

into dust together (semantics of stars and electricity)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/55705360) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/55705360>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Lifesteal SMP
Relationship:	Ashswag/Reddoons (Video Blogging RPF)
Characters:	Ashswag (Video Blogging RPF) , Reddoons (Video Blogging RPF) , Lifesteal SMP Ensemble
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Zombie Apocalypse , Alternate Universe - Post-Apocalypse , Hurt/Comfort , Unreliable Narrator , Fluff and Angst , told in the form of snapshots , it's slice of life if you squint , incredibly convoluted strangers to lovers
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2024-05-05 Completed: 2024-08-09 Words: 127,621 Chapters: 13/13

into dust together (semantics of stars and electricity)

by [ccarbonated](#)

Summary

“Ha, yeah, sorry,” The guy waves his hands around, “I guess the better question is do you want help?”

This has to be a ploy. Ash might have gotten his ass kicked because of his poor life decisions, but he’s not going to fall for something like this. He might as well be begging to get scammed; to throw his life away. Pride is the only commodity he has left.

“I don’t know, maybe I just want to bleed to death in the middle of a fucking- desert, or whatever.” Ash deadpans.

On Ash, and the intricacies of being human.

Notes

first half of the title from hey kids by molina & late verlane

this au is more realistic apocalypse adjacent but it is still very much based on minecraft and vaguely ashswags apoc video and a lot of event throughout all of the lifesteal seasons gets mentioned but its mainly s5 based. the apocalypse is about suffering and the indomitable human spirit but also i like it when things are cool and awesome

anyways i wanted to post this during roses&smoke week but oh well. apologies if anything is ooc i started writing when i was one week deep into lifesteal and now its been nearly three months. thank you to my lovely friend dakotah who has no clue about anything in ls and still beta-ed this for me <3

hopefully updating weekly @ friday

first

Someone once told him that *every good story begins with an end*.

Ha, how fucking hilarious, Ash thinks bitterly, laid down in the middle of a deserted landscape. The taste of copper permeates his mouth. This would be the perfect time for a tumbleweed to pass by, rolling and rolling onward with no worries in its life. Ash has also never thought that he'd be wanting to metamorphose into a stupid meaningless plant.

He was supposed to be better than all of them. He *is* better than all of them, even if his legs have given out and there's a trail of blood leading to him, as if he was tossed into the middle of a wasteland like a scrap piece of paper with all of its purpose used up. His leg only now aches with a dull throb, which is much better than searing, burning pain from earlier. His shoddily applied tourniquet seems to be doing *something* at least. Sand and gravel dig into him, a perfect chamber for incubating an infection. He doesn't even know how long he's been staring at the sky for.

He's never been one for contemplating life much -- if death decides to take him, then so be it, even if this is particularly embarrassing. *Fuck this*.

This fucking sucks, he thinks. Missing his eye was already bad enough, he doesn't need to bleed out.

But he's also so, *so* unbelievably lucky that it's only midday. Zombies are night-dwellers, stuck in dark corners of malls, apartments, molded into the shadows. He's heard about the mutations that make some of them slink out of the depths but he hasn't run into one yet. Maybe he never will, at this pace.

It's not a Zombie, but Ash's head snaps up -- or well, he hits it into the ground trying to look behind him, and god, everything *hurts* -- and he's trying to desperately look around when he hears rustling. It's too close to footsteps, and he still has some semblance of survival instincts.

Forcing himself to sit up, he struggles, trying to ignore the aching pain that sets his back ablaze, tries to force himself to stand on two feet again--

And the open sky crashes down with him when he falls down, head knocking into the ground *again*. It feels like forever, it feels fleeting.

The footsteps are coming increasingly closer, even quicker, and Ash ends up nicking one of his knuckles against the survival knife buried into his dull purple trench coat, but he's got it in his hands now. *Fuck this, fuck this*, the only thing keeping him going is adrenaline. Lying down and taking death doesn't seem appealing anymore.

Apparently, Ash finds out, that having lost what could be considered a substantial amount of blood also slows down your reaction reflexes. Without warning, the sun is now blocked out by some guy Ash has *never* seen before which is both great, because his former teammates

haven't come to finish the job, but also extremely unnerving because fuck, this guy might as well finish the job *for* them.

Instead, the stranger asks, "Are you okay?"

This also might instead be the stupidest guy Ash has ever met. He keeps on staring at the stranger to see if he catches on to the blatant fact that blood is all over him, matted into his hair, gravel and other debris also tangled into his braid, but the guy just keeps on *looking* at him.

The sun halos him from behind, but there's a sinking feeling in Ash's gut that this is as far from an angel that you can get.

The stranger keeps on staring. Ash finally deigns him with a response, "What does it look like."

It makes him *laugh*. He doesn't know why but it makes him feel vaguely irritated.

Well, Ash *can* concede that the man isn't the worst sight in the world, either. He looks as *decent* as you can in the apocalypse, he's just -- nice on the eyes. His hair is bright red, blond roots starting to peek in, and it's impressive that the guy has managed to find the time to dye his hair in the midst of the chaos. The lower half of his face is covered in a red face mask, fitting in with his whole 'red' theme. There's even an honest-to-god *sword* resting on his hip.

He's carrying a large backpack too, full of supplies, which is much more than Ash has on him at this moment. It's sort of perfect. He even has *sunglasses* on. A little strange, but not the worst.

"Ha, yeah, sorry," The guy waves his hands around, "I guess the better question is do you want help?"

This has to be a ploy. Ash might have gotten his ass kicked because of his *poor life decisions*, but he's not going to fall for something like this. He might as well be begging to get scammed; to throw his life away. Pride is the only commodity he has left.

"I don't know, maybe I just want to bleed to death in the middle of a fucking- desert, or whatever." Ash deadpans.

"Woah- alright, I saw you struggling." The stranger points out, oblivious to the sarcasm. *Or maybe he knows, and it's just in his nature to be annoying.*

"Fuck off," Ash says. It's more out of his defensive instinct than anything else.

Something flashes over the guy's face, and he's crouching down next to Ash. *It's time*, trying desperately to hit him, Ash stabs the knife straight up. Because -- because he's not going to accept an obvious scam, and this guy clearly has everything that Ash would need.

Ash's mouth feels dry. He feels almost like a cornered, especially wounded animal and he's lashing out. Because that's what life just does to you.

Instead of his knife connecting with the guy's throat or face or *anything*, he's managed to swiftly grab onto Ash's wrist. It's a burning hot spot of contact between them, even with his gloves. Ash solemnly decides that he hates blood loss even more because without the exhaustion settling in his bones he *would've* gotten him.

"Alright, woah- slow down there," The stranger tries to pacify him.

It really, really doesn't work. He's slowly, carefully guiding Ash's hand back down, still keeping his grip, just to avoid having a knife pointing right at him.

This might be one of his life's most demeaning experiences.

"I *can* help you, y'know?" He's put on a *tone* of voice. Ash doesn't like this sudden switch up. "I can heal you up. I have the necessary supplies."

"Why."

"I can see you don't have any supplies."

"No," Ash breathes out, a little bit of frustration creeping into his voice. "There's a fucking, *catch* to this, or something."

The stranger tilts his head, and Ash can imagine the small grin placing itself up on his lips. It's infuriating.

"There's not going to be any death involved - unless you decide to stay here and become a perfect meal for the vultures. Ah, well, I guess zombies would be more appropriate." He laughs at his *own* joke.

"Then *what*?"

"Well, if need be, you can owe me a favour. Later." He subconsciously twirls a finger around his tie, and it all proceeds to *click* together in Ash's brain.

God fucking damnit, this guy's a capitalist.

It's not exactly like *capitalism* is a thing anymore -- well, it still *kind of* exists -- shoddy little cities are only starting to rebuild, interspersed between the '*safety zones*'. A world eclipsed by apocalyptic ruin might as well not care about ideologies anymore, but it's just the general *prospect* that makes Ash groan.

Look -- it's not like Ash hasn't partaken in his own sets of scummy business practices either. His old suit lies in tatters, somewhere lost long ago. It's just that he doesn't want to give in to this.

"What?" The guy tilts his head, "Look man, I don't particularly like seeing dead people. And looking at the little blood trail coming to here," He makes a little *running* motion with his fingers, "You might have a few hours. You've been left for dead. You're not goin' to strike up any better deals than *this*. Dude, I'm literally going to help *you* out, practically free of charge."

“It isn’t free though,” Ash bites back.

“I’m not robbing you blind. You don’t even have *anything* for me to rob you of.”

Ash frowns. His situation fucking *sucks*. He hates feeling like this -- powerless. It’s completely uncomfortable. Ash’s fist unclench, and clench again, leaving little crescent moon marks into his palm. His pride is a double edged sword -- it prevents him from giving up. Which is great, in theory, until there’s some suspiciously nice guy that’s offering you help.

And this guy seems like he could talk for *forever*.

He’s so, so tired. Blood has seeped into his clothes, he’s disheveled (cause that’s what state *collapsing* on the *floor* puts you in) and he’s so ready for everything to be *over*. He’s still not intimidated by death, but the idea of *living* is still appealing to his overtly human body.

“Fuck-” Ash breathes out, shaky. “*Fine*. I’ll owe you.”

Ash can’t exactly see the guy’s face, but he can definitely hear the clear grin in Red’s voice when he says, “Pleasure to do business.”

A gloved hand reaches out for his. Like a handshake. Like you’d do in a business deal. Ash stares at him blankly, a little unimpressed. This guy doesn’t say anything though, only staring at him. With hesitation, Ash slips his hand against his; leather against leather. It’s synthetic.

The stranger proceeds to try coaxing Ash upwards, to sit up. *Oh yeah*, the blood loss is unmistakably hitting *hard* as his head spins with the most minute, fractional movements. This is horrible. It’s all his own fault.

“What are you trying to do?” Ash asks, a little frustrated. He was expecting *help*, not whatever this is.

“Tryin’ to get you to stand up, what does it look like?” He parrots Ash’s words from earlier. Ash scowls in response. “There’s an outpost around here, it should be safer there than trying to give you treatment in the middle of god knows where.”

“Do you even have a base? Friends?” Ash asks, innocently.

Okay maybe he’s trying to rile him up a little too.

The stranger blinks at him, “Thanks for the reminder of my loneliness,” He says, dryly, but answers anyway, “Nah, it’s only me.” He seems to think of adding something, but shakes his head, and gestures at Ash, “C’mon, up you get. We’ve got walking to do.”

*

As it turns out, Ash didn’t have any walking ahead of him. Instead, he tried to sling his arm over the stranger’s back -- seeing how disastrously his last attempt went when he tried by himself -- and this time it might've been downright catastrophic. The moment he tried to stand up again is the moment where the whole world went all fuzzy and the directions of everything went inside and up and around, and his vision had briefly popped in bright,

vibrant colours that were enough to leave him dizzy before flickering to black, like an old streetlamp, and he ended up *passing out*.

He's kind of glad for it. Even trying to stand upright was agony, excruciating pain that rippled up from the cut on his leg. Everything was all a mistake. He's only got his last shards of dignity to latch onto. Ash is used to taking whatever he wants, not any of *this*. Well, it's what got him into this situation.

Overall, not many wins today.

He's only woken up when the stranger -- fuck, he doesn't even know his *name*, he might as well be a serial killer -- accidentally hit him into a fence when trying to traverse up the stairs of the house. Even then, the memory is fuzzy, full of aches and pains. It's *miserable*.

The couch he's laid on is painfully uncomfortable. The whole apartment that the guy has put them in is a mess. It's not like Ash expected anything luxurious in the middle of the wastes, but there could at least be one other place out there that doesn't have a large blood splatter on one of the walls, or what looks like mold growing from the corner. Maybe it's just more dried blood.

"Out of every other building you could've chosen, it's this one?" Ash complains, "You've decided to fucking- live like *this*?"

"Great to see you're the same as always." He answers. He's busy rustling through his bags, unzipping pockets. It's a mess. It's sort of pathetic, too. "Don't move a single muscle from that couch. You freaked me out real bad when you passed out."

It's an honest admission, and it's- it's *weird*. It's *strange*.

"My bad. I wish I could *choose* which convenient moments I pass out at."

Logically, Ash shouldn't be pissing off the only guy that could help him. This is practically begging to get thrown out into the desert again. However, Ash deals with the present first, and then gets to figure out the fallout of all his decisions afterwards. Exactly what got him here in the first place. He will proceed to ignore any attempt of self reflection.

The guy sighs, and comes over to sit next to him on a stool. His gloves lay on the table behind him. He's got rudimentary supplies, and Ash isn't exactly confident that anything here is as sanitized as it should be.

Simultaneously, Ash is preparing for the worst first aid session of his life. The stranger (can he really keep on calling a *stranger* when he's the only reason that Ash isn't still on the floor?) rolls up Ash's trousers, starting to gently wash the skin around the wound, and every touch makes Ash twitch out of burning sensitivity.

"I don't think it's infected." He murmurs, cleaning out debris from it with a rag. It's damp, and the water mixes with his blood to run down his leg and seep into the couch in a mixture of strange pinkish and gray fluid. It's revolting. "Well. It might be. Maybe- okay, it just looks *really* messed up."

Ash sighs, breathing out a quiet *fuck*. He was hoping that the guy at least knew what he was doing.

And it's not exactly like he's surprised, but it would've been pleasant for the news to have been something more along the lines of *wow, this is great, you may have been laying there for god knows how long but your wound is perfectly fine! It's a miracle!*

"I have some old potions that I've stocked up." His voice is softer now. "That would probably help-"

"Yeah, you *did* promise to help me," Ash points out, trying to put his defense back up even in vulnerability. "Prevent me from dying from, tetanus or staph, or- whatever."

He just hums in acknowledgment, uncapping a bottle, and red fluid is poured onto the wound, and it sends sparking tendrils of pain out like branch lightning through his leg. It's almost comparable to the pain of what getting stabbed *actually* felt like, as increasing the rate that tissue forms and blood vessels regrow is the farthest thing from being pleasant.

"Ah- *fuck*," Ash groans, trying to keep his voice steady, "Maybe tetanus would've been better."

The guy just lets out a quiet laugh, and cleans the rest of the fluids off. The cloth stings when it's pushed into Ash's inflamed skin again. Ash never thought that he'd be getting treated like this. He especially never thought that he'd be *allowing* himself to be treated like this. It's not exactly gentle or clinical, sitting somewhere in between. It's not like he's more familiar with Ash's body than he is, but he acts like it.

Ash eyes the suturing equipment in his hands. He can't let this go on for any longer. He's gotten -- comfortable. "I can do that myself."

He raises an eyebrow back. "Your hands are shaking, I don't want you to accidentally stab yourself."

"Cause a needle is what is gonna take me out after today." It makes Ash feel sort of childish. As if he shouldn't be affected by all of *this* anymore.

Despite it, Ash leans back further into the couch, eyes searching the room warily. Trust isn't something that he should be giving out so easily, just like this. It's somewhat -- no, it *is* stupid to just be willingly led to some random place. If the guy notices Ash tensing up, he doesn't say anything.

Ash hisses under his breath, fingers curling back into fists as the needle first goes through his skin. The guy is at least *decently* skilled with his hands. It's still not enough to distract him from the general pain of sewing a whole wound shut.

He isn't exactly sure whether this is an appropriate time to start up small talk either. And Ash isn't really sure how to do small talk anymore *either*. Asking people *how their day has been* has become awkward, because no one can exactly say that *it's been good*, because *nothing*

has been good for the past few decades. Starting to talk about how *nice the weather is* seems inappropriate. And also a total, massive lie.

With the next stitch, the guy asks, “How’d this happen?”

“Got stabbed.” And, “Poor life decisions.” It’s not exactly a lie.

“They had to have been *really* bad, then.” He hums, obviously fishing for information as if it’s second nature when he tacks on, “There’s not much that can get you to end up like this.”

Ash thinks about lying. It’s obviously the smart decision here, because if he starts listing out how much he craves control, or power, then the guy would just leave him here. So, he says, “It was a mistake.” Because the best lies are closest to the truth, and, technically, it *was*, if mistakes include regretting it only in hindsight.

The room falls into silence as he continues suturing. It’s something Ash has become accustomed with. He sort of wishes that it was actually something like the texts from the world before all of *this* had described it as. It’s all about loneliness, survival and deception. There’s no cool, awesome zombie chases that leave Ash rushing with giddy adrenaline. It’s just walking, walking and fucking *walking*. It’s terribly boring but he moves on because there’s nothing else he can do.

Ash’s hands in his lap are still bloodstained, dyed crimson from the shitty tourniquet job that he did, as well as the thin cut from his knife. The assholes didn’t even leave him with a gun.

“I haven’t caught your name.” Ash says, trying to pose it as a question.

“I haven’t thrown it.” The guy answers as he finishes tying bandages around Ash’s calf.

After all, they had met the way comets pass by planets; seen once and then never again. If Ash wasn’t limping and indebted, he would’ve been thrown into the sparse galaxy again.

“You’re hilarious.” Ash says, straight-faced. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

There’s still bruises underneath Ash’s layers of clothes, but they’ll eventually heal. The blood on Ash’s hand is wiped off next, careful and deliberate. It’s dried by now, and it flakes off like snow. Only more bloody.

Being touched by someone else like this is even weirder. He’s not exactly careful with Ash; treating it all like a business deal, which admittedly, this all is. Ash can’t help the nauseous buzz it lights underneath his skin. He’s never let anyone do something like this. He thinks the last time he got touched was when he was stabbed in his leg, which was only four hours ago, but it reminds Ash about the range of humanity in touches.

It’s not as if it matters. He can’t imagine that he’ll stick around for long, anyways.

“Well, what’s yours?” He asks.

Ash thinks about antagonizing him further, but decides upon, “Just calling me A is fine.”

“A? Really?” The guy stares at him. “Like, the letter A?”

“God, aren’t *you* smart. *Yes*, the letter A.”

“Why?” He tilts his head, thinks about what he just asked, and continues, “Actually, it’s fine. Yeah. Maybe I’ll start introducing myself as R just to match you.”

“I do it better,” Ash says, playful. He doesn’t even question when he became so awfully comfortable to start joking around. He looks the guy -- ‘R’ -- up and down in front of him. “Would it by any chance start for *Red*?”

He stares at him. Ash stares back.

“You’re kidding me.”

And he still doesn’t say anything, which makes Ash burst into giggles.

R-- well, *Red* now, sighs. “Well, I guess it’s been a pleasure to meet you properly now, A.”

“Same to you, Red.” Ash tilts his head slightly, “Did the name come before or after the whole outfit?”

“You were *so* much more bearable when you were passed out.”

*

Ash looks at himself in the mirror of the apartment. Cracks are splintering down from the top edge into the middle, like little spiderwebs. He looks fine. He’s wiped off all the blood that came with getting beat up already, and his split lip is still inconvenient but he’s still *alive*.

He *has* thought extensively about just sneaking out during the night and leaving his debt behind. He already has enough people trying to come after him, there wouldn’t be much harm in adding one more. The leg wound proves more problematic than he thought it would be, as it leaves him limping. Putting more strain on it isn’t the best decision he could make, but he was getting sick of spending the past day on the couch.

At least he’s still alive. That’s more than what could be said for a good portion of the past world population.

Red is leaning against the doorway, looking at Ash. It’s almost like a cheap imitation of domesticity.

“Is your eye like, okay?” Red asks, blunt.

Over Ash’s eye, bandages are extensively wrapped around it. It’s not recent by any means -- instead, being from another, stupider incident from long ago -- but he just prefers having it covered over. It still fucks up with his depth perception a *lot*. Fuck Leo and turning a blind eye.

"I can't see out of it if that's what you're asking." Ash replies, doing a little hand gesture. It's not something that he'd normally just admit to, but it's glaringly obvious that something is a *little* fucked up. "I wouldn't particularly say that it's *okay*, either."

"Ah, yeah, that's my bad," Red apologizes.

Ash simply shrugs in response. "What's up with the face mask?"

"Would you believe it if I said people want me dead?" Red jokes. But it is also kind of *isn't* a joke, as Red keeps staring blankly at him. Ash sure could guess why people would want him dead. But it's also kind of stupid, because doesn't it just make him more recognisable? "Not even asking about the sunglasses?"

"Those too. Maybe just your whole outfit actually."

"I didn't know you were into fashion critique." Red raises an eyebrow, pointedly avoiding the question. It makes him feel like he's balancing on a very thin line.

"It's just that your outfit sucks." Ash supplies, instead.

Red laughs, sweeping a hand through his hair as he asks, "Is all you do just talk shit?"

"If that's what you want to believe."

*

"I feel like food poisoning is more of an issue than the zombies." Red says, rifling through the shelves of the supermarket. He's put down the fifth packet on the shelf that he's even managed to find, behind debris and cobwebs.

They've slowly moved from the outpost -- Red had estimated that Ash would be able to properly walk again in a week, which was a gross underestimate as they couldn't spend a week just staying there, doing nothing; their supplies had already started to spread thin, because Red wasn't expecting to supply for Ash too. They had to get out of there quickly, Ash's horrific no good leg wound be damned.

For the time being, he's limping his way around a small market just off the highway. He's put his plans of swindling, betrayal, larceny, on hold, as staying around for now seems like the most profitable option. Red isn't that bad of company; he knows what he's doing, he's easy to make conversation with even if it devolves into petty arguments, it's overall *just* fine.

"Is it?" Ash asks, deep in moving debris around. Finding another weapon is so much harder than it should be. Maybe he should just start throwing rocks at zombies.

"If they had the money to put into tryin' to carpet bomb the zombies out then they should've had the money to make these things last longer." There's a crash as Red throws another out-of-date package out.

"And the carpet bombing didn't even work."

“That’s exactly what I’m saying!” Red gestures, “Now we’re having to deal with both zombies, trying to survive, and *potential* food poisoning.”

“I think I’d take potential food poisoning over having to fight a zombie.” Ash says.

Ash had never really thought that he’d have to spend this life surviving from zombies. Maybe the next life he takes up will be better. With less undead trying to rip him apart and maybe more normalness. But still *exciting* -- there’s got to be a sweet spot between *nearly dying* and *going for a walk*. Maybe he’ll try gardening next.

“I dunno, food poisoning is its own type of hell.” Red does a little half-shrug. “Any luck finding anything on your side?”

“No,” Ash groans, “This place fucking sucks. You really think there’s gonna be anything left in some little market that’s been raided since the beginning?”

“Well, I don’t know- maybe someone just decided to drop off an AR-15 behind the counter. Have you checked behind the counter? Exactly.”

Pettiness is one of the things they’re equally good at, if Ash *has* to admit, only under duress. Good thing Ash was born with enough spite to outlast eternity.

It’s like a little game -- to see who can drop their outbursts and arguments first. It feels good - - intentionally pissing each other off. Red doesn’t hate him for it, but only plays back into it as if it’s *just* a game and it feels *good* behind the annoyance that simmers in his core.

“I *have* checked behind the counter,” Ash makes a show of standing back up, of humoring Red, no matter how much stress it puts on his leg.

“Maybe there’s, like, an employee’s room in the back. Maybe you just missed it.”

Can this guy let anything ever just go ? “Okay, okay. I’ll go check out the mystical fucking employee room that will suddenly appear.” Maybe a little because he can’t stand being around him for much longer.

Ash shuffles towards the front desk. Carefully, he steps over detritus and broken shards of glass that flicker like little stars under the still-working fluorescent light. He remembers once that some told him that *electricity in some old-world places still works because of the zones starting up parts of the national grids which is basically-* and Ash had ended up tuning that same person out. It’s nice to be able to actually see, though.

There *is* a room in the left corner behind the desk, and Ash curses Red for being right. He’s never going to announce this. He steps behind the broken down security measures, and opens the door with a low creak.

He’s met with utter darkness, and the revolting stench of rotting flesh. It makes his eye immediately water, his stomach churning with disgust. It’s downright foul, and has Ash choking for air. *Fuck*, is the immediate thought, and that *maybe he should start thinking twice about opening up random rooms*.

Zombies are lying still, waiting. The undead, with their flaky pieces of flesh and exposed bones and muscles that keep them moving on and on forever until they run out of energy. They're all laid over each other, in a weird criss-cross amalgamation of a flesh mound.

Though -- they don't seem to be exactly alive anymore. There's flies buzzing around them. They peer up at him with glazed over white eyes, red at the edges, completely empty and unthinking. If they were alive, they would've taken the chance to pounce at him. Maybe they're just in a zombie's version of hibernation. Either way, Ash really doesn't want the chance to find out which option it is.

He slams the door shut, blocking off the disgusting smell. It still lingers, too overpowering to fully diffuse back into the air. The early spring warmth doesn't help its case either.

He makes the walk of shame back to Red. If the loud bang of a door didn't alert him that something went wrong, then the smell definitely would.

"What happened?" Red asks, blinking at him over his sunglasses. "You alright?"

"There was a fucking room off in the corner, fucking- dumbass fucking zombies piled up in there. I'm fine." Ash answers.

"How many?"

"I don't fucking know- they seem to be dead? Can they- whatever, I don't know. They don't seem to be a threat if that's what you care about."

"Alright, it's good that you're okay," Red nods, more to himself than to Ash, "Look what I found."

In his hands, he's holding out a metal lead pipe. It's certainly better than his current hunting knife, but it's still nothing close to an AR-15. Rust and scratches coat its surface, but otherwise than that, it's a perfectly normal lead pipe. Still as lethal as it ever would be. Completely effective at bashing a zombie's head in.

"Sick," Ash says, lamely. He's not used to this -- at all. "Why was this in the foods aisle?"

"There's not a dedicated lead pipe aisle. Guess it had to settle for second best."

Ash lets out a sigh. He still reaches out to take the lead pipe, brushing against Red's gloved hand. It's a suitable, heavy weight in his hands. It's much less glamorous than what he's used to but it's not like he has anything else.

It's not exactly a gift, either. There's no pretty bow stuck on top of it, nor something that feels like he'd unwrap in old traditions. He reminds himself that he only met Red a week ago. He still doesn't *like* him. It's a *weird* transaction he's gotten himself into. He's only indebted. Nothing else.

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“Where are we heading?” Ash asks, casually. They’ve started to hit the road for the past week. Slowly, they’ve managed to build supplies back up. It’s a careful process.

“North. We should arrive at the next zone in two weeks.” Red says, scribbling something down on the map that was laid out in front of them. It’s *impressive* to have something as up to date as this. “Well, unless you have your own place to go.”

It’s not like Ash has had anything going on in his life prior to this, other than dying.

“I don’t.” Ash answers, his eye scans over to the zone. He’s pretty sure that he hasn’t wronged anyone there.

He’s *never* really been one for choosing impromptu travel companions -- having someone else other than him is always a liability, but he’s been through this whole process enough times. It leaves him apathetic.

“I need to meet up with one of my friends,” Red says as an explanation, rolling up the map and turning to stare at Ash. “I’m surprised you haven’t tried to run yet.”

It catches him terribly off guard.

Ash bites his tongue, “What?”

“Y’know,” Red gestures up and down, enigmatic, “Nothing is really forcing you to stay here.”

Ash stares at him. Tries to decipher him like he would to a machine; run through internal problems, half tempted to prod and poke at his insides. Nothing is revealed to him. Red furrows his eyebrows, waiting for an answer.

“You’re... useful. And I can’t really run.” Ash says, in lieu of his actual thoughts, as he points to his leg. Being out of control, for once in his life, has put him in a miserable situation.

It’s not exactly like he wants to be here, either. He keeps quiet.

“Useful?” Red asks, looking at Ash as if he’s monitoring him.

“It’s good to have you around. *Profitable* in business terms.”

Red laughs, muffled underneath his face mask. Ash watches Red turn away, packing up his bags. Key word *his*, as Ash doesn’t have anything to put his own things in. Getting everything stolen does that to you.

Instead, he looks at the back of Red’s head. He tightens his grip around the lead pipe. It’s all synthetic.

*

It’s really a shame that they can’t pick up any of the cars that are lying by the road.

Ash does know how to hotwire -- purely picking it up when he was younger because yeah, it *could* come in handy one day, but also it made him feel cool. Which was much more important to a teenaged Ash. The main problem with cars is *gasoline*. Ash could find as many abandoned cars as he wanted with their keys still in ignition, and he *still* couldn't drive because they didn't even have a lick of gasoline in them.

Therefore his skill in hotwiring is pretty useless; but it still sounds cool to say to people.

It's been a few days since they've set out. He's getting tired of walking. His leg still aches. Ash has never really gotten people who say *it's about the journey, not the destination* -- if it's not about the destination then what's even the point?

Red has shed his jacket to tie it around his waist due to the overbearing desert sun. Ash still virtually knows nothing about him. He's talked with Red a lot more than some people in his past groups, but this guy has his wits about him -- he knows what he's doing and it's *kind of* infuriating but also not exactly unwelcome.

Ash knows that Red is a criminal -- either the scamming or murder kind, he's not too sure yet -- that he occasionally talks to himself, a businessman, and that his second favourite colour is red. Overall, that isn't much.

And Ash knows that he shouldn't care because people like them always end up with spilled blood trailing behind them. A fire that will burn so bright from their collision that it will starve the neighbouring galaxies to feed itself. They'll cause the universe to split apart into splinters of atoms and molecules because Ash finds *trust* difficult.

But want and need and ought all live in different universes at times like these.

"Is traveling all you do?" Ash asks, because he *knows* it's important to build rapport before the fire catches up with him.

"Yeah, pretty much," Red kicks a pebble in front of him, the highway soon coming to an end. "I do some *business* on the side, though."

Ash eyes him, thinking about *business*. It's purposefully vague, and he still takes his chances by asking, "What do you mean by business on the side?"

"Business deals. For credits." It's even more intentionally unrevealing that it makes Ash want to rip his hair out.

Ash has also done aforementioned *business deals*. He's not clueless -- he knows that it almost always ends in a scam or violence. He can't even eliminate whether or not Red is a scammer or murderer, or *both*.

This means that the only other thing that Ash has managed to add onto his list is that Red is a traveler, and that he does *business*. Which is practically nothing, because offering a guy on the side of the road to *owe* you after finding him bleeding out is already scummy enough. There's no leverage that Ash can find.

“We’re heading up to a savannah in a moment.” Red alerts him.

Ash only hums in acknowledgement, a trail of gentle burns left behind them.

*

The process of sneaking into a zone is uselessly tiring. Ash gets that it’s for the people’s safety, and that they don’t want another zombie-in-zone outbreak like the one that happens every few years, but Ash *really* doesn’t get why this means he should be having to stick his head out of a floorboard.

“There was an attempted raid on here a few weeks ago, so they’re not allowing outsiders in for a while. I overheard some people talking about it, a few weeks back.” Red had explained to him, “I know the route around here, though.”

The room they’re in kind of sucks, though. Ash can clearly see the particles of dust fluttering down through the dawn light that shines in from the window. It’s very clearly abandoned, as anything that would have any personal sentiment is wiped clean from it. The only real semblance of life from it is the sound of birds squawking outside, and Red yanking the only door out of this place open.

Ash follows behind Red, seeing as he’s the one who’s been here before. He gets to appreciate parts of broken down pre-wasteland infrastructure, which is also the same as despising everything in his way. The route Red takes is complicated, clambering down ladders and pieces of rebar that jut out from the walls. Ash is concerned about falling, but also about the parts of the steel rods that are just a bit *too* close.

It’s not even worth the effort, as the moment they step outside is immediate busyness. He’s always known that places that brand themselves as *safety zones* are bad, but he just gets reminded of how chaotic they are. It’s just plain noise, civilians, annoying and never-stopping.

“Stay close,” Red reminds him.

“*Ohh*, I was planning to start running around and screaming to blow our cover. What a shame.”

“Are you ever not an asshole?”

“For all I know, you could just be leading me into a trap.” Ash points out, and hates the way that *something* in him sinks at that. He doesn’t want things to end like that.

He redirects them to arguing, because that’s more familiar to Ash.

They can share private little laughs together; Red can go to lightly shove him whenever he says something and Ash can sidestep it easily, avoidance of contact almost natural to him; and some days it’s silence to each other; other times it’s outbursts like supernovae.

“You’re still following me.” Red points out.

It's easier, to hide in the shadows, than Ash remembered it being. People already have enough going on, Ash guesses, and that the security is laughably bad on this side of the zone. It's overpopulated, a measly two or three guards isn't going to be enough.

These places are meant to be safe from the outside world. To provide people here with an idea of safety and what normalcy would've been. It's a place for people to pretend that this is all going to get better, that they can shut themselves out and still starve, but it's much better than being outside because they delude themselves with the idea of community. Humans are sociable creatures, after all.

"It'd be a loss for me to leave. Should steal your kidneys first. That'd net me a lot of credits." Ash says, and adds on, "You have your back turned to me."

"C'mon dude, you're not going to commit a murder in broad daylight." Red sighs, checking a piece of paper from one of his many pockets. "I know you're not *that* stupid."

"It makes me so happy to hear that you have *so* much faith in me." Ash mutters.

And Ash isn't stupid, so he doesn't stab him in broad daylight. He'd like to say, for the record, that he's pretty smart, actually.

He still doesn't exactly trust Red. It's not like he can afford to constantly doubt him, as he is the only other person in Ash's life. It's a thin balance of control. It's a combination that's almost perfectly made to taunt him.

Red lifts up a plank of wood on the door, leading them into another semi-abandoned housing complex. Only this one has a person eyeing them at the entrance, cigarette in hand. Ash, for obvious reasons, does not like this very much. Red hasn't done anything to harm him so far, but fuck, sue him for being worried. The stairs creak underneath them, as they go up and up and up until the top floor.

The door that they end up in front of is faded, with paint peeling from the top left corner. Red is completely unphased.

"You can wait outside if you want." Red says after knocking on the door. Ash is surprised it doesn't crumple underneath his hand.

"No, I'll go in with you."

Red shrugs, "Fine, suit yourself."

The door is pulled open by a woman with blonde hair. She looks earnest but surprised at their arrival. There's graphite smears all over her hands, as if she was in the middle of planning, maybe something like an architect, Ash muses.

"Hey Mid," Red greets her, a little awkward hand wave.

"Red! Oh my god, it's been so long." She pulls Red into a loose hug. Ash feels out of place; mostly because he is. She looks at him, and asks, "Who's this with you?"

“I’m A.” Ash introduces himself, clipped and awkward.

“Well, pleasure to meet you, A.” She smiles, and it’s kind, but also clearly assessing him. “You can call me Mid.”

“Nice to meet you, too.” Ash internally cringes. He hasn’t had *normal* human interaction in ages. He doesn’t classify arguing with Red as normal human interaction.

She and Red trail off to another room soon after she lets them in, leaving Ash to sit in the living room -- which honestly, he’s fine with; he barely even *knows* Red, he tells himself, and he only met Mid seconds ago. The room could be in worse condition, considering everything. It’s clearly well maintained, it has a lot of character in it, the wallpaper is painted over in rough coats of purple paint, and there’s pinned up papers and notes, and a half abandoned drawing on the table.

Ash feels like an intruder here -- mostly because he is. He wasn’t supposed to follow along Red, the universe has a funny idea of fate. Faintly, he can hear Red and Mid talking, too far away to actually make out the words, but he’s too distracted.

In front of him, there’s photographs pinned to the wall. It looks like she had ran out of picture frames, and ended up just pinning them as is. Cameras are a rare commodity, even more impressive that it could print out the pictures. They’re slightly faded around the edges, but they’re -- they’re obviously cherished.

There’s a lot, but his eyes lock onto two with Red in them.

In one, he’s surrounded by tons of people; obviously Mid, but there’s also a guy with shades and peach-orange hair, another guy that has a -- *god, what’s it called again?* -- rubix cube on a necklace. He recognizes Vitalasy, though, because, well, he was *involved* with Spoke; and he recognizes Subz too, because that kind of comes with Vitalasy. There’s also a boy with headphones and similar red hair to, well, Red. The other is of him, Mid, the same guy with shades and a collection of other people in the background, with writing underneath saying *the hunt is over!*

Normally, he wouldn’t care. Because -- because he *doesn’t* know Red, not really. Ash has been trying to keep his distance but this feels too much -- too close.

It’s *intruding*. He shouldn’t be seeing this -- maybe he should’ve ran for the hills as soon as he could have. Maybe he still could. If he survived the tear in his leg, then he could maybe survive jumping out of the window. Maybe he wants to light everything aflame, too. He *shouldn’t* see these things.

And like all things, the universe loves screwing him over. Mid has taken this opportunity to come into the room, and Ash is too slow to look away from the photos.

