

The First Day of the Rest of Your Life

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The First Day of the Rest of Your Life

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Summary

Chris attempts to adjust to a future that's no longer set in stone. Sequel to *Rewritten*.

Notes

Written in late 2019, after the end of season 2. Originally posted on AO3.

It's been three days since Chris woke up, and he still can't quite believe this is real.

He's pretty sure the doctors are worried about him – after all, most people who've been told they're likely to need a cane for the rest of their life probably aren't *relieved* about it – but as there's no way to explain his position without at best earning himself a psych consult and at worst actively committing treason there's not much he can do about it.

He's gone round and round in circles, wondering what this all means. Logically, there's no way changing the future should change the past – he took the crystal, Michael used it to go to the future, and Control was stopped. That all still happened, there's no way for it to un-happen just because what he promised in return never came to pass.

But Tenavik sounded so *certain* when he said Chris's future couldn't be changed, that that was the price he had to pay for saving the galaxy. It seems wrong, somehow, that in the end he never actually had to pay it at all.

It's possible, he supposes, that it was meant to be a test of character – that it wasn't so much that that future would come to pass as that he believed it would and agreed to it anyway. And he did believe it, enough that he's spent the years since then distancing himself from everyone around him in the hope that it would hurt less when... *it* happened.

(And there's a small, anxious part of him that wonders if it could still come to pass, if whatever Ash did – because he knows Ash had something to do with it all, even if he doesn't know exactly what – didn't *stop* that future from happening as much as *postpone* it. He's tried telling himself that's impossible – apart from everything else, the injuries he sustained mean any future events couldn't possibly play out the way they did in his vision – but the thought still persists, lurking in the back of his mind.)

He's spent the past three days thinking about this, considering it from every possible angle, but he was even worse with temporal mechanics than he was with astrophysics, so all he's gotten out of it is a headache.

He thinks it might be easier if he could talk to someone about it all, but Ash has been frustratingly absent since that first day, claiming urgent Section 31 business. Chris can't really blame him; he knows how important Ash's work is, and he was apologetic enough that Chris is fairly sure he isn't avoiding him on purpose, but the end result is that he has about a hundred questions and no answers for any of them.

In an attempt to give himself something else to focus on, he starts writing messages. To Phil, Una, Spock, and several others he's pushed away over the years. He wonders what they'll think, hearing from him out of the blue like this after so long. That his near-death experience changed him, probably, and they'd be right. Just not in the way they think.

He's halfway through his last message when he hears a noise and looks up to see Ash hovering just inside the doorway. He's wearing the black Section 31 uniform, and Chris wonders if he came here straight from work. "Hey," he says, a little tentatively. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

Chris shakes his head, unable to keep from smiling even as he glances over at the chronometer. "I thought visiting hours were over?"

"I *may* have allowed them to think I was here on official business," Ash admits.

"I feel like I should disapprove of that," Chris tells him. "But to be honest I'm kind of glad to see you."

"How about we compromise and say I won't do it again?" Ash suggests with a brief smile.

"That works," Chris agrees. "Though I'm blaming you if I start getting questions about why Section 31 wants to interview me."

Ash snorts and comes closer, sitting down in the chair next to Chris's bed. Chris reaches out a hand and Ash takes it, running his thumb across Chris's fingers. "How're you feeling?" he asks softly.

Chris huffs a laugh. "Physically or mentally?"

"Both."

Chris shrugs. "Physically, I'm okay. The scars are a little itchy, but they say that'll pass in time. Mentally... I don't know." He lets his head fall back against the pillow. "It doesn't quite feel real, like I'm still waiting for the catch."

"That's understandable," Ash says, squeezing his hand. "I can't even imagine what you've been through."

Chris takes in a slightly shaky breath. "It wasn't easy," he admits quietly. Years of living on borrowed time, dreading the day when his luck would run out and that image he'd spent so long trying to forget would become reality.

And then that day came. And he's still here.

"How did you know?" he asks. It's a question he's been turning over in his mind for days now; one more thing that doesn't make sense.

