Because It's Time

He stepped out into a slight shower, the overcast sky deciding now would be the perfect time to dump its troubles, now that Ransom would catch the brunt of it.

Chris sighed as he finished reading over the words that were displayed on the computer screen before him.

“This is total crap,” he mumbled as he dejectedly dropped a finger on the backspace key, watching as the cursor ate his shoddy text. When he was finished, there was nothing but that blinking cursor, taunting him from the top of the blank screen.

Why can’t I nail this? Chris closed his eyes as he tried to calm himself and clear his head. It’s not like the first sentence is that important… I mean it is, but I can just go back and change it later, once I get the ball rolling.

But he couldn’t. Chris hadn’t been able to “get past it” for a bit over a year now. He would start writing and get distracted by work, or find something else to steal his time, or in those cases when he actually forced himself to stay at the computer, he would rewrite the opening lines until he was disgusted, as he was now.

Why can’t I do this? The aspiring writer asked himself yet again. But he knew the answer. He always knew the answer, though he was too much of a wuss to admit it…

“Don’t you have an interview you’re supposed to be doing now?” a feminine voice said from somewhere behind him.

Chris blinked and turned, until now totally unaware that Randi had been in the room. They had been living together for about a year and a half, and she had gotten quite adept at entering unnoticed while he was trying to work. He had no idea how long she had been lying on her side on that old tan couch, still clothed in those green scrubs she slept in, reading a tattered novel. A gaudy old brass lamp illuminated her and her texts from the end table that was just to the right of her head. Farther along the wall was a wide bookcase that reached almost to the ceiling and was filled with a collection of well-used and well-loved paperback fictions. That was pretty much it for their small living room besides the unremarkable dark wood coffee table and the composite wood shelf that held up their average television, and the desk and computer where Chris now sat. But at the moment Randi was the only thing Chris cared to think about. He could just make out her forehead behind the book, and the golden-red curls that fell over one shoulder.
He smiled while he watched her, but as his gaze drifted to the clock on the end table near the lamp, the smile faded.

"Shit."

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After a few minutes which Chris used to frantically shave and shove a slice of toast down his throat, he pressed a good-bye kiss against Randy’s forehead and slipped out the door before she could pull herself from her book. He turned and stepped out into an overcast day, very much like the one he had envisioned with those lines he had just deleted. It was only a little past eleven, but the rain was drifting down in full force. Hell, when wasn’t it? He wasn’t unhappy about it though. When you lived in this part of the world, dealing with a constant drizzle was something you became used to.

Fishing around in his pocket for his keys, Chris stepped away from the first floor apartment that he shared with Randi and moved towards the silver-grey ’84 Honda civic nestled in the covered parking spot before him. As he started the car that was fast becoming a relic, the new Shania Twain song erupted from the speakers. He winced as he turned the volume down, then punched in the memory button for KZEL, the local classic rock station here in Portland.

“Man,” Chris said to himself, talking over the boisterous dj as he pulled out of the North Parks apartment complex, “I think she does this to punish me for giving her so much crap about her love for country.”

The traffic was pretty light for a Saturday, and as he merged onto Burnside Street he again shoved his hand into the depths of his pocket, this time pulling out the crumpled piece of paper that had the directions to his interview. The annoying dj had been replaced with Floyd’s “In the Flesh” by the time Chris had reached the stoplight at the corner, and as he read over the information, the hand on the steering wheel drummed with the beat.

Approximately fifteen minutes later Chris pulled over in front of a large, two-story cream colored house with blue trim. He checked the address and grabbed two pens and a notepad that had been lying in the passenger seat. One of the pens wasn’t actually a pen at all; it was a digital recorder that could hold a couple megs of audio information. It was better than carting around one of those mini-tape recorders and it was a good icebreaker anytime Chris pulled it out and asked if it was alright if he recorded the interview. That always got a laugh or a curious look.

The rain hadn’t stopped, though it had let up a bit. He checked his watch. 11:32. A couple minutes late. That much could be explained away by clocks being different or something. Again, he hoped everything would be okay.
Having walked through the empty driveway and reached the door, Chris closed his eyes and tried to force himself to calm down. Taking in a deep breath he reminded himself that he had probably done well over a hundred interviews for articles he had written for the *Oregonian* and this should be no different. Pay no attention to the fact that this time it was Steven Kendall, the man whose books decorated an entire shelf of that bookcase at home. Try to forget that the majority of Americans thought of him as the best novelist of their time and that all of his books had been number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. And oh yeah, that small voice in the back of Chris’s mind added, there’s always that little fact that he’s been your hero since you were eleven, when you decided you were going to write books that were even better than his when you grew up. You know, no biggie.