“Oh, sorry-”

“No, no! It’s okay,” Mid smiles at him, choosing to stand at his side. She seems to grow fonder when looking at the photographs. “These are all from a few years ago.”

Ash isn't really sure whether Mid should be telling this to him. He's not going to be permanent in Red's life. Ash's stringing him along, and Red is probably stringing him along too, and that's the extent of their relationship. But this is Mid and not Red, so he plays along.

"That's cool. Who's everyone else in the photos?" Ash asks, because he's still curious.

"Oh, that one's Pangi, that's Cube, then those two are Vitalasy and Subz, and that's- that's Spepticle," She stutters over the last name, and Ash pretends to not notice. "And then Red and me." She points at the group photo, listing people off. Ash nods along, as if these names mean anything to him.

There's something else lingering in her gaze too -- something more somber than plain nostalgia. Ash doesn't comment on it.

"What exactly does it mean by *the hunt is over*?" Ash points back to the second photograph, this one pinned by a purple pin. He now knows the orange haired guy is *Pangi*.

"Red and Pangi were participants in a scavenger hunt that I had hosted - well, it was a bit *more* than a scavenger hunt. It was for a pre-wasteland artifact that we all called the *Dragon's Egg*, it was a piece of machinery that- well, you don't need to know the details. But they were the ones who won it, though Red let me keep it."

This is -- more than Red has ever told him about his life.

He doesn't know Red like this. It's a different side than Ash is familiar with. It's like turning over circuits, expecting to get shocked, electrocuted, maybe. Instead, he's allowed to run his fingers over the engravings -- not pressing too hard or else it'll snap, but still able to touch.

"Well, it's just- surprising. I'm not used to having Red come by with anyone with him."

Rationally, Ash should ignore this.

Instead, before his brain can catch up, he asks, "Really?"

"Yeah, he's- quite introverted. He doesn't like doing the whole duo kind of thing anymore y'know? It's nice to see that he has someone." She looks at him as if she's judging him. Scratch that, she's definitely judging him.

"Oh. Well," Ash hesitates. There's no *right* response to this. "He's useful."

Mid laughs, and Ash thinks that he's getting somewhere. "He is, he is."

"I can hear you guys." Red pops in, leaning on the doorframe. "The soundproofing is *bad*."

"Right, I'll get the card-"

"The card?" Ash asks. He regrets not having listened closer. Not being *in the know* makes something gnaw at his ribs. He pretends to ignore it.

Red cuts in, "Mid is having me run errands for her."

“Red, come on, it’s not an *errand*.” Mid protests, rummaging through cupboards before pulling out a small slip of paper. “I already have the storage bought in the town, I just couldn’t complete it myself back then.”

She says it more to Red, than him, but he still pries, “What is it?”

He thinks about the credits he could make. It’d be nice to have something to his name, again.

Like the calm before a storm, Red shrugs, “It’s, well, we’re gonna have to go to True North.”

“*What?*”

“Yeah, it basically comes down to that,” Mid sighs, and passes the paper to Red. Ash peeks over, his height has always been an advantage, it’s a rough drawing of *something*. “There’s just, I’ve always wanted to include something from there in one of my projects. It’s been described as a star.”

Ash stays silent, thinking it over.

“I’ve always been good at paying.” Mid grins, as if reading the strings and lines that run through Ash’s mind.

“...Alright.” Ash says.

“So, he’s coming with you, then?” Mid asks, to Red. The decision was kind of made without his input, but;

“I mean, sure. Alright.” Red parrots his words, looking between the paper and Ash.

Ash’s attention gets stolen away by Mid talking, a basic rundown of the job, saying the amount that will be paid to both of them (it’s a *lot* of zeroes, more than enough that he doesn’t think of trying to wrangle or argue against it). Red seems to know a lot of it already, so it’s more directed towards Ash. *A road-trip*, Ash muses. *How fucking exciting*.

Red seems to be looking directly at Ash. It’s different from the ways he looked at him before. It unsettles him, right down to his core.

second

Chapter Summary

Ash doesn't know why he doesn't run already.

He could leave. He could walk away and never be seen again if he wanted to, there's nothing really tying him down to Red except for the favour. But if Red really wants that repaid, he could just track Ash down to the ends of the world. There's nothing between them, nothing at all.

Chapter Notes

apologies if pacing is a little off this is summer to autumn condensed down to like 7k words. anyways!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They hadn't stayed for long, immediately going back to walking. It was a nice change of pace, to actually be able to shower under warm water.

Ash has always never liked traveling much, but it's all that Red *does*. He must say that this might be one of his worst road trip experiences in his life, and that's not even factoring in the zombies.

"Is there any reason you don't just stay in a zone?" Ash asks, readjusting the grip on his lead pipe. It feels awkward to carry, different from his previous guns. "You've got a friend in that one."

"Well, when you start, ah, deceiving people, you kind of build up a *reputation*," Red says, "I thought it was kind of obvious."

"I don't know, dude, maybe you're just a really shitty businessman. I've never even heard of you." Ash says, because Red is talking as if he should know him, and Ash has already overseen the black market of the apocalypse, and Ash doesn't have knowledge of any other darker markets.

"I do business on the side now, though." Red shrugs, as if playing with people's livelihoods is a mere game.

“I don’t know man, if I was as rich as you were, I’d just get people to beat up whoever talked shit about me.”

“Dude- that’d just spread *more* rumours. Besides, I didn’t really deal in the normal side of business.”

Ash blinks, “What, murder then?”

“Oh, that too. *But*,” Red makes a stressed hand gesture, “Those were mostly all for self defense. Is there any reason you don’t stay in one?”

Ash eyes the sword on Red’s side warily. Okay, so he is *both* a murderer and scammer. That’s great. That’s reassuring. It’s not surprising, no, Ash wasn’t really expecting him to be a *good* person. Maybe he didn’t even need goons to beat up people for him because *he’d* be the one to do it.

“I tried to, before.” Ash says, letting little pieces of his past fall through like light scattered in a broken building. Most of it is omitted. “Multiple times. I found it too- too boring though. I bounced around places for a while before ending up here.”

He walks through the grass, reaching up to just below his knees. It’s an undisturbed fragment of nature. *As if it will ever get disturbed again.* If Ash strains his ears too, he can hear the chirps of songbirds in the background.

“Boring?” Red prods.

Ash’s defense has been built so far up that he might as well not have seen light in years. He tries to keep it vague, “Everyone there just *sucked*. At least out here I’m having some semblance of fun.”

“I wouldn’t call trying to survive *fun*.”

“Well, I’d say after years of fighting zombies, it becomes more of a game than that of a survival threat.” Ash hums, hooking his fingertips into his pockets.

It dissolves into a petty argument not soon after.

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The violence part of killing zombies is fun. It’s better than being sat around in a zone, waiting for his next measly paycheck, but the clean up is *never* fun. There’s guts and blood splattered all over his front. It’s not like normal human blood either, it’s darker and coagulated and it makes Ash buzz with a feeling of disgust.

There was already blood soaked into his clothes that he couldn’t get out, but the feeling of fresh blood is all that much worse. It soaks into him, clinging to skin. It’s *wet* and disgusting, and if there was any more on him he doesn’t think he’d even be recognizable. Repulsion and filth and sickness.

He holds his lead pipe in his hand, covered in a much more considerable amount of gore. Copper clogs his throat. This is why he misses long ranged weapons. He doesn't have to get in close and personal to bash a bat over and over into a zombie's brain.

"Good job," Red says from next to him. He's drenched in a more sizable amount of blood than even Ash. "There's probably gonna be more coming in, let's leave."

Red goes to support him with a hand on his shoulder, but he retracts it. He cringes a little. "Get changed, too."

"You sure look handsome too." Ash mutters, acrid.

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"Let me see your leg." Red says.

"What? Why." Ash stares at him, from the makeshift sleeping arrangements they have set up.

Red stares back at him, blankly, as if he's stupid. "To see how well it's healing?"

One of the things that Ash knows, for certain, is that he isn't stupid. He'd like to say that he's incomprehensibly intelligent, actually. He's had these stitches in for the past few weeks, if anything was infected, he would've already felt the aching and fever and shivering that would come along with it.

Red is still looking at him, patiently waiting. Well, patient's a bad term to use, because it also looks like he wants to clock Ash around his head.

"Fine." Ash relents, because Red is the one who put the stitches in, after all.

He shifts around, curling up rough fabric to his knee. It exposes his skin, and the pale stretched fabric of bandages.

Red carefully unwraps the bandages around his wound, and it's been healing nicely. It's not formed into scar tissue yet, there's still the angry red flush around the stitches but it's better than Ash thought it'd heal. Changing the bandages on the wound has become a part of his routine, so he doesn't really register the way that the stitches have actually prevented him from bleeding out.

"See? It's fine." Ash says, trying to ignore Red's featherlight touch.

"Yeah, I *can* see." Red sighs. "You don't need to wrap it, the stitches shouldn't break by now."

Ash makes a noise in acknowledgment, watching as Red just stays, looking over his leg, the ripple of stitches down it. It's fucking weird. He's perfectly fine, Red should be going, or something.

Red looks up at him. Without hesitation, like swinging his sword down, he asks, "Why are you so afraid of people caring for you?"

“I’m not fucking afraid,” Ash says even though that’s not what Red really is asking for. “I don’t need anyone to *care* for me, Red.”

(Because, Ash has never been afraid of *anything*. He tells himself that he prefers to be alone, to reach into the vacuum of the heavens by himself. People are a burden, a nuisance, a hindrance; other people will only drag him down -- emotions and caring are such a fickle thing -- that he just keeps staying unattached. Tries to).

Red sighs. It looks like he’s giving up this time. Another score for Ash in his mental board for the game that only he’s playing. “Did anyone ever tell you how annoyin’ you are?”

“Plenty of times.”

*

“I’m pissing you off.”

“I’m not pissed off.” Red stares at him, blankly.

“You’re *so* pissed off.” Ash continues.

Red sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. “*Fuck*. You can never let anything go, can you?”

It started out stupid and small. As most things do. It’s not destructive, not by any means, but Ash’s pulse is beating in his brain so hard that he can’t hear his own thoughts. Anger burns in the center of his chest, flaring.

“You know fucking nothing.” Ash thinks he’s going to die on this hill. He doesn’t even know what this started out as; he knows that arguments between them bloom rapidly, into something more, and then they’re almost back to normal the next day. Ash will giggle at his stupid jokes, and he’ll tell him to shut up and--

This isn’t tomorrow. It’s still *now*. Ash almost wants to slam the lead pipe down, or something. He’s never been good at being dissected, it just shoved him into a corner, exposed.

He could feel his skin heating; feel his guts roiling. It’s all very much his own fault. Ash loves moral disengagement as much as he loves exploitation.

“God- fucking hell, why do you always do this?” Red makes a gesture between them.

“I’m doing nothing.” Ash says, tilting his head. It’s all intentionally done to get on his nerves, pull them together a bit too tight. It’s easy.

“Watch it, A,” Red retorts.

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Red stands in front of him, his sword pointed at Ash. It’s almost nestled in between his arm and his side. It’s careful -- it’s controlled. There is a non-zero chance that if Ash moves, it

will be cleanly swiped through him. It's not like Ash expected Red to be everything sweet and nice since they met, because the stupid (lifesaving) deal is a constant weight, but this is a reminder that he's *adept*.

“Do you ever know to shut up?” Red snaps.

Ash stays in place. Well, it is *his* fault that irritated Red, after all. It's his fault that he just makes it so easy.

He's found that between having to travel together, that they clash a lot. It's usually Ash who instigates, but Red pisses him off just as badly some days. It's a constant push and pull. It amounts to this.

“No, not really.” Ash hisses back, and he wishes that for the power that he used to have.

Ash has also learned that Red is good with his hands. He knew how to notetake on the map, how to clench his fist, how to swirl around an obnoxious shot glass, how to tie a necktie, how to make grand and wide gestures and how to hold a sword. Ash had always thought that he'd be at the end of it one day, to see the gleaming metal pointed right into his throat, maybe into his chest, but to have it be so soon is surprising.

He keeps his expression neutral, though. It's one of the things that he's learned all the way throughout all of his exploits. To stare into the face of death as if he's above it.

“It's just my luck that I helped someone like you.” Red sighs.

Ash can only huff out a laugh at that. It's a strange resignation, allowing him to walk away scot-free, without a large slit into his heart.

“Should've let me bleed out then, no? Are you regretting it now?” Ash presses.

He sees Red's grip on the sword tighten for a second, shaking, and it looks to Ash like he *will* plunge it right into Ash, through his jacket, and leave him bloodstained and helpless for the vultures. It relaxes immediately after, Red regaining his previous composition, and he lowers his sword, away from Ash's ribcage.

“No. Shut up already.” Red turns, already leaving.

*

“You asked me if I had any friends when we first met.” Red says, idle musing.

“Yes, I did.” Ash says, “And I've seen that you do have *one*, at least.”

Red lets out a dry laugh, “Do you have any?”

Ash glares at him from across the water fountain. They're littered throughout the trail that he and Red are walking through. Breaks are frequent and often, because hiking is one of the things that Ash can concede that he's not suited to. He's used to hitching on cargo caravans, or normal caravans, to avoid the extreme hills. It's just as bad to traverse as remembered.

“Why do you want to know? Who even cares. I’ve never needed to burden myself with someone else. Death is an inevitability.” Ash avoids the question like a shadow, slinking further and further away.

"God, do you ever shut up?" Red says, a little tired. Water splashes against his hands from an overflowing bottle.

"It's true." Ash says. He still can't see his eyes behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses. "I've just never needed anyone, really. Family, friends, lovers, just people. Never have, never will. You only need yourself. I'm *only* indebted to you." He's used to *control*. Commanding and monopolizing and getting his way.

" *God* ," Red groans, again, "Man. there's no need to get all high and mighty, dude. What are you trying to prove -- that you're cool? That you don't need anyone? Whatever. I don't care, you don't need to *wax poetic* about all this to me."

"That's not how you use that." Because Ash is annoying, and also, "I don't care either, I'm not trying to prove anything. You've got me wrong. I'm just stating a fact."

"Well, whatever. You can believe whatever you want to believe." Red says.

*

Ash has always hated sleeping in shifts. The *teammates* that he did it with prior insisted upon it, and he gets that it's for safety, that it's better to just be a little sleep deprived to make sure that you aren't going to get bitten and torn apart by a zombie while in your most vulnerable state, but it doesn't make Ash hate it any less. It's only slightly better in the summer, where they can sleep longer because the sun is out earlier, and the zombies slink back into dark corners.

Red and he have been sharing a sleeping bag, technically, for the past -- god, how long has it been? Nearly three months since they met? Every so often, they could find a good abandoned apartment where the beds weren't rotting and decomposing, and the blankets lacked mysterious stains, but in between those moments was the switching and accidental sharing of body warmth.

Turns out that having everything stolen from you also means your sleeping bag. And Ash still dislikes it just as much as the first time.

Like other people, Ash hates the feeling of debt. It's not like it drags him down, everyday, until he's collapsed and muddled; it's an insidious rot in him, and when he breathes too hard, it sparks a pain in his side.

But life doesn't care for that, so Ash is still pushed into having all of his trust into Red to keep him alive. It's not exactly trust, maybe just reliance, because Ash *can't* trust anyone else, evident from the scars littering his body -- even if most are from his own escapades -- but he still has to have Red to -- to be there.

Ash feels like his brain is going to short circuit. So much in his life has gone wrong just in the past few weeks.

He's slowly managed to build back up though. In between odd jobs in cities and escorts that lead Red and Ash further to wherever, he's managed to get a new bag (though he misses his old, sewn and worked in purple one) and a hefty sum of credits that lay in a secret pocket. It's not large by any means, but it would do in case of emergency.

He needs to get back in control soon, even if it means playing the long game, because that's much safer. Ash is carefully climbing his way back up the food chain, because damn it, he *was* at the top. In the shadows, always lurking, but there.

"Stop thinkin'," Red murmurs, even more muffled due to how he's sleeping.

"I'm literally *silent*." Ash bristles. Every interaction is one step forward and two steps back.

"Well, I dunno, your thinking is loud." And, "I can't sleep."

Ash ignores him. "We need to go get supplies soon. Old-world cities fucking suck."

"I know, I know," Red waves his hand lamely, "Next zone is soon, okay? Then we can rob them or somethin'. Maybe not rob. Yeah, No. Maybe scam. Or do jobs normally. Whatever." His speech is slurred with sleep.

"Okay." Ash says. His heart -- he doesn't know what it's doing in his chest. He wants to rip it out. He needs to leave before Red leaves him. He can see it coming, in the horizon, like a flicker of lightning.

Red is still looking at him, under hair and under his eyelashes.

He sleeps with his face mask on. Ash doesn't question it, even though the sunglasses come off but the face mask is still there. It's jarring to see him like this. It's not exactly vulnerability but it's something awfully close.

"What are you waiting for? Go to fuck to sleep." Ash mutters.

His eyes have another hint of that burn in it, and it makes Ash's stomach twinge, and his coat's warming up on his back, and he knows that he can't exactly take off running from here, but his veins thrum underneath his skin with fervor.

Red closes his eyes, shuffling back over and falls asleep. It's going to be another long night.

*

Ash doesn't know why he doesn't run already.

He could leave. He could walk away and never be seen again if he wanted to, there's nothing really tying him down to Red except for the favour. But if Red really wants that repaid, he could just track Ash down to the ends of the world. There's nothing between them, nothing at all.

Red knows nothing about him. There's no gravitational orbit, no pull, nothing except for the blinding desert sun and synthetic leather handshakes.

After all, wouldn't it be more profitable to just complete the job? He tells himself. Ash surrounds himself in figures, in zeroes and ones, in cold hard credits that are *solid* in his palm. There is nothing abstract about money, not like *feelings*.

Maybe, it's foolish. He stays.

*

Ash thinks that they work strangely well as a duo. He doesn't *like* working with him, but he's strangely fine with doing odd jobs around. It also reminds him of just how far he has fallen. They've planned to stop here for a week, just to regear, before setting out again. It's the second last day.

"What's our next destination again?" Ash asks, because he's slowly coming to terms with following Red along.

"Still going north." Red answers, he's dressed down to only his shirt, and the rest of his jackets are thrown on a crate not too far. Repairing carts might be one of the most annoying jobs they've done yet.

"Always fucking north." Ash hisses.

"It's kind of in the name." Red says, a grin evident in his voice.

He focuses on hammering the nail into the wood. It's endlessly repetitive. Ash is almost tempted to start pickpocketing.

One of his last remaining belongings is a little notebook. It was hidden within pockets within his jacket, and he crossed off the date earlier. *29th July*, the heat has long since rolled in properly. It'd be worse if they were in one of the hotter pockets of biomes, stranded in a desert or mesa or the like, but they've managed to find their way to the flatland plains. The fallout had quite affected the biome generation.

Ash finds the idea of crossing dates off quite mundane, too. It's not something that he would usually be into, but it's one of the things he finds that he can control.

He can't stop the Earth from rotating, nor the galaxies from being pulled further out in the expanses of the universe, but he's the only one in charge of the crosses that he makes through the numbers.

"Maybe we should've just scammed people." Ash says, after the third hour of working. He's laid down on the floor, letting the sun shine down on him. Whatever amount of credits they're going to get isn't worth it.

"We don't have much to scam them with." Red points out.

“We could just lie, or something. Say we have something- something cool. But we don’t have anything. And we take their money anyways.”

“That’s usually how a scam works, yeah.”

“Fuck off, you know what I meant.” Ash sighs, “Maybe we just start robbing people. The prices in this city are *so* fucking high.”

“This is just gettin’ worse and worse. Next you’re gonna suggest that we may as well just stab someone. Let’s just become hired mercenaries, why don’t we?”

“No, no, that’s been done already. I don’t wanna work for the P.M.C.”

“P.M.C?” Red looks at him, as if he *hasn’t* heard of them. His expression is unnaturally controlled.

And it’s almost laughably oblivious that Red is bluffing, because the better question is *who* hasn’t heard of them. Still, Ash doesn’t call him out. Maybe he should, but it’s intriguing -- no one just blatantly lies like that, but Red has always been confident in his ability to talk.

“Private Murder Company -- It’s one of Clown’s latest *ventures*. Haven’t you heard of it?” He plays along.

Mercenary companies have been rising recently. Of course, such corporations are sure to arise wherever there is society -- and, in turn, wherever there's injustice and inequality, there’s the inevitable reality of the strong trampling the weak. And, with the same certainty, they're all one and the same; it's always just different people at the front. There’s obviously always *one* best one to go to in the end.

“Nah, not really.” Red shrugs, “I don’t keep up with that kind of stuff. Last time I heard he was running a casino. Maybe we could start up our own mercenary-for-hire and put them out of business.”

This is just gossipping, Ash realizes. This is *not* something that he should be doing with Red, he should be doing this with one of those lovely little old ladies that he used to see on the route to his former job. Except it usually wasn’t lovely little old ladies, and instead scummy rich people. Red doesn't seem far off from that category.

“Bro, they have like, actual weapons. All *we* have is a sword and a fucking lead pipe. And I think I’ve been on the edge of death enough lately.” Ash jokes lamely.

“Oh yeah, how’s your leg?”

Ash shrugs. “It’s been fine.”

There’s always the off-days where it hurts. Sometimes, it starts aching but he keeps quiet, because he doesn’t want to slow them down. He’s long since stopped limping around, but it’s still unfathomably annoying.

A solitary pigeon flies by in the sky.

“That’s good to hear. I might know how to suture but I don’t know how to carry out an amputation.”

Ash lets out a short laugh, leaning against a crate. He’s already exhausted. He watches Red wipe sweat off of his forehead, brushing past too long hair, and Red is also looking back at him, focused on his braid.

“How is that you haven’t like, cut your hair?”

“Laziness. I’ve just let it grow out long and went fuck it, and let it keep growing.” Ash answers. “I usually just trim the dead ends.”

Ash calls this an imitation of friendship. And it is, it always has been. It still doesn’t let something stop brushing at the back of his mind, electrochemicals latching onto synapses. He knows that just *talking* should just be a normal part of comradery, but, it’s just -- casual. This whole thing messes with him.

Impulsively, Ash adds, “I could cut your hair, if you want.”

“With what? Your hunting knife?” Red raises an eyebrow.

“It’d work.”

“Clean it at least.”

*

For all things considered, it isn’t the worst haircut that Red could’ve gotten. It’s a strangely kind thing for Ash to do. It doesn’t get in Red’s eyes anymore, even if it is a little uneven. Mostly because of the whole hunting knife problem. It’s not like he really uses it for hunting, anyways.

“See? Thank me.”

“It could be worse.” Red says, sees Ash twirl the knife around in his grasp hands, “Thanks.”

*

“Hey, A, don’t panic but-”

“I’m already panicking.” Ash replies, a few steps behind Red.

“-We *might* be lost.” Red finishes.

Ash stares at him. Red stares back.

”You’re fucking kidding me.”

It’s not exactly one of the places that Ash would envision being lost in. It always happens to random stragglers and desperate people in forests, trying to follow an unkept trail, or people

who are inexperienced. It doesn't happen to two grown men, who had a clear destination, in the middle of what would be the loveliest little meadow with the loveliest little sun in the sky that Ash has had the pleasure to walk through.

It's not like it's the end of the world (well, it is) but everything is perfectly normal. How the fuck could they mess up *just* walking?

Though, it's surprising this is only the first time they've gotten properly lost. Red is begrudgingly good with a compass and directions, and Ash knows that if it was him they would've ended up in a ditch somewhere long ago. He's good at directions, but most of his map skills have rusted over. He's just -- prone to wandering.

"We shouldn't have ended up in the plains," Red tries to explain, "There shouldn't have been a plains anywhere in this vicinity."

"Okay. Okay! So, where the fuck did we go wrong?" A little bit of hysteria and annoyance creeps into Ash's voice. It's not like being lost is his worst nightmare, he can deal fine with camping out in the woods, but it's everything else that surrounds it.

"Dude- I have *no* fucking clue, that's the thing."

"Shouldn't we trace back our steps?" Ash asks, "Even if that sets us back."

"Maybe, but--"

The rest of Red's speech is cut off by a *crash* behind them. It shatters through the conversation, and the noise makes Ash's ears ring. It's spectacularly loud.

Ash turns around, following after Red who ran ahead to see neon colours of green, blue and orange. They stand out in between the grass, like a star in the night sky. Except it's nothing quite like a meteor coming to earth, it's just a young boy that's ate shit.

"Hey, you okay?" Red is nudging him.

"*Hfhrhghfhg*," The boy replies, clearly not okay. Ash feels a hint of *deja vu*.

The boy sits up, slowly, with Red's help. On his back is an elaborate system, hooked with copper and wires and rebar to resemble a pair of wings. Ash thinks that they're functional too, because there's no way they couldn't have seen the kid coming if he was just walking. They're decorated in elaborate feathers. An aviation helmet sits half on his head, and the goggles are hanging loosely around his neck.

"I'm A, he's Red," Ash points at the two of them, "Who are you?"

"Dude--" Red begins, but is prematurely cut off.

"No, 's okay. I'm Parrot," It's a fitting name. He rubs his eyes, "*Fuck*, my head hurts."

Ash has never been the best with comfort. It might just come with holding the title of the most emotionally unavailable human alive.

“How’d you crash out of the sky?” Ash asks.

“My elytra ran out of fuel. God that’s so lame.” Parrot sighs, “You guys don’t have any painkillers? Potions? Or are you just planning to interrogate me?”

“Here,” Red cuts in, saving Ash from the devastating task of talking to someone. He’s unzipped his jacket, and places a health potion into Parrot's hands. He chugs it all, and proceeds to bury his face into his hands.

Red looks at Ash. Ash looks back at Red.

“So-”

“Give me- a moment. *Fuck* dude, this was so stupid.” Parrot says. He’s obviously dizzy and lightheaded.

“You’re lucky you didn’t die.” Ash says. Not to console, but just as a fact.

“Yeah- whatever dude. I’ve learnt my lesson already.”

There’s leaves and debris stuck in Parrot’s hair, as well as what Ash thinks might be a possible concussion in his head. There’s streaks of mud covering his clothes, as well as the elytra. Surprisingly, it wasn’t damaged much in the crash -- but that might be just because Parrot took the brunt of the hit. He doesn’t seem too outwardly injured, either.

“What should we do?” Ash asks, turning to Red.

“Wait- wait,” Parrot puts one of his hands up in surrender, his face still buried in the other one, “Look, you don’t *need* to kill me.”

“No, I didn’t mean that.”

He bites down laughter. It’s sort of pathetically hilarious.

“I don’t think we should just leave him here.” Red replies. Ash wonders whether he tries to help everyone he finds injured on the road.

“Sure, yeah.” Ash nods along.

“I’m right here- I can hear this!” Parrot groans.

“Hey kid, where were you going?” Red asks.

“I’m not- I’m *not* a *kid*. But uh, it’s not that far away from here. It’s by this lake-”

Red jumps in again, “Okay, we don’t need its geographical location. We just need you to lead us to it.”

“Why should I?” Parrot furrows his eyebrows.

“I don’t think you’re in the position to make requests.” Ash says.

“We’ve lent you some of our supplies.” Red takes on that very specific *tone* of voice, “We’re just trying to get to the closest town around here, and if you’re going there too, then you could also help us out too. It’s not even that much to ask of you, it might as well be the *most* generous deal you’ll ever get.” It’s a very strategic omission of the fact that they’re helplessly lost.

“Fine.” Parrot relents, “Just give me a moment.”

They’ve given this kid *a lot* of moments. He guesses crashing straight into dirt would do that to you.

*

It’s been only a few days before they’re waving Parrot off at the entrance of the city. He wasn’t actually the worst -- maybe even cool to hang out with, if Ash has to admit. Albeit chatty, and Ash got to hear about how he’s meeting up with his friends, Woogie (who Red knows, apparently, god, what’s *with* this guy?) and Vortex, and that he made the elytra design himself, and that it is very easy to bicker with him.

And now he’s leaving just as quick as he came around. Like starfall.

“So he doesn’t owe you anything else?” Ash looks at Red.

“He’s helped us get *un*-lost. He was nice, too.” Red says. “A lot nicer than you. Not a high bar to cross.”

“Fuck off,” Ash says back. “Go die.”

Red laughs, “See?”

*

Carefully, Ash reaches between the leaves of the tree. Autumn is settling in. They’re out in a field, trespassing, probably, because they’re clearly not meant to be in a place that looks this well cared for. However, Ash is confident in his ability of running, and maybe fighting if the owner of the small farm doesn’t own a gun. Probably not, anyway.

He drops the small, round clementine into Red’s hand. Some of them have dropped to the floor already, long before they came here, and have started decaying and rotting back into the ground. Most of them are still on the trees; young love and fuzzy feelings.

“Thanks, A.” Red says, peeling the rough skin off it. His fingers, thicker than Ash’s, dig into it, and it bleeds like flesh. The scent of citrus fills the air.

Ash stares at him. “...You’re welcome.” Because it’s the polite thing to say.

Red separates the endocarp, ripping apart like tissue under skin. They’re small in Red’s hands, innocent, unaware of the life everyone has been living, protected under orange skin.

“You want a part?” Red asks, holding a piece out.

And sure, Ash could just take his own clementine from the tree, and this isn't something that he should be thinking too hard about, because there's nothing special about this. Not the clementine, nor the offer. A solipsist's first exposure to -- to something like this. He reaches out, taking it from Red. Leather separates skin from touching. Ash ignores the simmering heat in him.

It's dizzyingly sweet on his tongue.

*

Ash slowly makes his way up through the building. They've split up from each other, to search more effectively, to find whatever poor old rations that the apartment complex has been hiding from them. Realistically, Ash knows it's probably nothing, maybe a spare water bottle if they're lucky, but Red still insists, because they're weeks off the next outpost.

He's been getting the whole appeal behind exploring these kinds of structures. It's almost mystical, being able to walk through something that's long gone. There's days of roads and camping and walking and more roads but there's also the past lives of civilizations in short bursts.

Graffiti takes his interest, in the sparse few moments that he can afford to look at it. Nothing around looks like it anymore, spray paint reserved as something valuable. He watches people carve their names. How awfully human.

He makes his way through the top floor and slowly down, there's really not much. It's the same as every other apartment complex they've been in before, but slightly more damp and reeking of decay.

It's only when he's gotten to the sixth floor that he finds something. He's yanked open one of the closets, just to see, and in front of him there's an old glock.

There's nothing else around it, though, except for a letter. Ash doesn't dare to read it.

It's not a rifle or anything Ash is used to, but this is *more* than he expected. He swipes it up immediately, checking out the feel of it in his hand. The steel is cold and unfeeling. The magazine has fourteen slots, but Ash can only see the five bullets in place. It's not much, but still insanely valuable.

It's not food or water, but it's the first good weapon Ash has gotten his hands on. Carrying a lead pipe around eventually gets tiring.

He steadily heads down to the bottom floor, internally delighted with his find. He can almost overlook how the railing underneath his hand shakes and a piece snaps off underneath the pressure of his hand. Or how annoying it is to go down stairs with a lack of depth perception. He doesn't trust these little steps.

Ash turns the corner, and it all immediately just smells instinctually wrong. There's rot permeating the air, it's damper, it's the faint smell of decomposition. He raises his hand over his mouth and nose to try and block out the stench.

He should've expected it. The lights haven't been on in ages here of course it's a spawning ground. Ash curses under his breath. He carefully peeks around to see if he can just run past. It's slowly ambling around -- maybe coming from a floor higher up. It can't be *that* hard.

And he's about to. But the universe hates him.

Red chooses that moment to leave from one of the other doors from the opposite hallway. This, naturally, alerts the zombie, because it was human once, and it still has ears that lead to its unarguably nauseating leaking brain, and it can process sound.

Red's hand is on his sword, but it's too slow as the zombie *leaps* towards him.

Time slows down. Ash points his newly acquired gun. He hopes that his aim hasn't rusted, and pulls the trigger when it's only inches away.

The bullet sprays through the zombie's neck. Blood splatters over the wall, over Red, over the floor.

It makes a terribly loud noise, which will only attract more of the undead to their location. It doesn't outright kill it, because zombie biology is *weird*, and Ash thinks that anyone who tries to study it is *weirder*, but it makes it stagger backwards, into the wall, spasming.

Red stares at him, stunned behind his sunglasses.

"You're welcome," Ash says, immediate, and, "Fuck, we need to run."

"Okay."

Red is a lot more compliant than he thought he would be. Maybe it's because Ash now has a gun. Or maybe it's hidden beneath the awe that he looks at Ash with. Either way -- he doesn't have time to dwell on it, because they're running and running and the ache in his legs has never felt quite this good.

*

"Nice kill." Red says, when the adrenaline of running has died down.

"I didn't kill it." Ash points out.

"Well, nice shot. Is that better?"

Ash makes a non-committal noise. He's arguing for the sake of arguing. They do that enough, already, but he just wants to bring it back to something familiar. Something that he's able to grasp and hold in his hands.

"You know how to shoot a gun?" Red asks, because Ash has already found a very secure place on his hip for the glock to reside. It feels so, *so* good to have a gun again.

"...Yes?" Ash says, because he's not really sure where Red is going with this. "Why?"

“Well- I dunno, I haven’t seen a shot that clean in ages.” Red gives a little shrug. This is all empty compliments. It still doesn’t mean that it *won’t* boost Ash’s ego. Subtly, there’s always that weird hint of prying for information, from Red.

“I don’t like handguns all that much, I’ve done better,” and, “You won’t see one that good in a while, either. There’s only four bullets left.” Ash half-evades the question.

Red laughs, “Well, as long as you won’t turn on *me*.”

*

“How much longer are we going to be here?” Ash asks, looking at the horizon.

Red hums, “I didn’t know you had places to be.”

“Funny.” Ash deadpans.

“Maybe another day or so.” Red shrugs, “We haven’t taken a good break in a while.”

He doesn’t know when he properly became part of the ‘we.’ It messes with Ash’s head, to be regarded as part of a duo. Maybe it shouldn’t be surprising; he’s spent a terribly long time with Red by now. True North does mean *true north*, after all. They won’t be there for a good while. Maybe he’s fucked. Maybe he’s been fucked ever since he first accepted, his hand in Red’s, his life just another playing card in the worlds game.

“You think we’re friends in another universe?” Red asks, abruptly.

“Are we friends?” Ash means it as a joke. Kind of.

“Well. You’re still here.”

Silence passes between them. Like a calm ocean wave and like the searing burn of flames. Ash feels himself pulled in. Maybe this is something that he’s never going to be able to get out of. Maybe Ash just takes that as a challenge.

“I don't know. I think it’s unlikely.”

It’s weird vulnerability. Redwood forests and stinging deserts. Venom fills Ash’s veins, dragging him under the crust of the earth. It’s pure and vulgar, warm and cold, sweet and sour.

Redd laughs, “Really? I think I’d chase you down to the end of the earth.”

And there’s something in his head -- taking over, stinging stars in searing yellows and reds -- and it splits the air apart like lightning, the discharge of electricity. And maybe *that* -- the ignition, the electricity, the *everything* -- was why he was falling apart into the stars.

*

It’s bright.

Ash walks in through the entrance (which isn't *really* an entrance, more of a shabby little hole in the side of it with a rusted over door that's *just* hanging on) of the cooling tower -- it's a part of an old power plant, there's pipes running through the bottom of it. They snake and wind around, sturdy ever since the last time anyone has ever taken care of it.

Its wide, open top lets the sunlight pour in to coat the center in stinging golden hues. It's like if he just reaches out, and touches, he'd be able to harness the warmth itself.

His footsteps echo in front of him. It was a small detour they've decided to take -- just to check it out, maybe there'd be some long forgotten supplies. There was really nothing left of value here, even the long-since-inoperative control panel was scavenged of nearly all its parts. And Ash is *good* with machines, he operates them like a part of himself, but sometimes he's forced to just leave it.

It's not like it could've worked without electricity, anyway. This place has been gone for years before the first outbreak, already broken and abandoned. Which really, is weird. Abandonment is quaint and curious.

Instead, he's treated with the sight of Red climbing over the pipes and broken down railings, trying to get into the center of it.

The echo of his voice is carried over as he's talking to himself, Ash can hear little exclamations of *woah* and *wow* and *that wasn't even close* and a loud *fuck* coupled with the noise of clanging pipes, and all those little, other noises that Ash can't really describe but he's grown familiar with.

