

One Day at a Time

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/860) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/860>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Star Trek: Discovery
Relationship:	Ash Tyler Voq/Christopher Pike
Character:	Christopher Pike , Ash Tyler Voq , Original Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Fix-It , Hurt/Comfort , Recovery , Disability , Romance
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of A Sky Full of Stars
Stats:	Published: 2023-08-25 Words: 2,205 Chapters: 2/2

One Day at a Time

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Summary

Snippets of Chris and Ash's life together post-A Sky Full of Stars.

Notes

Written in 2019. Originally posted on AO3.

Heartbeat

Chapter Summary

Chris goes in for surgery.

Chris glances up at the chronometer, checking the time to find it's about two minutes later than the last time he looked. Just over an hour to go.

Ash is telling a story, something about an aggrieved Tellarite. Chris usually enjoys his stories, but right now he can't seem to keep his attention from wandering, the words washing over him without making an impression. He rubs absently at the scars on his hands, forcing himself not to re-check the time.

"Chris?"

He startles at the sound of his name, looking up to see Ash staring at him with an expression somewhere between amusement and concern. "I'm getting the feeling that my Tellarite drinking contest story isn't gripping you."

"Sorry," Chris tells him.

Ash shrugs. "It's okay." He studies Chris for a moment, expression softening. "Thinking about the operation?"

Chris nods, rubbing at his scars again. He knows it has to happen – he can't wear this life-support device forever, and getting his heart fixed will be one more big step towards having a normal life. But no surgery is without risk, and that's the part that has his stomach tied in knots. After Boreth he got used to throwing himself into dangerous situations, knowing that, whatever happened, he had to live long enough for his vision to come true. But his future isn't set in stone anymore. If something goes wrong this time, he could actually die, and the prospect is terrifying. Especially now he has something – someone – to live for.

He expects Ash to offer some platitude like 'It'll be fine' or 'You don't need to worry', but instead he just moves to sit next to Chris, pressing their shoulders together. Chris leans against him gratefully, drawing what comfort he can from the touch.

It's selfish, he knows. Their relationship is still new, fragile, but moments like this will only make it worse for Ash if something happens to him. After all, there's a reason he spent most of the last ten years pushing people away.

"Gupta's an excellent surgeon," Ash tells him, taking his hand and lacing their fingers together. "I was hit by shrapnel in an explosion a couple years back. Tore up my leg pretty good, but she fixed it. Barely even left a scar."

Ash never told him about that. Part of Chris wants to ask for the full story, but his mind is still going in circles and he isn't sure he'd be able to concentrate long enough to hear it. *Later*, he tells himself.

Assuming there is a later.

"If something happens..." he begins slowly. His speech is halting, the words not as clear as he'd like, but this feels like the kind of thing that should be said aloud. "Don't blame her. Or yourself. You saved me."

Ash grips his hand a little tighter. "Nothing's going to happen," he says, firmly enough that Chris can almost believe him. "But I appreciate the thought."

He presses a kiss to Chris's temple and adds, "Do you want to watch a vid or something? Maybe it'll take your mind off it."

Chris mostly just wants to rest – he didn't sleep well last night, unable to get his brain to shut up long enough, and it's left him tired and achy. But that doesn't really seem like an option right now, so instead he lets his head fall against Ash's shoulder and mumbles, "Sure."

He doesn't pay much attention to whatever Ash chooses, closing his eyes and letting the sounds flow over him. He finds himself drifting, too anxious to sleep but too tired to do much else, until Ash nudges him gently and tells him it's time.

"I'll see you when you wake up," Ash promises before Gupta shoos him away. Chris can only hope that he's right.

Starfleet isn't exactly a low-risk profession, especially in his case, so this isn't his first time being anaesthetised. Gupta injects him with something and tells him to count back from ten, and he doesn't make it to seven before he's out.

* * *

Chris comes to slowly, blinking as the greyness above him resolves into the familiar sickbay ceiling. He's as drowsy and nauseous as he usually is after anaesthesia, but he's alive.

(Well, either that or all those sermons in his childhood were seriously off base in their description of the afterlife.)

Fingers slip into his and he turns his head to see Ash standing next to the bed. He's smiling, which Chris takes as a good sign. "How're you feeling?" he asks.

"Mrrf," Chris mumbles, rubbing his free hand over his eyes. His chest hurts, and talking of any kind seems like far too much of an effort.

"Yeah, that's about what I'd expect," Gupta puts in, and he lowers his hand to look at her. "That was a fairly serious surgery you just went through, so don't be surprised if it takes you a while to recover. The good news is everything went well, and all of the damage has been repaired." She smiles and adds, "Your heart's beating on its own now."

Chris blinks at her, then glances down at his chest. The machinery that has been his constant companion for so long is gone, replaced with bandages. Slowly he raises his hand and places it over the bandages, on the left side of his chest. It takes a few seconds, but then he finds it. His heartbeat.

"There were a few areas where I had to replace your own tissue with bionics, but I don't think you'll argue with the results."

Chris shakes his head, blinking back moisture. He can feel his heart beating. Such a small thing, something he used to take for granted, and yet. On impulse, he takes Ash's hand and holds it to his chest, wanting him to feel it too.

Ash's expression goes soft, affectionate. "It's strong," he says. "Like you."

Chris rolls his eyes at the line, but he can't keep himself from smiling. He feels a little like a weight has been lifted from his shoulders – it's over, and he survived, and now he can get on with the process of living.

He's still very tired, but he curls his fingers around Ash's and manages a single word. "Stay?"

"Of course," Ash says.

