No problem," Chris tells him, pushing down a flicker of discomfort at the gratitude in Lucas's eyes. "Maybe you can do the same for me someday."

"Yeah," Lucas says. "Maybe."

* * *

Chris makes a quick stop at the stables, wanting to make sure Lightning knows he isn't holding a grudge, before heading back to the cottage. He's starting to ache again by the time he makes it back, and he drops down into an armchair in the living room with a sigh.

"You okay?" Ash asks.

"Yeah, just sore," Chris replies, settling further into the armchair. Maybe sitting on the ground like that wasn't the best idea in the world. "Think I made some progress, though."

He gives Ash a quick update on his conversation with Lucas.

"Sounds like we've got him right where we want him," Ash concludes.

"Yeah," Chris says. He hesitates, then adds, "I feel bad about lying to him."

It's been bothering him more and more as time goes on, and the conversation today has left him particularly uncomfortable. Lucas seemed honestly grateful to Chris for his advice, and Chris can't help but wonder how he'd react if he knew the full story.

"I know," Ash says. "You're a good person." He sits down on the sofa nearby and leans towards Chris, hands clasped between his knees. "If you think he's ready to talk to Starfleet we can ease the deception a little – explain that my job in administration is a cover for Starfleet Intelligence, and that's how we really met."

"I guess," Chris says. "I'll send him a message later and tell him I've found someone who can help him." He sighs, shaking his head. "I know we can't tell him everything, but I just... I guess I don't want him to hate me when he finds out the truth."

"If it helps, you're a very hard person to hate," Ash tells him. "Believe me, I know."

Chris can't help but laugh at that. "You tried really hard," he says. "But I got there in the end."

Ash smiles briefly before looking away. He's close enough to touch, Chris realises. He could reach out and lay a hand on Ash's knee, or tangle their fingers together.

Instead, he clambers out of the armchair and heads for the kitchen. "I'm going to make some coffee," he says over his shoulder. "You want anything?"

"Yeah, I'll take one," Ash replies. "White-"

"-With sugar," Chris finishes. "I know."

* * *

Chris wakes up early the next morning, the sun only just starting to rise. Ash is still asleep, curled on his side facing Chris. He looks peaceful, all the stress and strain of his waking life washed away, and Chris finds himself caught, unable to look away.

I want this, he thinks, the realisation hitting him like a punch to the gut. *I want to wake up with you.*

Ash shifts, beginning to wake, and Chris closes his eyes and pretends to be asleep. It isn't the bravest thing he's ever done, if he's honest, but there's no way he can interact with Ash right now and act like everything's normal. Not when everything in him aches to touch, to reach out and kiss him until they're both breathless.

He lies there, eyes shut and breathing carefully even, until Ash rises and disappears into the bathroom. Then he rolls on his back and stares at the ceiling.

This, he thinks, *is definitely becoming a problem.*

* * *

Chris has an appointment that morning to get his cast off, so he and Ash set out straight after breakfast. Chris does his best to act normal, but every part of him feels hyper-aware, wondering if Ash has noticed anything, and what he thinks of it if he has.

He nearly jumps when Ash slips a hand into his, calloused fingers brushing across his palm. It's a gesture they've done many times without meaning anything, but now all Chris can think is how much he *wants* it to mean something.

"You okay?" Ash asks, glancing at him with a frown. "You're not in pain or anything?"

"No," Chris replies. "Why do you ask?"

Ash shrugs. "You're quieter than usual."

"Just thinking about Lucas," Chris says, which isn't a total lie. "I feel bad for him. He's in a difficult position, even if it is partly his own fault."

"Everyone deserves a second chance," Ash says. "I know that better than most."

"You're a good person," Chris says, and Ash shrugs, looking away.

"Thanks," he says quietly, then speeds up a little, tugging on Chris's hand. "Come on, we don't want to be late."

The actual appointment doesn't take long. The doctor removes the cast and runs a few scans to check that the bones have set and healed correctly, then asks a few questions about pain and stiffness and whether he's been resting it properly. Chris answers them all truthfully – more or less – and is released with a clean bill of health and a new note to his medical file. (He can already imagine M'Benga's reaction to that one.)

"So what do you want to do now?" Ash asks as they leave the medical centre.