"Hey, A, c'mere" He tries to wave Ash over.

"I hope you fall off."

Red laughs at him, as if it's all expected; a routine.

Their voices echo in the space. It's such a weird feeling. It's turning a page, and expecting to find more words and paragraphs, but it's all just blank. Ash -- Ash tells himself that he knows, that he will always know what he wants.

*

It's a weird, almost-easy coexistence they've been inhabiting to have.

Ash realizes that this is dangerous. He can't let himself get betrayed or fucked over or anything. Because It's all just *business*. It has been since the beginning, and he's sure it still will be in the end.

He trusts Red. He doesn't trust him, like his own circulatory system, nor with the certainty that they will all be surrounded by frigid void one day. He trusts him like nicotine, like loyalty. Maybe that's one of the worst conclusions he could come to at this moment. He trusts him and trusts him and he needs to break it before he can be left behind again.

The end of summer has long since closed in. Ash is glad, because it means no more sweltering heat, but also the nights are slowly starting to get longer, the zombies more restless. It's also cold, which might be the worst part of it all. He can deal with zombies, but the cold is much more of a threat.

The first few wisps of dusk are starting to emerge, which is a signal for Red and Ash to hurry the fuck up, find a place already that's just close enough to get to but far enough to say that it's still progress.

They've stepped into the last remains of a ruined city, and Ash guesses that they're in the industrial complex of it. There's a lot of old machinery, completely useless by now. Anything usable would've been scrapped to be remade into something new.

It's completely empty, silent, desolate, whatever other adjectives Ash wants to use. There's no other people that have decided to stay here. It seems to be relatively safe though, even if Ash dislikes the rats and vermin scuttling around.

The peace is broken when someone shouts, "Hey!" in the distance.

Ash looks back in front of him to see a young boy with blond-white hair running towards them. He's waving them down, or waving *at* them, but clearly vying for attention. Ash sends a glance to Red, but he's only met with a little shrug.

The boy's finally caught up to them, and he's panting, heaving out gasps. There's something vaguely familiar about him, as if Ash had seen him before.

Ash begins, irritated, "What-"

"My teammate- my teammate is injured. Please- please, you need to come with me, oh my god," The boy is in distress, messy blond-white hair falling into his face. It's badly cut. He's lanky and pathetic and obviously hasn't been treated well by life. "Fuck, he's, oh, fuck. We were just trying to get to the coast-"

Ash feels like he's seen him before. Maybe it's just the itch at the back of his mind, where it reminds Ash of himself; young and scrawny and ready to take everything on. He's better now, of course.

"What happened?" Red steps in, cooler. He's still awkward, hesitant about this, but able to mask it better.

Ash stares at the boy. There's apprehensive dread forming in his gut.

"We got- we got ambushed. I don't know if he's going to make it," He's a mess.

"What do we get out of this?" Red asks, erring on the side of caution, also hesitant, even if his hand is firmly on his sword and ready to go with him.

"I- you can take some of our supplies- *please* , anything you want-"

Red looks at Ash. He tries to school his face into a blank expression, but there is something *wrong* about all of this. He decides that he'll try to slink away with Red in a moment, but;

“We should go, shouldn't we?” Red asks, but it's more of a statement.

The boy isn't crying, but he's heaving, loud and obnoxious in front of them. It's a reminder of regret and death and mourning. Ash feels weird, just looking at Red. There's something else about Red, too, something more mellow, but he really has no time to dissect it, pick him apart cell by cell. He sighs. The back of his neck pricks with uneasiness.

“Fine. Lead the way.” Ash says, beginning to walk.

And then a *bang* echoes next to him. Ash turns to look, but--

All he can register for a split second is the brilliant vivid iridescence of pain, and then the world goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

i love silly little cameos. teehee (uh oh)

third

Chapter Summary

“Do you think I’m *trying* to screw us over?” Red’s composure was pulled taut, like a knot twisting tighter and tighter. “I want my items back *just* as much as you do. I’m not- I’m not gonna let them just fuck off.”

Ash thinks that he would’ve felt a lot lighter without having to lug around a whole bag of inventory. Maybe this is payback for all of the sins that he’s committed, but he doesn’t believe in any other gods. He breathes out, slow but harsh.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being knocked out is uncomfortable. It’s much worse than fainting from blood loss, because that at least didn’t cause a pounding fucking headache in his skull. It’s like a bell being rung constantly over and over again. He’s not sure if he’s concussed -- he doesn’t think so, hopes not -- but the pain is unbearable. It’s not like he can try and block the light out either, because his hands are tied behind his back.

He kind of gets why Parrot struggled so hard to face the light when he crashed into the floor. The world comes in gradually, from blurry little shapes to something slightly more clear.

There’s nothing particular about the room they’re in, either. Gray and dull. It’s obviously just the closest place that they’ve been thrown into. Light filters through broken windows, broken plaster in pieces by the wall, and Ash is vaguely surprised that it hasn’t collapsed from the wind.

Ash turns to look around him, and Red is in a similar position. His legs are tied with rope, and so are his hands behind his back. They *at least* let him keep his sunglasses and face mask. Ash should’ve never agreed. This really is one of the oldest tricks in the book. Sure, it *might’ve* meant that they would’ve had to turn away a kid that was on the verge of crying, but it would also mean that they’d never end up like this.

He’s so stupid -- they’re both so fucking stupid for not having seen through it. God, it’s one of the oldest fucking tricks in the book, how did they *both* fall for it?

“Red,” Ash hisses, quiet, “Get the fuck up.”

He nudges him. No response. *Fuck*, this might be one of the worst positions they’ve ended up in. He awkwardly maneuvers with the ropes around him to kick at Red, once, and then harder again, which is the thing that stirs him back into the living world.

The headache almost comes back ten times stronger. He's visibly tense. Ash is *so* unbelievably pissed off.

Red groans, "Huh, *Where* -"

"Quiet down."

"*Sorry*," Red whispers, mocking, but sensing urgency in Ash's tone, "Where the fuck are we? Where's our stuff?"

"I don't know. A part of me thinks it *might* do with that kid and his fucking, *teammate*." Ash thinks his blood pressure has never been higher. "God, aren't you meant to be the strong one? You should've fought them off."

"I got knocked out *first*." Red protests. Arguing and whispering is getting really annoying already.

But there's sound coming in from outside of the room, and Ash tries to gesture for Red to quiet down, with the best that he can. Thankfully, he gets what Ash is trying to say, and they sit in uneasy silence. The door is slightly ajar.

"Dude, *look* at this Ro," Another boy, different from the white-haired one, says. "They had so much stuff. I told you I recognised him."

"Yeah- yeah. Holy shit." The boy, Ro, replies. It's not really a reply, just more of awe.

"Your acting skills could use a little work but this is good. That was so good."

"Mapicc- *Mape*- c'mon."

Ash's hands itch. He misses his lead pipe already.

The door is pushed fully open to the room. It finally connects with him that *oh*, Ro was part of Lala Legion, too, just in a different branch. It somehow makes everything worse. Ro is standing there with another boy, a red bandana tied around his head. He connects that this is the aforementioned Mapicc.

"What the fuck." Ash slurs, involuntary. squinting in front of the bright rush of light.

"Oh- I didn't-, fuck, how did they wake up already?" Ro's eyes widened.

This just serves as a reminder to Ash that he is a grown ass man. He should *not* be having his life threatened by some teenagers.

Mapicc just shrugs in response, and hey, that's *his* fucking bag on his back. Getting everything he ever had taken for the first time this year was already bad enough, but getting robbed for a second time would register as *embarrassing* if Ash wasn't more focused on biting down insults.

He's standing in front of them, now. The only thing that's intimidating about this is that they've been tied up. And okay, maybe the shotgun Mapicc's holding too.

It's weird to have a shotgun. Ash can tell this is one from the old world, because it's lever action, and nothing produced nowadays looks like it. And he also lacks faith in the kid to scrounge up that many credits to buy one. It's basically useless -- the ammunition for it must be pretty much non-existent by now -- but the idea that he *might* just have ammo lingers in the back of Ash's mind.

"Your items or your life."

It's awfully fucking corny. Ash has a split second to develop the patience and tolerance of a saint to avoid giggling at this, because he doesn't want his brain to splatter behind him. Mapicc is pointing the rifle between their items, which Ro has put down in front of him, and then at them.

"Man, I don't feel like we have much of a choice here." Red says, as neutral as he can.

"You guys fucking suck." Ash says, a more bitter approach.

Mapicc looks at him, with one raised eyebrow.

Red is glaring at him. Ash can feel it without even turning his head. Even if Ash is right (because he *is*) decisions made in anger can never be changed back. Ash might not exactly be the businessman of anyone's dreams, because he can't talk as eloquently as someone like Red, or run people around in circles like Spoke, but he likes to think he's good at it anyways. He's underhanded. It's a kind of capitalism incarnate.

"Are you sure you should be talking like that?"

Without waiting for an answer, Mapicc's shotgun is put up to Red's forehead. Ash is awfully helpless to watch as the muzzle's cold apathetic metal tilts his head back into the broken wall. Red glances at Ash, a split second of weakness. It's more than Ash has seen for a long time.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea. The power discrepancy grows larger and larger. Ash grips his hands into fists, leaving behind crescent moon marks, to make sure that they can't shake, even if no one will see.

"But, you can just give us your items and *live!*"

"Dude, you already have them." Ash backtracks, trying to diffuse. He's more concerned about staying alive than looking pitiful. His ego is pushed aside, because it's already wounded from ending up in *this* situation.

It does its intended job as the shotgun retracts away from Red and it's back to being slung over Mapicc's shoulder. His one goal of staying *alive* has been fulfilled, at least.

"You said that you recognised us." Red says, trying to reign the conversation back in.

It's like he's playing a game with their lives. And it's not like Ash wasn't doing the same a second ago, but that was *unintentional*. Look, Ash can believe that Red is a businessman, but he's played enough with his life. Whatever sharp, silver tongue he has, it's *dangerously* close to being cut out.

Mapicc furrows his eyebrows at this.

"You said it outside. The walls- they're pretty bad here, man." Red explains.

He wishes he could slam his head into the wall. Mapicc's eyes flicker back at Ro, and then properly looks at Ash, "You're- you're just recognisable. Without the eye."

Ash can't help the bitter, "*Thanks*," from leaving his mouth.

Mapicc then turns to Red, and there's snarling anger on his face. "And you- you're *that* fucking informant." Which is the first time Ash is hearing *any* of this. "You nearly got me killed- you're *so* fucking lucky that--"

"Mape, let's go." Ro cuts in.

Which really, is a shame, because Ash wants to know *more* because god knows that Red is never going to want to mention this again.

Mapicc's fist unclenches on the rifle strap on his shoulder. He doesn't say anything back to Ro, but he does slowly step away. They clearly trust each other, Ash can see that. It's a weird reflection.

"Good luck getting out." Mapicc adds just before they leave, attempting to close the door behind them, but it doesn't properly fit in the frame, which leaves it half open anyways.

This lets Ash get to see the scene of Ro and Mapicc hopping onto a *bicycle* (a fucking bicycle, *dear god*, and Ash doesn't have any hope that it was legally obtained) outside, and Ash can hear Ro going, *that was so cringe*, and then Mapicc's yelling something back at him and they're riding away. It's the last piece that pushes Ash over into hysteria, because it's so unbelievable, and there might be pounding red frustration in the back of his head, too, but it's all *so* fucking stupid.

*

"This is so fucking *stupid*." Ash repeats.

Once again, all of their stuff being stolen means that it was all of it. His hunting knife is long gone, and so is his notebook (who even does *that?*) and if they even get out of here, his back up stash of credits is also useless, because it's *gone*. A robbery this thorough can be only classified as *annoying* at this point.

Trying to get out of the rope is a very, very slow process. It's not fun, and Ash can already feel the raw rope imprints on his wrists, but the rope is just about weak and old enough that it's possible to break it through rubbing it against the pole.

Ash doesn't know how long it takes. The knots are not by any means good, but it's layered, so it takes an annoyingly long time to break free of it. Ash's wrists sting from the rope, but he can't afford to focus on that. He gets his legs free quickly next, and then getting Red out is even easier when they have mobility.

"We need to get our shit back. Fuck, they had that bike-" Ash would find it hysterical if they weren't completely fucked over. "How long has it been? They could just be- fucking anywhere."

"They said they were going to the coast." Red says, massaging his hand over his wrist. "That should be -- east, from here."

"Well- *fuck*, they could be lying."

"Do *you* have any clue where they went?" Without waiting, "No, no you don't. It's our best chance at finding them again." Red stares at him.

It pisses Ash off.

"I swear, Red, if you fucking get us lost again-"

"Do you think I'm *trying* to screw us over?" Red's composure was pulled taut, like a knot twisting tighter and tighter. "I want my items back *just* as much as you do. I'm not- I'm not gonna let them just fuck off."

Ash thinks that he would've felt a lot lighter without having to lug around a whole bag of inventory. Maybe this is payback for all of the sins that he's committed, but he doesn't believe in any other gods. He breathes out, slow but harsh.

"We're just wasting time arguing dude. Let's go." Red calls the shots, and doesn't wait for Ash to agree as he turns on his heel.

Red is lucky that Ash agrees this time. They leave the building with incredibly palpable tension between them. Ash hates everything that has led him to this moment.

*

Losing everything again is even worse than Ash imagined. It's dangerous, because not only are they defenseless -- oh, how he misses his glock already -- but also having *nothing* means eventual *starvation* and *dehydration*.

Ash has never hated looting old buildings this much. Every single one he comes in to, he only leaves with dust and cobwebs. These areas have been combed through, but they've managed to find a single supplementary backpack, to which they stuffed in relatively clean blankets, because the human body's necessity of sleeping becomes a *lot* more dangerous when hypothermia looms over them.

Surviving becomes scary, and he feels young again. It reminds him of how excruciatingly vast the world is.

It's more terrifying to walk through dark parts of places again, because Ash can't choke out a zombie with his bare hands. The prospect of being bitten is too real again. They don't have the lead pipe, or the glock, or Red's sword anymore. They have a solitary scavenged crowbar between them. Maybe it loses time to avoid dark areas, but it probably saves his life.

They do find food -- it's canned, and Ash is sure that it's going to taste terrible, but at least it'll keep them from starving. Clean water is rarer though, and they need to ration it out. It's one of the all time lows in Ash's life.

They've started to share more body warmth in the night too. Ash tells himself that *it's nothing, nothing at all* when Red inches closer next to him, and pretends that they both don't notice the lack of distance between them. It's not an embrace, but just a loose hold only for heat. They don't speak about it in the mornings, because it's all for survival, he tells himself.

Mid-autumn is not a kind season.

Walking is exhausting. The sleep he gets is not peaceful, and it never really has been. He doesn't even think it should qualify as sleep -- it's passing out for four hours and then being unkindly brought back to the living world when Red wakes him up. Sometimes it's even less time, because sleeping means that they're losing even more time, more distance, and the forest floor is terribly uncomfortable. They have to keep moving in the morning.

*

Ash is fed up with this.

He turns to Red, next to him. He's always *there* nowadays. It's not like he wasn't before, but it's all different, when it's too dangerous to split off.

"They said you were an informant." Ash says, because it's buried itself deep into his head. It's one of those conversations that plays over in his head, like a tape recorded being pressed in again and again.

Ash has been *mostly* fine with the silence that's been pressed into their lives. Having too much noise sucks, but having too much silence sucks, too. Especially with a relationship as volatile as theirs. They haven't really talked much about that day, either. It's almost regarded as a dream, half-settled in reality and the other half twisted beyond comprehension. That doesn't take away the fact that it overwhelmingly *did* happen.

"Huh?"

"That one kid. He said you were an informant." Ash repeats.

"Yeah, I was." Red shrugs, putting up the facade of complete and absolute nonchalance. "I don't remember him." It doesn't work.

And he's obviously not telling Ash anything. It makes sense why -- Ash hasn't told him *anything* either. He sighs.

Ash tries to push, "Well--"

“A. Drop it.” Red says, blunt.

“What?” Ash starts, tension almost suffocating, like hands on his neck. Red doesn’t say anything to him, just stares. Like a warning. Ash thinks it over, about to push and push further into electrostatic explosions before settling on, “*Fine.*”

*

White, blank eyes stare back at them.

Ash makes sure to keep his breathing as steady, as muffled as possible. Rot permeates the air, stinging bitterness. He wills himself not to gag. Red’s hand is uncomfortably digging into his shoulder, like the touch itself will keep impending disaster at bay. It’s an unfortunate situation.

“*Don’t move,*” Ash mouths. All he gets in response is Red’s thumb digging in further, either to tell Ash that *he knows*, or just *shut up*.

The zombie keeps walking around, faded moonlight through the building window highlights stripes on the floor. They should’ve been more careful, more cautious, maybe if Ash wasn’t so focused on the exhaustion gnawing away at him they wouldn’t be here, maybe if Red listened more, maybe if he ran already.

A few days ago they could’ve navigated this situation easily. Maybe it’d just take one bullet, or one swing, and they would have to run anyway, but it’s not time to think about that. Instead, they’re staring and waiting for the stupid fucking zombie to move.

All of this is *so* stupid. So fucking preventable. The crowbar hangs in his hand.

The zombie makes its first move, as if it knows, and it *knows*, it knows that they’re right in front of it. Rotting skin, rotting teeth, rotting breath hits Ash in the face, as if falling apart, it opens its mouth, jaw hanging limply.

It comes closer. Ash hates this, the humidity, the stench, the *everything*, all too close. His hand moves swiftly, jamming the crowbar into the zombie’s mouth, knocking out a few black teeth, wrenching it open. He shoves it back the best he can, stumbling back into old walls, dust falling from the ceiling, a loud thump that surely will alert anything undead to their location. The crowbar is firmly lodged inside, gushing gray saliva around it.

Red doesn’t wait, his hand on his shoulder yanking Ash away.

*

“What the fuck is going on with you?” Ash asks, but it comes more like an order.

“Huh?” Red glares back. He’s messing with a cigarette, the second one today, Ash thinks. He’d have liked to ask for one, but Ash still has the rationale to figure out that it’d end up with shouting. Smoke blows into the wind.

It’s like a first bruise. There’s something that rattles Ash, knocks around all his organs.

“Are you going to answer?”

“I’m fine. I don’t need to be treated like, fucking, glass or whatever.” Red says back.

“I’m not treating you like *glass*. You’re like, a pipe bomb. Volatile.”

“What kind of shitty analogy is that?”

Whatever Ash was trying to do, it works, because there’s some sort of familiarity that’s brought back to Red. Self-imposed isolation turned into something like itching, easy, irritation. That’s something Ash can work with. The cigarette has nearly burnt down to the butt. Red makes no move to put it out.

“It’s a fucking *good* analogy.” Ash argues back. “You’re kind of made by some guy in their basement, you know? You’re going to explode sooner or later by accident. What’s it, premature detonation? Everyone dies.”

“You know, just shut up.” Red sighs, something like amusement in his tone too. *Huh*. “Let’s keep walking.”

*

The days seem so much longer. It’s driving Ash insane. Maybe he’s not a zombie physically, he’s still clean and free of bitemarks, but he sure fucking feels like one.

They’ve finally hit the coast. Blue water shimmers, sea foam piles up between jutting rocks. They’re finally walking along it, closer to their goal than ever. It’s only been a few days but, *fuck*. Only in the private, back of his mind, can he admit that the stress and fatigue have just blended into one long abnormal session of pain and aching and pain.

He’s so tired.

*

One week has passed.

In the near distance, a city begins to emerge from the shoreline. Ash has never felt such complete relief in his life. It’s unnaturally tall, towering, and immensely different from every other place they’ve been to before. Everything about it looks like a complete contrast -- to the lights shimmering, melting across the water, to buildings that look like they’ve had parts added on and on to the top, to the smoke billowing out from some of the structures. It looks -- weirdly put together.

“You think they’re gonna still be there?” Ash asks, because he’s still cynical about this whole thing. It’s not like he *wants* this whole thing to amount to nothing, but he aches for a little control back in his life.

“I don’t know.” Red answers, in the loosest term of the word.

They haven't really talked about what would happen when they finally get here. This all seems like the conjuration of his mind, as if Ash was actually concussed and he'll suddenly wake up and end up back on the floor of the room where this all began.

Dusk settles in the distance, and it'd be beautiful every other night, but all Ash wants is to *sleep*. He wants to rest for the first time in a week, without waking up exhausted, because fatigue has become a parasite that's burrowed itself into his very being.

Ash knows that he can't fight like this at all. When they meet those two again (*if*, they meet them again) then there's no way they'll be able to put up a proper fight, and he doesn't know about Ro, but Mapicc was *quick* to be able to knock them both out.

"We won't be able to fight them like this."

He thinks that it's just his decline that makes him say it out loud.

"I know," Red says, softer. Offering up a part of himself, too. "I hope they're still here."

"I never want to go through this again." Ash murmurs.

Red makes a soft noise in acknowledgment, their conversation is swallowed by the waves.

It's silent up until they get to the first few buildings on the outskirts, and they have to sneak through the shadows. Normally, this would be the parts of deserted cities that they strive to avoid, but these people are in a commune. It's busy. If there was a zombie outbreak here, they'd all be gone long ago.

The first problem they realize when they step through rebar is that they don't have any more credits on them.

Number one reason is because they got attacked and robbed. This puts sleeping on an actual bed out of the question, because everything here looks so -- lived in. Ash hasn't seen so much actual life in a while; it feels like one of the first points of civilization bouncing back. He doesn't know whether they'll succeed.

Moving under construction tape, they decide to scale up onto an apartment roof. It's not scaling up really, it's more so walking up the stairs and then having to bash the roof door lock open with the crowbar.

Ash has never felt so close to the stars as of now. It's almost as if he could reach up and pry one out of the sky. Maybe he'd slide his finger through the sky like water, rippling a hole through to allow streaks of lightning to come down. The stars in the universe blink down at him, hidden behind light pollution.

Red sits next to him, looking at the same sight. He's almost softer under moonlight.

And in the morning, they're going to have to get up. And carry on, maybe this would all reveal to be futile, and they're never going to get their things back. But this is okay, for now.

“Hey, hey- have you seen a kid with white hair and another kid with a red bandana pass by here?”

The skeleton-like woman turns away from Red. She looks reasonably unnevered. “Sorry, I haven’t.” And immediately scuttles away from them. Ash thinks this tactic is useless and stupid. Which it has proven to be. So, he says;

“This is so fucking stupid.”

“You’ve got to trust the process, dude. Eventually-”

“They’ll be alerted to *us* before we find out if they’re even here. We just need to- search. Try to. I- *fuck*, no one’s gonna spill about two kids- they’re probably hiding out anyways.”

Red’s staring at him; wide-eyed beneath his sunglasses.

“Think about it logically. We just- we need to *go* after them already, okay?” Ash says, posed as a question but it really isn’t because he’s started walking away. The buzz of irritation sets his nerves alight.

Red narrows his eyes for a moment, before walking at an even brisker pace to catch up with Ash. He concedes;

“Fine, sure.”

*

They’ve ended up in the backstreets, down winding alleyways. Out of pure desperation. Lost, but it’s not like they have anywhere to return to.

The sun is at its highest point in the sky. It hides behind dense clouds, and the autumn breeze only makes it colder. It’s a claustrophobic area of town, with areas that are so close together that Ash feels crammed into a spare gap.

But none of this matters, when they see Ro and Mapicc at the end of the street.

And that’s definitely still *their* things on their back, and that’s Red’s sword at Mapicc’s side, and that’s Ash’s hunting knife. It’s unequivocally theirs, and he can’t indulge in the relief for too long because--

“Holy shit-”

“*Fuck*,” One of them shouts, and they’re both paralyzed for a fraction of a second.

Then, chaos comes -- in the form of shouting at the end of the alleyway, the pounding blood rushing into Ash’s ears, and more yelling, and the shock that resonates through his legs with every step, and Ro and Mapicc are booking it now, and Red is a few paces in front of him, and there’s adrenaline settling into every single nerve ending. There’d be giddiness, but it’s pushed past, invaded with agitation.

They don't have their bicycle with them (Ash, privately, hopes it crashed and burned) so it's much fairer than before. Red and Ash immediately follow the turns they take, through winding cobbled streets and flashes of the main street.

Ash feels his brain going a bit haywire. His legs hurt. Not in a deep-seated, agonizing ache; but the pain of loving winning and taking and gaining.

It feels fucking *great* again. *Free*.

He skirts around a corner, and he's forced to confront the sight of Ro, Mapicc, and a dead end. Ash's heart pounds in his chest, and oh, there is nowhere else he'd rather be. Everyone -- everywhere -- has always pissed him off. It feels so good, so intoxicating, dizzying, to have some semblance of power back in his hands. How awful. How gratifying.

Both of their bags have been thrown over to Ro, as his hands are hooking into the dumpster, ready to scale upwards. The stench of rain and filth fills the alleyway.

Red has made Mapicc -- for lack of a better term -- eat shit. Ash blinks, and they're both on the floor. Ash blinks, and he sees Red's hand yanking *his* sword out of Mapicc's holster. Ash blinks, and Mapicc has his rifle swung around in front of him to block Red's swing in turn. It's a horribly desperate power struggle -- they both seem like good fighters. Maybe in a world more fair than this, nothing would have happened. This, though, now, is the only world.

Having his one friend be forced into danger, Ro freezes, stopping his prior task of escaping. He's trying to rummage through the bags, trying to find something, and Ash may not be as skilled at killing as Red, he's still going to fucking contribute and *win*.

The only option in his mind is to slam him into the wall.

The force of the hit jolts through both of them, and Ro is winded for a moment -- for a second, but it's *enough*. His grips loosens on the bags, spilling onto the floor.

Ash forces Ro out of range, not like he'd be able to do much, completely winded, forcing his body under his will, taking their items, their everything -- Redd's stupid map, the stupid note from Mid, Ash's credits -- and everything is finally back.

Ash feels in true control, for once, in these past few months.

He knows he has Red, but now he has *everything*. He has *all* his items, and all of Red's, and Ro is at his mercy -- only a boy, his brain reminds him -- and it's the most choice that he's had in a while. Behind his collected exterior, it makes him feel downright *ecstatic*.

Though, he knows to keep a cool exterior. He's always ferocious intellect and a flare of chaos and a trace of ignition that sometimes cooled the smoldering frigidness.

Red is staring at him, something like hopeful, secret awe, from his own scuffle with Mapicc.

He pulls out the glock, shooting it up to try and get everyone's attention. It's dangerous, risky, and a resident could start checking this out at any time, but he needs, no, he just *wants* to see

everything.

It's a careless power play, one that gets him internally giddy. It's cool nonchalance outwardly, trained.

Ash trains the glock on Mapicc, next. It's definitely a difficult shot, one that he won't even bother attempting -- especially because there's not much ammo left -- but it's the *idea* of pretending that he's going to shoot. But why should he even pretend -- why should he do anything?

He's got so many other options underneath his fingertips. Ash has never believed in God, or being good, or anything like that.

It's not like Ash cares about any of this. He does care about getting everything back, but it's just Red, and this is the moment he has been waiting for ever since they first met. As insidious as poison. It's been a painfully, slow, slow, corrosion, a contaminant, but all of his work has amounted to this -- to so much more than he thought.

He has everything. He has the opportunity to leave. It's what he needs to do, what he's been wanting to do ever since the beginning. There's no hesitation, no second-guessing. It's the natural conclusion. He thinks -- he *thinks* -- he says that he *knows* Red would do the same thing in this situation.

He knows, he knows that *they weren't friends. Not really. He'd do the same thing.*

Ash decides. It's a fraction of a second, it's an eternity.

"Sorry, Red."

And he turns.

Chapter End Notes

lol. lmao. (very unfortunate short chapter with two cliffhangers in a row. oh well

man i love lala legion. quick note -> red's informant stuff is based off the journalist bit he did with poafa during one of the void arc streams. and also raw self-indulgence

next chapters pushed back for two weeks cause there's some things i have to fix and exams are beating my ass rn. for the first time ever i have to actually put studying over mcyt yaoi. how sad

fourth

Chapter Summary

Red is probably -- maybe -- he doesn't know -- still there, with Mapicc and Ro. He's never hesitated in his decisions before. Death and hesitation are synonymous, dancing together until the end.

He's gone; that's all he wanted. He's profited. He's taken more than he ever gave. He's *won*, really.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's equivalent to dropping a nuclear bomb to mow a lawn. It does the job, of course, but the grass burns so bitterly that all it leaves is ionization and cancer and not even a layer of dust. Sure, it may all grow again -- eons passing -- but it will never be the same, always tainted by chemical fumes and poisons and the thought of other possibilities.

Ash runs with no destination in mind -- no goal in particular, save for what's probably avoiding being hunted down. He just runs and runs and runs, until he's sure that the already-healed stitches in his leg are going to burst again, leaving a trail for Red to chase him down and down again, until he's sure that he doesn't know where he is. That might be a problem, but for now -- it feels good. It feels like the Earth has stopped rotating on its axis. It feels like the sky is crashing down. It feels *terrible*.

It doesn't matter, not when he's won a game that only one of them was playing.

He's got something on his back again, bags that are his and formerly Red's, and the glock that's strapped onto his hip. Tragically, his lead pipe had been thrown out by Ro and Mapicc along the way. Ash ignores the strange loss. He's never cared for these sorts of belongings. Not those that were purely used to help him survive. But it was a little bit more than that, wasn't it?

And it's complicated -- and sick, and messy

Ash left and left and kept leaving people, because he cares so much that he *needs* to leave. But the guilt fades. It always has. Because those times have always been for the best. Always for him. He doesn't care about anyone else, he repeats.

Red is probably -- maybe -- he doesn't know -- still there, with Mapicc and Ro. He's never hesitated in his decisions before. Death and hesitation are synonymous, dancing together until the end. Ash still frowns. God, fuck him and his errant heart. Maybe he'll rip it out and live with all his perfectly rational bones again. No need for his circulatory system, or his

respiratory system. He's gone; that's all he wanted. He's profited. He's taken more than he ever gave. He's *won*, really.

He shouldn't question himself. He *doesn't* need Red. He doesn't need to go north all the time. He's got beautiful directions open, like east, and west, and even *south* now.

(Ash knows he should probably finish the job. It ought to be faster with only him than with Red. He can get the item, take the money and leave. No strings attached. Red *isn't* needed).

Time and time again, he's only got one constant in his life. A laughably short list.

It's only himself, now. Sure, he's gone under some changes but everyone that lived did, everyone that's living does, and everyone who will live will.

He sees himself in the passing puddles, fountains, shattered glass and in his eye. He still looks the same, the same guy who once had the world in his hands, the same guy who has been forced to obey the laws of the universe. Sometimes he looks until he cannot recognise himself, until he thinks that his bandages are going to fall apart and reveal his muscles and bones and organs to the world. He's still there, and that's all that matters.

He used to have more. He used to have his semi-auto rifle that would always hang over his shoulder. He used to have a lot more people, silhouettes edging into the corner of his mind.

Ash shouldn't -- he *can't* dwell on this. Ash isn't the introspective kind. He destroys and exploits and destroys until it's all lightning and petroleum. He doesn't like to dwell, like a sad old dog that's stuck on happier days.

It's important to move on, anyways. Afterall, the sun is setting in the distant horizon.

*

Ash throws out everything that he doesn't need. He does it cleanly, methodically, without sentiment. Because he doesn't need things like a second sleeping bag. He doesn't need the spare back-up sunglasses. He reassures himself that he doesn't need to hold onto these things. Though, he kicks them down, left behind, at the base of a tree. It'd just be a waste to let them wash down the river.

Impulsively -- he carves 'A' onto the tree. It's only human to want to leave a mark on the world. He doubts Red will find it, anyways.

He's half-tempted to keep the bag. Maybe he'll accidentally lose his own somehow. He's never been the best with repairs. He lets it go anyway. Lets it disappear into the blurry edges of a memory.

It's his fault. It is -- and it is.

*

Late autumn moves into early winter. It's not snowing season just yet, and Ash is happy to avoid it for as long as he can. He doesn't sleep as long, and he sleeps earlier. Because there's

no one to watch out for him.

It's not as dangerous as travelling without any of their- *his* supplies, though. It's much, much colder, and more lonely but time alone in this world was always common.

He's been traveling on the verge of a mangrove biome for a while. He knows that he's still going north -- after all, Mid did promise to pay, with a number whispered full of zeroes. It's one of the only points that he can recognize on the map easily; everything else is too vast, too big. He can't remember what the little notations mean, nor does he have faith in reading the scrawls of Red's handwriting. It feels too personal. It's one thing to steal his map and use it, but it's a different thing to read it, because he hasn't lived through any of *his* experiences.

How stupid. How sentimental. Still. Ash runs his hand over the paper slip Mid had given *Red*. Maybe Red wouldn't be here anymore, but he still could take the credits. He could still complete it, go up to True North by himself.

Seeing as most of their credits have been spent, too. He resorts slowly back to looting corpses, burying his nose in the crook of his elbow to try and stifle the stench. It doesn't resort in much. It's degrading, and disrespectful, but the dead haven't meant much to Ash in a long time. He's always been one to take and steal with no disregard, because the world owes him so, so much.

He passes through towns, and thinks about taking up exploiting again. It'd be something less boring. Maybe he could make a name for himself again. Spoke told him he was good at it. But he hasn't seen Spoke in years, too.

So he just -- walks. And it's strange.

It's something awfully familiar. It is also something distant, left behind in another life and the life before that and the one before. It's not as if he *needs* to walk; he doesn't need it like food, or like water, or like shelter.

It also feels almost -- almost -- disgusting. It's the way that a centipede curls around their young, writhing and alive. It's like taking up the shell of a still-warm corpse. It's almost comfortable, and moist, and warm, so he keeps burrowing inwards until his core swells, too, and he's taking up all of the space. There's hydrogen on his tongue, helium in his veins, iron in his heart, and he's closer to dying with every moment he lives. Each step ahead is into the unknown, and Ash looks forward, keeps moving, keeps breathing, keeps dying.

Maybe he loves things he can't have the most. Maybe he loves when what he wants is behind smoke and soot; buried and carved into sides of buildings, left behind.

He crosses off the new day. He breathes out, and a thin, singular wisp of mist comes out. It's awfully lonely.

*

Hunting is a careful art.

It's not like Ash doesn't relish in the telltale hit of a good shot. It's just that he's never been good at carving out meat. It's just -- messy. It involves blood and gore spilling over Ash's hands. The air is thick with copper, and it makes the back of Ash's throat burn. It's disgusting. It's-

"-something that everyone should know how to do." Red said. He looked very unimpressed at Ash's poor, sad attempt.

Ash glared back at him. Blood soaked into the creases of his hands. "There's meat."

"I don't get how you fuck up skinning it, dude."

"I didn't fuck it up." Ash argued. The fur of the hare laid in strange clumps. It's definitely skinned, but it-

-could be worse. Blood seeps around Ash's boots. He's slowly been getting the hang of it, because he's made sure to avoid big hotspots, which means that he's having to finally use his hunting knife for its intended purpose. He doesn't bother going after anything big; mostly because it's a pipe dream to think that he could even stab a knife through a deer's neck, but also hare's and small birds are easy to trap.

It still sucks. He tries to keep it-

"-more humane." Red put the corpse on their shoddy set-up.

"That's nice of you." Ash had murmured.

Red shrugs him off. He's standing beside Ash, closer than usual because he's really monitoring the way Ash is cutting the meat. Fucking hell.

"Are you going to shut up and leave me alone already?"

"No because- dude. A lot of the toxins and shit build up in its stomach," Red pointed to the hare. It was one of the smoother, more clean cuts that Ash had made. "I'm not gonna shave a year off my life just to appease you."

Ash raised an eyebrow. "Then why don't you show me how it's done?"

"I will." Red said, and stepped even closer to Ash.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Ash realized, a little too late, when Redd's hand was already splayed over Ash's, which grasped the knife over his hold. He keeps his renegade heart's beating steady. He opened his mouth, ready to curse Redd out. It's warm. It's so awfully-

cold. It seeps into his bones.

Winter is unkind. She especially must not like Ash, as even with double layers of gloves to keep the circulation in his hands going, they're still shaking. It doesn't help that there's not

much insulation. If it snows in the night, Ash guarantees that he'll see snowflakes pile up in the corner of the room.

It's so, so cold. It makes something ache within him. It's like shattered glass and packed ice and blues and the aurorae rumoured up north.

