

No Way Out But Through

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Summary

Ash tells Chris about L'Rell.

Notes

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They're on the bed in Chris's quarters, jackets, undershirts and boots discarded but trousers still on. Normally they'd be naked and halfway to orgasm by now, but Chris wanted to try something different this time, draw it out a little. Ash gives them 50-50 odds on being interrupted by a red alert or something before they can finish, but he can't deny there's a certain pleasure in taking things slow as Chris kisses down his jaw, sucking gently at his pulse point as he toys with the fastening to Ash's trousers. Ash pulls him closer, fingers combing through Chris's hair, and Chris's hand slips lower, cupping the hardness in his pants.

Ash shifts, grinding against Chris's palm, and Chris makes an encouraging sound, rubbing Ash through his trousers as he nuzzles against Ash's neck. He mouths at the point where Ash's neck meets his shoulder, exploring it with tongue and lips and just a hint of teeth-

-L'Rell's teeth in his shoulder as she rides him, pain and horror and the look on her face as she sits back, blood on her teeth and triumph in her eyes-

Ash stills, trying to push the memory away. This isn't L'Rell, this is Chris, who would never hurt him, who he *wants* to have sex with, but it's hard to fight the part of his mind that's still back there on that ship, the part telling him to *stay still, just stay still and it'll be over faster*. He concentrates on his breathing in an attempt to hold back the rising panic, but it's already washing over him, making him feel like he can't breathe.

"Ash?" Chris pulls back, looking concerned. "What's wrong?"

Ash can't answer him. He reaches up, feeling at his neck and shoulder – there's no mark, of course there isn't, Chris wouldn't-

"Did I hurt you?" Chris shifts away, giving Ash space, before reaching out to touch his shoulder. Ash jerks away instinctively, so hard that he nearly falls off the bed, and Chris pulls his hand back, looking horrified.

Ash opens his mouth to reassure him, tell him it isn't his fault, but then his stomach lurches and he realises he's going to be sick.

He barely makes it to the bathroom, pulling up the lid of the toilet just in time to lose his dinner into the bowl. He waits until he's sure he's finished before slumping to the floor, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth shakily as the auto-flush activates and sucks the mess away. He still feels panicky, like he can't get enough air, and he digs his nails into his palm and tries to focus on his breathing. *In. Hold. Out. In. Hold. Out.*

It helps a little, enough to take the edge off at least. He bangs his head against the wall, then again, harder, wanting to scream at the unfairness of it all. Things were going so well; he likes Chris, trusts him, had started to wonder if maybe this thing between them could last past the end of the mission. And then something like this had to happen and screw it all up.

"Ash?" Chris's voice comes through the door, interrupting his train of thought. "Are you okay?"

Ash hesitates, debating how to answer. He must wait too long because Chris continues, "Do you want me to call sickbay?"

"No," Ash replies instantly. There isn't anything they can do for him, and with his luck Culber would be on duty and that's the last thing any of them needs.

He rubs his hands over his face, then through his hair, trying to pull himself together. "I'll be okay. Just give me a minute."

He sits there for a second longer, steeling himself, then stands up slowly before crossing to the sink to rinse out his mouth. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror and averts his eyes, splashing water on his face before running a cold wet hand over the back of his neck.

Chris is waiting for him when he finally leaves the bathroom, fully dressed again except for his boots and unfastened jacket. He's perched on the end of the bed, but rises when he catches sight of Ash, and moves forwards a few steps before halting. "Are you okay?" he asks, expression filled with concern.

"Yeah," Ash lies. "Just a panic attack." The words are bitter on his tongue.

"You're shaking," Chris tells him. "Come sit down."

Ash lets himself be led over to the bed. He hadn't noticed before, but Chris is right; he's shaking, partly from adrenaline, partly from cold. His shirt and jacket are nowhere in sight – he's pretty sure he tossed them somewhere over the other side of the bed – so he settles for wrapping his arms around himself, startling when Chris drapes a blanket over his shoulders. It's warm and soft and smells like Chris, and Ash thinks he shouldn't find that as comforting as he does.