Choices

Chapter Summary

Ash and Chris talk, and Chris makes a decision about his future.

"Gupta says you should be well enough to be released soon," Ash says one afternoon, slipping into his usual seat at Chris's bedside.

Chris nods. It'll be a relief to finally get out of sickbay, but he's aware that his release brings up a whole new set of questions.

Sure enough, Ash continues, "Have you thought about what you're going to do after that?"

He has, a little, but as far as he can see, his options are limited. No home, no family, the few people he called friends scattered to the corners of the galaxy. The only thing he really has to hold onto is Ash.

He's getting better about using his voice, but this promises to be a long conversation so he decides it'll be easier to let his fingers do the talking. *"I'm open to suggestions."*

Ash frowns. "I've thought about it a lot," he says, "and the way I see it, there are two options. The first is I drop you off on some out of the way planet and let you make a life there."

"And the second?"

"You stay here. Join Section 31 and become an official part of the crew."

Going back to Earth isn't listed as an option, but Chris didn't think it would be. It doesn't really bother him, though – Earth hasn't felt like home in a long time. Nowhere does, if he's honest – the last place he felt at home was the *Enterprise*. After that... well, it was the same as with people. It just didn't seem worth getting attached to anything when he knew where it all ended.

This, with Ash, isn't home either, but maybe it could be. Someday. *"What if I choose to stay here?"*

"You'd join Section 31?" There's a hint of surprise in Ash's tone.

"Is that a problem?"

"No!" Ash blurts immediately. "Definitely not. I just wasn't sure you'd be interested. Too many grey areas, and all."

"Things change," Chris tells him. *"And I know you've done a lot of good here."* He frowns as something occurs to him. *"This isn't just because of us?"*

"Us?"

Chris gives him a frustrated look before turning back to his PADD. *"Our relationship. I told you before, I don't want pity."*

"It's not about that," Ash says. "I mean, yeah, I have personal reasons for wanting you to stay, but they're not the only reasons. Someone with your knowledge and experience could be a major asset here." He shrugs and adds, "To be honest, I would've recruited you years ago if I'd thought there was any chance you'd say yes."

Chris ducks his head, uncomfortable with the praise. *"I'd like to stay,"* he admits, glancing up in time to see Ash smile.

"I'm glad," Ash says, before his smile fades. "But if you're going to be part of my crew, there are a couple of things we need to discuss."

"Such as?"

"Well, firstly, you'd be under my command, which means following my orders. Even the ones you disagree with."

"You think I'd have a problem with that?" It'll take some getting used to, admittedly, but Ash has come a long way in the past ten years, and he's a competent leader. Chris trusts him.

Ash doesn't seem to share his certainty. "You do remember how we met?" he asks, then puts on a voice, mimicking Chris. "'The chair outranks the badge, Mr Tyler.'"

"You really know how to hold a grudge," Chris tells him.

"I'm just saying it might be an issue."

"It's not the same," Chris argues. *"The problem-"* he nearly puts 'on Discovery', but thinks better of it *"-before was that you were trying to assert authority you didn't have. You have the authority now. And trust me, I've taken orders from people I respect a lot less than I do you."* He pauses, then adds, *"I'd be allowed to question your orders, right? Not just follow them blindly?"*

"Of course," Ash replies. "Everyone here is free to speak their mind, as long as they listen to me when it counts." He hesitates, then adds,

"Though, for the record, if you're going to call me an idiot I'd rather you did it in private."

Chris snorts. "*I'll keep that in mind.*" He frowns, thinking, and continues, "*You said there were a couple of things. What's the other one?*"

Ash shifts in his seat. "I'd have to give you a new identity."

Chris is startled enough to respond out loud. "What? Why?"

Ash raises his eyebrows. "I might have a lot of autonomy out here, but I do still have to report to Starfleet. You don't think me telling them I've recruited Christopher Pike is going to raise some questions? So far I've managed to keep things quiet – even most of the people here don't know who you really are. But if I start making things official, that's all going to change."

"*I didn't think of that,*" Chris admits. The last thing he wants is for Ash to get into trouble, especially after everything he's done for him.

The thought brings up another question, though, one that should really have occurred to him sooner. "*What's the official story about what happened to me?*" Given the restrictions around Talos, it can't be the truth.

"That you were moved to a private facility for further treatment." Ash tilts his head, considering. "Which is actually almost true, depending on how you look at it."

More true than Starfleet knows, certainly, and Chris feels a surge of frustration that this pretence is even necessary. But as he told Ash, they shut down everything involving *Discovery* for a reason, and it would be both selfish and hypocritical to demand that the law be changed just because it's no longer convenient to him.

These are the cards he's been dealt, and he'll just have to play them as best he can. "*So you want to give me a new name?*"

"Well, Christopher's common enough, you can probably keep that. It's your last name that's the issue."

Chris lets his PADD fall into his lap, thinking. He *likes* his name. But then, he supposes, there are still women – and men – who change their last name upon getting married, and this can't be that different. It'll be an adjustment, sure, but everything about this situation has been an adjustment. If this is the price he has to pay to stay in Starfleet, to stay *here*, then so be it.

He picks up the PADD again, decision made. "*My grandfather's name was Matthew. What about Christopher Matthews?*"

"I like it," Ash tells him, before his expression softens. "Are you sure you're okay with all of this?"

Chris nods. It might not be the choice he'd make if things were different, but things aren't different. And here and now, with the options available to him, he can't imagine choosing anything else.

Ash smiles briefly, his eyes warm. "Well then, Specialist Matthews," he says. "Welcome aboard."

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