He keeps his focus. The last thing he wants is to slice off his finger along with-

"-the sinew." Red sliced it off smoothly. His hand sat adequately on top of Ash's, and with his other, he deposited it away from the carcass.

Ash makes a small noise in acknowledgement, and his hands with Red's move to-

slice away the stomach, a thin piece of meat, the most damaged part of the rabbit. He cringes at the fluids that leak out, attempting to wipe his hands down on his trousers. It does nothing except stain them with blood.

He's already-

"-removed the rib cage, yeah, that's good." Red said, the saddle and ribs separated in not the neatest cut, but it was still bearable.

Their hands moved in sync next, to the next cut of meat, the saddle of the rabbit.

"You know, I didn't think you would be able to do this." Ash said.

Red shrugs, and Ash can feel the movement more than he can see it. "What? You think I'm too rich to know how to hunt?"

"Something like that." Ash said. His hand-

raises up, striking across the vertical upper portion of the saddle. It's clean, smooth. Ash has always been the *best* at what he does. *It's not egotistical if it's true.*

"There." Red said. The actual edible meat sat on the stained counter. His hand slowly removed itself from Ash, with one last brush of fingertips against his knuckles. Ash-

shivers. He-

steps back, because holy fuck, this is dizzying, and there's something coursing through him, through and through, into-

-the wooden crate. Fuck. He's been getting lost in his thoughts a lot more lately. He looks at the head of the hare. It's empty, blank eyes stare back. A shell of what it used to be.

*

Ash hisses. The wound has smoothly healed over -- well, it's not exactly all that smooth, roughed and ragged at the middle from just how long the stitches have been left in, but it's

healed. There's no more blood that sticks to his pants leg, or the raw urge to itch at the thread.

It's an awkward angle. It's not like he has scissors, or anything small and easy to maneuver either. He takes out the knife, careful. He's sharpened it recently, because he's been busy carving just his initial into walls, like a sick game of chase where he's the only participant. Though, it being sharper also helps out with the whole task of removing the thread.

It'd be easier-- no, no. He *doesn't* dwell.

With a sigh, he takes quite great care -- more care than he's ever really had with anything he's done -- and slices through the stitches. It only leaves a small trickle of blood where he accidentally pressed down too much due to the bad angle.

He lets the singular droplet run.

*

Ash watches the person in front of him take out her gun, an antique rifle, and carefully pose it at him. They're much shorter than him, with bright pink glasses. He also could recognise her from miles away, despite the mesa sun searing down.

"I'm still not gonna fight you," Ash says, keeping his voice level. Look; maybe the last time he and Squiddo were together, it might have involved explosions and threats but before that, they still were *old friend*. What a completely loaded and completely nondescript term.

"Really? How can I trust you?" Squiddo asks in response, the sole thing that betrays their composure is the surprise that flickers over her eyes.

Trust. It's almost hilarious.

"You can't. You just need to take my word." Ash points out. His walls have been re-built even higher, blocking out the sun. "Nice gun model. It's an improvement." Ash tries small talk. He's still not any good at it, still doesn't get it.

They lower their gun. "I didn't expect that. Well!" It's almost like a switch had been flicked in them, beaming at him, "Long time no see, Ash."

"Nice to see you again." He smiles back, a little crooked. Awkward. It's not something that he was already known to do, but it feels even more out of place on his face nowadays. He knows how to do smug, asshole-ish, grins that show his canines. Not niceties.

"What are you doing out here?" Squiddo asks, fixing the glasses on her face.

Ash shrugs. "I'm walking."

"Well- yeah, I can see that," They blink. Ash doesn't offer anything else. "Okay- where are you going then?"

This is the one question that Ash dreaded answering. No matter what, he's just going to end up looking suspicious. Maybe fake confidence will work; maybe it'll solve all his issues, like it always does. "Away from here."

"That sounds *suspicious*."

"I know." Ash overlooks it. "Where are you going?"

"You always have *so* much going on." At the second question, she seems to light up, "I'm planning to go down south, to meet with my friend. He's planning something and wants me to help out. If you'd want, you could join me?"

"Ah, I can't, I'm—" Ash pauses. *True North* lies on his tongue, which is stupid, so stupid, but he's also Ash, so he's never made any poor decisions in his life. He settles on, "I'm busy with something."

There's something (just *something*, he repeats, he's not going to spend time on what, or why, or-) that makes him hold his tongue, something that makes him want to guard the squandered months (*only* months) of his life and deeds alongside Red a secret folded into halves and quarters and eighths and tucked away under his ribcage.

It's fragile; the gossamer membrane and paper shell, the only thing hiding blood. He pretends it's stronger. Denser than lead.

"Oh well. That's fine! Totally cool! There's just - a problem. You could say. I think I'm lost." Squiddo says, awkwardly.

Ash procures *the* map out of his bag. "This should help."

They proceed to beam even brighter at him. Ash has the feeling that he should squint if he doesn't want to go blind. Passively, he watches Squiddo unroll the map, and mutter out loud to himself, about the place they're at right now, roughly, and the coordinates, and the positives and negative axes. It takes a good *few* moments, filled with semblances of pleasantries and actual small talk about places and life and the closest thing to *friendship* Ash has experienced in a while.

"Thanks, Ash!" Squiddo smiles while handing the map over. "I've got it now, okay. Yeah, *yeah* I do. Okay. Safe travels! Hopefully we can meet again!"

"Safe travels to you, too."

They give one last wave to Ash, skipping away happily.

With that, the only thing surrounding him is the wind. He doesn't come across many people often, and he prefers to keep his distance. Ash still doesn't get the appeal of helping people -- it's always been chaos and destruction and pilfered code under his fingertips. It will never change. He walks the opposite direction.

It's snowing.

Ash shivers. He thinks that he should wait out the winter somewhere warm, somewhere where he doesn't chance catching fucking *hypothermia*, but he knows that he's particularly recognisable so he resorts to slowly making a little spot for himself in what he thinks is a janitor closet. It's kind of messy, but he's not a fool, as it's much, *much* easier to keep one small room warm.

Maybe this would be another day where he waits out chaotic weather but this is different -- the celebration of another year passing. It's a celebration kept up by the initial survivors, and Ash usually finds the idea of celebrating the earth making a revolution around the sun useless, but he remembers the shabbily-made fireworks that he set off years ago and -- and he doesn't care.

If it's special once, it'll be special forever.

He's not sure if he'll even hear the celebrations of another year behind them. He's far out, farther than ever, holed up in a semi-destroyed building, and he's quite sure that there's not going to be anyone setting off fireworks anywhere near here. It'd be nice to feel included, though.

Ash watches the sky from one of the open balconies. The perfect (shabby) carving of an A sits next to him. It doesn't talk, no matter how much he stares at it.

He hopes he won't get sick in the morning, but waiting out long nights might just be the most mind-numbingly boring thing he's had to experience. It's so much more dangerous out here, too, and he's always understood *why* travelers were discouraged from spending winters walking, and he's already experienced something like this years ago, but it's times like these where he gets the gravity of the situation. He'll be at an inn soon; he'll be fine. He's survived worse.

Instead, he watches his pocket watch tick down to midnight.

He waits. The clock ticks. He waits. It continues like that. He lingers, with the last few ticks of the clock, looking up for the colourful explosion, the new life, the bloom of fireworks. He wants to see the way they blossom and then fade into sparks. Maybe off in the horizon, maybe close to him. It's the last few seconds--

And--

Nothing happens.

Silence settles over the surroundings. Maybe he can hear the far away sounds of the last leaves rustling on trees. There's no eruption of vivid colours and euphoria; it's the darkness and the soft glow of the moon and the last stars that share the same sky.

Ash looks to his side. Empty air greets him back.

Days pass. It all blurs together eventually.

He thinks it's been something like two months. It's *not* all guilt. It's just that when it is the guilt -- it comes crashing back into him, and it might as well be the most notable experience he'll have for the next few weeks. And then the cycle will repeat.

He spends a lot of time just walking. At least, the times where he can. It's almost a rhythm. It's just slightly out of tune with his heartbeat; a mosaic of all his experiences. It's one of those things that has been wired into him.

It's still not enough to distract him. It's a vicious thing. It has claws and sharp teeth and love for a face. It drags itself into Ash's blood like nicotine, except there's no blissful high. Betrayal has never tasted like this. But it's not -- it's not betrayal, he tries to remind himself, because Red would've done the same in that situation. There's never been any friends in the apocalypse, just hesitant companions.

That's all they amounted to -- corruption. A rot. A cautionary tale with a trail of corpses sprawling out behind.

He's always been a master at compartmentalization. Best at everything he does. He doesn't know why it's Red that has etched himself so thoroughly into Ash's atoms. He's just Red.

There's never been anything special about anyone else out here. Ash knows that he too, himself, is a random collision of atoms, brought to life through spite and willpower. He might've gained everything monetary -- everything that should matter to him -- and yet it's not anything like what real winning feels like.

There's no one else around him. It's him, the sky, and the land underneath and Ash pretends it doesn't make his head spin.

It's the same problem as the night before, and the night before that; it's the weird tingling itch that won't go away, the feeling of being nauseatingly hot, the thoughts that move in strange directions, round and round, nothing resolving itself. He dozes on and off, but when he's half asleep his thoughts seem to grow and stretch.

He's not used to this. His thoughts wrap around him. He's started to cling to Ash's clothes like the smell and particles of smoke from cigarettes; buried deep until he can wash him off. Ash might have been a dying star for a long time, and the first thing a dying star does is swallow everything it has near, to destroy, to break apart into different arrangements of atoms; different and completely the same.

Ash *doesn't* care. He needs to look forward. That's what he's been missing -- a direction. He's been missing a lot in every definition of the word, from the curve of the m to the dot of the i.

Misses him in all the tenses -- past, present, and future. Sees him out of the corner of his eye and in the blurry space between waking and sleep, and throughout it all, he wonders. It is very strange to think of how someone who you don't know -- who you don't know except in the ways that you do -- can become so important to your life.

Ash grits his teeth.

Life goes on. It does not bat an eye to Ash's misfortunes (fortunes, *fortunes*, always) or to Ash's feelings.

Life goes on, and Red is everywhere.

(Ash looks for Red in everything. *Subconsciously*, he tries to add, edit to the text. He's still surprised when he finds him there.)

Red is there in the midnight sky and the haemoglobin in blood. Red is the discarded thread from his stitches that was put in all the way back in spring. Red is the smell of ozone and hauntings and eggshell white. It is a thousand years and only a second ago. He is -- inescapable. And to run into Red again -- that's a nightmare that Ash doesn't want to live through. The polices; the biting transactions that will surround it makes Ash's skin itch. Ash guesses that this is the burden that everyone else carries.

*

He decides to watch the world from a safe distance; and while he was away from all the people who would knock him sidewats, he'd figure out the secrets of the stars and the universe.

Time passes. Moons orbit planets. Planets lap around the brightest of stars that come from hydrogen gas and love in galaxies. And the galaxies swirled, unknowing to the void next to them. And the void consumes as the universe expands. And--

Then, one day, as if by a miracle, he's still here.

"Do you want it?" The man -- *Terrain*, Ash thinks his name was -- asks. A radio sits in his palm. "I have no need for it."

A frog is sitting on the man's head. It reminds him of Spoke and Poopies. But a lot more endearing, and humane, because it's a frog and not whatever Poopies is, nor is it biting at the bars of its cage. He's almost reminiscent of a snail, but the bright orange shoes are certainly attention-drawing.

"For free?" Ash asks.

"Sure," The frog on his head ribbits in agreement.

Ash looks at the radio. And then back to Terrain. And to the radio. It might... help. *God, what has his life come to?*

"I'll take it then." *4CVIT* is branded on the corner. "Where'd you get it from?"

"From 4C." Terrain says, casually. "I just don't need it anymore, I've been planning to go out to search, though, with Snooh Riddle," He points to the frog. "So I needed something better than that."

"Huh." Ash nods along, the radio feels like a nice, solid weight in his hands. It tethers him back down. It's a connection.

*

Ash has never cared for his birthday all too much. It's not something that he hands out to people, because he doesn't need anyone else, but also it's just one of those *things*. He doesn't expect celebrations, not like new years, or any other festivals, because no one else has ever really known. It's twenty-three years after the apocalypse; no one has the time.

He looks at the radio; stereo static stuttering like a hymn. He's too far out from any possible signals that there's nothing for it to catch onto. Ash sighs.

*

The last three months have been exceedingly lonely. Ash has stayed confined during winter. He's careful. His hair is longer. He'll cut it, later, when there's some resemblance of peace in his life.

Even though he should have gone to the nearest zone and stayed there, even if it meant doing menial labour for a month to be able to afford a room. He just didn't want to see how the world has stayed unchanging when everything about his reality has been flipped upside down inside and out.

He's still in control. So he stays out. Even if it means the chance of being bitten. He's not come close, yet. There's only three bullets left in the glock, and he regrets not being more careful. It's not the *worst* situation he could be in. Although, he doubts that he'll just stumble upon conveniently placed 9mm parabellums, so he's cautious with pulling the trigger. It's all mostly intimidation.

Maybe, when he has enough credits one day, he thinks about buying one of the weapons that are produced by Lala Legion. He's still working there in spirit -- an *idea* more than an actual job -- so it wouldn't be the worst to walk up to Planet, or Spoke, but the only downside is that everything is *expensive*.

He doesn't get the chance to think about Red, much. Mostly because he's compartmentalized it away. He still draws his initial into walls, billboards, alleyways. It's just curiosity; a game; fun; whatever excuse he wants to use.

Ash still hates passing through towns and outposts. It's a necessity, to be able to regear and restock but he just feels out of touch, really. He's fiddled with the radio so many times, taken it apart and put it back together because he still can. Because that's one of the last things he remembers how to do.

Days pass. Days blur. It's longer. It's a heartbeat.

His eyes scan across the bulletin board, to check out any local job recruiting for the day. There's old, tattered posters about the *Eclipse Federation*, which are faded beyond belief to where he can *just* about read them, and another that says the *P.O.G is recruiting!* which have

been half torn down. *Makes sense*, he thinks, bitterly. Another one mentions a *Poafa's Informant Agency*, the address about halfway across the world. An advertisement about a reward for a totem of undying from someone anonymous, it's all standard.

Something else catches his eye, though. Something with explosions, traps, something fun. It's a small letter-sized poster in the corner, and he only skims over it, the name Spepticle lingering in his mind; only because he vaguely recognizes the name, like an itch that you he hasn't been able to get rid of.

*

There was always something hateful about this time of night, in Ash's opinion. Darkness of deep midnight had come and gone, sweeping the stars away, and an incorporeal dawn had instead crept its way over the side of the building and through the window, leaving everything in its path gray. It lit up the world enough just to leech it of its colour.

He's become accustomed to solo traveling again. It's not the worst, just wandering through places, taking and taking supplies when he can find them, to only having to look out for himself. Winter frost ebbs in and out, fading into spring. Overall, it's easier.

Ash doesn't have a lot to mention these days. The world fades in, and it's just him, skimming over days and weeks. It's all the same.

Living in between blurs, alone. Loneliness is nothing new, after all; he spent a vast majority of his earlier years not quite unlike being trapped. It's not something he dwells on.

Ash gets back into the swing of things, easily enough. He's just going to have to focus on walking in the morning.

*

It should be the end of the world again.

He's afraid that if he blinks, that the sky will splinter down upon them. Maybe a new plague will unleash. Maybe the Earth will just combust. A part of him hopes the heat death of the universe comes soon, in the next few seconds.

But nothing happens. The world goes on; pigeons take flight from their nests.

Ash is paralyzed. There's nothing eloquent that can be said about this. He can't spin this into any other tale that he was preparing to do something, or -- or *anything*. He's standing frozen, at the entrance of the alleyway. He's never been this unsure of any decisions that he can make since he leashed control. Ash can only stare.

Red is staring at him, too.

The quiet that falls is different than every time it'd fallen before -- nothing familiar to punctuate it. Ash's own pulse beats hard in his head.

Red's expression falls somewhere between shock and disbelief, flickering between the two and *nowhere* else -- Ash swallows hard, eyes flitting over his face.

There's yellow star-dots bursting in his vision. Red's in much worse condition than the last time Ash saw him. He's not really sure how he survived either. But there's fresh blood on him, dripping from his forehead, and his sword is drenched with blood, too.

Red opens his mouth, he's saying something, but Ash can't hear, it's all white noise and, and -- there's a *bang*, and the world goes into chaos again.

There's something deeply, *deeply* wrong with the zombies that crash out of the building's fire exit. They're grotesque, morphed in the wrong way. They're larger than normal, which means they're probably stronger, too, and Ash's heart sinks. It's gore in its purest form. Blood leaks out of pores, there's some bones that are jutting out in the wrong directions, but they're unphased by the pain. Maybe Ash should invest in getting a face mask, because the putrid stench of rot is so bitterly strong.

And then there's Red -- beautiful, insipid, enigmatic creature. Red -- a fucking bastard, and an idiot, and a genius, and a catastrophe synthesized in the shape of a man.

Ash never thought he'd see him again, or end up living to see the new rumoured forms of mutated zombies. The buildings hide them from the sun, and Ash can't believe this is the situation he ends up in. The horseshoe on the side of a building mocks him.

Red's pushing past him, and yelling, "What are you waiting for?"

It's what he needs to pull him back into the present.

He turns on his heel, and starts a mad dash after Red. Maybe he's not the best fighter in most situations, but he's got *height* and he's plenty good at running. It's easy enough to catch up.

He could split up right now. But he keeps following Red around the city. Why? Probably because he's a fucking idiot, too. *Birds of a feather flock together.*

The zombies don't seem to be slowing down behind them, and it's only the feeling of certain death behind him that keeps Ash going. They run into the sun with no hesitancy, no survival instinct, but they don't shrivel up like most other ones -- no, they keep running, and Ash knows that they're burning, because the rot is stifling, and the crackling of flesh is loud behind him, but it's deafened by the feeling of his heart in his ears.

This seems like the moment where Ash dies. Everything he tries to think of is virtually impossible to execute. They can't fight a horde with only three bullets and a sword. Outrunning them seems impossible. Maybe Ash, once, would have tripped Red into the horde just because he could. Ash has already fucked him over enough already.

"What the fuck do we do?" Ash asks, because he's *lost*. This isn't something that should be happening to him.

“I don’t- I don’t know,” Red heaves, blood drying over his eyes, “They’d burn up eventually but- I don’t- I don’t think I have that in me.”

Adrenaline keeps Ash running, like a machine. Ideas run through his mind. Blood keeps pumping through copper wires.

“We should- get on the roof,” Ash blurts out, “And jump. To the next roof. They should be too heavy.”

Red swears under his breath, but it does seem like their best bet. Reluctantly, he makes a noise of agreement from Ash’s side. Any little energy they can save is conserved.

Stars explode slower than this. It’s a synchronized blur of the closest private property door smashing open, and the pounding of his feet against the old tiled floor. It’s horrifyingly close.

Up, and up, and up. That’s the only way they can go anymore. Up to the roof. Maybe up to heaven, if Ash wants to delude himself. That’s something for later as he’s still binded down to the very real world, and between the blood rushing in his ears and his heartbeat in his throat, there’s the zombies that are so, so close on their heels.

The stairs they’ve already passed begin to crumble and crack from the sheer weight and amount of the rabid zombies behind them. The plaster walls slowly break. They were never designed for this chase.

His heartbeat thuds louder and louder -- he’ll be left with nothing at the end -- but Ash can only push and store away the dread. His shoes slam from concrete stair to concrete stair.

It’s a small mercy that the door to the roof is already unlocked, hanging off its hinges.

Wind whips against him. His boots slam against the concrete, fire running through him, through every nerve ending, because there’s a chance that they don’t make it, but Ash can’t waste his time on doubting himself, no, he’s done enough of that already. He’s already on the little raised bit of concrete, so it’s too late to back out now, and, and, *and* --

Ash jumps.

The world slows. He lands, poorly, but he’s on the next roof over and it’s only the shock that reverberates through him, not his bones that would shatter across the concrete floor in between the buildings.

Ash scrambles to sit up, to see Red jump across just moments after him, but the zombies are closer, and one is close, so close, *too* close to grasping onto the end of his jacket. Without thinking, without hesitation, Ash aims his glock up, and this shot -- everything relies on this - - and he shoots.

It staggers backwards. It’s not lethal by any means, but it makes it stumble back, into the horde, and Red leaps over the threshold.

It’s a poetic irony, saving Red.

He lands a few paces away from Ash. It's somehow even rougher, skidding across cement.

The zombies are fast, faster than any other counterparts that Ash has seen, but they're *heavier*. One tries to cross the gap, and Ash tenses, gets ready to bolt again, but they crash into the pavement below them. He imagines the bones that splinter into pieces under flesh, the muscles ripping apart under the force, the rocks embedded into wasted nerve endings. That could have been him. That could have been Red.

They're both silent. Red wants. Ash craves. It becomes a silent standoff; a stalemate neither of them want to acknowledge.

And he is all the more vulnerable now. He's lying flat, on his back, and Red is right next to him. He knows, in that soul-wrenching moment, that he'll look over, and there's absolute certainty that he will find judgment. It's not undeserved.

He looks anyway.

And it's anger. It's disbelief. It's fury. It makes Ash's heart squeeze in between his ribs, his lungs suddenly too big and too small.

Red looks at him like he's lightning, scared to reach out and touch in fear of being burned; like he's destined to spend the rest of his life dead in an alleyway; like he's a mystical figure - - a god -- who has just appeared before his eyes.

"I should kill you." Red heaves. He's the first to break.

Ash wheezes out a laugh, this is so stupid, this is so, *so* fucking stupid. Maybe he's delirious. Maybe every moment of the apocalypse has caught up with him and he's finally breaking apart, shattering into little fragments. The world registers in pixels and glitches.

"Are you going to?"

Red doesn't answer. His hand tightens on the sword on his hip.

Despite it all, Ash thinks that this isn't the worst condition he's ever been in. He takes in deep, shuddering breaths. Everything hurts, and aches, and his legs are killing him because he just ran and ran and ran for so long, ran up the stairs, and leaped, and it all just *hurts*. He doesn't think it'd look too out of place with his heart carved out. Neither of them move.

They're partners in business. They're strangers. They're so much more. They're nothing. It messes with Ash's head.

"Why'd you come back?" Red asks, as this was deliberate. "Why the fuck did you do it?"

"I didn't plan to." Ash answers the first question, trying to keep cool, and the sinking feeling in his stomach goes lower and lower. His whole heart is just -- pieces. Stuck together with stardust and impermanence. Just a spill of fragments like shattered glass, sticking in his throat. They're having a civil conversation, as if all of this is normal. It pisses him off.

"You know, I think you're lyin'."

“The fuck do you mean I’m *lying*?” Ash hisses, already bitter.

“This is *further* north, asshole.” Which really, can just be explained with a pretty sum of money. Red slowly sits up. Ash can see him stifling back a wince. “You’ve been carving your name into walls.”

That, though, Ash doesn’t really have a good response to. Ash can only half-heartedly shrug. He means for it to come out scathing and bitter, but, “Maybe I missed you.”

Shadows move before they can be made out clearly. An angel, or death, it doesn’t matter anymore.

“A. Fuck- *why*?”

It’s hurt. There’s a lot of other tones weaved into those three words, two hearts, one moment. It was much more than just the single moment. Much more alike to million lifetimes. A fire rekindled deep inside of his gut, something that should’ve been there already. Eons pass.

Ash stays quiet. He thinks it over, and over, until the whole world lights on fire again, and the smoldering embers quiet down into smoking remains. He can’t explain everything, he knows parts of Ash too well, he knows nothing about Ash. It’s suicide. It’d be giving out all of his secrets about himself, he bites his lip until it bleeds.

This pisses Red off too. Ash doesn’t care.

(Everything aches. Ash cares. But he wants that scratched out of the record, deep enough to ruin the text underneath, and then for the record to be struck down by lightning, just in case).

He can see Red standing up from the corner of his eye. Ash remains lying down, breathless. Both of them could walk away but this -- the anger, sparking, more than pettiness -- it’s all so much more familiar. It’s nicotine and cravings. Ash can only revel in it for a moment.

A tip of a sword is pointed at his neck. Ash raises his glock at Red.

If Red stabs, Ash will shoot. (He ignores how just a moment ago, it was what saved -- no, not *saved*, it’s just what got Red out of dying. A tool).

It’s a much more violent stalemate. Ash cannot lose. Intrinsicly, Ash *cannot* lose. Even if Ash is vulnerable like this, chest open to the world. He can’t die. He won’t. He *can’t* die, because he is an innate part of everything.

Ash can’t hear anything except for the blood rushing in his ears like white noise, copper on his tongue. He doesn’t care about death. He didn’t know that it would feel like his whole body being rearranged on a molecular level initially, when he turned, didn’t realize he’d end up with rough concrete against his back, pebbles digging into him again.

This -- the lingering threat of death -- doesn’t feel cold. It’s excruciating and revolving and searing.

It's like he's manipulating and living lightning, fast and reckless and painful. There's no equivalent exchange for this, no transcending of the world or something higher again, the layers of the universe stay together in his hands. He doesn't know how long they just fucking *stare*, wordless, quiet for once. The threat of blood is almost an intoxicating high, dizzying, the unfeeling metal of his gun only keeping him grounded.

"You still owe me. You owe me *so* much." Red says, harsh and hot.

"I'd say *you* owe me. I shot that zombie just now. You wouldn't have made it otherwise." Ash spits out. Something mundane as pettiness is awfully exhilarating. He knows that the original favour isn't what Red is mad about.

"You always act like everyone owes you the world." Red huffs out a laugh, between laboured breathing. There's blood matted all over his face. He continues;

"Was it- would you say it's a bad thing that I trusted you?"

"Extremely."

Ash wouldn't exactly describe himself as untrustworthy. He's just -- aching. For something. He clenches his fists. The hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Electricity zips through him, electrons replacing blood.

"Do you regret it?" Ash asks.

About trust. About synthetic handshakes. About sewing Ash back together.

"Maybe. Maybe not." Red breathes out. "I don't think mercy is a complete mistake."

It feels, awfully, terribly, equal between them. Ash doesn't want to give up. Red doesn't want to give up either. It makes something burn, smothered, under Ash's skin. He thinks of gossamer webs rebuilding, lavender smoke, oozing albumin. He can't believe that he's missed this. Red strikes down like organ music. Harsh and loud; building up and up and up.

Red is loyalty incarnate. It's the collision of two galaxies, forced to live and breathe with each other. Ash hates this, like he hates the rain, he hates incompetence, as he hates cockroaches, and immovable forces.

They both hurt. Leaving and staying. He's placed into an in-between, not exactly alive, not exactly dead, in a forever purgatory. Leaving is the rational option, but his all too rational bones ache. Forever reaching happiness, forever being forced behind. Watching Red leave. Watching Ash disappear into the event horizon.

"I think I hate you." Red says.

"You think?" Ash repeats.

"Maybe. There's a burning feeling in my chest."

Betrayal is stranger, he realizes. There's feelings surging in his vein and words gargling up his throat, leaving in the form of screams in the air between them, at breakneck speed. He hates the arms that have brushed his skin, and the hands that stitched through flesh, and every moment he's secretly sought shelter in, if only for a fleeting moment.

Ash doesn't tell him that he can just *leave*, that the sword is right at his carotid vein, because Red must already know. Ash thinks over his options. He's died already; he's going to die; he will die.

"How's the past few months treating you?" Ash prods. He's putting too much faith in the steadiness of Red's hands.

"Shut the fuck up, A." Red hisses.

Ash hoards stolen moments like he hoards canned goods, or like he hoards power and electricity. It's cruelty and kindness. Marked by stars, forever and always.

"I'm only making small talk." Ash doesn't know how much longer his arm can stay up, pointing. Maybe he should pull the trigger already. Karmic justice must be fed up with him.

There's strange tenderness in Red's look, behind his sunglasses. Tenderness that acidifies into pain, or something darker, like the last rays of the sun.

"You know, I don't want to spend the whole night here."

"Who says you'll even live."

"You haven't stabbed me yet." Blood pulses through his carotid vein. He's playing a stupid, risky game, and all of the cards he had previously burned when he decided to run.

Ash imagines Red's sword plunging right through him. Copper staining across his blade. Smoke trailing off his glock when he shoots at the same time. Intertwined in death; a tragedy. Maybe it would have worked out if Ash wasn't Ash, or if Red wasn't Red. But then, that wouldn't be faithful. Ash is here because of his actions, learning that they have consequences after being so sure he's higher than everyone. Ash is here because *he's* Ashswag; a solipsist, corrupt, a scammer, whatever you want to call him.

It doesn't have to change, maybe they never will, but Ash hopes it does.

Slowly, Red retracts his sword. Ash lets his hand finally fall down, his glock solid and cold in his palm. Diamond to polymer; electricity and static.

"Let's go. Before night comes." Red says.

And it's not perfect. It's not by any means perfect, because the universe is scared, the universe turns away from *this*. A collision that will send them spiralling; all reduced to nothing; back to the boiling hot mess of electrons and quark. Stars shudder in the void.

But for now, this is still *something*. The sky and the world and *Red*. Ash keeps living.

Red holds out his hand. It's nothing grand. Nothing big happens. Just the quiet confession that they're still here; that they're something different now. Not whole, but hale, and somewhat equal. He offers it like a heavily threadbare olive branch -- most of the leaves missing and the wood scarred. Something that can spiral down into a mistake if they don't tread lightly enough.

Ash takes it.

Chapter End Notes

lovely [fanart](#) for the fight scene !!!!!!! <333

red in hell: WHERE IS A

fifth

Chapter Summary

Ash doesn't know what he's done to be allowed back into Red's life.

He's not, though. Not exactly, because it's a stark difference from before. Their prior companionship was built on white lies and half truths that they both paraded around as everything they needed to know. Ash has tried to leave Red for dead and it's hard to ignore when the dead come back alive and talk now.

It goes like this;

They're holed up in one of the rooms. It's a strange pass at trying to portray everything as normal. It reminds him of their first meeting. Ash doesn't know if he deserves any of this treatment. *Definitely not*, his brain supplies, as he had left him to the wolves. All he remembers is the pounding of his steps against the concrete, the freedom that comes with being alone, a cold that can't be removed no matter how hard he would try.

The first truth is that Red has mourned Ash once, twice, a thousand times already. Because people don't just show up again, in a world as vast as this.

It's -- it's horrible, because Red wears his battered heart on his crimson-red sleeve, and the light of it is blinding. It's something that Red isn't even aware of, thinking that if he hides it under layers and layers of blood and smoke no one will be able to see it.

But Ash's heart resides under deserts and the barren sun and pale sheets to protect it from the dust; Ash's heart is subterranean; it is secret; it is alien from society; it is hushed. None will ever hear it.

Ash doesn't know what he's done to be allowed back into Red's life.

He's not, though. Not exactly, because it's a stark difference from before. Their prior companionship was built on white lies and half truths that they both paraded around as everything they needed to know. Ash has tried to leave Red for dead and it's hard to ignore when the dead come back alive and talk now.

Here is the second truth, learnt both a heartbeat and an eternity later; coming back is worse.

"I still don't like having you here." Red repeats.

Ash pushes, like scraping off a healing scab, "Then kick me out."

“I’m still missing nearly *all* of my items. Fuck, you know, I think that was the only time you apologized to me.” Red says. The blood on his face has dried. Ash’s hand aches out to reach, and touch. Whether it be to brush or to tear apart.

“It was a bad decision. I- regret it. If you want to hear that.” Ash murmurs, from across the room. Respective sleeping bags an ocean away.

It’s everything from before in a different script. It’s a facsimile, twisted and spun around.

“Dude- I don’t think- *okay*. You fucked me over *bad*. Even worse than bad, you left running into the horizon and now- *now* you’ve come back and I want to believe you, A, but,” Red trails off. Words hang heavy and raw in the silence.

And it’s strange being back here again, with Red. He never thought that he would be across the room from him again and talking to him because Red, *reasonably*, would stab his sword into Ash, the first moment he gets. A debt collector. That’s how it would always go with Ash’s betrayals. He leaves and runs and they try to hunt him down until they realize that he is too deft at slipping through the cracks, undetectable, like a fault in the code.

But he’s a fool. Red more so. And he’s back, now, with Red.

“Why don’t you kill me?” Ash asks, a flicker of a smile over his face. It’d be so, *so* easy for the sword to sink between his ribs. Despite how Ash parades around, his flesh would give way; the blade would sink through his muscles in one smooth motion until Red wants it to stop. Because Red has all the reason to. Because he’s delaying the inevitable.

“Am *I* supposed to kill you?” Ash continues.

For a split second, between electrons spinning around nuclei, between light crossing the planes in space, he feels -- cold. Not winter-cold but the cruel cold reminder of mortality.

“You probably couldn’t,” Red says. With a little shrug, he adds, “Anyways -- it just seems wasteful.”

Ash raises an eyebrow and opens his mouth to say that he could, that one he was able to level cities all that time ago, that he was the one left behind smoldering embers. Power once burst from his fists, energy like electricity but -- but that was from a time passed. His powers stripped down like copper cables.

So he says nothing.

Red stares at him. Unrelenting. The facemask and sunglasses only make him seem lightyears away. They’re standing on opposite sides of the room, as if it was a duel. It might as well be. Red doesn’t pull apart at the seams. Ash wonders what colour he is inside.

”You’re still an asshole.” Red eventually states.

It’s an adequate judgement of his character.

Ash has always been inexplicable in godhood, an antithesis, an angel of inhumanity, an eater of worlds.

But Ash also isn't stupid enough to ask for them to start all over, again. Because his decisions have consequences, alarmingly. An olive branch is just a branch, it's not the roots that they've grown from.

Perhaps the worst part about all of this is that he does *want* to talk to Red. He wants to know what Red's universe looks like, how his world turns.

"Maybe I am. But, *fuck*. Look, Red, okay. I'm *sorry*. I didn't mean to pull you along and shit. And you can't just forget because that'd be just dumb, and I would've probably still stole everything at some other point if it wasn't for those two," sometimes Ash is honest to a fault, "and it was really fucked up. I fucked up, okay?"

Ash feels sorely out of his element here. Trying to pull an apology out of him is like eating glass. It sticks in his throat, lodged in his larynx, and death is a preferable alternative.

"And I know- I know that just apologizing isn't gonna be enough, okay? I didn't- it was a stupid decision. I know. I just- I'd like- I want to keep *working* alongside you. Just get to finish this job."

"A- *fuck*, it was a pretty *big* mistake."

"I know. *I know*. You don't- you don't need to forgive me right now." He tries to recall what a good apology looks like. It's very hard to. He's always been the subject of threats to his safety rather than reaching out for reconciliation.

"I still don't get why you did it." Red says, subdued.

There has been a void in him for many years, now, but the last time that it seethed and swelled and swallowed fire like this--

"I can't, I don't--"

"Well you can fucking try, A, okay? You don't need to play all of these games- you don't need to lead me around like I'm *beneath* you. I don't get why you can decide to show up, and help me out, when the last thing you did was run away." Red is white-hot anger; a straining light in his chest.

He tilts his head, just slightly, and Ash can see the cast of the tiny shadow of his eyelashes on his cheeks changing. "This is- we're just going in *circles*. I'm expecting you to run away in the morning again. And I'll keep chasing after you. So give me something. Anything."

Ash is, after all, trained to these sorts of games -- to tricks, to gaslighting, to manipulation. And for a master of diversion and smokescreens, what could be more terrifying than having to play for keeps?

He's the key component in a live vivisection; he can only just hope that he's pulling out the right organs to lay bare.

“I’ll fucking tell you, okay? You were eventually going to leave anyway- I just knew. And you would’ve done the same.” It’s a desperate plea. Ash’s heart does its best to convince himself. “The only way I could keep in control was to- to take the step first.”

Red’s frowning at him. It hurts in a slow way -- a low, ongoing, background ache like a bruise turning colors as the blood vessels mended. It doesn’t hurt enough which lets Ash ignore it, keep it all in.

“And it’s stupid. It was a bad decision.”

“That might as well be the understatement of the year already.”

“ *Red* -”

“You were with me for *months*. You didn’t even give me a chance to do *anythin’*. You just fucking- ran.” Red gestures between them, synthetic leather.

“Why did you even help me in the first place?” Ash asks, because that’s really what it all boils down to. “Why did you keep me around? Just for that favour?”