Opening his eyes and taking another breath, Chris reached up and knocked heavily on the door. A moment later a dark haired man who appeared to be nearing his sixties opened the door and smiled as he looked over Chris from behind a pair of metal-rimmed glasses. The older man was dressed plainly, a black and red long sleeved flannel that was unbuttoned around the neck, showing a white undershirt, untucked and hanging down over his worn blue jeans.

“Are you by any chance the reporter from the *Oregonian* come to find out if I have anything more worth imparting to the masses?” The older man asked with a smile as he filled the door.

“Uhh.. yeah” Chris answered, the words flowing out before he thought to answer. “Chris Prinz. And you must be Steven Kendall.” He thrust out his hand as he spoke and the man in the doorway took it and they shook. Chris had done this part so many times it was just natural, and his nervousness subsided for the moment. Thank God for auto-pilot.

“Ayup, I must be.”

The older man smiled and led Chris into his home. They moved up a half flight of stairs onto the upper floor and into a den area. The walls were a plain white and were adorned with various works of art that Chris was unfamiliar with; most of them looked quite modern. One in particular looked like a surreal pencil sketch of a large city with random blotches of color, all on a gray canvas. A large, deep blue sectional couch filled up the center of the room, a comfy “L” shaped island amidst the sea of gray carpet.

“Mind if we have the interview in here?” Kendall asked as he plopped down partway down the sectional.

Chris glanced around before answering. He could see the spacious back yard through the large window that the couch faced. Behind him and to his right the den opened up into a dining area, and another door led into what looked like a kitchen.
“Sure” he answered and flashed a smile, moving to another spot further down on the couch. “Mind if I record this?” He glanced to Mr. Kendall and raised the ice breaking pen as he spoke.

At that moment, Chris slipped comfortably into his interviewing mode. He no longer marveled at the writer before him, or his many accomplishments. Steven Kendall had, for the moment, just become part of the job.

Chris went down through his mental list of questions and Kendall answered them in due time. For the moment, the two seemed to share a comfortable familiarity in the words and mannerisms. Chris shied away from asking the older man why he had chosen to retire from being a novelist, because he felt that Kendall had adequately covered that in other press releases. He would never actually stop writing, he just wanted to step away from the stress of publishing and deadlines. It had just been time to quit. Simple, but true.

Instead, Chris focused on Kendalls’s career and what he thought of as the highlights. As the interview was wrapping up, Chris asked Kendall one last question, more for himself than for the interview.

“So, Mr. Kendall…” Chris started.

“For Christ’s sake Chris, it’s Steve, please.”

They both laughed. Chris had lost track of how many times Kendall had to tell him that through the course of the interview.

“All right. So, Steve…” Chris paused and unwittingly let the moment sink in. His interview mode was leaving him and he was again becoming Chris Prinz, the aspiring writer who worshiped the man before him. “What made you decide to become a writer? I mean, you’ve obviously grown quite talented over the course of your career, but what started it? Why do you write?”

Kendall stared at the reporter as a couple seconds ticked by, then the right corner of his mouth pulled up in a half smile. “Damn good question.” Another moment passed and the older man nodded and leaned back into the cushions.

“Well, I suppose there are lots of reasons for writing or wanting to write. There’s money of course, prestige for the few who are very successful, a needed vent for expression” Kendall lifted up a finger for each one of the motives. “And many others I’m sure. But me, well, I suppose I did it because I had to.”

Chris gave the old man a confused look.

“Well, I suppose I can do a bit better than that,” Kendall laughed out the last few words at Chris’s expression. “It’s silly, but people’s reasoning usually is I suppose. You see, I always had these ideas in my head, these whole other worlds that just seemed to grow and change over time. After a while I had no choice but to put these worlds and the people
in them on paper.” Another pause as Kendall thought it over. “It made them real for me, those places and the people in them. Writing brought those worlds to life.”

Chris stared at him for a moment, then nodded with a smile. It would seem like so much brown nosing if he chimed in with an assurance that he felt the same way, would sound too much like hero worship. But it was truth. Kendall had put into words the reason Chris himself felt compelled to write.