Ash frowns. "Know what?"

Chris pulls his hand away gently. "That day at the transporter station. We hadn't seen or spoken to each other in months, and yet you showed up out of nowhere to insist I wear your 'good luck charm' right before I boarded a ship that was destined to explode. I've been thinking about it over and over and I just can't see how that's a coincidence. So *how did you know?*"

Ash shrugs. "Maybe I just had a feeling."

Chris gives him an unimpressed look, and he sighs. "What do you want me to say?"

"How about the truth?" Chris suggests.

Ash mutters something that might be "As if it's that easy" and glances over his shoulder at the door. "Okay, fine," he says. "But don't blame me if you don't believe me."

"I'm not sure there's much left I wouldn't believe," Chris tells him. "Try me."

Ash runs a hand through his hair. "I had a visitor, the night before. My future self, or at least that's who he claimed to be. He said you were in danger; that in his timeline there was an accident, and you were... hurt. Badly. He came back in time to save you." He pauses briefly before continuing, "He gave me the disc and said it was a shield that would protect you, and that all I had to do was get you to wear it. And then he disappeared and I... did what he asked. And it worked."

Chris stares at him. He's right, it's a little unbelievable, but it actually makes an odd kind of sense. Proof that things were meant to turn out like in his vision, and in one reality actually did – until Ash stepped in and changed it. He supposes the crystal couldn't account for that. "Dr Burnham uses time travel to save the galaxy, you use it to save me. I'm flattered."

Ash flushes. "It wasn't exactly my idea." He frowns and adds, "Or, well, I guess it was, but-"

Chris cuts him off with a laugh. "Don't start down that road," he says. "Trust me, you'll just end up giving yourself a headache."

He frowns as something occurs to him. "I thought Section 31 shut down all their time travel experiments." Not that he's not grateful, but this is bigger than him. It always has been.

"We did," Ash replies quickly. "I checked up and down, in case someone tried to start them up again without my authorisation, but I couldn't find anything. But I've been thinking, and he never told me *how* he managed to travel through time, just that it was against the rules. It might not be Section 31 technology. Hell, it might not even be *Federation* technology. I don't have any way of knowing."

"Questions with no answers," Chris says. "I know the feeling." He thinks for a moment, then adds, "What about the shield?"

"Oh, that's ours. R&D have just started working on something similar, but it's still in the planning stages." He gives a half-smile and adds, "It's kind of a pity yours got destroyed. Could've saved them some time."

"And created a nice bootstrap paradox into the bargain," Chris replies. "I don't know about you, but I think I've had enough of messing with the timeline for one lifetime."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Ash says, but he looks a little wistful. He seems to shake it off and adds, "They're smart, they'll figure it out eventually. The important thing is that it worked, and you're... okay."

He reaches out, then hesitates as if unsure whether to pull back. Chris grabs his hand before he can, holding it tightly. "I am," he says, more emotion in his tone than he intended. "And I don't think I said it before, but thank you. You have no idea how grateful I am."

Ash smiles briefly. "Glad I could help."

His expression is warm, affectionate, and Chris's heart twists, his gaze dropping to their clasped hands. As much as he wants to explore this new thing between them, it's been a long time since he allowed himself to get close to anyone, and it's hard to know where to start. "I don't know how much I can offer you," he says quietly. "I'm a little out of practice with this kind of thing."

"My last real relationship ended with her jumping nine hundred years into the future," Ash tells him. "I'm not really in a position to throw stones."

Chris glances up, meeting his eyes tentatively. He wonders if it was hard for Ash, all these years, not being able to talk about Michael, or *Discovery*, or any of it. He knows it was hard for him.

Ash shifts until he's holding Chris's hand in both of his. "Maybe we could start off slow," he suggests. "See where it takes us."

"Yeah," Chris replies, as something loosens in his chest. "I'd like that."

It'll take time, he knows, to adjust to everything, to deal with having a future again after so long, but this feels like a good place to start.

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