“Newsflash buddy, but I cared- I *care* about you. You sucked, you kept on starting arguments, you never fucking shut up, and you’re not the most morally upstanding person, and fuck, it was *fun*. You’re so stuck in your head that you didn’t even realize that I fucking enjoyed being business partners. And- I don’t think I’d call those months a mistake.”

They’re staring at each other right now. Closer than ever. Ash feels livid, feels like a dancing flame on a funeral light -- he feels like nothing in the world will ever be the same again. It definitely won’t be. They’ll cause the world to collapse and fold upon itself into nothing. They are two complete and utter parallels doomed in the same way. Everybody dies alone, it’ll just be more hurt in the long term, and-- and--

“And you’re here *again*. You’re still a huge asshole. You’re a massive bitch. And I want to hope that this doesn’t backfire on me, because I still want to try with you.” Red continues.

It’s a horrific confession. Ash wants to get swallowed up into a little black hole and get lost. Ash has two paths to the great beyond. They don’t even know each other. Ash has never known himself.

“Why?” Ash asks. Cool demeanour -- totally impenetrable -- hide everything until Ash himself doesn’t even know it’s there.

“A- *fuck*. Because you’re here now. You’re not runnin’ away right now, are you? I’ll be loyal to you until you force me to hate you. I can’t forget, but we can keep trying.”

Ash looks at him. He wants to wait for something to happen, maybe for the building to crumble underneath the weight of Ash’s mental thesis on the horrible, no good, very bad consequences of loyalty. He sighs. Maybe he should just decline and raise his gun and--

“You’re an *idiot*.” Ash says. There’s a million more curses that want to rise from his lips.

The bluntness startles Red. *Because it's true*, Ash thinks. He still offers his hand. "You can call me Ash."

Is it drastic, stupid, dumb, impulsive to give out his actual name? Yes, of course. He doesn't give himself time to regret, because he's done enough of that. It's only a syllable. It's Mephisto's Waltz. There's probably thousands of other Ash's that are living here at the same time as him, but it's been hidden within him, carefully concealed for months. It's a small peek into the constructed layers that he's built up to protect himself.

"Thanks, Ash." Red reaches out, to shake his hand. It's serious -- it's *serious*. "You can still call me Red. Pleasure to be back in business, then."

It makes something in his chest squeeze impossibly tight.

*

Red has chased him to what seemed like the end of the world.

It wasn't, because they haven't reached *True North*, but Ash was sure it'd at least be the end of his life. Somehow, he's able to breathe in fresh air. The universe hasn't turned its back on him yet.

Ash never really thought he'd be in a situation like this. It is more profitable to keep by Red's side, yes, but still being here is -- plain weird. He's not sure what he feels because reasonably, he should hate it, but someone actually wants to keep him by their side; despite everything Ash has done and will do in the future.

He's never liked being resented, either, so it's a preferable alternative. After all, keep your friends close but your enemies closer.

Ash thinks that Red fits neither of those categories. He doesn't know what Red thinks.

It's a cold sort of morning. Red is leaning against the railing, looking up and blowing wisps of white mist into the air. They've been sitting in silence, and it doesn't make Ash's skin prick, but it's just quiet enough to the point it's unobtrusive.

Their earlier act of push and pull is abandoned for the time being. He imagines he can see Red's lazy heartbeat as it pulses along in his neck, feels it beating alongside his own.

Ash's eyes, which have drifted down to Red's wrist, flick back up, and light runs laps around the universe. All Ash does is stare at Red's mask, like he's staring past it, like he's looking right into his crimson, pulsing heart.

Maybe they both just itch for a connection.

And the connection might be petty, and horrible, but they've danced too close to each other; like a tick burrowed under skin; a parasite and its host; a god and its mortal; a symbiotic organism. They are two sides of the same coin, sharpened to a point. It's a lot. Almost too much. Red has loyalty engraved on his ribs -- it's about worship, it's vulnerability in a little

package. Ash can only see it through, layer by layer. Through skin and flesh and sinew and bones and luck.

”What were you doing, still going north?” Red asks.

Ash doesn’t have a good answer. It’s not like he wants to dig into himself, because he does what he wants and loves to destroy. All of Red’s items lay still between them.

“Maybe I could beat you to true north. Claim all of the credits for myself.” Because that’s the only part of the map that he could stomach looking at.

Red raises an eyebrow at him, quiet lingering for a moment too long as if he’s just *now* been hit with the realization of how huge of an impact that he’s had on Ash’s life. “Too bad, it looks like we’ll have to reach it together.”

It’s the small hesitance of a door opening, a tiny slither of light, but Ash is slowly being let in again.

*

Despite Ash being a massive huge asshole who pushes and pushes, he’s never really *lied* to Red. He’s only ever lied by omission, which is a completely different ballpark in his mind. He hasn’t ever said that he can turn water into wine, or his flesh into bread.

It’s a hard balance to figure out. Ash is used to scheming, to plots made under the shadows, hiding away from the sun.

It’s kind of hard to now, though, because Red is here again, and with him comes the energy of solar flares, settling back into Ash’s life. It turns Ash’s world upside down and inside out when he was just getting used to the solitariness that comes with wandering. A countdown has begun to the end of the world.

And Ash can no longer tell himself that he’s only working with Red because it’s profitable. He can’t be here just to drain him of his items anymore, can he?

It’s a subtle thing.

“Ash?” Red asks, which disturbs the flow of his thoughts.

Ash knows that he gave up his name, free of charge, with nothing compelling him. Well, except for everything that he’s done. Maybe something was compelling him, then. It still feels weird to hear, off of Red’s tongue. It’ll take time to get used to it.

“What?”

“Have you been listening to literally *anythin’* I’ve been saying?”

Well. Ash thinks about lying for a second. It wouldn’t improve anything. “Nah.”

“Of course,” Red sighs, leaning back. “I was saying it’d take ‘til the end of this year to get to True North.”

It’s almost nauseatingly dizzy at how they’re able to fall back into this whole *thing*. Ash still doesn’t know what to call it. He puts a ramshackled name tag of *business partners for business’ sake* onto the whole ordeal, and decides to not think about it any longer. They’ll be separating at the end, anyways, it’s just a job.

“How fun.” Ash rolls his eye.

*

Red’s very closed off. It’s something Ash knew. The sunglasses and the mask are so *blatant*, it’s almost lazy. Though, Ash now notices how Red keeps his back hidden, to keep ‘equal’ with Ash, whatever that means. Maybe it’s always been the end since the beginning.

“I don’t really know you.” Red says, when asked. Before Ash can start up an argument, Red’s speaking, “I don’t know- how do I know you’re not just going to fuck me over again?”

Ash thinks of mesa’s and maps. “What do you want? A pinky promise?”

Red just chuckles, half-hearted.

“You don’t trust me.” Red says. If it was as simple as that.

Yes. No. Maybe. In some ways, yes, in other ways, more, yes, yes. Yes. Horrifically, undeniably, against his better judgement and with something like a god to a worshipper. It’s not a healthy way to feel about somebody, Ash knows, especially not Ash being who he is, but the stakes of his life have always been intoxicatingly high.

Trusting someone should not come close to signing his death certificate. And yet.

“What does it change?” Ash asks, leaning back. “You shouldn’t trust me either.”

Like some sort of sick, karmic fate, the uncaring, frigid black hand of the universe dotted with stars like freckles pushes them together. The further north they go, the more sparse zones and settlements become. It’s the first drop of water to the sprout of dependency.

“And yet, I’m still here.” Red sighs.

“You piss me off.”

“God, how would have I *ever* been able to tell?” Red lets out a dry laugh, “Maybe I do hate you.”

Of course, Ash almost wants to reply. It’s a clock ticking down to doomsday; maybe they’d kill each other; maybe they’d drift apart; maybe it’ll be today or tomorrow. Red has a fool’s hope for expecting to lay at Ash’s feet and trusting that he won’t be stepped on. All Ash ends up doing is raising an eyebrow.

And of course, there's still a catch.

“Maybe not in the way I should.” Red tacks on, lamely.

“And in what way do you hate me?” Ash asks, eye lazy for the truth.

Red laughs. “I hate that I would recognize you in the dark.”

And -- maybe, just maybe, in the most remote depth of his bruised rib cage -- Ash wants him to. Ash would very much like Red to know him, to recognize him even in the dark, to know. It's the kind of awful realization that makes Ash curl his gloved hands into fists.

He wonders how hard it would be to run again (well, he didn't just *run*, he *profited*, he amends). For some godforsaken reason, he doesn't leave.

“Even after all this time?”

“Unfortunately.” Red answers.

Living after betrayal is one thing, when you're able to make decisions on your own and purely for yourself. Living after betrayal, and proceeding to be let back in, is a completely new thing.

(It wasn't exactly being let back in, Ash says. It's unstable and volatile and ready to explode and they keep harnessing it because -- because it's the only thing they can hold on to).

He had adapted to being on his own again, despite *everything* and now he's coming back to the before that was there since the after. Movements that were once secondhand become distant, strange. It's no longer instinct, no longer muscle memory. Everything he says becomes unwieldy, strange in a different way than before.

Everything becomes deliberate, everything becomes on purpose, and it's all horrible again.

Forget life and death, forget the stupid job, forget True North. How is he supposed to deal with any of this? How much has he fucked up that the universe must hate him this much?

Ash moves to lightly kick Red in the shin, before he can let the silence stretch out any longer. It's faux normality. Maybe Ash hates Red too, in an awfully, dizzily, similar way.

*

In the horizon, the moonlight shines over the world. Ash doesn't know what hour it is, but he knows that it's late at night, and that he's supposed to be asleep because he has the second shift afterwards. He's trying to imitate all the features of a sleeping person; relaxed, still and even breathing, but nothing is actually working.

Red doesn't know this, though. It's now why Ash is fully awake, pretending to not hear the quiet whispers in the night.

He can't make out much, just quiet murmurs carried away by the wind, but he's still talking, still there, watching over him. It's nothing close to a guardian angel.

There's silence, and then there's not, and Ash can vaguely make out *I wouldn't have* 's and *you know nothing at all* and *asshole* and *you* and *I* and *you*. He gets the general gist of it, wills himself to fall asleep, to forget language itself.

It's a wonderfully sickening thing.

*

"Where did you get the radio from?" Red asks, a completely harmless question.

Winter feels almost taboo to even mention.

Which is stupid. Incredibly so. They won't get anywhere skirting around the bush, pretending to leave everything behind. A smokescreen is only smoke.

It's not explicitly banned, but neither of them have said anything about it. Red is reaching into the abyss that was *Ash's Winter*. You'd think hell would be full of demons and fire, but the true face of pandemonium buries snowflakes and regrets and loneliness in its heart.

But Red is the one asking. These past few weeks have been hesitant, and slow, and they're on a snail's pace to getting back to where they were before. They argue, because of course they do, it wouldn't be Ash and Red without mockery and mimicking and name-calling, and a heavy hand on his shoulder that could have been the tip of a sword. It's not friends, it's not enemies. It's just all business.

He's never liked the cold of winter either, he prefers when everything is at a *comfortable* and *normal* temperature.

"I got it. It was from this one guy -- Terrain? I don't remember." Ash tries for it to come off as a casual dismissal.

It's very sturdy in his hands. He flips it around. He had unscrewed it and put it back together more times than he could count, to the point that the actions had become automatic. It at least kept his hands occupied, with blood running through to his hands so he didn't develop frostbite.

He can't believe he missed Red's endless chattering and had to fill that void up with a radio, of all things, which isn't even the same as Red, because everytime Ash would flip through frequencies nothing would ever work, always too far out of range of any of the still-operating radio towers. Always hidden in the white blanket of snow, far away, far out from civilization.

"Huh," Red shares, pointing to the little logo that says *4CVIT* in the corner. "I know that guy."

Ash raises an eyebrow. *Does everyone just know him?* He pries with a little, "Yeah?"

“We were pretty fine friends, yeah. He gave me an experimental communicator.” Red gives a little shrug, and continues when Ash keeps staring at the lack of one, “Ah. I might have lost it.”

“Couldn’t you just... buy a new one?” Ash suggests, like it’s a groundbreaking discovery.

“Look, I’d much rather not starve over buying a new one.” Red says.

“Well, how the fuck do you even lose it in the first place? They’re kind of *hard* to lose.”

“It’s- it’s nothing, man.”

Ash wants to know even more, now. “C’mon. You can tell me.” He grins, canines peeking out.

It’s another minute of coercing Red, when he finally relents. “I was trying to, uh, cross a river, right. And I ended up tripping- stumbling, whatever, over some rock.” His head in his hands, because it is a very stupid reason after all. “It washed away my shoes too. But- but that was *years* ago, okay? I was a *teenager*. I didn’t know-”

Ash starts giggling, repeating the story through little snickers back to Red. Red just sighs, going back from nodding along in defeat and trying to defend himself and waiting for Ash to stop laughing.

“Fuck- you’re- that’s so stupid-”

“Dude- you’ve had to have something like that happen to you.” He bumps Ash’s shoulder, just casually. “You’ve done somethin’ stupider, c’mon.”

“It’s too bad I’m the perfect human being alive.” Ash’s grin grows even wider.

It’s only another five minutes when Red purposefully trips him over. Ash has to keep the urge of lunging straight at Red quelled within him. He’s trying to be *better*, okay? Red, rather gladly, keeps on bringing it up for the rest of the day.

*

His resolve of being better breaks rather quickly. In two weeks on the dot, apparently.

It’s always one step forward, and two steps back, except the two steps that Ash takes backwards always leads to the pit of hatred and the craving destructively. There’s a saying about pots and kettles. There should be another for digging for secrets when your own yard is a graveyard of them.

“You’re gonna listen to me, alright?” Ash speaks, low and candid.

”And if I don’t?” Red plays back.

“Red,” He hisses, low. It’s not like they *don’t* argue but it’s always just them being Ash and Red. It’s what they’re *meant* to do. It doesn’t usually result in something like this, because the

next day they know they have to go on the road with each other.

(Even if it's hesitant. Even if Red still makes sure to keep his items too close to his chest. Materialism straight to his manufactured heart. Reasonably, the past few weeks are more tense than they would've normally been. Well, it's not like Ash has a normal, really).

He doesn't even remember what they're arguing about anymore. That used to happen a lot. All he knows is that he's right, and Red is wrong, and he just needs to prove it to him. Ash's fingers curl into fists. He knows that this fight is pointless -- it's just something to do. They were bound to break eventually. He doesn't mean to be puppeteered by his emotions, he's always been the puppetmaster.

"Ash." Red says back, casually, as if it isn't irritating him just as much.

He takes Red's tie into his fist, curls it around and yanks. Red stumbles forward, stupidly fucking confused by the action. So fucking stupid -- so, so infuriating. Ash is leaning over, and they're eye to eye again. His nose is nearly touching Red's mask. If it was off then they'd be breathing each other's carbon dioxide in. Sometimes, Ash wishes to lock Red in a garage with a running car. It's too bad that it's the apocalypse.

"Red," He tries again. "We're not fucking doing- doing *this*. We're going to die attempting. You're going to get fucking bit and fucking die."

"Oh? I thought you didn't care if I died or not." Red begins, pressing onto the worst topic, of course, "You know, I was pretty sure I was going to die then but I'm still here--"

"Shut the fuck up, *shut up*, fuck off." Ash rants, his grip growing tighter. "You- fuck you, Red."

"Are you going to run *again* now? Leave me alone and--"

"You make it hard *not* to want to shoot you."

Red rolls his eyes. "And will you?"

Ash bites his lip, fist clenching and unclenching on his glock. Someone has to die. Don't fucking hesitate-- stop fucking hesitating--

"Don't pretend to be the better person, Ash, we both know what we are--"

He shoves Red away instead, harsh. Doesn't care that he stumbles back, it's what he deserves for being so -- so fucking annoying. He's going to tantalizingly think *this* -- *everything* -- over (not mope, because Ash *doesn't* mope) for ages. "Shut the fuck up. We're going a different way."

Ash doesn't wait for Red to say anything more, as he's leaving immediately, something vibrating and echoing inside of him. Reverberates through hollow bones. Wonders whether everything was misguided. Wonders if Red will follow.

Of course he does. Trust and loyalty are different, and Red's always had a hell of a lot of loyalty.

*

Early spring is, unsurprisingly, still very cold. Even when Ash has passed what he's dubbed as the *worst part*, when it should technically be classified as winter, where the temperatures drop to their lowest.

It's worse now, though, because they're cutting through a snowy taiga. They've found a small, abandoned structure in the middle of the woods. The temperature drops lower as nightfall approaches quickly. His breath comes out in misty clouds against the black sky, leaning out of the window.

Red is in the room with him. He's shivering. Winter spares no one.

"You're making everything worse," Red states, aggressively rubbing his hands together to combat the cold. "Close the window already."

Ash sighs, again. He follows through though, leaning away and shutting the window. The lock on it is broken, but with enough finagling it doesn't swing back open.

They've amassed a mess of blankets and everything else insulating they could find onto the singular, non broken bed in here. Maybe if he wasn't in a wasteland, it'd look comfortable, even downright cozy. Alas, there's mysterious stains on the corners, frayed fabric at the edge and they're all unbelievably thin and scratchy that there's no other choice but to believe it.

Well, either way, he'll gladly take shitty blankets over frostbite. Cold and freezing, Ash drops down into the pile. It's worse than he expected. The fabric scrapes over skin.

"I'll take first shift, then." Red says. As if it's completely different from what they always do.

Ash just makes a small noise in acknowledgement.

Ash tries very hard to sleep for the first few moments. It's not like he wants to peek into more of Red's thoughts (and that time was an accident, anyways) but it's horrifically uncomfortable underneath the pile. Everything provides so little warmth that Ash might have more luck balancing in the last stages of pneumonia where everything feels pleasantly warm. He tries to ignore the scratching fabric.

He turns over to see if that will help. Nothing does. The world never passes by the chance to grab him by the ankles, turn him upside-down, and shake him for change, as a reminder that he's only mortal.

Behind him is Red, sitting slightly closer than normal. It's hesitantly sharing the barest hint of warmth that doesn't even help Ash. His breathing is almost an anchor; a reminder that he's still there. Ash squeezes his eyes shut. This is just exhausting.

He doesn't know how long he tries for, before, "Red?"

“Yeah?” Ash hears him shuffling around.

“You chose the shittiest blankets.”

There’s silence for a moment, as Red presumably processes it. Ash thinks he can even hear the creak of gears running in his head. And even then, “What?”

“What do you mean, *What?* It’s cold as fuck.”

“You literally- okay, whatever- what do you want *me* to do about it?”

“I just want you to know that it’s going to be your fault if I freeze to death overnight.”

“Finally, peace and quiet.” Red mutters. Ash lamely half-shoves him from his position, which Red *laughs* at.

Ash closes his eyes again, maybe that’s enough of his energy spent. Maybe he’ll finally be *truly* exhausted from having to deal with Red and now he can fall asleep. Yeah. Maybe. He shudders out a breath, deep and slow.

It’s not enough.

"You can come closer." Ash says; it's unlike him. You'd almost think it's tender.

“Move over, then.” Red mutters. It’s not the response that Ash was expecting but he reminds himself that this is all just for warmth.

He shuffles over, leaving just enough space for Red to slip under thin blankets. Ash thinks that if he managed to get ahold of a thread and pull, everything would fall apart. So he keeps quiet, staring at Red next to him.

They’ve done this before. *It’s only to share body heat*, Ash reminds himself. That there’s no other way that he’d be able to sleep through the night and wake up with all ten of his fingers attached without holding onto Red. The frame creaks underneath them, and then wind whispers to the floorboards, and Red is awake but every sound feels like it’s coming from a million years away. From start to finish, conception to catastrophe.

*

Ash is something unkillable. He’s still fallible, a problem with his *design*, not *him*, and it’s not like it’s their first time fighting; physical and bruised and bloody; of course, of course they have before, it’s them, and Ash is being forced to look up at Red, shoved against the floor of some fucking meadow, light summer showers drizzling down. His coat is caked in mud, but it's not like Red is doing much better.

Pain radiates from his head in staggering uneven cycles, Red's hands thoroughly fisted into his hair, strands of black and purple. How awful. His own hand grasps into Red's hair, exchanging mud and hatred and dirt and filth of emotion. He makes sure to dig his nails in, as deep as he can, ignore the shaking. His jaw fucking aches. Blood drips from his lip.

This has primely nothing to do with the previous argument, but it sure as hell didn't help. An elastic band that's ready to snap.

Things just naturally end in explosions. It's not like this is an end, it's just an inevitability in the cycle they like to play in. It's been coming since the start, desperation for something physical, to leave a mark.

It's fucking -- stupid. Ash hates this. Ash hates too many fucking things, and this has to be pretty high on the list. He can only bite his lip to stifle a hiss as Redd's knee digs into his abdomen. Their limbs are entangled like a lovers embrace. How fucking awful.

Maybe Ash deserves it. Definitely, really. However, he lives in prideful sanctitude.

"What do you want from me, Red?" Ash sneers, his words laced with malice. "Another apology? A promise to *never* make another mistake?"

"I want you to stop acting like everything is a fucking game," Red hisses, his fists clenched at his sides. "You just don't fucking care, do you?"

"Is that what you think?" Ash taunts.

Ash thinks about his glock again. It's been lost somewhere in the field, in the scuffle. A scuffle -- like this is some kind of playground fight, of course -- as if Red wouldn't already have his sword digging into Ash's chest if it wasn't left behind.

Death always follows, an eyelashes breadth behind. Not cold, not freezing and shivering, but dizzily hot and hazy.

"Why don't you just leave again?" Red spits out, again.

Of course Red says it again. It's not exactly raw but it's left festering; it's a bacteria that's constantly growing; it will infect and it will pulse in a mimic of a heartbeat and it will stay alive until one of them can kill it. Ash knows he has to say something but he can't bring himself to -- not yet, not yet, not when there's stars on his tongue and voltage in the circuitry of his veins -- and it's stupid and it's dumb to keep holding it in, biting it down.

Ash is not a coward, not a fragile scared thing, not at all, he just puts himself above others, protects himself first. He's never liked the word protect. He imagines vulnerability. And Ash has never been some vulnerable thing. The idea of him isn't going to shatter apart.

He just has to -- desperately -- keep the awful, awful human thing inside of him quelled.

Words simmer on his tongue. It's the one promise that Red just aches to hear, almost hurting more than the nails in his head, or the blood that leaks through the facemask, or the surefire bruise on his side.

"You're just looking to get rid of me." Ash hisses back, the words almost cloying.

Red's face immediately switches to something that Ash can't name, can't decipher from his autoimmune heaven, and through gritted teeth, "Fuck you."

Ash feels the movement more than he can see it, as there's now synthetic leather wrapped around his throat, squeezing just right on his pulse point, around his carotid artery, knowledge hidden away but never forgotten. A gateway to love.

He does the only rational thing he can think of, which is to slam Red's head down into the mud next to him, yanking him by his hair, forcing him down. There's a choked out noise of surprise, Red writhing but not letting up the pressure on his throat, tilting his head back, and Ash only laughs, rough and raspy. It's vain.

Ash is forced to look up at the sky, still drizzling down with rain. The bandage around his eye clings to his skin, soaked through. He doesn't know whether it's being forced to look into the sun or Red's hand around his neck is worse -- what's making his mind run so harsh and slow. God's watching. Ash doesn't care.

One day the cycle will spit them back out. His hand is buried, entangled, within Red's hair. It must be doing something, as trying to breathe and heave out breaths into mud isn't possible. Red's pushing his head further into the mud, fingers pressing in heavier.

Red twitches above him again, and Ash has to do everything in his power to keep him pressed down, into the mud. Inch by inch, blink by blink, they're both suffocating.

They're both struggling. It'll either be him or Red first, and it's rolled down into something that neither of them can grasp.

Ash coughs and heaves between aching breaths, his other hand digging into Red's wrist leaving behind marks, and good, *good*, he hopes they bleed and leave scars, but it's getting harder to keep clawing, keep breathing. It's maybe been thirteen seconds. How fucking unlucky.

Maybe this is how he dies. His personality has always been fake and *so* very convincing. Enough to land him into this.

He's seeing white, small blurry stars that blink in his vision, and he's crashing down. Satellite parts scattered, coming down like comets. He's getting more and more lightheaded, and faint, and fucking everything, and maybe he does fucking die, maybe he's being sent to hell for the rest of his life for fucking everything he's done, his hand shakes so brutally, barely clinging onto Red anymore, and this really is just it, isn't it, he lets out a choked gasp, because-- because he's not going out crying, he doesn't care, nor is he scared of death, or-- or-- or--

Red's looking over him again. Perfect. Horribly perfect, the last sight that he sees before eternal fucking rest. His hand is still on his throat. Ash wants to say that he laughs, but he can only cough, shakes, as the blood flows back to his brain. It's fucking useless.

Materialism and sentimentality. Just fucking decrepid, isn't it? It rots his organs.

“Don't make me beg.” Ash rasps. His voice fucking hurts to use. Wrought with strain.

Ash stares. Red stares back. He's still pissed, face and hair and his mask caked in blood and dirt, running down slowly with the rain. Ash knows he needs to say something, feels it

crackling in his throat, and keeps it at bay by heaving for oxygen. His head feels fuzzy still, not quite there.

"Why don't you kill me?" Ash asks, again, voice ripped apart by now.

"I don't want to." Red says.

It's four fucking words. Four fucking syllables. Ash decides he hates the number four. It lies between the boundaries between three and five, there's always been something so -- so unsatisfying about it.

Ash just keeps panting for air. He's hesitating and he knows it and he knows that he'll pay with his life.

"You're such a fuckin' nuisance." Red mutters, leaning up. It leaves Ash dreadfully cold.

Ash sighs, still rough, "Only for you."

Red's eyes narrow, at least Ash guesses they do, only a slither showing through, hidden underneath sunglasses and the dirt. "You're so fucked up."

"Right. Like you should be saying that." Ash can only guess that there'll be soon forming bruises around his neck.

"Do you find this excitin'? Toying with death like this? Like you can fuckin' just, manipulate death itself?"

"I don't." Ash glares back.

"Then shut the fuck up already."

Ash hisses, ready to spit something back already and Red's shakily lifting himself off of Ash, in utter ruin. A businessman's downfall. It's still -- mercy. He stands in front of the sun like a mocking halo, like he isn't the devil in disguise. Ash is horrible and unkind, not too dissimilar. Instead of saying anything, he can only bring himself to lean up, slowly, idly entertains the thought that he might pass out.

Red stands, waiting. It's always Red.

*

Ash is vile and insidious and has enveloped his way into Red's cells. A virus. He doesn't know when he's been allowed in, because, reasonably, viruses should know when they're inside something warm and fleshy and alive, but Ash focused on keeping his distance, and, well, look where that has ended him up in.

It kind of hurts to breathe. Strains his throat. He coughs lightly, having rerolled the soaked bandages around his eye already. They've drifted off in different directions for the time being, and Ash stares at his reflection in the water for a little bit too long, bruising vague and

blurry. Ash already found his gun again, buried between grass and mud, and it's strapped to his side again. Everything hurts.

Everything hurts in a no good way. Not in the way of being alive, exhilarating and breathtaking, but in the way of living. It's an ache, the reminder that his body has to function, that he's not just some code or concept.

He winces as cold water hits his wounds, but it feels so fucking good to wash away the dirt and the blood from his body. They both got their frustrations out at least. Something physical, something to finally show. Maybe some breaths are raspier than others, but fuck. It's getting better. He's alive.

How fucked up of the world, to come back to bite him for his decisions.

Red has found his way over to Ash, and he doesn't really know where this is going to go. He's switched out his mask, cleaned his face and hair the best he can. Maybe Red will just kick his legs out from under him and let him fall into the river. His sword gleams in the last light of day.

It's finding comfort in the only other person who will understand.

"So." Ash begins.

This might just kill them, inevitably. Right now, though, it's all they need. For a few more days, until the end of the year, until Ash can take the money and walk out into the horizon again. It doesn't matter.

Red stares at him. He's still silent, looking at Ash and past him. Like he sees the outcome of next year already.

"I can't fucking believe this." Ash mutters. "What now?"

"You're more valuable to me alive than dead." Red says, a belated answer to a question never asked, looking away. It's like looking at the world with a layer of plexiglass between. A weird, fucked up semblance of fondness betrays his words.

Ash raises an eyebrow. Maybe the lack of airflow is finally getting to him, and he's hallucinating, or he's died already, or something.

He can't have, though, because this feels primely more real. It feels more real than the past three months in cold solitude, more real than the voltage that runs through his internal circuitry. Ash breathes out. It's definitely real. How holistically fucked up.

Red sighs, as if Ash isn't getting the point. "I want you to stay."

It's going to be choked out of him. It's going to come sooner than he would like -- than he wants -- than he needs. A collision of every subatomic particle in the cosmos. It sprays apart. He is the universe. He is terrified.

"...I know."

*

They continue onwards, trudging through stretches of land filled by fields. The only passing sights are distant houses, which once would have been filled, but they are now remnants of empty shells. Structures, and nothing more. As they walk further in, away from the last ruins of towns with cracked pillars and hollowed out homes only in name, the more untended the fields become -- all abandoned, falling to neglect or the season. The only thing that kept them alive has been the rain, and even that has failed them.

A broken fence lays a few yards away, sharp wood standing out like jagged teeth, rotting from the natural elements. It's still marginally intact. As Ash closes in near, an exceptionally foul smell of decay lingers from it. Red places a hand on his sword and vigilantly steps around what's left of the exposed skeleton of the fence.

Carefully hopping over the wire, Ash approaches and finally sees the perpetrator of the odour. A corpse is buried in the towering wheatfield around it. Ash looks to his right, trying to gauge Red's reaction to the scene.

Which really, isn't much. He's staring blankly at the scene, wrinkling his nose at the odour. Early death has become a certainty, and corpses are a common occurrence. It's a monotonous job.

Although, the corpse is missing its head, which isn't a factor that usually falls under natural death. It seems to be as clean as a cut as you could get, though skin is still frayed at the edges and the tissue is slowly breaking down, soft and weak. The corpse still as wax, lays bloated, undiscovered for weeks, dead for who knows how long.

Anything remotely of value has been stolen from him, a crumbling and flaking leather jacket laid over his shoulders and an axe that stays still in his hand. His skin is marbled with green with decaying veins and blotched with discolouration and blacks.

Two months ago Ash would've been pathetically searching through his pockets.

The man is dead, directly dedicated to being a corpse. Dead and never to be seen with blood rushing in his veins, seeing as it's all splattered against the fence and onto the soil who drinks his nutrients up gladly. Swollen large fingers clenched around an axe, his only belonging tying him down to his life. How charming it is, to be mindless.

"Not one of the best places we've been." Ash comments.

"The map didn't have a landmark dedicated to a dead man, if you were worried about that." Red says back, clearly antsy, ready to go.

The desire for destruction sprouts and grows wildly, blooming almost without warning at this moment. A flashover of pettiness.

Ash ignores him, "You know, there would've been a landmark dedicated to *my* dead body."

Ash can see Red's eyebrows furrowing. It's the only indication of emotion that he has on his face. He won't call it anything like *heartbreak* nor anything adjacent but it's somewhat close. Like Red -- no, no, it's certain at this point that Red cares about Ash. He still has no clue why, or what he did to deserve it.

"Dude- don't say that." It's more subdued than anything he's ever heard from Red. Don't get him wrong, there's still the very obvious hint of frustration underlying it. This just makes Ash want to push further.

"Why not?" Ash prods, "I would've died. Maybe I'd have kept my head, though."

"Ash, just, drop it." Red starts to walk away, through mud.

"I'm not dead." Ash points out, as if Red can't see him walking and prying irritation from him as if it's as easy as breathing.

An even quieter, "I know."

"Then why-"

"Can't you drop it?" Red snaps.

Ash kept staring. "No. You're literally- overreacting. What's up with you?"

Secretly, it's all comfort behind bared teeth.

"I don't like thinking about you dying, is that enough for you?" Red snaps. "Let's just- leave already."

Ash tilts his head, blinking. He wasn't expecting any confession to this level, or really any confession at all. He still doesn't know what it is about him that makes Red care so much, like a dog, loyal to its last rib, waiting outside the door of its deceased owner.

"You've tried to stab me before." Ash says.

"One of the first things you ever did was try to stab *me*."

"Still." Ash lamely puts up an argument.

"Ash, shut up already." Red bristles. "You're not a corpse, you're not a landmark, you're fucking alive. Which is somethin', okay? Just- shut up."

Ash bites his tongue, keeping himself from saying something stupid. Red's already walked away, clearly seething.

He wants to delve deeper right now; right into everything. To tear all the parts upon parts that Red has settled himself in, to peer over the sunglasses and mask. Maybe he shouldn't do it right now, where the headless man keeps watch of them.

Ash follows, the ground under his boots squelches, covering them in grime and filth but that's fine. He can keep on moving onward, leaving the past behind him -- if only for a little longer.

sixth

Chapter Summary

Red sighs. "I wonder if it's worth it."

Ash opens his mouth. All his thoughts eradicate when Red keeps staring at him.

The world is ending and *you* are at the center of it. He wishes on a star -- he loves things that are unachievable; and the stars lay in the distant galaxy, dying and dying and dying.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"It's warm." Red observed, peering out of the window. The sun peeks above the mountain range.

Ash hums in agreement, taking out his notebook from his inner jacket pocket. He crosses out today's date. It's a commitment that only Ash would undertake. Some dates are crossed off with graphite marks, or charcoal, some with blood. Some pages are singed by accident.

He puts away the pencil carefully. "It's May. Of course it is."

"May?" Red blinks. Ash had more hope in him to remember the *names* of the months.

"Yes, May. As in *actual* spring."

"No, no, which day?" Red clarifies.

Ash just flips his notebook around, letting Red look at the date himself. The sun peaks outside of the clouds.

Red falls silent. It's not something Ash expected.

"What?"

No one's ever accused Ash of having a single empathetic bone in his body. It holds true to this day. It's not like he doesn't care -- well, usually he doesn't want to -- but it's just that out of all his cards, understanding people isn't one of Ash's strongest suits.

"It's my birthday." Red answers

His voice is soft, almost personal. Which it *is*. Ash doesn't know what to do with it.

It's not like he has a gift or anything for Red, either. Because birthdays were for the living, for a time before the end of the world. There's no time to celebrate, and there's no gifts to give.

The precarious thing about traditions was that the moment you neglected to feed them, they started to starve and die. They didn't cry out as they withered, either -- just writhed, and faded, and diminished into a silence that you couldn't revive.

Still.

It meant something.

"Happy birthday." Ash says, and it sounds unsure to his own ears.

"Thanks." Red's face seems to go softer at this. Even though Ash can't see most of his actual face, it's what he's dubbed as *the Red smile*.

"How old are you now?" Ash asks.

"Twenty-three I think?" Red answers. "Might be a little older or younger. I haven't really counted." Time in the apocalypse moves in a weirder sense than *real* time.

"Happy twenty-third, then." Ash lays back. It's not long before Red finds a place next to him, sitting up instead. Sunlight flits through curtains, dousing him in hazy warmth.

"What do people usually do on their birthdays?" Red tilts his head.

"They- I don't know, they used to celebrate them. They used to have cakes and shit, parties, and like, they'd sing songs or something. Maybe you get presents nowadays if you're lucky."

"Get presents, huh?" Ash can just *tell* that Red is grinning beneath his mask, "You got anything for me?"

"Being with me is a gift already. Besides, I didn't even know it was your birthday until like-right now."

"Aw. You could sing for me."

"I'm *not* doing that." Ash pushes him away.

*

"This fucking sucks. Spring sucks." Ash says, peering over Red's shoulder. Rain patters down on the windows, a light drizzle under moonlight.

"Winter sucked more." Red states, like a fact. Because it is. His writing on the map stills.

"Yeah." Ash says, a light agreement. "I--"

"You know, it wasn't fun trying to get out by myself." Red looks up at Ash.

Oh.

Red's back to unwrapping the careful (half-assed, acrid) layers that they had placed over that day. Ash is surprised that it took him so long to start pulling again, seeing as he's been extremely, extremely bitter about it; the memory gnawing like a cancer. Ash just breathes out, stays steady, hummingbird heartbeat in his chest. The past always follows, trailing behind the present.

It clings. It cannot be forgotten.

Ash stares at Red. He's already apologized. "You managed it though."

Red says nothing. Ash keeps staring. Light bounces off his sunglasses, his mask pulled up, resolutely hidden. Maybe he'll get a miracle, and have to avoid this conversation

Instead, Red stares back at him for three abominable seconds.