The pen recorder clicked off and Chris stood slowly, gathering his stuff.

“Well I suppose that’s all Mr. Ken.. err.. Steve.” He thrust out his hand for a farewell shake. “It was a pleasure to meet you and thanks again for the interview.”

Kendall grasped Chris’s hand in his and shook.

“Well Chris, I have one question for you before you go.”

“Shoot”

“Why haven’t I seen anything of yours published yet?”

Their hands had already fallen apart by the time Kendall’s question hit him. He must have meant articles in the Oregonian.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean” he lied feebly. “My articles for the paper are published all the time.”

“Pffft. Come off it.” Kendall arched an eyebrow as he spoke.

“About a year and a half ago, a certain friend of mine in publishing sent me a note about a promising young writer.” He smirked and continued. “Actually he sent me a note asking me if I was using the alias of this promising young writer as another pen name. I told him no and asked if I could read the work.”

Kendall continued, either oblivious or uncaring to Chris’s changing temperament. “A week later I received in the mail about two-hundred pages of a story, written by one Christian J. Prinz.”

“Errrrrrmmm...” Chris looked even more uncomfortable as that unintelligible sound slipped from his lips. “I.. I didn’t know many people had seen that.”

“Well not many... me, a board of people at the publishing house, whoever made the copies. Not too many.” Another small smile. “Now Chris, I know they sent back your treatment with some editing advice and an invitation to resubmit once you had finished. Hell, I even slipped in a few anonymous notes of encouragement myself.” There was another awkward pause as Kendall looked over the younger man. “But as far as I know, Christian J. Prinz has gone unpublished in the world of fiction.”
Another few seconds slid by and Chris found himself seated on the couch again. How had that happened? With a slow, deep breath, he tried to settle his nerves for the second time this day, and tell Kendall the thing that he hadn’t even admitted openly to himself.

“I just... I was afraid... I am afraid,” and before he could stop himself or before Kendall could start laughing at him, the rest of his fears spilled out frantically. “All I’ve ever wanted to do was write. I’ve been told I have more than a bit of talent, but what if that’s not enough, or what if that’s wrong? I want so much to be a writer, to see people lost in the stories I write, but what if I can’t do it. What if I fail?”

All right, Chris thought, let the laughter roll in. Here he was, venting his fears to a man who could write with the ease that most people breathed. This man couldn’t understand how someone else could stop pursuing his dream just on the off chance that he would fail.

But no laughter came, only a slow nod from Kendall. The older man filled the silence with his voice a moment later.

“When I was seventeen, my brother beat me until I was every color of the rainbow, because I had told him I was too afraid to submit a story I had done to a popular magazine. Too afraid that it would be rejected, or worse, that it would be accepted and that everybody who read it would think it was garbage. Then I’d never become a writer.”

Chris listened, not moving or uttering a word, unable to accept what he was hearing.

“No, instead of beating you senseless, how about I just tell you what I learned that day as I mailed in my story. It’ll save us both some time and energy.” Kendall leaned in closer and made sure he had Chris’s full attention before continuing.

“You are a writer, Chris. No one can say you aren’t. It’s not an award or a title you have to gain, it’s part of who you are. You’ll go through life’s trials and tribulations and no matter what happens, no matter who you become, you will always be a writer.”

A long silence followed Kendall’s words, then the man barked out a short laugh.

“Besides, your worst writing is probably better than most people can ever hope to obtain. You can write kid, you just need to get yourself out there.”

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Chris left Steven Kendall’s house with a mumbled good-bye and another handshake. He drove home in silence, the conversation with the retired writer... no... retired novelist, cycled constantly through his head. Chris thought that something inside him had changed. Or perhaps he just hoped for it.
Randi was gone when he came home. Off to work he supposed. He wasn't sure he cared right at the moment. His notes and recorder sat on floor beside him, forgotten.

Chris sat before his computer, a smile pulling at his lips. The numbing fear that swept out over his mind and imagination each time he sat down to write was gone. He hadn't really been aware of that paralyzing force until it disappeared. A wall he had put up to impede his own progress.

Well, Christian J. Prinz thought as he stared at the blipping cursor that had now become his ally on the empty page of the screen. Let's give Mr. Kendall something nice to read during his retirement.