Chris is about to answer when his communicator chirps with a message. "Hold that thought," he says, digging it out and flicking it open.

It turns out to be from Lucas, and Chris reads it through once before glancing up at Ash. "He wants to set up a meeting," he says. "Lucas. He says he's spoken with Sebastian and they're willing to work with Starfleet in exchange for protection."

"Great," Ash says. "Tell him to come over and we can start working out the details."

* * *

Everything moves pretty quickly after that. Chris sets up a meeting, and less than an hour later is welcoming Lucas and Sebastian into the living room of their cottage. He offers them both a drink, which they turn down, before Lucas decides to cut to the chase.

"You said you knew someone who could help us."

"Ah," Chris says. "Yes." He turns to Ash, who has been mostly silent up until now. "You want to take it from here?"

"Wait," Lucas says. "I don't understand. What does he have to do with this?"

"I'm afraid we haven't been entirely honest with you," Ash tells him. "I don't work in administration, and my name isn't Tyler Roberts. That was a cover. My real name is Ash Tyler, and I work for a division of Starfleet Intelligence known as Section 31."

Lucas blinks at him for a moment, then turns to Chris. "You knew about this," he says. It isn't a question.

"I wanted to tell you," Chris replies. "But it wasn't my secret to tell."

"Don't blame Chris," Ash adds. "I made him promise not to say anything. But he told me about your situation, and I think we can help each other. Section 31 is aware of Midas and his activities, and I'm prepared to offer you amnesty and relocation in exchange for your cooperation with our investigations."

Lucas glances at Sebastian, the two of them communicating silently. "Fine," Lucas says finally, turning back to Ash. "What are your terms?"

The discussion of terms takes some time. Aware that his role in all this is basically over, Chris settles back to watch, barely able to take his eyes of Ash as he leads Lucas and Sebastian through the options available to them.

He knew, intellectually, that Starfleet Command wouldn't have both given Ash the role of head of Section 31 and kept him in that position if he weren't at least adequate at his job, but knowing and seeing are two different things. The slow understanding of the last week is crystallised into a realisation that Ash is *good* at this. Chris has always found competence alluring, and if he weren't already attracted to Ash, that realisation might have been enough to push him over the edge.

Finally, after everything has been sorted out to both sides' satisfaction, Lucas signs a contract agreeing to relocation and new identities for both him and Sebastian in return for telling Ash and his people everything he knows about Midas's operations and associates.

It's the outcome they hoped for, a win for all parties. The mission is over, and he and Ash can go back to their lives.

Chris wishes he could be more excited about that.

* * *

"So that's it?" he asks once Lucas and Sebastian have left. "Mission accomplished?"

"Looks that way," Ash replies. "We got what we came for."

"So we can drop the act and stop pretending to be partners?"

Something flickers in Ash's expression. "Guess so."

"Good," Chris says. "I'm tired of pretending." And with that, he throws caution to the wind and leans in and kisses Ash.

Ash freezes for a second, just long enough for Chris to worry that he's made a huge mistake, but then he kisses back, arms wrapping around Chris's back to pull him closer. Warmth explodes in Chris's chest, every nerve in his body coming alight at the feeling of finally having this, being able to touch and be touched in return.

Ash is smiling when they break apart, and Chris reaches up to trace the curve of his cheek. "I was right, before," he says. "You do have a nice

smile."

"And here I thought you were just all fuzzy from the sedative," Ash says.

"Well, that too," Chris admits. "We've done this a little backwards, haven't we?"

"A little," Ash replies. "But we got there in the end."

* * *

Packing up ends up taking longer than unpacking did, partly because they keep getting distracted by being able to touch each other, and partly because they're dragging it out, all-too-aware that their time together is limited.

"You know," Ash says, as he shoves a pile of laundry into his bag, "there's a meeting planned a few months from now to decide how to better integrate Section 31 into the rest of Starfleet. Wouldn't take much work to convince them to invite the captain of the flagship. Assuming he'll be available?"

"Hmm," Chris says, pretending to consider it. "I'll see if I can find an opening in my schedule. A few months, you said?"

"That's right," Ash says, and Chris smiles and pulls him in for a kiss.

"Yeah," he says as they break apart. "I think I can work with that."

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