"It was *hell*." Red sighs.

Ash continues staring. He feels sorely out of his element again and again. He thinks, and he thinks, *why is it fucking Red, time and time again, of all fucking people?* "It was- yeah. My bad." Every recycled word feels foreign on his tongue.

Red's gaze is almost piercing, even dulled by the sunglasses. Ash wonders what more he sees.

Ash wonders what more he's allowed him to.

Without warning, without a hesitant glance, Red asks, "Do you think you would do it again?"

A confession, asked for by the man furthest from a saint. His life will depend on this. It's being stripped open just because Red asked. A request for exposure, to be prosecuted. All that he's done, all that he is, all that Ash is not. Maybe this is Red's idea of vengeance. Sinking in his teeth and claws and wrapping his hand around Ash's neck and telling him to come back at the end of the day. To not get lost in the meadow, to not run too far.

Ash loves winning for the sake of winning, he loves power because he deserves it, and having everything handed to him just because he wants. He's conceited to his pulsing selfish heart. This is not a situation where he can rely on these things.

It's where it all went wrong in the first place, isn't it.

"I wouldn't."

Red keeps staring at him, as if he'll find something more in Ash's eye. World, justice, everything is blind and bitter. He paid the price.

"Ash, do you really mean that?" Red asks, skeptical. It's annoying. Ash cannot fault him.

Ash knows perfectly why he did what he did. Stealing from Red was thrilling in the moment, and dumb in hindsight, and he was able to grapple down the traitor of his own mind. Isn't it so much better, being alone? Relying on yourself is easier. It doesn't deal with things like straining himself to burrow up his feelings, vandalizing his pride, or god forbid reaching out. If only Ash ever bothered reading the fine print.

He doesn't know how low Ash has gone before. Neither of them are good men. Voltage builds in his circulatory system. He's a fly caught in a spiderweb -- burning alive on a circuit board.

Red handles him like he's holding a star that is sharp with a searing white-hot core that's constantly trying to break out of its bounds; cosmic liquid ready to burst. Somehow, somehow, it doesn't. It stays, changing, hypocritical maybe, but it doesn't explode.

"It's not like I loved winter, either." Ash says. Tranquility of being alone gives way to burning cold solitude soon enough.

Red sighs. A pure truth can never be said, but he can always say something that sounds like it.

"It must've been a lot better having my things."

"It was." Maybe this isn't the best tactic. Ash doubles down, digs his shovel in. "I still wouldn't do it again. What else do you want?"

Red sighs, suddenly exhausted, looking worse than Ash has seen in weeks. Time and space drift further on without blinking an eye.

"I don't know."

A conversation destined to spin in circles -- maybe it'll turn out different if one of them finally snaps and tears out the other's jugular.

"How'd you keep going north without the map?" Ash asks, trying to start *some* sort of idle chat.

Blankly, Red stares at him. "You know, Ash, there's these little things called compasses--"

"Okay, okay, fuck off." Ash mutters, with a little wave. There's *the* question, on his tongue, not just any question, lingering between his skin in his ribcage in his heart and he blurts out, "How'd you survive?"

Red huffs out a laugh, still different and short and aching familiar.

"I don't like to admit this, but I've come close to death a fair few times." He stares again, at Ash. "It's another thing to do it through your own fault and instead be- be pushed by someone into it. Anyways, yeah, *barely*."

It doesn't make anything better. Definitely worse. Ash sighs. Being a good person, or trying to come close, is harder than he thought. Nothing is ever simple.

"You're still alive." Ash says.

"Aren't I the luckiest."

Winter slowly dissipates. It leaves them behind. Ash knows what he wants, he's always known.

He ignores that he can't shoot down what he needs; however, wanting and needing have always overlapped, or they'll inevitably converge, or *something*. Ash listens to the buzzing current that drives him onwards.

Eventually. Human contact in these situations is always transactional, wholly materialistic. It still doesn't stop his cardiovascular system from craving. His atoms feel like they're sparking and crashing into each other. It's not like he can do much now, because his throat feels like static, and he's just waiting for Red to respond. A distant memory will always trail along.

It's not like they can replace everything with blind innocence. They can only just go again and again and again and--

"You're a fucking enigma, Ash." Red says, in the end.

It almost makes him want to laugh. He breathes Red in; takes a drag; it's hard to quit.

Ash just glances back at Red. His body collides with space, dreams colliding with stars. It's a pipe dream, really, it always has been, to come back to *this*. With Red. To think that they can start from the stop because -- because -- everybody dies alone.

Instead, he just says, "I try."

Red just raises an eyebrow at him. Sometimes, Ash wonders how he's ended up here.

He's not good at this humanity shit. He never has been, because he's *Ash*. They're both not any good at this, and he's lumping in Red because it's not like he's making it any easier.

"This fucking sucks." Ash says, some sort of anger and frustration seeping through, resorting to what he knows.

Red sighs. "I wonder if it's worth it."

Ash opens his mouth. All his thoughts eradicate when Red keeps staring at him.

The world is ending and *you* are at the center of it. He wishes on a star -- he loves things that are unachievable; and the stars lay in the distant galaxy, dying and dying and dying.

"I won't do it again." Ash mutters.

Ash really, really hates his sunglasses sometimes, under the dull lighting. Red responds, dry. "So you've said."

Momentum is easy to maintain once gained. They can't keep going through the same motions every fucking day, they just need to push and shove each other into it, northbound, biting and raw but it'll still send them forward.

He does the one thing he can think of, impulsive and rash, too like lightning;

"I'll stay, Red." Ash promises.

A built in electromagnetic pulse whirrs in his chest, thrumming, a broken spectre made from backscatter sunlight, a knot pulls tight inside of him, a promise. To stay; to keep trying. It is irreversible. It can never be taken back.

Red sighs, something accepting, something almost ardent, "You better."

*

"You're practically asking for an *infection*."

"*You're* asking for a fight."

It's not complete *trust*, still. They're just -- together now. Again. Again after the already-back-again point. It's a mess of wires and plugs and sockets, not fitted quite correctly, but jammed in together.

Ash doesn't call it a start over, because it isn't, not exactly, they're simply back at the point where Red would wrap his arm around Ash and help him walk; it's tentative, forced to bear the brunt. They're just having to keep going on and on until they start again. Ash doesn't know whether he wants to kill him more or less sometimes.

Red is trying valiantly to get to clean Ash's wound. It's not the deepest gash, but it runs up along his forearm, and the acute taste of copper fills the air.

It was just unfortunate -- trying to climb up, and just snagging his arm on a brick in possibly the worst moment. He thought it was further away, okay? Ash brushed it off initially, because it didn't hurt in the usual way that a wound would, it was a background ache, something that Ash didn't pay attention to. It's only when blood started dripping down that Red had pointed it out, asking him whether *he's going to do anything about that*.

He thought that maybe he had just bruised himself. The cut, itself, says otherwise, as it keeps on bleeding. It leaks down his hand onto his gloves. He's been through worse, really. Having one eye has never been fun.

"I can fight you *later*, when you're not bleeding." Red says.

"You'd need the advantage." Ash grins.

"Are you sure?" Red challenges, getting swept away in petty insults. Then, goes back to focusing on the more important issue at hand because Ash's forearm is actively bleeding. "At least wipe it down."

Ash stares at him. He doesn't like when Red has a point.

"You can do it yourself, right?" Red teases.

Immediately, "Fuck off."

Red laughs at him. He hands Ash one of the last pieces of clean tissue, and watches as the blood soaks into it. It's nothing life-threatening.

Carefully, he wipes over his arm. Blood is matted over the surface of his skin. It's only another scar on top of his body. Ash doesn't care much about being gentle with the process. It's easier to do it quickly and just endure the additional stinging aggravation.

"Wait, let me." Red interrupts. He holds the health potion in his hands.

Ash could do it himself. But well, Red's offering. It's practically nothing -- just pouring the potion over it -- but it's still something more. And Red has always been better with things that concern fights, and injury, and blood.

"Fine." Ash keeps his arm steady.

Red holds it, tenderly. As if Ash is a marble statue, priceless, displayed in churches. Slowly, he pours the red liquid into the gash, and Ash bites his lip to not make a noise at the stinging sensation. There's *got* to be a lucrative market for health potions that don't make you want to die.

"Don't run off on your own again." Red says. Ash almost wants to laugh.

After a moment, until the flask is empty, Red takes out another tissue. He wipes off the excess frothy liquid in clean strokes, used to this procedure.

"You don't need stitches for this one." Red comments.

"How lucky of me."

*

"You were an informant, right?" Ash asks, leaning in closer. He's already *tried* once, but he's still curious.

Red pauses, frowning his eyebrows. "Personally, I just prefer the term *businessman*. A pretty good one, too. But- yeah, I was. You already asked."

"Well, yeah," Ash just waves his hand, "I just want to know whether you ever had anything on me."

"What, are you *worried*?"

"No, I just wanted to know." Ash shrugs. He decides to leave out the part about how huge his ego is.

Red huffs out a laugh, “Don’t think so. I can’t remember every piece of information that everyone has *ever* given me.” Red does a little hand gesture, “I’m not even that *involved* in being an informant anymore, I left my office to my friend -- co-owner, Poafa.”

“Really?” Ash blinks. It feels familiar. “How come you had those shitton of credits when we first met?” Ash also decides to keep quiet about when he looked through Red’s belongings on one of the first nights. It’s one of those things that he likes to leave out.

“Oh, he used to send me checks and stuff. Although cause I’m constantly moving around now -- and you know, the messenger services suck, but yeah.”

Red half-gestures to the open road in front of them. Deserted highways are always the easiest to pass through, and this one is the same as all of the ones previously, but maybe with slightly more wreckage than usual. Most of the cars are pulled apart though, metal unscrewed and copper wires that are now stripped. Ash has slowly noticed the uptick in industry as they travel further north.

“How come I’ve never heard of you?”

“Huh?”

“Like, you know,” Ash does a vague gesture. It doesn’t help Red know. “Business-wise. If you were such a big shot back then.”

“I used a different name.” Red replies.

“Oh, huh.” Ash says, not so subtly intrigued. “Is Red your like, real name then, or just another codename?”

Really, Ash isn’t sure whether this is his place to ask. He still does, anyway.

“Yeah, it’s real.” Red sighs.

It’s real. Ash wasn’t expecting that response, or really, any response at all. Maybe Red would just laugh and say *a businessman always keeps his secrets close* and they’d devolve back into petty arguing. Instead, it’s just this. It’s good though, it keeps them on equal footing, both real and real all the way through.

“Why’d you give it up?” Ash asks, because it was clearly something he was invested in. Maybe not passionate, but the credit payout was certainly attractive.

“There was- something else happening in my life.” Red stutters, lamely.

Ash waits for an elaboration, of *anything*, but it doesn’t come. Instead, Red leads them into the next conversation topic flawlessly, pointing out things in the distance. Ash doesn’t let the conversation slip his mind though. It’s just another piece of information; another card in their drawn out, too convoluted game.

“Hey- Red,” Ash calls him over, kneeling over a broken plant pot. It might be a stupid decision. Ash knows a lot about them, but not enough to stop repeating them.

“What?”

“Come here.” Ash says, a little bit more irritated.

“Whatever this is must be fucking golden.”

“Shut the fuck up, you- whatever.” Ash mutters, and simply waits for Red to make his way over.

In front of them, in between bits of soil and debris and exposed railings and the shatters of something that was once loved, lies a golden artifact. Emerald green eyes peer up at them both, slotted into gilded clay. Despite the dirt scattered over it, it bears no semblance of filth or dirtiness. It glitters, not subdued by its age. It's *more* than an old world artifact.

“What the *fuck*.” Red pauses. “They just hid it here?”

“I guess so. We must be the first ones to find it.” Ash keeps staring into its eyes. A silent stand-off. He almost imagines it comes alive, bursting in golds and greens.

“We should take it.” Ash says, thinks about waiting for Red's input, but decides, “Ah- fuck it, I'm taking it.”

Ash reaches down to sift through the coarse dirt, and takes the totem in his hands. He expects for a heavy feeling to sink in, for anything to happen but -- he doesn't feel any different. It's just a totem, and he's holding it, and he's the same as ever. It's underwhelming. Still valuable. More than valuable. Lifesaving by nature.

It feels like clay in his hand. Steady ceramic that hasn't dulled or weathered. He hasn't held one in a very, very long time. He remembers seeing a poster for a reward to get one, or something.

“Let me have it.” Red asks, in the form of a statement.

“What? No. I found it, asshole.” Ash's hand tightens on the pale colour of its body.

“Ash- no. I meant just to hold it for a second.”

“What? You never held one before?” Ash prods. Maybe for a reaction, maybe just to find something new out. It's all the same in the end.

“Nah, I've held plenty.” Red shrugs. The wear on his sword clearly had to have a source.

Ash thinks it over for a moment longer, but eventually stands up from his crouched position, placing the totem into Red's hands. Maybe it's about trust. Maybe it will always be.

There's not much to do except watch as Red messes with the totem, flipping it over, inspecting it as if it'll be a fake. Its skin stands out against the leather of his gloves, like a

star. The totem does not care about the treatment. After all, it is only a thing. Unaware and unfeeling with no conscience.

Ash almost expects Red to start trying to pry the emeralds out of its eye sockets, but he does hand the totem back over, fingers brushing over Ash's palm.

"I have no need for it, anyways." Red says.

"Are you calling me weak?" Ash asks.

"*Well,*" Red begins, and there's a little yelp from him when Ash goes to kick him again. Ash wonders if he's ever kicked hard enough to cause bruises.

A totem might protect from sword wounds and bullets, knitting people back together with the universe's needles, but it's still useless to zombies, or anything slow-acting. It's just a failsafe, really.

Ash slips it into his inner jacket pocket, next to his notebook.

*

"I've always hated the rain." Red says, and he's dripping wet. Water droplets slide down his forehead, and his sunglasses are fogging up.

"Mhm."

The rain pounds against the roof of the little shack. Concrete pillars hold it up, and it's a small blessing that there's no holes in the roof despite all this time. It's a small sanctuary to them both; dripping with rainwater onto the floor. Early summer showers continue beating against the outside walls.

"We can't keep movin' with the storm." Red continues.

"All you need to do is hold an umbrella-"

"Oh yeah, let me just get hit by lightnin' real quick, I'm sure that will help us."

"It'd help *me*." Ash grins, peeling off his drenched coat. He lets it hang against an out of use radiator, dripping down. He lays down on the rough couch next, kicking his legs up onto the barely standing table.

"You wanna explain why?"

"It'd finally shut you up." Ash says, with a lilt in his voice.

"Oh, of course, just strike me with lightning to shut me up." Red deadpans.

Ash huffs, "We're gonna be stuck here for all of eternity for you to shut up, long past the storm."

Red rolls his eyes at him, dressed down now. His hair clings to his forehead, drenched and wet. They both look like they've come out of the sewers. Sheltered in the same stupid hole-in-the-wall place.

"You look like a mess." Ash comments.

"*You're* saying that?"

Maybe Ash *does* look worse, mud gathered onto his legs. He tripped. It's embarrassing. He doesn't admit any of this. Red immediately had helped him up, which really, was the only saving thing about that situation. He's lucky that a stray rock didn't embed itself into his leg. He's had enough pain from one leg injury, he can do without any more.

Ash shrugs, deciding that flipping him off is an easier alternative.

Red flips him back off, and proceeds to leave to go further into the place. Ash is idly running his fingers through wet hair, undoing his braid. It's a mess, and he doesn't look forward to drying it anytime soon.

It's a few more minutes, and Red has walked back into the room, a towel in his hands. He has another one slung around his neck, catching stray droplets off of his hair, now sticking up in random, loose directions.

"Here, for you." Red stands in front of him, offering the towel.

"You're *so* kind." Ash says, taking it.

It's relatively clean, not stained with anything like blood or a mystery substance, a little rough. Ash reaches up, rubbing the towel over his drenched hair, attempting to coax the moisture out. His movements feel slow, delayed, like he's crawling through molasses. Walking and living in this world eventually takes its toll. He lets out a heavy sigh. He's so tired.

"I've just done somethin' nice and you're just gonna mock me?"

"It's not mocking." Ash says, even though a *little* part of it is. "Thanks, really."

There's not a visible reaction, but Ash can hear lingering surprise in Red's tone when he says, "You're welcome."

*

"I'm so fucking- sick and tired of this. You think everything is my fucking fault-"

"Oh, come on, Ash." Red begins, and the way his name is said is laced with something more bitter than gall, thicker than tar. "Because it always fucking is, isn't it?"

Ash grimaces. He's always hated Red's mask, able to just hide everything. Bitter resentment fills his mouth. It was only inevitable that they start arguing about something dumb, because

really, it wasn't even *that* pivotal in the first place. Ash's mouth opens, something between perfected neutrality and irritation about to slip out but Red gets there first.

"You could've gotten us fucking *killed!* Do you fucking realize that? Does every action just go in and out of your little stupid pretty head because you're *Ash* and the world must bend to your will?"

"I don't fucking act like that," Ash defends. *He kind of does.* "I didn't expect there to be anything there, dumbass. I don't *want* to die either, surprisingly."

The difference of apathy versus *wanting* to die is acridly distant. One can turn into another in just a flicker under dim light but -- but Ash just has never *cared*. Death hasn't fazed him for a long time.

Red sighs, the grip on his sword hilt tightening for a fraction of a second. Ash wonders how he's trying to rationalize this. For a man who tries to come off cold and stoic and collected, he's never seen anyone burn as bright as Red; rouge smoke that cloys like something sweet and stained with blood.

"Shut up." Red eventually settles on.

"Is that the best you can do?" Ash taunts, not ready to let it end that easily (because that just means they'll bring it up *later* in some messier argument).

Red levels him with another glare, blazing fire that has set cities and lives to ruin. "If you pull anything like this again, I swear to god, Ash--"

"It was a fucking *accident*. What else do you want from me? To kneel down and pray and beg for *your* forgiveness? We both made it out alive. Case closed." Ash feels the sharpness in him -- the metallic volatility of anger that crackles like electricity -- dangerous and unpredictable. Heavy ozone like the warning of thunder.

After a moment, Red sighs, "You're impossible."

Ash laughs, stark crackling stardust.

"Do you just get a thrill out of *this?*" Red presses, pissed off at Ash all over again.

"A thrill out of what?" Ash asks.

"Just- *this.*" Red hisses, gesturing as if that makes it any clearer. "Death- arguing- everything."

"I get a thrill out of living." Ash says.

It's better than being dead, at least. It's a complicated messy relationship, maybe not true apathy. It's something Ash doesn't have time to care about now, though. Living is his and solely his.

He wants to get back at Red somehow, too, still irritated under his skin, so he adds, like a warning, “You like playing with danger too much, Red.”

Because it’s inevitable from just being in proximity of Ash. It stalks like a snake in the garden. It’s a reckless dance with fate, a game of chance they can’t keep playing forever. It’s not something to be *excited* about.

It looks like Red is going to keep barking at Ash, maybe even take his sword out as the leather gloves crease again, but he lets his hand drop to a more comfortable position. “Shut up already.”

Everything slinks back into familiar pettiness. Ash can feel a headache forming already, but he can keep entertaining it, if only for a little longer.

*

They’re sitting in the window booth of a restaurant right now.

It’s almost like the world hasn’t gone to shit. Except it very much has, and there’s a smear of blood trailing to behind the counter. Ash chooses to not go behind it this time. This is almost a perfect facade of normalcy -- only if he ignores the eerie quiet of everything. It’s a small place off the highway, the once-neon 24/7 sign still standing tall, albeit completely out of power by now. Wonders how many people have sat here before him.

It’s kind of laughable, really.

”This seems like a place where, I don’t know, a cannibal would hide.” Ash comments, leaning back in the plastic chair. It’s not all too uncomfortable, considering everything.

“Are you accusing me of luring you here to kill you?” Red raises an eyebrow across him, jotting down numbers in Ash’s notebook.

“Not you.” Ash rolls his eyes. “Someone else, maybe.”

Red laughs at him. Fuck. How terribly normal. “You have your glock, you’ll be *fine*.” He stretches out the syllables.

“You think there’s zombies in the back?” Ash muses.

“Maybe.” Red glances up to look at the corner of the fast food chain. It’s dimly lit. “Do *you* wanna find out?”

“I’m good to stay here, thanks.” Ash says, tapping his fingers against the table.

Red hums in acknowledgment, going back to working out prices, credit spending, supplies, *whatever*. It’s a terribly boring thing to do, but they’ve needed to do it at some point, and Ash is more than happy to delegate it to Red. His cheek is pillowed in his hand, every so often just spinning the pen in his hand.

It’s kind of cool. Ash will collapse and explode before he admits it out loud.

After a few more moments of seeing the pen travel around his index finger, to being spun around by his thumb, and so on, Red looks up at Ash.

“You know, this might be the worst date I’ve been on.” Red says, stupid fucking grin clear as the sky in his voice.

Ash resolutely does *not* sputter, and even if he *did*, he regains his composure flawlessly. “*You’ve* been on a date before?”

“Well, shut up.” Red says after a moment, “I’m just saying you’re kind of bad at it.”

“Fuck off.” Ash says, lamely.

*

Ash has seen plenty of beautiful things before.

He’s seen lights travel down the river, he’s seen the chaos and lightning of war, he’s seen the moon and stars share the same sky, he’s seen water flooded with petals pink and purple and white. He’s seen bloodshed and he’s seen the sunrise. The list could go on forever, if Ash wanted to think about it. He’s looking over at Red, in front of him.

Ash has also seen plenty of flowers before. Buds opening up in small patches in forests, or wilted in the corner of a long forgotten home. But this -- a flower forest, is something different. It’s something that has outlasted the bombing efforts and the catastrophes of the wasteland.

Sprouts of colourful flowers poke out from everywhere; they’re alive, vibrant and in full spring bloom. Off in the distance, the sound of bees buzzing blur into a harmony.

“I haven’t seen one of these in ages,” Red comments.

Ash makes a non-committal noise, ready to keep walking through it because even though it’s rare, it’s nothing useful. Despite it, Red crouches down in front of a patch, which forces Ash to stop. He wants to leave Red behind and keep going forward, but Red starts speaking, which forces Ash to at least pretend to listen.

“I’ve heard that from above, the flowers make a sort of- image? Well, somethin’ like that.” Red talks. Ash has always known that he talks a lot, about things he just *knows* or he just *heard*.

“There’s no way for us to see it.” Ash points out.

Ash is overly pragmatic. He’s heard people describe it as a ‘flaw’ of his. (Realistically, he’s flawless).

“I mean, yeah. But isn’t it nicer to hear that you are part of some grand little thing instead of having to live without an idea what you’re useful for?”

Ash stares at him. Something itches at him. “Maybe for others.”

Red hums at that, and his attention is taken away by the group of flowers in front of him. It's a wonder he hasn't died yet. Ash vaguely remembers them being called tulips, or something like that. They're in a variety of colours, swaying in the breeze, peeking over the grass.

Delicately, Red plucks one of them from the ground. It's a deep velvet-red colour.

"You've got any more *wisdom* to share about flowers?" Ash raises an eyebrow.

"Nah." But he goes on anyway, "Well, I've also heard people talk about flower meanings. Y'know like- like roses symbolize love and stuff, but sometimes the colour affects them. And all other flowers, too. It's like- a whole flower language."

"That's stupid." Ash says.

Red lets out a short laugh. He's standing up now, twirling the red tulip around in his fingers.

"What does that one mean?"

"This one?" Red asks, as if he's holding any other flowers. "I don't know. I know that there's the whole language, but I've never *studied* it." He holds it out to Ash, "Well, this one can mean *fuck you*, if you want."

"Ha-ha."

He still takes the tulip from Red's hand, and spins it between his fingers. He can see the sunlight through the thin petals. It's almost *nice*. The realization makes something in Ash spin too, completely unlike the turns of gears and cogs, something that is so much more inherently human that it leaves his mind hazy and dazed for a moment. Red's looking at him with something akin to quiet amusement.

Ash defaults to, "Fuck off."

Red laughs at him. It's not the worst sound, suddenly.

Later, Ash slips the flower into the pages of his notebook. He's been told something about pressing flowers, or whatever, to preserve them. It'd be a shame to just let it rot within his pocket.

*

A solitary gas station stands at the end of the road. Nothing good ever happens in gas stations.

There's something worse about this one, though. Not in the usual sense of being filled with zombies, well, maybe a little, as there was one; Red's sword was able to make a ragged cut into their head, and stabbing it in and out and in and out was enough that they're pretty sure it's the zombie version of dead, and promptly kicked it out into the bushes. That part's fine, completely normal. Ash loves making Red do stuff for him, and it's always just another zombie, only sometimes harder to kill.

It's the fact that there's *lights* on. All of them, working completely fine, no weird flickering or sputtering as you'd get with the other gas stations lucky enough to receive a hint of electricity.

It might as well be a gleaming beacon to announce to everyone else that *hey, we're here, please rob us as soon as possible!* Especially in the night, when the sky falls the dim, fading blue-black colour, light pollution ushering the stars away.

Ash rolls his eyes when Red suggests to go in.

He follows Red in.

They've long since adopted the strategy of looting and running these kinds of places. It's unsurprising to find that everything that could be taken has already been taken, even the cash registers knocked astray over the floor. A vending machine blocks the bathroom, the miniscule pieces of glass scattered looking like small stars.

Ash sighs, "We should go already-"

"Shut up." Red mutters.

He's pretty sure that he hasn't done anything recently, especially not in the last few minutes to piss Red off. Maybe he did shake Red's hammock a little bit too hard in the morning yesterday, but that was *yesterday*, and it's not like he tripped out onto the rocks and got a concussion bad enough to see the light leading him to heaven. Hell, probably. Ash keeps glaring at Red, waiting for some sort of explanation.

"What?"

Red gestures at him again to keep it down, and then points towards a side door, whispering, "Zombies, I think. Be quiet now."

Oh. It's a little mortifying that he was ready to start arguing and could have gotten them both killed. If he strains his hearing enough, he can definitely hear the echoing groans of the horde, moving slowly in the dark stockroom.

Ash fades back to neutrality, giving Red a mute nod. It's annoying to be ordered around, even more when they have an actual point.

He walks, quiet after Red. It's a few, tense minutes, where Ash idly messes with his hunting knife, making sure to keep his steps feather-light against the cold tiles. It's fine if it's one or two zombies, the problem is always when there's a horde, because more and more will keep coming, drawn towards their prey. Ash hates the undead.

They continue like this for another moment, and then the moment after that, and then they're at the entrance, slowly pushing open the door, minimizing noise.

Foul odour chokes Ash out, as the previous zombie Red had tossed away lunges back up. Ash only has his hunting knife in hand, which is fucking stupid, and he only has the room to

swing it down into the zombie's jaw, which clutches desperately around the knife, rotting teeth biting into it.

Desperately, Ash twists it around, trying to do as much damage as possible without pulling it back out because that means he'll get caught in its jaws instead. He looks at Red; desperate for a good, non-laughable reason.

It's another split second as Red unsheathes his sword, properly severing the neck and the head from each other. The body falls down limp onto the ground, while the head keeps gargling around his knife, mucus and pus coming out of its mouth, and *fuck*, Ash isn't going to sleep well after this one.

Ash twists his knife around in one more attempt, which apparently does something, as the jaw of the zombie spasms one last time, losing its grip on the knife, and with one last shake, it falls to the floor, next to the body.

"What the *fuck*." Ash hisses, looking between the three components. His knife, the body, the head.

"I really thought I killed it- dude, *fuck*." Red says, immediately after.

"I guess you didn't." Ash says, a little bit of accusation sneaking into his tone. He hasn't been close to being bitten in ages.

"You saw me stab it." Red gestures. Its head *is* incredibly damaged from the earlier attempt on its life.

"Stab it harder, next time."

Red rolls his eyes, "Will do."

Ash takes his knife, dripping with phlegm and viscous zombie fluids, wiping it off on the side of the building. He's above using his coat, thanks. There's something that catches his eye, as between the blood and grays and greens, a fleck of bright orange squirms for a few seconds.

"What the fuck is that." Ash points, immediate.

"Huh?" Red looks back to him, and then the wall, and cringes. "Oh, what the *fuck*."

He leans closer, which Ash really wouldn't advise, but most of his face is covered up. If he somehow gets infected it'll be his own stupid fault. "That's- that's a fuckin' parasite, dude. *That's* why it came back to life."

Ash glances at it, grimacing. "Cause that's so much better than you failing to kill it."

"You slandered *my* name."

"That was *before* I knew about the fucked up orange thing living inside it." Ash says, putting his hunting knife back into its place. "Let's go already."

*

There's the end of a broomstick handle at his throat.

It's so fucking stupid. It's all his fault too, really.

He's the one who coaxed Red into roughhousing, training, *fighting*, the answer lies in the middle somewhere between these three. It wasn't exactly coaxing, either, it was more so goading with a little bit of evil and fun intent. Summer storms are in full swing even more often, increasing humidity, and trying to travel is dangerous, and they could be doing something *productive* like *training*, unless *you're just too scared to fight*.

It only really takes so long for Red to finally bite, hook, line and sinker, even though he puts up the whole act of *I don't want to fight, it's useless and annoying, I'm already good enough at fighting*.

Ash's own broomstick has rolled off to the side. It's barely out of reach. A slither of light comes through the curtains, taunting him.

"Come on, pretty boy." Red says, over Ash, reeling his attention back in. His sunglasses are knocked askew.

"Shut the fuck up." Ash says back.

Red laughs, but he doesn't move or *anything*.

The broomstick handle is just barely pressed against his throat, more so laying there than applying any force. It's all a power play, the finite control of someone under him. His legs bracket Ash's hips. It makes him feel all the warmer, being dressed down, with less layers to obstruct the heat.

"Why'd you even want me to fight you? This was useless." Red says, after a moment.

"I'm helping you keep your instincts trained." Ash hums.

Really, a broomstick can't do any damage, especially when Red has such delicate control over it. He's playing casual.

It was really a standard fight, for what it's worth. Just with less pointed and sharp edges, and just the blunt clash of broomstick handles. Ash has been forced to pick up a few skills just through living, but Red is just -- stronger. (Ash refuses to say better). He sees Red's suit sleeves ride up every so often, giving way to scarred and rough skin. It just comes with being alive.

Ash had him pinned down at one point, not too dissimilar to this, but Red had rolled them over. It continued like that until this. Ash breathes, slow and heavy.

"I wish our positions were switched, really." Ash says, a flicker of a grin on his face.

“Shut up.” Red rolls his eyes, applying a firmer amount of pressure to his throat, still light, but enough to be really felt, “You would’ve been dead by now.”

Ash giggles.

A mistake Red had made is not pinning down his hands. Ash pulls the glock out from his holster in one smooth motion, pressing the muzzle to the hollow of Red’s throat.

“And now?” Ash asks.

Red glares at him, surprised, and also a little unimpressed. He stutters, as if Ash will put his finger on the trigger and actually shoot. “Well.”

Ash laughs again, not mocking, but not *not* mocking. It’s a familiar position. Without the hands around his throat this time. Maybe a little bit more intimate, warm, closer. He thinks of roof tops. He makes a small fake shooting noise, an explosion, tapping Red’s neck again with the gun as a reminder, before letting his arm fall down.

“I won.”

“You cheated.” Red says.

Ash giggles again, which prompts Red to finally take back the broomstick handle from Ash’s throat, and roll over to lay on the floor next to him.

Laying out on the floor together isn’t the worst. Ash pants, quiet. Red is only a few inches away. Ash finds it also very impressive that Red doesn’t tear his face mask off after a fight because it feels beautiful to breathe in actual fresh air.

If he wanted to, he could just reach out to touch. He could reach out and feel the warmth, the blood rushing through his veins. There’s faint warmth on his sides from Red’s knees, fading quickly.

Ash decides to stare at him instead. It’s much less weird than touching him, Ash rationalizes. Red’s hair lays mussed up around him, a crimson imitation of the sun, a halo.

Red eventually turns to look at him, “What?”

Fuck. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks, so do you.”

Ash just kicks him in the shin, the best he can at this angle. Contentment is a strange feeling, he realizes, as Red laughs at his attempt.

*

Ash froze, staring. Red's mask was down, moved down to his jaw, and in the process of being removed. Looking was an accident.

And -- and Red's face is... ordinary. There's nothing exactly surprising or remarkable about the lower half of his face that warranted hiding it behind the mask. Ash was expecting something *more*. More exciting, maybe.

It's still something that's actually akin to a secret of the universe, though. It's nothing like figuring out equations for the first time, nor being the first one to discover quarks; it's like when you're young, and you find out fire hurts. It's something completely ordinary but the knowledge stays with you forever.

Ash knows fire hurts, and now he knows Red's smile.

It felt like it should've been harder to... to *find* this out. Ash thought he would have to dig deep into Red, to find it buried underneath more layers; rarer than diamonds or netherite. The sunglasses stay on, though. They're not obstructive, not at all, so Ash gets to see pretty much the full extent of Red's face. There must be something very, very wrong with him because the second thought he has is that Red's face is actually quite attractive.

There's a dark pinprick of a beauty mark next to his lip. It calls out to him like a smear, to press his thumb against it, and see it printed back onto him. And-- no, *no*, he can't do that. Not now or ever.

There's something so -- strangely alive about his face. Nearly too high cheekbones, sharp jaw and thin mouth and a nose that looks like it's been broken once or twice. It's a good face, for what it's worth.

Ash has never seen him without the face mask ever since they had met. Only without sunglasses during the night, which Ash thinks must just be a fashion statement at this point where the only man participating in the trend is Red. He's never pried too deep, though. It's only the light brush of rough fabric against a fresh scab than a nail digging in.

Ash might be egocentric, an asshole, or whatever you want to call him, but he's better than trying to invade Red's privacy. If Red tells him to look away when he's eating, then Ash is going to swivel around and stare at the wall. (And probably make fun of him anyways).

“Are you going to say anything or just stare?” Red asks, looking blankly at Ash. He's had the pleasure of seeing Red's face initially morph from shock, to perfect neutrality and now -- this. Blood trails down the side of his face from an unlucky encounter with a wall.

“Nah.” Ash shrugs, trying to play it off cool. Like he expected for Red to not think when he called out for Ash and suddenly the sole secret of the universe was thrust into his chest.

But it's unsettling to see him unguarded.

It's unsettling to be trusted with *so* fucking much. Too much, probably.

“That's underwhelming.” Red says. “Pass me more tissues.”

“*What?*” and, “Fine.”

Red wipes the flakes of blood off his face. Careful hands sweep over the pale plane of his face. "Does it not live up to your expectations?"

His mouth is still smiling though, albeit a little more nervously, one corner ticked up higher than the other. Ash has already gotten good at reading his tone through forced exposure but it's things like this -- actual *expressions* -- that he's always been excluded from.

"What do you want me to say? That you look even more punchable?"

"Y'know, I don't know, I thought there'd be a better reaction than you just staring--" Ash falters before a chorus of *stops* and *shut ups spills* out of his mouth, but Red ignores it. "Maybe you'd start crying at how *handsome* I am. Maybe you'd confess your undyin' love to me. Love at first sight."

Red's grinning at him. It makes his canines look impossibly sharp. Though -- there's something that's almost off-kilter about this. Ash doesn't know what. He chalks it up to just being unfamiliar with this side of Red.

"*Love?* Fuck off. Obnoxious bastard."

Red laughs. Hearing him laugh behind his mask and now, finally seeing it, is a *sight*. Ash *needs* to punch him. (In the undertones, there's something almost bittersweet to it).

"You're just fishing for compliments, you bitch."

"Maybe." Red smiles, lighter than before, and it's something solar. People who live in the shadows yearn for the sun the most, don't they?

Ash coughs. It's completely natural to admit when someone is easy on the eyes. It's just that Red's personality is what breaks it. Stupid and annoying and insidiously, lamely charming and completely idiotic and arrogant. Ash keeps staying.

"You look *alright*." Ash caves in.

Red looks back up, startled. His expression smoothly fades back to one of complete nonchalance, and it's moments like these where Ash wants to kill him the most, "*Me?* Gettin' called *alright* by *Ash*? Oh, lord, save me, we're going to get hit by something worse than just zombies--"

"Dude- shut up." He doesn't retract his statement.

Red sends him another universe-shattering time and space breaking smile. There is nothing special about him. Maybe that's what makes him so interesting. He's turned his attention to his bag but there's still a speck of blood left behind.