"Do you want something to drink?" Chris asks. "I have scotch."

The thought has a definite appeal, but Ash doubts it'll play well with his still unsettled stomach. "No thanks. I'm fine." He pulls the blanket tighter around himself and adds, "I, uh. I guess I should explain."

Chris sits down next to him, keeping a careful distance between them. "You don't have to."

"No, I really do," Ash tells him. He doesn't *want* to, but the longer he waits the worse it'll be. Might as well get it over with now.

He takes a deep breath, bracing himself, then begins to speak.

"You know the Klingons experimented on me to make me into their spy." He can see Chris nod out of the corner of his eye. "They couldn't keep Voq's memories from slipping through entirely, but my mind kind of... recontextualised them. The surgeries they performed became torture, and other things..." He trails off, fingernails digging into his palm. "Voq and L'Rell were involved. Sexually. From his perspective it was consensual, or as consensual as Klingon sex ever gets anyway, but from my perspective-" He breaks off and swallows hard against the rising nausea. "From my perspective she was my captor. I was doing what I had to do to survive."

"I'm sorry," Chris says softly. He reaches out, then pauses with his hand hovering over Ash's arm. "Can I- is it okay if I touch you?"

Ash nods, and Chris's hand lands on his arm, squeezing gently. "I know it wasn't real," Ash continues quickly, wanting to get the rest of the explanation over with. "But I can't stop feeling like I was violated."

"You were," Chris replies instantly. "Maybe not the way you thought, but I don't think anyone could argue what happened to you wasn't a violation." His hand moves to Ash's back, rubbing comfortingly, and Ash leans into the touch.

"I thought I was getting better," he says, the words falling out before he can stop them. "It hasn't been as bad lately and I thought maybe I was finally getting over it, and then *this* happens and it's like nothing's changed." He runs a hand through his hair, tugging on it hard enough to hurt.

"I'm sorry," Chris murmurs. "I can't imagine how hard this must be." He hesitates, then adds, "Do you know what triggered it this time? Was it something I did?"

Ash wishes he could say no, but that wouldn't help either of them. "It was a stupid little thing," he says instead. "You couldn't have known. I didn't even know." He picks at a thumbnail, trying to order his thoughts. "L'Rell, uh, she liked things rough. Bruises, scratching, slapping, biting... When you had your mouth on my shoulder you grazed me a little with your teeth, and it really wasn't a big deal, but it reminded me of her. And then everything kind of snowballed from there."

Chris nods slowly, accepting the words. "I didn't even realise I was using my teeth," he says. "Guess I'll have to be more careful next time."

Ash glances at him. "Next time?"

Chris's eyes widen. "I didn't- I mean, if you want to stop, that's fine-"

"No!" Ash interrupts hastily. "I don't want that. But I... if completely random stuff like this can set me off then it'll probably happen again. You shouldn't have to deal with that."

"Neither should you," Chris replies. "And I'm not going to leave you to face this alone." He hesitates, then adds, "I care about you, Ash. This isn't just about sex for me."

Something seems to loosen in Ash's chest. "Me either," he admits.

Chris moves closer and wraps an arm around him – slowly, giving him time to pull away if he wants to. Ash shifts into the touch, letting himself be moved until he's fully in Chris's arms, head resting against Chris's chest as a hand strokes lightly along his spine. His eyes drift shut

briefly, the adrenaline wearing off and leaving him tired and drained.

"Do you want to stay here tonight?"

Ash startles at the question, tensing in spite of himself, and Chris continues quickly, "Just to sleep."

They've never actually stayed the whole night in each other's quarters before, not wanting to risk the rest of the crew finding out. Ash can't bring himself to care about that right now, though, not with Chris's arms around him, grounding him. Warming him. "Yeah," he mumbles. "Sleep sounds good."

They lapse into silence for a while, taking comfort in the closeness, before Chris speaks again. "Ash? I'm glad you told me."

"Mmm," Ash replies, but what he means is *Me too*.

The Klingons might have taken a lot from him, but they can't take this, and maybe that's enough.

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