Ash, without thinking, leans closer. His hand reaches out to brush it away. He's met with soft skin and the sticky feeling of drying blood. He smells like clementines and cigarettes. Red's gaze snaps to look at him, and the sunglasses are impossibly dark.

He's wiped the blood off, but his hand lingers. Fingertips resting against his cheek, grazing pale skin, and fucking lightning runs through Ash's veins and how -- how do people live like this? It might be a trick of his mind, running haywire from the sudden rush of chemicals from human contact.

Red--

And Ash--

Ash drops his arm.

Red stares at him. Registers the *touch*. Blush blooms over his face like a wildfire, overtly obvious. It would be funny how flustered he got if Ash wasn't also mortified of -- the intimacy -- his actions.

There's now a colossal heat in his face, spreading outward from where it had burst brightest in his cheeks to sizzle underneath the rest of his skin. It's not noticeable on his face, but he can feel the heat cramming itself into every possible neuron. *Fuck*.

He closes his eyes. Well, eye. He hopes to die.

Unfortunately, he can't go around all of his life with his eyesight completely missing, so he's forced to confront the red that spreads over Red's cheeks.

"You still had blood on you." Ash says, as an explanation.

"Oh- *oh*, thanks." Red stutters out. The red on his cheeks can't seem to die out.

And Ash's head is so woozy and weird right now that he honestly doesn't know how to deal with any of this fucking shit.

So he doesn't. He looks away.

*

"What the fuck happened." Ash asks, well he doesn't really ask, more so demands, because Red's jacket is ripped in places, and there's blood dripping down his arm.

"Bounty was stronger than I thought," Red murmurs, "Messed up. Still got the payment."

"Yeah- okay, that's great." Ash says, tired already. "How did the reception even let you in like this? Fucking hell."

Red shrugs off his jacket, which is similarly covered in bloodstains. And rips. And tears. And the last stitches that Ash had sewn in are coming apart. Ash, not for the first time, wants to choke him out. Red flops down on the bed, they're staying in an inn, as there's rain pouring outside. It's only a small outpost, and they're only going to stay for so long.

"Well- you see- he didn't. I ran past."

Ash sighs, and has to take a moment to compose himself. It's, so, *so* hard to deal with Red sometimes. Even harder than it usually is.

“You look like hell.”

“You've called me nicer things before.”

Ash sighs, again, louder. “Pass me your jacket. I'll fix it up for your lazy ass.”

He almost offers to help him clean the wound, too. He stops himself.

“Really?” Red asks, blinking at him. He's already unrolling bandages, wrapping them around his arm.

“I'm offering this *once*.” Ash rolls his eye.

Red ends up giving him the jacket. The fabric is tough and worn through and somewhat soft. It mimics the usual old world suits, but it's been repurposed for travelling. Ash is taller but Red is just slightly broader than him. It'd fit. He scrunches that thought into a little ball and rips it apart and eats it and *then* starts to examine the piece of fabric more closely. *Oh yeah, this is totally fucked.*

Stitching is slow and methodical. Ash won't say that he's the *best* at it, but he's good enough for him to pretend to be. He's got experience. He sticks the needle through, and pulls it back out, and then in, and it passes through easily, with minimal resistance, like flesh. The wound closes up over time, over careful care.

Ash can see Red messing around in the background, the room evolving into quietness. What a fool. He's glad he survived. He's also pretty sure that there's a blood trail leading up to their room right now.

He's in the middle of a stitch, needle through fabric, when Red speaks up;

“Hey, Ash,”

“What?”

“Thanks.”

Chapter End Notes

re-reading this i have realized that the silly little reference to red's birthday is wrong as in it is in march and Not may. however changing it would accidentally fuck the already messy timeline even more . sorry buddy you get a new birthdate

seventh

Chapter Summary

Ash doesn't know what he's done to deserve this. He swears that he's agreed to come back to Red and his world has burst again into power struggles and vivid colours.

They keep going north.

He's seen a lot more machinery around. It's not anything like broken down factories either, which you can find a dime a dozen, or old, beyond-dead radio stations, but it's more like actual *vehicles* and *technology*. It's still very outdated and far from the old world engineering, because it's all resorted back to redstone, but the industry still survives. The north of the world is weird.

"Why do we need to go fucking, True North, when all of this is here?" Ash asks, rhetorical, dust piled onto him from a cobbled together motorbike racing past.

"Well, you know, it's True North." Red answers anyway. Half-answers really.

They've developed a kind of swing of things, where Ash offers up information about himself, like it's a form of currency -- well for an informant, it really is -- and then Red gets to share his own shards of information back. It's -- strangely comfortable.

"They look like fun." Ash says. He's never driven anything before, but he's poked around enough in technology, and he's always been a fast learner.

"I don't know man, I'd hate living here. I don't think motorbikes can outweigh the zombie mutations." Red yawns. Dull, brown-tinted night comes over the sky.

Light engulfs them as a car flickers on on its own, as if in agreement. They're both caught in the headlights. Ash blinks, blinded for a moment, while Red covers his eyes instinctively, even with the sunglasses. It's all fucking strange up here. He wants to know *everything*. To keep it all in his grasp.

"Fucking hell." Ash hisses, turning away, stepping out of the bright white LEDs.

It's only getting darker. They keep walking.

*

Ash has come to quite the obvious conclusion that there's a large disparity between the north and the rest of the world. He doesn't know what's caused it, but things have been developing

more up here than they ever have everywhere else. *Maybe because all of the businesses prefer to reside here*, his brain supplies. It's where-- well, that was long enough ago.

He's been up north more than enough times. Only that it was years ago, so whatever market boom that's been happening is even more exploitative than everything he was previously involved in scheming and manipulating.

To the east, stands a casino. It's awfully gaudy. If people cope with alcohol and cigarettes and everything else then they will cope with gambling, too.

It's not any other casino, either. It's fucking *Clown's Casino*. The jester mask is more obnoxious than the sun, lights swirling and flickering on in spirals. Ash should've recognised that they were passing by it from miles away, before they even saw it in the distance, but, well, it's been a while.

Everything around it is overshadowed by it. It's the largest, and only attraction around here. It's what Ash thinks megacities in the old world would feel like. Ash wonders if Squiddo passed by here, when they were busy with *apocalypse-tourism*. Either way, Ash doesn't want to step any closer near it. It already seems loud enough from where they're walking.

"You wanna go *there*?" Red asks, because Ash has been glaring at it for the past minute.

"No, it's just like- the only thing in the vicinity." Ash sighs, "It's a major fucking scam, anyway."

Red laughs. "Yeah- yeah. They'd always say *the house always wins*, or something like that. I don't get why people kept coming back to it. Nothing's ever good comes from Clown owning a business, anyway." As if he's speaking from experience, which Ash *can* believe.

"Their head engineer was fucking *Branzy*, too." Ash says. He'd be more annoyed if everything Branzy did do wasn't so fucking impressive.

"What, did you meet him personally?" Red raises an eyebrow.

Although, Ash feels like he's met Branzy before with the way Clown would talk about him. God, sometimes he's glad he's *technically* out of his former job now.

"No, but- y'know. Fucking- he's Clown's boytoy." Which startles a laugh out of Red. The fact that if he said anything ill of Branzy in front of Clown he wouldn't even be walking on the street still sits in his mind. "Have you met him?"

Red laughs lightly at him, "I've met a lot of people."

The most convoluted way to say *yes*. Ash rolls his eyes, keeps moving forward. Compared to the luxury that permeates the casino, he feels out of place. He hasn't been having a good few months, years, really.

There's some semblance of an explosion that's heard from inside the casino. They decide to move faster.

*

Another explosion blasts from behind them.

Ash doesn't know what he's done to deserve this. He swears that he's agreed to come back to Red and his world has burst again into power struggles and vivid colours.

He's not going to say that he's ever been the most morally right guy, that he hasn't ever screwed people over, because it just comes with being *Ash*, he loves violence and craves destruction in control; however, he hasn't tried to fuck anyone over *recently* (Maybe a few weeks, give or take). He's a businessman, maybe not in appearance anymore but in name, and he hasn't done anything *big* in a good year. Well, everything he does is a show stopper, but if anyone wanted his head he would've already been running.

Red is right next to him in a blink, running through the main street. For obvious reasons, Ash doesn't think that they would be able to go against multiple hitmen -- especially when one of them is *Clown* himself.

"Do we have any plans?" Red urges.

"No- none except running." Ash answers, a little cynical. There's not much they can do. "The roof won't work this time. How- *fuck*, why is there even a hit on *us*?"

Assassins never followed people for happy reasons. *Congratulations, you haven't fucked up in a week! Your prize is an assassination!* was never a thing that happened. Ash didn't understand why it was *them*.

A bullet whizzes past them, into the window. It shatters into a million little fragments as they try to get past. One of the shards whizzes across Red's cheek, leaving a small cut. Just a fingertip closer and it would've hit his sunglasses.

"I feel like I should be askin' *you* that."

"I'm a good citizen, *Red*." Ash says, like a liar.

"That's rich coming from you. Well, I don't know- *I* haven't been involved in any scandals lately."

Another explosion is set off. The acrid taste of gunpowder is thick in the air, as well as the smoke that billows out when the pole next to them splinters and breaks into two, landing with a heavy thud behind them. There's crackles of sparks, almost like fireworks that engulf the wood. Ash keeps running, feet pounding against the pavement because it's *all* he can do, for once.

"Red, they're *not* your local fucking debt collectors."

Ash had never thought that they'd endanger civilian life quite like this. Well, most civilians have walked off the main street anyways, but some stay around as if this was just a normal afternoon. Which it might as well be for them. And sure, he gets that this area is known for

its indifference towards what other people might think of as normal laws; he gets that it's the culture -- but still, he'd expect to see at least a few *more* heads turning.

There's loud shouting from behind and it looks like even hitmen can have disagreements on the job. It would be funny if it didn't seem serious because he can hear Clown's voice the most, but Ash doesn't have time to focus on that.

A fierce gust of wind howls right next to him. Right in front of his face; a mere pace away from where he would be.

A solitary arrow is embedded in the pavement, glistening in the blazing sunlight. Ash didn't know that the number one hitmen ever would have to be cautious with ammunition. He'd expect another bullet or something.

There's yelling, not a disagreement this time -- Ash can only vaguely make out *good try*, and *try to cart them next* over the ringing in his ears. He can only push his body to run faster.

They're definitely trying to goad them into an alleyway to corner them when he sees another explosion in the distance. Ash yanks Red away from the alley entrance, because that's *stupid*, and it's just offering up their lives on a silver platter.

This leads to an argument for a split second, and it mostly consists of shouting *what the fuck* and *shut up* and then they're forced to focus on the problem at hand.

Ash pants, "You'd really think they'd plan this out better."

They're good hitmen. Good for Ash that they're shit at communication, too.

He narrowly avoids a trash can. Depth perception has never been on his side. He keeps running; they're slowly leaving the city though, running out onto the highway. There's cars littering the place, modified to work with redstone and other machineries.

Something else fires off in the distance, and there's no loud sound for where it ricochets off the pavement, or if it hits anything else. There's no bright explosion in the distance.

Instead -- there's a choked, short sound from next to him.

It hit Red. It's only an arrow, but it's lodged firmly in his shoulder. Blood trickles down his sleeve.

There's more shouting, but Ash has blocked it out. They can't fucking slow down now, but it's only inevitable, because Red is gritting his teeth against the pain. It's pierced straight into his skin, tearing his jacket sleeve. He's still running -- because they have to keep going forward, but Ash--

Ash is *worried*.

Ash also *really* doesn't want to deal with this right now.

"Red--"

“Try to- try to slow them down, *fuck*, holy shit,” Red calls out between the pain.

He decides to turn around, drawing out his gun, because that'd have to slow them down, too. If he plays his cards right. Because that's their only chance, and if Ash misses then they might just be screwed, but he takes the chance even if the odds are against them. It's desperation, Ash concedes.

He squints, and -- and oh, *fuck*, that's *Leo*.

It's not like Ash has time to dwell on past histories together but it still makes him hesitate. It's not like Ash will feel particularly bad about it either, but he has no time. Unsteadily aimed, roughly, he pulls the trigger.

In his split second of hesitation, with strange, inhuman reflexes, the new one -- *Minute*, Ash knows, he remembers -- barrels straight into Leo.

He can only see them tumble down over a bin, and a crash when they fall to the ground. That's good enough for buying time.

Ash is strangely glad it didn't hit, maybe he just doesn't want to deal with second degree murder, maybe it would just muddy his history with Leo further into murky untreadable waters. It's not like there's anyone around to prosecute him nowadays.

That's two down. They're distracted, and it's not like Ash is delusional enough to think that the two of them will even be able to take on Clown but they still have more survivable odds, even with the stupid arrow trapped in Red's shoulder. That fucking arrow. Only that along the way, well, he might've lost track of Clown. *Shit*.

Ash feels like they're coming up to a dead end, even with the highway stretching out in front.

The *fucking* highway -- holy shit, the fucking *highway*. “Red,” He hisses out, urgent.

“Yeah?” Red heaves, sweat dripping down his face. One of his hands is trying to apply pressure to the wound but it's exceedingly hard to do when running. It leads it to looking more bloody than it actually is.

“Get in the fucking car,” Ash points to a silver car just a few paces in front. The driver's door is wide open.

“*What?*” Red stares at him. They're *so* close to it.

“Get *in*, we can drive out.” Ash spells it out, and doesn't wait for any sort of response from Red when he slides in.

Red doesn't seem to argue -- putting faith into Ash knowing what he's doing which is *something* that he'll decide to unpack later at night -- or maybe never -- and running around to the other side to rip the door open to the passenger seat. There's more commotion going outside, which can't mean anything good. And fuck, *fuck* -- the person who owns it didn't have time to *close* the door shut, but the key for the ignition is *nowhere* to be found.

“Ash?” Red asks, his hands are shaking.

“Hold- hold on, give me a fucking moment,” Ash’s hands are sweaty, as he quickly works his way around hotwiring a car. He can’t afford the time to be slow and careful and deliberate; he hasn’t done this in ages, hopes there’s enough fuel, but it’s their only chance out.

It’s still easy, smashing the necessary panel, ripping them out to the side. He can hear the chaos outside, there’s destruction but they *can* get out. He takes the wires, cuts the tips off with his knife, crossing them together, bringing in the motor wire to touch. The machine sings with him, engine flaring to life. He jams his knife into the keyhole, breaking the steering lock.

“*Ash*,” Red repeats, increasingly desperate. His knuckles are a stark white against the red of the blood.

“Ash-” A voice that Ash can only recognize as Clown’s himself rings out from next to the window and he’s got it, *he’s got it*. “-Fuck, *wait*,”

The engine rumbles to life. Kinetic and frazzled as much as his own mind.

Ash looks back, and then over at Red -- always Red -- before slamming onto the gas pedal.

The car rockets off, leaving the town behind.

*

“I don’t know how to drive.” Ash admits, seconds later.

“What the *fuck*,” Red’s bleeding out, but he still has energy to argue with Ash. Ash is pretty confident that he’ll survive.

“Don’t pull the arrow out. Try to clean around it.”

“I know- I’m not stupid,” Red mutters, pulling out water right as Ash takes a sharp turn.
”Y’know, I’m *more* concerned about dying in a car crash than bleedin’ out right now. Or the car combusting-”

“Believe it or not, I don’t want to hit a brick wall *either*.” And he really doesn’t want Red to bleed out. After all this time.

Red lets out a short laugh, obviously strained. Ash watches Red from the corner of his eye as he sheds his jacket, now down only to the white button-up, and the awkward angle makes it a struggle to pour the water over the wound. He might as well be as lodged in Red’s life as the arrow. Red half-convincingly turns his wince into a sigh.

“Just keep driving.”

*

Ash certainly knows that he's gone through the whole dictionary of expletives, front to back and again, and Red's yelling at him.

Turns out, his driving *is* terrible.

He was going *fast* -- only that it was *too* fast, and it ended up in them spinning out from the road. He feels the car fly for a second, and then his whole body jerks when they land on solid ground. Maybe he'll spin out of the earth, out into the void and into the great beyond. There's black and color edging in at the corner of his vision, and oh, god, he sees a spark of bright light. It's the light at the end of the tunnel, surely--

But no -- his world keeps spinning. He's alive. He's alive and the most nauseated he's ever been.

"I think- I might throw up."

Red, in much worse condition, arrow in shoulder, still asks mockingly, "Do you want me to hold your hair back?"

"*Dude*, shut up," But he's also never been this badly winded. He vows to never steal a car again. Even if the moment felt pretty cool, looking back. Nothing will ever live up to this experience. Ash thinks he never wants to experience this again either.

"You okay?" Red asks, because Ash has experienced worse, but this is also pretty bad.

"Yeah," Ash lets out a low sigh, "I'm okay. We- we need to help you first."

Ash has never really had the pleasure of operating a surgery where they have to pull an arrow out. The first reason why is that he's not a surgeon, not *anywhere* close to a medical professional.

The second reason, is that attempting to stay unattached means that you don't really deal with these sorts of things happening. Either way, Ash has been thrust into being their only hope.

He takes the necessary equipment out of their bags. Because Ash *isn't* a fool and he isn't going to make Red walk to any safer place, and they've driven far enough away, hopefully, and they need to finally extract the arrow lest it get stuck forever. Red's jacket lays on his lap, and his hand is covered in not-quite dry blood from holding his shoulder. It sticks.

"I've never done this before." Ash warns.

"You know, you're *really* reassuring."

Alright, maybe that wasn't a good warning to say.

He still coaxes Red to face him, to try and get the arrow out. He's paler than normal, which is saying a *lot*, and a thin layer of sweat covers his forehead.

It's a messy procedure. The shaft of the arrow is snapped first, and then he's carefully trying to widen the wound so that it doesn't tear through anymore tissue. Red hisses from next to

him, and *it'll be okay*, Ash reassures himself. He'll get the arrow out and Red will be *okay*, because he *has* to be okay. It's not too deep in his skin, but it's still problematic. He hisses at the minute adjustments.

Ash wills his hands to stop shaking. Nothing is fucking helping.

"A- fuck, *Ash*." Red groans.

"Just- hold on, okay?" He's never gotten the comfort thing down. It's not exactly like he can function between getting an arrow out and comforting someone.

He dislodges the arrowhead with careful movement, and blood gushes out. He applies careful pressure on it. Wound care has no place for hesitating; it's only convincing yourself of the trust in each other.

Ash looks at the arrowhead and despite it being drenched in Red's blood, there's also the thin, telltale coat of *harming* applied to it. Of course. Of fucking *course* it does! Because that's just their luck.

To end up in these sorts of situations, damaged, some pieces missing, and relying on each other. Thrust into *caring*. Red's staring at the arrowtip.

The universe mocks him. It has written out every possible way to fuck him over. Fuck them both over.

"Is that...?" Red trails off.

"Yeah." Ash answers. "It's- you should be okay."

He doesn't know how well a health potion deals with harming that will have endlessly circulated in his body. It seemed to work for Ash with his dirt-riddled wound -- all those months ago, but that's completely incomparable with the new tipped arrows. It's all he can put his trust into, though.

Quickly, he makes sure to apply like clean linen drenched in a health potion, to try and speed up the process of tissue regrowing to form a neat little scar in Red's shoulder.

Red twitches next to him. Ash isn't a nice person, not by any means, but he's still trying this whole *gentle* thing.

There's blood all over Ash's hands. It's different than anything before. He's had blood on them, of course, but never from caring for someone else. It clings to his skin, and it's a grating texture; he tries to wipe off the substance the best he can on his pants. It's only one more coat of blood onto layers of however many more.

Ash doesn't want to spend the night in a car. And it shouldn't be too bad, if Red moves around. It's only affected his left shoulder. There's dilapidated buildings covered by fog in the distance but that's enough, and it shouldn't take that long to walk.

“We should get going, find somewhere, before night falls.” The car might as well be in a ditch. It’s a shame.

“Let’s.” And a softer, “Thanks, Ash.”

“Don’t mention it.”

*

There’s a broken down house off the highway. It’s surrounded by a small field, and it’s patchy, held together through sheer luck but it’s better than nothing. There’s dust all over in the attic. Moonlight shines in through the sole window; the room cooler in the night, which isn’t saying much when it’s still the midst of fucking summer.

Red’s lying down, in the corner on the makeshift bed. Ash set it up and it’s quite terrible, really, but it’s not like they have the luxury of trying to find a better place. They’re talking quite in hushed voices together, retaining a degree of normalcy.

It’s all okay, Ash reassures himself. They’re going to be fine.

“It could be a personal vendetta.” Red muses. The conversation has circulated back to the whole reason of *why*.

Ash scrunches his nose “I don’t think Clown’s ever had it out for me.”

“Well- *hey*, wait, what was that with Clown telling *you* to *wait*? He called you Ash, too.”

Ash blinks. He forgot about that. It was lost between the engine revving and the adrenaline of getting out, his foot pressing on the gas for the first time, and the thick scent of copper next to him.

“I don’t know.” Ash shrugs, trying to come off as casual, “I do know him though. Kind of. We weren’t exactly allies but- it was something like that. I remember being situated on his good side, though.” He makes a so-so gesture. “Shouldn’t you know this?”

“I used to work with Clown, too. God- that guy. But I wasn’t stupid enough to try and extort information *out* of him.” But clearly he still knew enough.

Ash guesses that it must be spilling-their-secrets-hour.

“Well, I worked in *Lala Legion*. You know, the weapons market. Or whatever you want to call it. We- I- *we* used to work with him.” Ash talks, telling Red the time when he got to shout at Clown for trying to complete a hit on someone on *his* marketplace, and more importantly -- the incredibly obvious extortion where Ash got to mark-up prices to Clown because he used to be oh *so* trusted before he technically left.

“Our working relationship was good. I don’t get why he’d tell me to wait. Well, *maybe* because he was trying to *assassinate* us.”

“He had a lot of chances.” Red shrugs, “It was only Leo and Minute actively trying to go after us.”

Ash tilts his head, accusatory. It’s petty, because he already knows that Red was lying then, but he still brings it up, “I thought you said that you didn’t know much about the P.M.C. That you didn’t keep up with that kind of stuff.”

“I might have lied before.”

“*Might have.*” Ash repeats Red’s words, “Fucking, businessmen.”

Red laughs. “Well- if it’s only Minute and Leo going after us, I think I pissed off Leo a while ago but- we had settled that.”

Leo. Fucking Leo. He knew that Leo was in the P.M.C, of course, the guy is *prominent* in every institution he leads or business he does, he knew it ever since it got leaked and plastered onto bulletin boards and newsletters. It’s just -- jarring to see him again. After their last rendezvous, which ended in blood and betrayal that he really *did* expect coming, just not in a certain form.

“How come?” Ash pries.

“Ah, let’s say that I was a good businessman.” Red shrugs. He sounds unsure of it. Ash decides to leave it.

“Fucking hell. What’s wrong with that guy, honestly.” Ash sighs, glancing at Red again. He points up to his eye, the one layered in bandages. Really, it’s an open secret. “He fucked my eye up.”

Red looks at him, “Fuck, really?”

“Yeah. Fucking, asshole.” Ash mutters. “*Take a blind eye*, or whatever he said.”

Red seems to be struggling for words, eyes flickering between the bandage and the rest of his face, because, really, this isn't just something that Ash was supposed to drop casually.

Either way, “I’m not too pissed about it still.” He still kind of *is*.

“Really?” Red raises an eyebrow, despite everything. “I kinda find that hard to believe.”

“Maybe I am.”

It’s not even that he’s pissed that he has one less eye, that he’s been living through the world for the past decade with a bandage covering it up, it’s that he fell for something so stupid, so *unavoidable*. Maybe he’s also pissed about having one less eye, the more he thinks about it. Maybe he’s still pissed about *everything*.

“If you don’t mind me askin’, what exactly happened?”

Ash thinks about miming the action, but instead just taps at the bandages. “He put his sword through.”

And then he twisted it around too, to drive the point home, or something, and completely gouged his eye, which really, defeated the purpose of taking a blind eye when the eye is completely mutilated into squishy flesh bits.

He keeps it covered. Red doesn't need to know any more.

There's never really been an appropriate response to someone telling you they got their eye gouged, so Red just nods silently. Ash doesn't need pity, never has.

“I *guess* it could be something with Leo, still, but, fuck, I don't know. Minute?”

“I've helped Minute and his friend out before. They paid handsomely. I don't think he'd be involved.” Ash answers. Minute seemed to be too good to a fault, sometimes.

“Maybe someone else then, fuck, I don't know.”

Ash watches Red breathe out, ebbing frustration. They'll get through it.

Red puts his head in his hands. Well, in one of his hands. He's letting his left shoulder hang limply by his side. Ash's eyebrow furrow, glaring at the bandages as if with enough time, every secret would bleed out.

“It looks like we were really close to finding each other. Before- uh, I found you bleeding out.” Red says, with a small laugh.

Ash thinks it's weird. He's never been a believer in destiny or fate, because everything he does is his own actions only, he's the one leading the waltz. It still doesn't make his meeting with Red any less of an accident. *This*, though, feels personal. An almost fuzzier atmosphere settles, tinted with rose and ozone. It's the two of them again, and Ash stays.

*

Ash is ready to wake up Red to try and switch shifts, but his hands find him blistering hot to the touch. Fuck, it *can't* be a fucking *fever*, of all things. He's more hesitant, but he still needs to wake him. Just to make sure. For his own peace of mind. Even though it's glaringly obvious.

“Red, *Red*,” He hisses, quietly.

He's not enough of an asshole to suggest for Red to still do his shift. Not only because he'd pass out immediately, but it's rest that's key to treating stuff like this. Someone told him that long ago. Someone else, but that doesn't matter, because it's Red now.

Ash just -- needs to make sure.

Red's eyes slowly flicker open, glazed over with sleep and exhaustion. It's one of the few times he doesn't have his sunglasses on. Voice heavy with sleep, he asks, “What?”

“Let me check your shoulder.”

Red blinks at him, slow, before registering the request and sitting up properly. Ash doesn't *fuss* over people. That's just not what he does. That's never been who he is. Fussing is for people who care, and Ash, well, he cares because he's pissed. That's totally different. It still doesn't make him feel any less out of place as he peels back bandages with rippling, rust-colored lines indicating that it had either opened several times, or oozed over the course of the night.

“I feel like shit.” Red murmurs. His skin is flushed all over.

The wound is worse. Much, much worse. The edges are an angry red, inflammation puckering at the skin. When Ash brushes his hand over the skin of Red's arm, it's searing warmth emanating from his shoulder. *Fuck*. The health potion did fucking nothing, the wound still shaped just like the arrowtip.

Though, maybe, Ash has heard of the body sometimes trying to reject the effects of a health potion. Hopefully, it's just that, and they *both* can get out of here in a few days.

“No wonder.” It's *fucked*.

Red makes a little noise of acknowledgment. Ash doesn't know if he picks up on the inching unease that surrounds Ash's actions. He looks -- *tired*.

It's *more* than the after-effects of Ash's first surgery, or the health potion trying to work its way through muscle, or just the whole infection. He's not going to say shaken, but he's having a hard time coming up with a word that accurately describes the exhaustion that's burrowed into Red.

“Stay still,” Ash orders, like Red is going to have the strength to move. With care, he washes water over the wound. Red hisses at the pain, but through either willpower or exposure, keeps still.

“Can't you- health pot it again?” Red asks.

“No- no, that'd just fuck you over, it'd fucking strain your body more.” Ash sighs, a little irritated, re-wrapping clean bandages around the wound. “That's one of the fucking, like, *basics* of first aid.”

“Do I still have to do my shift?”

“No- no, just, sleep. I'll keep lookout.”

”You're just gonna be even more tired.”

“I don't know if you remember this, but we were getting chased down hours ago. I'll be more help, tired, than you are now, anyway.”

“That sounds like a lie to me, Ash.” Red rasps.

“I don’t care what it sounds like to you. Go to sleep.”

Something in his tone must cohere with Red, because he just rolls his eyes one final time, utters out a softer goodnight, and falls back asleep. Ash can only hope that the fever is just a response to the potion. He knows it isn’t.

*

It’s even uglier in the morning. Ash frowns.

“Oh.” Was Red’s response to the news. It’s not like much would resonate with him in the first place, but the fever seems to slow his thoughts to a crawl. “That’s not good.”

“Really?” Ash snaps.

He’s changed his bandages already, and he’s careful. More careful than he would be, usually he’d pull them a bit tight, just enough for Red to glare at him, a fun little game, but this has become all the more serious. The wound leaks grayish fluid, blistering at the edges. He’s white-hot, rivalling all the stars in the galaxies. Sweat gleams on his skin.

“You need to drink,” Ash says, uncapping a water bottle.

“I think I’ve done enough of that in one lifetime,” Red tries to joke, but it lands flat. Ash ignores it, and tries to coax the water bottle into his hand.

He looks away as Red unhooks his facemask -- Ash still feels weird about it. He doesn’t like the tight feeling in his chest while looking at Red. But he can’t be getting caught up in his own thoughts -- Red still needs something to eat. Fuck, taking care of a sick person is much harder than Ash thought it would be.

”You should go to sleep, soon.” Red says, because of course he fucking would. “You’ve been awake for a long time.”

Ash makes sure to breathe out, nice and steady. “Not yet.”

*

The fever; the wound; the infection; whatever they want to fucking call all of *this*, is not getting better no matter what he’s trying. It might as well be getting worse.

Red’s skin is sweat-flushed, and the edges of the cut weren’t *red* anymore: they were the cream of dead skin, shading into a dark purple, bruising fanning outwards from the edges. Ash is afraid that it will soon develop into aching necrosis.

Ash is tired. Fatigued. Sleep deprived, which is *worse*. Red is even more useless -- which leaves Ash as their only hope, staying up later and later, watching shadows creep along walls, because if it’s not him, then who else?

Ash nestles the totem in between Red’s fingers. Because he’s getting weaker, and he only wakes up for short little bursts where he lets Ash unhook his face mask and Ash slips water

between his lips and encourages him to eat shitty and bland and tasteless rations.

The totem looks out of place, in his hands. Emerald green against blood red.

And he's heard all the horror stories about what coming back to life feels like. He's heard and seen the terror on men's faces when they die and their body knits itself back together in long, flowing threads like a reverse supernova. Their bodies energy flows in from the surroundings, and as bright and luminous as a protostar and -- and they're back again.

It is horrible. It is gruesome and painful but it's the only thing that Ash can give Red.

A terribly flawed plan. He knows.

The best option is that Red gets better. If not, then -- then either he'll let Red slowly, painfully die until the totem's properties are activated, or he'll watch Red stab himself and bleed out, or he'll have to be the one to stab Red.

Surprisingly, he *doesn't* want to witness any of those options. Even if Red is terribly annoying, enough that it makes Ash crave to choke him out, to leave scratch marks on his flesh, to dig his claws in until he can't let go, it's different when he's like this. It's no fun if Red can't curse him back, and he can only lay quietly, with slow breaths that make Ash internally dread. Ash is balancing a very, very tight line.

His eyes flutter shut, unwillingly, his second night staying up. No, *no*, he can't fall asleep just yet. He jerks up. There's still the P.M.C, and Red, and everyone else out in the world, and--

Ash's body makes the decision for him anyway, forcing sleep, next to Red.

*

He wakes up to the stench of rot.

Decomposition has lent itself to fester in the searing heat, a decay that drapes over all of the atmosphere in the room, curling up and making itself at home. Ash has tried opening the lone attic window that's responsible for all of the light in the room, but it's only served to allow the rot to fester and multiply, the air stale and still. It's seeped into the threadbare blankets and the mattress.

Ash has peeled Red's shirt off again, slipping his arm out of the sleeve. Red's at least lucid enough to follow basic instructions, such as *sit up*, or *roll over*, or *lift your arm*, but it seems that the instruction to *shut the fuck up* still can't land.

"I never thought I'd be in this situation." Red says, a little slurred, his other arm laying over his bare chest. The totem lies right by his waist.

"Neither did I." Ash hisses.

Red shivers underneath him, fever and necrosis destroying his body. Inside out. He's mostly hidden underneath the covers, for the sake of keeping him warm, and the idea of maintaining a little decency. Red almost seems grateful, even in his fucked up state.

Ash has always known that Red is scarred. He's seen him when he dresses down, tying the suit jacket around his waist, but it feels like *too* much to see him laid bare. (Ash aches to touch).

Summer warmth swelters. Ash scrunches his nose, tries to ignore the stench, bats away another mosquito that's come through the window. Fuckers somehow survived being *bombed*. It's unfair.

"...Is it really that bad?" Red asks.

Ash thinks of sugarcoating it. However, there's no way that he can. It's *necrosis*. "Yeah-yeah. It is."

Red's body is still beating, pulsing, warm under his hand. It is wrong. It is vile.

There haven't really been a lot of situations where Ash has needed to know how to treat necrosis. In fact, there has been approximately *one*, and all he did was sit there and space out. He decides to not tell Red that he's been completely winging his treatment, and instead focuses on clearing away the dead tissue the best he can, running damp gauze down over his shoulder, pulling away the dead tissue.

Red lazily looks over at him, observing. Ash is grimacing at the sight, the smell, the cloying heat that sticks to their body. Summer sun shines through the weathered attic window.

"I'm cold." Red says, pressing his cheek to the least-stained pillow Ash could find.

It's bad. It is more than bad. It is the middle of fucking summer.

"That's lovely. You know, *personally*, it feels more like I'm going to have a heat stroke."

He's tried his best to cool down the room. He's tried his best to cool down Red, his skin pyrexia, but it's not like he can place a wet rag over his forehead constantly -- they need to conserve water. It's an unlucky situation. It's *more* than unlucky. It's.

"Does this hurt?" Ash asks, poking at the expanse of blacks and purples.

"No." Red says, tilting his head back to look at Ash. "Can't feel it."

"I see." Ash murmurs, as if he's totally got this under control. Of course he does, he's Ash. He's made the world bow to his whim, he can totally fix up a little bit of necrosis and infection and fever.

He drops the stained gauze into a spare bucket that he's found, hearing the splat that it makes against cold metal. He unwraps another roll, and shifts Red's arm, pulling it up in hesitant movements to start covering it again.

Red has lapsed into silence for once, eyes hazy and unfocused as he gazes up at Ash. He watches as he has to pause to bat away another mosquito before returning to the bandage.

Ash flicks the remains off, watching its bloodied and mangled body smear on the floorboard next to Red; Red's eyes flickering over to look at it. Ash thinks he sees its wings twitch a final time, a high pitched buzzing noise fading into the stillness of the air. Red's breathing replaces it, quiet, subdued.

“What is it?” Ash asks, because the silence is making him uneasy.

“Am I going to die?” Red asks.

“No, no.” Ash says, immediate and hesitant, and *fuck. What the fuck.* “No. You won't.”

eighth

Chapter Summary

He continues moving around the room, drawing up a circular pattern, his footsteps continuing like a steady buzz. He avoids the creaky floorboards, avoids anything that could wake Red up. He's a constant presence, even when he's not even fucking lucid.

Red wakes up in short bursts throughout the day, mostly when Ash nudges him awake and feeds him water and bits of his rations and maybe they even talk if Red has enough energy, and it's stupid, and it's horrible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Stop being so paranoid.” Red murmurs, one night. “You’re worse than me.”

Ash sighs. “Shut up. It’s not *paranoia*, it’s called being the only one conscious enough to fight.” He tacks on, “I’m better than you.”

“Whatever helps you sleep.” Red replies, his voice hoarse and rough, eyes fluttering closed again.

*

Red talks a lot. Usually. And it’s not like Ash doesn’t mind it, but he doesn’t hate it either. It’s just something that he’s become accustomed to, through forced exposure to Red.

Red, feverish, still can’t stop talking. It’s soft murmurs of dreams, or more so nightmares, from what Ash can gather. It’s not reassuring, but he’s still conscious and alive which is the one thing Ash wants. Sometimes, he hears his name called out. He doesn’t know what to feel about it.

Therefore, he decides to ignore it.

The best thing for a patient with radiation sickness is to let the symptoms pass. Well, Ash is sure that there’s a bit more to it than that, but the principle applies. There’s not much else that you’d be able to do other than to brave the sea and let the storm take you to the other side, safe and sound. Though this is *necrosis*, an infection, and not radiation sickness, but there's still some half muddled advice that Ash can claw out of it.

(Because -- surely, if Ash allows everything to wait out, everything will be fine. Red will be okay. Red will be at a normal temperature, and he will no longer be calling out for Ash, and every other horrible sickly emotion will also pass when he’s healthy again).

He's just trying to ride this wave of sickness out.

*

Ash has ended up pacing around the room. It's only so long that he can stay in the same spot before he has to bring himself to move. Which leads to this.

It's not his proudest moment. A lot of things lately haven't been his proudest moment, but fuck, he's Ash, and all of his decisions *have* to be a net positive anyways. It's cramped in the attic space, the room both spacious and suffocating. He continues pacing.

He makes sure to keep his movements quiet, as if not to disturb Red. He needs rest, his immune system working and working constantly to make sure he stays alive, but fuck, it's still horrible and Ash dreads the moments where Red's breath goes a little bit too quiet for a little bit too long. He's forced the totem back into Red's hand, just in case, *just in case*.

Ash doesn't *fret*. Maybe he does.

They're running out of clean gauze, and the infection is only getting worse. Such a simple little wound, just one shot in the shoulder, and it has reduced someone like Red to *this*.

Ash knows he's not the best. He is awful in the way that a star is unhasting and unresting with obnoxious radiance, and horrible like a permanent stain that you cannot get rid of, and he has taken so much from Red. He's pierced Red's skin, and he's sucking up the blood, and he will leave behind saliva with histamines. An ever present itch. Maybe he already has. Maybe he just can't stop himself from coming back for more.

He continues moving around the room, drawing up a circular pattern, his footsteps continuing like a steady buzz. He avoids the creaky floorboards, avoids anything that could wake Red up. He's a constant presence, even when he's not even fucking lucid.

Red wakes up in short bursts throughout the day, mostly when Ash nudges him awake and feeds him water and bits of his rations and maybe they even talk if Red has enough energy, and it's stupid, and it's horrible.

The dead mosquito lays on the ground.

The totem lies in Red's hand.

Ash ended up messing with Red's sword idly at one point, picking up something so sacred, like the crown of thorns that overlays a head, like the nails that bore into hands, twirls it around. It's a heavy weight -- something that with enough usage would become comforting at some point.

It wasn't made for Ash's hands, though, so he puts it back down. He continues pacing.

Every so often he does stop to stand over where Red lays, crouches down, pokes at him. He's trying to get a reaction out of him. At best, his breathing shudders for a moment as Ash's comparatively cool skin brushes against him, at worst, nothing happens. And nothing will keep happening.

Ash is always in the attic. A shadow that refuses to be forgotten; that refuses to blend into the wall. He continues pacing. It's only making himself sweat more in the still, warm air. Fucking useless.

This stupid fucking thing. This stupid fucking situation. A moment later, he looks back at the pale totem. It's almost a white, blurry sclera, covered around the bloodshot crimson of Red's suit.

*

It's not exactly that Red is *completely* unresponsive, but he's been asleep the whole day.

They've been stuck up this stupid attic too long. Days. He's lost track, maybe just under a week. It's sealed, sure, the attic is safe for now. That does not mean the rest of the world is. Nights curl into the miasma of sweat.

He doesn't want to go to drastic measures yet, either. The totem lies still. Inanimate.

And Ash has been trying his best to take care of him. Because that's what good people do, or whatever.

He's distinctly aware he doesn't exactly have a uniform moral code -- his is more of a flexible, amorphous thing with sharp edges he strikes against occasionally, and even then he debates on whether or not to pay attention to the wounds, and he *knows* what's right and what's wrong but he loves to pick a fight -- and wonders if he feels this more because Red is who he is.

Even though it's fun to toy with Red and argue with him and rile him up and see the always steady hand on his sword clench, it's not like he can do that right now. Not like he can do much of *anything* at all right now.

Ash tries to stay up as long as he can, every day, and he knows that his sleep schedule is beyond fucked but it's better to be hypervigilant when he's the *only* one able to, as the other one is constantly shivering and turning every night in the shoddy bed. *Fuck*.

It's a constant cycle every day. It's the same damn thing, and they're starting to run low on supplies.

Ash doesn't know if they'll be able to make it to any other outpost with their current supply. His heart beats hard once, twice.

It's hushed intimacy. He's never been *this* close to Red. He hopes he will never be in this position again.

The image of Red's face might as well be burned into his mind, to the vermillion border of his lip, to the ear piercing on his right ear, to the slight, faint scar that's barely visible on his eyebrow. He tries to erode the washed out paleness from his memory.

He decides to lose himself in the routine. He washes the wound. He wraps it with bandages. He does everything that someone *should* do for an infection. He tries to even wake Red

briefly to drink water, because stupid fucking mortal bodies can die from stupid fucking *dehydration*, but Red's just -- too weak to respond, so he settles for a damp cloth at his mouth.

Ash admits that Red is one of the furthest things from the word, weak. He's able to look a god in the eye, unflinching, but he's still ended up like this *anyway* as if they're doomed to repeat a cycle.

Nothing he tries is working.

Ash has considered making him down health potion after health potion to try and repair the wound, at least. But the idea that something could go wrong is too dangerous, too probable. No one's ever bothered to study the effects of a health potion, meant for *living* things, on necrosis and dead tissue.

He repeats that they're just going to get through this whole infection thing, and Red will be okay.

And Red *will* be okay, again. And he'll be able to look Ash in the eye again behind his shitty sunglasses and make jokes to him again. And tell him to fuck off. But that's still Red.

This breathing, living corpse is only Red in the sense of his name. It's alive in the sake of a heart beating. But it's not anything close to Red.

(Ash misses him).

*

Red isn't awake the next day either. He's curled in the mess of threadbare blankets, his own jacket, a few more unstained pillows that Ash had found laying around because why not at this point, and Ash's own trench coat.

It's almost like the fever doesn't want to leave his body. Like it's found its own happy, perfectly warm climate for it to settle into. Which is unfair, because Ash is the only thing that's supposed to destroy Red from the inside out. Red still trembles, shivers wracking his body, and Ash has to sit on the shoddy, drenched mattress; he presses himself close, only separated by a thin blanket, personal space be damned.

He doesn't know if it's soothing in the right way or not, doesn't know whether his body heat does much to help even when Red is already covered in fabrics, but it has to be *something*.

Ash does not know when the last time either of them had a peaceful sleep. The minority of the time Red is in a haze of fever bliss, not quite there but not quite awake either; and the majority of the time he's dazed with dreams and nightmares.

And for Ash -- fuck. Don't even get him started. The last 'full' night of sleep he's had has been a week ago, and he sleeps in short flashes, waking up at the slightest movements, only for it to be something stupid, like the branches of the tree knocking against the window, or

weak shifting in the bed, or a low pained groan from Red. Those times are the worst ones. He's constantly restless, alert, and the adrenaline crash is catastrophic.

Maybe this rescue operation has been doomed from the start. Maybe he should have just plunged his hands into Red as soon as he saw the first signs of necrosis, and took the easy way out, resting his head against Red's chest in prayer as to hope for the totem to bring him back right.

There's the last rolls of gauze left in his bag. It's getting too low. Ash changes the bandages infrequently, watches the rot spread, and he cannot do fucking anything.

The totem cannot activate if he still has a heartbeat.

If nothing happens then -- then tomorrow -- *tomorrow*, he might just have to crawl over Red, knife in hand.

Ash will lean over him. He thinks of whether he'll do it by his bedside, or whether he'll climb on top of Red, knees at his side. He thinks of how hard he'll have to sink his knife in, whether Red's flesh will willingly give way, or struggle like always. He thinks of leaning down, holding his knife like a rosary, of leaning down, of--

But tomorrow is not today. Today is still the present, and Red is breathing, no matter how slow, his heart beats under Ash's head.

*

In the middle of the night, a floorboard creaks.

It makes Ash shoot up from his spot, where he's shielding Red from whoever just came in through -- fuck, the *window*?

Hypervigilance has led him to sleeping with his glock only an arms reach away; for times like these. He aims it at the figure. Ash forces his hands to stay steady even through the coursing fatigue.

"Woah, woah- *wait* there--"

The intruder tries to reason, and steps forward a little more in between. Ash's finger is right on the trigger, when he finally steps into the light, and it's organ chords and lightning and it's-- it's--

Spoke.

Spoke? What the fuck.

"Hey Ash, long time no see!" Ash can't see much of his face between his visor goggles and gas mask, but he can still hear his telltale grin in his voice.

He looks -- harmless. On the surface. Ash knows there's weapons upon weapons strapped to him, underneath his relaxed demeanour, under the void black of his clothing that's interrupted

with rainbows.

“What the fuck do you want.” He keeps his voice monotone, flatter than usual, hiding exhaustion and irritation, though he does lower his gun.

It’s not like he *doesn’t* like Spoke. Technically, if Ash wants to call him that, he’s one of his friends. At least one of the closest things he’s had to that, anyways. Red stays asleep behind him. But he’s still Spoke to Ash. It’s always a bad thing when Spoke wants to speak. Not strictly -- Ash has had some *fun* times -- but there’s something foreboding that will eventually cause the world to split into pixels and particles.

“Aww.” Spoke tilts his head. “Didn’t you miss me?” Then, Ash can only see vague movements in shadows and Spoke is holding out a cage and oh- *fuck no*. “Look! I even brought *Poopies* along! Say hi to-”

The leech-like creature snaps at the bars with a clang. Ash still does not know what species it is. He’s never wanted to.

“Shut up- I don’t-” One breath in, one breath out. “What the fuck are you here for?”

The energy in the room stills. Like moments away from an unstable nuclear reaction, like the room will be full of neon-bright blue sparks and cherenkov radiation in just a second from Spoke and Ash interacting. The only possible witness to this phenomenon is completely unconscious.

“Looks like Clown didn’t deliver my message for you.” Spoke is graveyard still, which might as well be the worst indicator of any Spoke emotions. He’s clipped the cage back to his bag.

“What fucking message? The one where he tried to *kill* us?”

Spoke has always been like a conductor of lightning. Electrostatic discharge lingers on him. He commands attention from the room, coruscating, a little annoying, never shutting up.

“No- no! That was an accident. I told him that I needed to talk to you- and well, I guess it must’ve spread through the P.M.C and for assassins, *talking* means a lot of things. Sorry, sorry *I know*, my bad.”

It sounds mocking. Probably is. It’s not like Spoke would care if a couple of people would die in the way. Ash really, really doesn’t have the energy for this. Unstable sparks of electricity seemingly flicker around him.

In situations like these; Spoke has always been the lightning, and Ash always the thunderstorm rolling after the first strike. He’s the after-effect of bright striking glory that kills and electrocutes and dances. It’s stupid to say that one of his most steady connections is someone as unstable as Spoke.

He sighs. Confidence has always been key. “That’s lovely to hear, but I don’t have time to deal with your shit-”

“Ash. I can see you’re struggling.”

He exploits and he is exploited and he exploits and he is exploited and it's divinity in action.

Ash has always liked Spoke. They're still on fine terms, surprisingly, with the way Ash's life has been going. It's good whenever Ash isn't on the receiving end of whatever Spoke wants from him, it's only good to be his business partner. Someone who can do the same waltz in the same circles. The parts where it gets bad is situations like this moment, where he's sitting on the floor staring down the metaphorical barrel of a gun.

Except it's just Spoke, energetic and weird and just *Spoke*. Death has never fazed either of them.

"Let's say. Your little sweetheart is suffering. I can strike you a bargain."

"Don't call him that."

"Which part, *yours*, or *sweetheart*?"

Ash hisses, "Spoke, shut the fuck *up*. Why- what the fuck are you trying to do?"

He still wants to hear him out. It's something he needs to squash underneath his ribs.

"I need something from you."

It's awfully vague. Ash glares preemptively. "As *lovely* as it would be, I have shit to do -- I'm not getting associated in a fucking, second wormhole."

Spoke tilts his head. "You profited. You had *fun*."

Right. There was always that deal with Minute and Wemmbu. But it was just one time. He did like the power that came with it but -- it felt overdone. He's not anything like a God anymore, not now. He'll always keep the feelings of the bursts of power and control locked away in his heart. It was kind of a steep fall, from God to another businessman to this. It's not like Ash cares, not at all, he's always been the best at what he does. For now, he's just Ash. It was foolish to bring it up.

"Anyways, it's nothing like that, you don't need to do anything," A smile worms itself into Spoke's tone, casual, "I just want that totem. The one that Red is holding."

"What?" Ash blanks.

Spoke doesn't elaborate because -- because it is a relatively simple deal, just an *item*, with no contracts or any other liabilities that surround it. But that's what makes it all so much worse. And -- reasonably, no one should know that they've taken a totem. And it was just Red and Ash; Ash and Red; whatever you want to call them, when they picked it up. And Spoke shouldn't even know who Red is, and--

Ash has played this game longer than him, there's still moments where his cool and collected facade slips like sand between his fingers.

"*Spoke*, what the *fuck* --"

“I can give you this in return,” Spoke pulls out an enchanted golden apple, twirling it around. “That’d help him, right? Wouldn’t it?”

It gleams under dull lighting, beautiful and extraordinary. It’s something that was never meant for this world. The skin is an unreal gold, a burst of colour in between muted midnight tones. It’s *just* an object, but it holds everything.

This is all going fucking horribly, a part of Ash’s brain registers.

The totem -- it’s their safety insurance. It’s not making the best use right now, but it’s still something that Ash wants to keep hold of, for obvious reasons.

Ash narrows his eyes. Spoke is a good ally, of course, Lala Legion is a concept between them all, and it’s about the wormhole, too, and it’d be a great loss to lose him but -- but *this* -- this is just beyond Ash. He doesn’t trust any of this. Nothing’s wrong, but everything’s weird.

“I’ll hand the gapple over, promise.” Spoke says, like this is something -- something ordinary. And Ash can’t see his face, but he knows that Spoke is still trustworthy. Something horrible crawls under his skin. “You don’t want him to die, right?”

It’s a fact, like the way the earth spins, or the way that pigeons fly, that Ash has always been horrible at accepting help.

This is something that continues to fuck him over, right to this very moment. From the start to this. Maybe even to the end of everything.

“Why’d you come back now, of all times?” Ash asks, quiet, ire creeping in his voice. “How’d you even get here?”

“I just want to help my good friend, *Ashswag*.” Spoke says, vivid purple edging into the corner of his vision. It’s not the whole truth but it’s something, something iridescent and warping. Spoke has always been someone to him, a silhouette edging into his vision, the power and his name. How fucking awful-- how *horrible*--

“And well, the uh, economy is in shambles over there. So I walked.” Spoke answers that, too.

Ash breathes out. He pretends he isn’t exploding from the inside out. “You’re telling me that three hitmen can’t afford a car?”

“Look, okay, I’m helping *you*! We’ve both seen what totems do, you don’t want that to happen, right? So here’s a nicer alternative, and you’re still trying to argue with me. Ash, you’ve been a supplier, you’ve put the art into *scam artist*, a liar, and so many more things, and you’re still my friend. You won’t get this deal from anyone else. You’re one of the best businessmen I know!”

The notch apple gleams in between the last stripes of moonlight. It knows nothing of its worth. Ash doesn’t believe in a higher power anymore, but if there was one, it’s cruel. It’s fucking horrific. Ash hates this. It’s the closest thing to a cure.

The totem can't save Red. He knows this. It will save him from certain death but what use is it when it will spit him back out, still weak and in pain.

Giving it away like this is rash and stupid, but, but--

Ash relents.

"*Fuck*, I'll do it."

Ash can sense the grin on Spoke's face. He turns around, saying something about *privacy* while Ash carefully works on unhooking Red's fingers around the totem.

It feels disgustingly intimate, to cup his hands around Red's. He's motionless, static, and the only indication that he's alive is the slow movement of his chest. He curls Red's fingers away one by one, and he hates how easy it is, how Red doesn't even twitch, doesn't even fucking react.

In Ash's hands, the totem is heavy, heavier than it's ever felt before; emerald eyes peer up at him, unphased that it's life is being played with in a transaction. Red's eyes stay closed.

"Spoke." Ash calls out. There's a quiet buzz in his ears. "I want the notch apple first."

Spoke turns back around, thinking it over, and with a little shrug, he throws the apple at Ash. He catches it. Barely. It feels enormous in his hand, but he can't dwell on the weight of all his decisions when Spoke is still waiting, analyzing him.

"There you go. Now--"

Ash sighs, deafening in a silent room, and holds the totem out.

In a second, Spoke closes the distance separating him from Ash. The pale colour of the totem is a stark difference from void-black gloves, and Ash sees it disappear into the abyss of his jacket.

"Thanks for this, Ash. Knew I could always rely on you to do the right thing."

And this isn't any type of ploy, nothing *classic* Spoke style. Spoke has always done betrayals and hints of something *more*, coming in last second and tearing everything apart as if it's going out of style.

This, there's no strings that are being wound around him to whatever Spoke wants. He's not meddling in something again, and he won't feel the adrenaline of power once more; that buzz of electricity long since gone. It's something that Ash doesn't think he's privy to, which is *fine*.

Now, it's just Spoke and Ash again. They're certainly missing people here, but that's okay. There's still questions, judgement on Spoke's face but he keeps quiet about it. He's learnt to read Spoke, maybe not *exactly*, but he's been able to tell these things. It's a skill that can't leave him, like a bird's ability to fly, or a dragonfly's agility in manipulating its wings. That's what working for so long together does to you. There's words unsaid.

“You're welcome.” Ash says, words in his throat like broken glass with acid edges.

Maybe Spoke smiles at him. Maybe Spoke is saying something but the ringing in Ash's ears deafens everything, and Spoke is just used to Ash leveling him with the same old glare so maybe it's nothing out of the ordinary.

Spoke jumps back through the window. Ash can feel the scratching at his chest, that he won't see him again anytime soon, leaving the page behind. The notch apple sits in his hands.

He imagines the world collapsing under its weight.

Nothing happens.

*

He's managed to furiously shake Red awake -- he's delirious, and tired, and the infection is doing a number on his body but he's more conscious than he has been for a good while.

His skin is still hot, and he just generally looks horrible, but he's slowly blinking up at Ash as if he hasn't been making him go through hell and back to make sure he doesn't drop dead. Ash doesn't care. (*If he says it enough times it will become real*, he thinks). Ash has very carefully unhooked his facemask, the feeling of his fingers brushing against scalding skin still lingers.

Red -- well, Ash isn't sure if anything is being *understood* right now in his brain. Which might be ethically questionable, but Ash has never had time for ethics or morality.

“Open your mouth. I know you can hear me.”

Red's head is laid onto Ash's lap, because Ash reasons that this is the most comfortable way to do this. It's not like Red will remember this, anyways, with the dazed look in his eyes. And even if he does spring back to life immediately, good as new, Ash vows to knock him out just to make sure.

Red slowly blinks, once, then again, and *then* his lips part open.

They're flushed cherry-red from the fever. He *then* reasons that he's only paying attention because Red's face is hidden away behind his mask. (Always, really. Which just makes it more -- prominent, now). Ash should be more focused on other things.

He's taken back into the present when Red tilts his head a little, which reminds him that this all still isn't over. *God*. He can't go running into the hills now, when he's dedicated *so* much, two sides of the same coin, the mind keeps hanging on. That's the point of living.

Ash stays. He pushes the gapple to Red's mouth.

“Eat. C'mon.” Ash is completely out of his nature like this.

He's dealt with cold metals, gunpowders, wires that sparked against his skin. Never something like this. He can't size Red up like a rifle in his hands because he's flesh and bone

and blood.

Red doesn't say anything back, but he seems to get the message as his teeth sink around the apple. Ash's hand supports his head up as he eats through the rest, making sure he doesn't die now, of all fucking times. His hands are buried into Red's hair, more grown out, impossibly silken, and maybe in any other circumstance he'd describe it as nice. But right now -- this whole thing feels like a cruel joke.

Ash doesn't care. Ash cares so much that it feels like his chest is sinking.

"There you go." Ash murmurs, hushed in the attic. He doesn't even know if it registers to Red. He'd want to make fun of him more if he wasn't the one hand-feeding him.

It doesn't really matter, as he carries on holding the apple up to Red's lips, watching him chew. Ash makes sure to keep his hand steady and sure, his fingertips rough against Red's lips, palm against his cheek, as he offers the fruit. Red is still awfully warm but -- he's going to get better. He has to.

He lifts the apple back up, prodding Red's lips open with his thumb. They're chapped but awfully soft, and Red just pliantly opens his mouth back up, teeth sinking into the flesh of the apple. Like sin, like life.

It's a slow, few minutes as Red just eats. If Ash wasn't banking everything on this, then he'd be more annoyed, and maybe he'd be half-tempted to make Red choke. He wonders how synthetic gold tastes.

The apple core is all that remains in Ash's hand.

"How do you feel now?" Because he needs *answers*. A clear result. He needs to know that this all wasn't *useless*.

Red's skin is starting to look less pallid, colour seeping back in, still pyrexia, but whatever regenerative qualities are in that apple are working their best. He looks -- alive.

Instead of anything useful, Red stares at him, murmurs out, "I'm tired."

And Red keeps staring at him for a moment longer before his eyes flutter shut, not bothering to move. His head lays on Ash's lap, red hair spilling out in a mockery of the sun against his legs. Ash stares at him. Keeps staring. *Is this a fucking joke?*

Ash sighs. He should push him off, reasonably. Red can go back to sleeping in the stupid, shitty makeshift bed with its shitty pillows instead of his lap. Ash sighs, again. He keeps Red on his lap. Ash wishes to squeeze his heart dry of blood to stop the quivering in his rib cage.

*

His back hurts, feels like hell. Ash ended up falling asleep not exactly sitting up, but not exactly lying down either. There's a warm -- but not exactly fever-searing -- weight on his lap, which he recognizes as Red.

Early dawn light scatters through the window. He feels more tired now than before falling asleep. It's almost like being woken up (*not* startled awake, Ash thinks) by Spoke and then the yawning abyss of uncertainty would wear someone out. Ash has to remind himself that his body is merely mortal.

And -- and Red is awake. He looks stupidly comfortable on Ash's lap, which is just outright wrong and unfair, watching the particles of dust fall through the light.

"Hey," Red says, as if he wasn't dying last night.

"Hi." Ash says back.

Really, Ash has no fucking clue what to do. He *acts* like he knows, because that's the thing that he's always *known*.

Red looks relatively normal, the same as ever. Ash doesn't know how much he remembers.

The only move he's made is to put his sunglasses back on, but the mask is off. Ash doesn't comment because he's too busy staring and -- and he's *living* and breathing and his heart is beating and he's thinking actual thoughts, thank fuck.

Ash shifts up, to look at Red's shoulder. There's a small indent still from where the arrowtip sliced through his skin, but otherwise, it's Red's skin.

A part of Ash wants to reach out, to feel it under his touch -- maybe dig his fingernail in and make it bleed again because it's unfair that it's so normal -- maybe just stroke the pad of his thumb over it, map it out to memory but -- that'd just be weird, wouldn't it. So he keeps his hands to himself.

But it's healing, it's healing, it's fucking healing at last; there's no purple-black rot that stems from the wound, the wound's edges no longer inflamed. He didn't even have to use the totem for this. It's entirely just -- Red.

It's so perfectly *normal*. It's practically any other scar.

Ash would almost think the past week was a strange hallucination, that maybe he was the one who was actually hit by the arrow instead of Red, but the dead mosquito lays in the same spot. Fuck, Ash can't wait to get out of the attic.

He has to act steady, at least. *For Red*. Ash isn't the one who nearly died.

"I had to give away the totem." Ash says.

"Oh," Red says, processing the information. He's not pissed off. "That's fine."

And it has to be, because he's still alive. And it *has* to be, because he said that *it's fine*, and this is the only world there'll ever be for the two of them.

"Sorry." Red rasps out, during the quiet. "For making you worry. And for getting hit."

“I don’t worry.” Ash says. Maybe if he repeats it enough, both of them will believe it.

Ash has still not got the hang of this whole vulnerability thing. He doesn’t know how to respond. So instead he brushes his knuckles over Red’s hand. It’s warm, to a normal amount this time. He lives to chase the sun.

“How’d you end up- curing the infection? I don’t remember much.”

But he still doesn’t bother to move from the arrangement they’re in. He looks almost smug about it. Ash remembers why he wanted to knock him out last night.

Ash points to the core of the apple that he had thrown away with his free hand. It’s slowly rotting, like most of the house. It’s lost most of its lustre, but there’s still the feeling of otherworldliness that surrounds it like a strange mixture of contradictory elements, never meant to exist in the same space.

“That’s what I gave the totem for. It worked. And now I’m having to deal with you again.”

He almost expects Red to bitch at him -- to make jokes about this whole catastrophe, or even a *hey at least you didn’t run this time* even though Ash kept staying and thinking and kept staying but -- but instead -- instead he stares at Ash like he’s hung the stars, like he’s something more and more than life itself.

It’s soft, and quiet, “Thanks.”

Ash can’t really shrug this off, either, because his hand is laying against Red’s, skin against skin, completely involuntarily. He feels like he’s going insane. He’s missed this. All he can do is nod in acknowledgment, the neutral composure already crumbling.

“I do remember, uh, parts of last night. Just little fragments. Nothin’ major, I promise.” Red admits. “You know, you fed me. And, it’s blurry- but I do remember you talking with someone.” It’s not a statement, it’s a statement that’s *leading* into an interrogation, and he’s giving Ash the chance to give in a confession.

“Oh.” Is the smartest thing Ash can come up with.

Red is waiting, expectantly. Ash guesses that it’s the least that he can do.

It’s different from before. It’s different from the prior hesitant hand outs of information about each other because it’s one of those things that Ash has always kept with him. He doesn’t tell anyone about this. He *hasn’t*.

And -- and it’s almost horrifying how easy it is to let the words spill out, syllables forming in his larynx, coming out of his mouth. It doesn’t sound much different from a normal conversation for anyone that would listen in, except that it’s Ash’s guts spilled out and lying on the floor.

“It was Spoke. Lala Legion founder, that guy. You probably know him for more. Fuck,” Ash sighs, “We share history. I don’t know why he wanted the totem, but fuck, it’s fine. Whatever,” Ash rambles.

It's a mess, trying to start at the very beginning; about knowing Spoke, about Leo, about the chaos that erupted; about the wormhole, the power and corruption that came with it, which he's pretty sure Red *does* know about but still -- he lets Ash explain it, listens to him recount it with little gestures and effects because he's just *so* tired, and he's regressing into making explosion and sparking actions. It's unsurprising that he ended up at Lala Legion in the end.

Catastrophe and chaos dance together. It's even more unsurprising that Ash and Spoke stuck with each other.

Red's looking at him throughout, because it's the polite thing to do. He should be calling Ash fucking insane, or trying to kill him, or anything else like that. But he's just looking at him and Ash feels that it's all about to unravel and maybe it's been unravelling like that from the beginning.

"Huh. That's cool."

It's not the reaction Ash was expecting. He'd more believe that this shitty little attic would come crashing down on them than Red just being so *casual* about this all.

"What- what do you mean that's *cool*?" Ash stares at him, scrunching his nose.

"A lot happens in business, doesn't it." Red levels him with his own stare. "I thought you should know."

"Yes- but fuck! I don't know- I was expecting a little bit *more*, maybe."

Red shrugs, "It's cool with me, though. We're business partners, aren't we?"

Ash stares at Red. Red stares back.

They are, aren't they? It's simple.

It's just trust. Awful, awful *trust*. Ash could've chosen to leave him, to turn again, or something -- and yet, here he is.

Ash looks down at their hands. His hand is still limply on top of Red's, not exactly holding it, but just resting on top of it. He watches as Red's hand moves, to brush a finger against Ash's open palm, tentative. It's not -- it's not holding hands. Their hands are just resting together. Of course.

It only took a couple of months for Ash to follow a promise, and they're halfway to True North, and the stupid fucking words of *I'll stay* are still warm and beating in his heart, scratching at his throat, *staying*, and he thinks he'll keep staying, and isn't that just awful--

"Missed you." Red says.

It seems involuntary. It should be completely involuntary, but Red is looking up, looking at him over the bridge of his stupid sunglasses. It's so wholly him it makes Ash nauseous.

It's so, so much worse than whatever other direction this conversation could've gone in.

Ash's throat gets annoyingly itchy, mostly just because he doesn't know what the hell to say to that.

He missed stupid fucking Red like sundials miss the light, like circuits miss the voltage and old maps miss the press of fingertips. Like-- like--

But he can't say any of that. So he just nods.

*

The only noise is the quiet muffled chirping of the birds outside of the window. Everything's alive. The view is the same as it would've been a week ago. A small part of Ash thinks that it should've changed -- that there should be something drastically different here, like maybe buildings on fire and smoke billowing into the sky -- but it's the same as it has been since the apocalypse.

Maybe the world should've stopped revolving. But it continues to spin on and on, like it has since the start. The present is never static.

Hiking through mountains is stupid, Ash decides. After another day in the attic, they've decided to start moving again. He doesn't get why people would do this for fun. This might be one of Ash's least favourite activities to do, and it's really hard to get on that list, because he has things like *nearly dying yourself* and *getting chased by hitmen*, and *nearly having your business partner die* on that list.

Red walks a few paces in front, suddenly conscious of being in Ash's eyesight at all times.

Ash didn't believe that they would last this long, if he was being honest. Well, the past is the past. There's no point of returning to it. There needs to be forward movement, not backward.

It's all perpendicular, not parallel. They've crashed together and -- and Ash is strangely okay with that.

There's still a hell of a lot of future, True North coming closer inch by inch. It turns out making an effort actually does something, and suddenly, he's admitting that he's *happy*. Which sucks. They're both outliers in each other's lives, not fitting exactly together but still included together.

Ash had always thought he'd be a meteorite to Red, passing along him for a few months and then never seen again. Like the moon has become a natural satellite to the earth, maybe he's been dragged into his gravitational pull.

Maybe a binary star system is more fitting -- both orbiting around the same point in the sky, mistaken for one star to the naked eye.

*

“Oh.”

Ash wasn't sure what he was expecting, when he had pushed open the door. The stench of death utterly drenches this place -- which means a lot, as he's become all too used to rotting flesh -- that Red had suggested to go check it out, which was a stupid idea, and Ash had argued that it was stupid, and that they're *not* doing it.

Therefore, this has led to Ash pushing open the said door.

It's a grim scene. Blood is splashed around, and it's faded, aged and old, clinging on. The room is eerily normal apart from that, like the piano has become accustomed to the people that are sitting in the corner.

It's not that -- it's not exactly the death that makes him blank. It's the people, the faces. And - and it's not like Ash has cared about them, no, not much.

It's the silent reminder that the universe hates him, specifically him, because he must've fallen in one of his past lives, or played god a little bit too much, because this just doesn't happen to everyone. Maybe the universe thinks he deserves it.

"Ash? Ash, what is it?" Red asks, because Ash is blocking his view.

Instead, he says nothing and slowly, carefully, steps into the room, and lets Red follow in at his own pace. And he doesn't know, so this doesn't mean anything to him. But it still feels personal, to let Red in. Even after how much time they've spent together.

There's bodies scattered around the room, the stench of copper and sweat and burning flesh dizzying. There's no zombies around anymore, long since crawled or walked out. There's only one that remains, charred with a gaping hole in its head. Really, it should be nothing different. It should just be another death scene, too bad they can't stay in this place, and they keep moving.

Three other bodies lay in the room. He couldn't really match their name up with their face, but he remembers something like Myles, and fuck, what was it -- iShlaq, yeah -- and Tertel, he thinks. Dog tags have long since become too expensive.

"These were my former teammates." Ash says, eventually.

A standard pleasantry, "I'm sorry."

"No, you don't have to be. Never- never really cared for them." Ash shrugs. They tried to kill him, too, but that was justified. "I left them to die."

Red lets out a short, stifled laugh. It's humourless. "All the way out here?"

"Nah. They must've survived the first time." Ash shrugs.

Ash keeps staring at the room. They should leave before the smell clings onto them, buried into clothes, but still. This is somewhere to be. Red keeps staring at him, as if he's hesitant to press him.

"So." Ash begins.

“So.” Red repeats, looking at him over the frames of his sunglasses.

Sometimes, it’s hard to talk.

He’s come to realize it’s evolved to something past Red, something past selfish desires. it’s not only that everyone around him has changed, but him too.

“You know. They were the reason you found me bleeding out.” Ash says. He slips his hand into his pockets. “*They* got into a shitty situation, you know? It’s their own fault, anyone else would try to leave them for dead and then profit.” Ash pauses, remembering the knife that carved through his skin. Belatedly, he adds, “Didn’t work out.”

“I couldn’t tell.” Red deadpans.

“Shut up- fuck, whatever. I guess they must’ve survived that time, even if they were more busy trying to go after *me*. Fuck.” Ash shrugs. It’s almost ironic. Stealing and betrayals and more stealing and more betrayals. “It’s kind of funny.”

“And all you told me was that it was *poor life decisions* that ended with you bleeding out.” Red mimics quotation marks.

Ash laughs. This is horrible. He stares at Red, who has tried to kill him; cold metal at his neck, the three months in winter, the carvings, the control, blurry little stars and fevers in an attic room, everything; at Red, who has allowed him to come back in.

“It must be good that I left when I did.” Ash says, glancing at the scene again. It’s mostly to himself, because this is still a reminder of dying. He’s never cared.

Red makes a noise in acknowledgment, bathed in the warm light pooling in from the open door.

“I’ve never regretted it.” Ash keeps going because he just can’t seem to shut up, it looks like. “You think it’d be like, a violation to steal from them?”

“Stealing from dead people always feels like a violation.” Red says.

“Well- yeah. But they ended up taking *my* stuff.” Ash points out.

“So you’re just going to do it anyway.”

“I had a rifle, Red.” Ash says, not moving. It’s not like he needs it anymore. He can’t even see it, and he’s had enough of kneeling down, and blood staining his fingers. “It was *their* fault, anyways. I told them not do stupid shit, and then they did it, and fuck. Whatever. They’ve already paid for it.”

Red just looks at him. “Of course.”

*

“What if I was trapping you?” Ash asks.

Red raises an eyebrow, about to fall asleep, hair mussed up. "What's this about?"

"You know. When we first met."

"Well- I thought you were actually dead at that moment." *Oh*. "Why are you thinking about it?"

"It was stupid of you to just- I don't know, not expect anything."

"It didn't seem like you would've been able to do anything, dude." Red tilts his head at him, "Hey- this almost sounds like you care for me."

"Fuck off."

Chapter End Notes

THIS CHAPTER NOW HAS [FANART](#) !!! <333
IT HAS EVEN [MORE FANART](#) !!!!! <3

ahh. the intimacy of hand feeding...

also i mixed up red's very casual reaction to ash's god powers in s3 with the wormhole. man whatever. he gets unconditional acceptance either way.

im very very normal about the ash and spoke dynamic (dont even joke lad) mmmm i couldn't find a good way to shove in an explanation of the wormhole because it's kind of one of those things that everyone knows in universe & i couldn't find a smooth way to do it. but still i thought about it. so. lengthy authors comment instead

also cause i forgot --> red, as an informant, definitely knew of ash before but he kept his identity so muddled that red can't/doesn't connect the quadrillion different names to ash. (god this au shit is so complicated

anyways. wormhole! it's kind of the same but kind of not. it's obviously spearheaded by spoke with vitalasy + subz & ash having their own parts within it that i am just going to say were Happening before the big wormhole event itself because it's still kind of messy-vague in my mind. spoke just had a monopoly on more illegal + technologized items during the time and it was shared out and messed around with between the wormhole group (<-- this part is more secretive, red knew it Vaguely) while the 48 hour wormhole event is raiding and stealing and pillaging towns/zones etc for two weeks (<-- everyone in universe knows this) ash wasn't as involved with that part except for giving shit to wemmbu & minute. this also explains why he doesn't know parrot when he saw him as he was there just to profit and mostly did not physically participate in spokes raiding.

ohh man . hope that was understandable. the machinations of my mind are a prison and minecraft exploiting is incredibly hard to translate into a realistic setting and makes me want to bash my head into a wall. anyways two week break to get the last few chapters together

ninth

Chapter Summary

It itches at something under his skin. They've become a package deal for the time. Meaningless in the face of eons of the universe.

Instead, he just looks back over at Red. There's something in his eyes when he looks at Ash. He doesn't know what. It makes something in his stomach burn on fire, though. Maybe like he's the only other person on earth, which he might as well be. The wastelands are solitary, and pockets of civilizations only grow sparser the more north they go.

Chapter Notes

i lied when i said this would be 90k it's . ended up at 125k+ words. okay.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The last few wisps of daylight break out, leading into night. Orange light paints itself over the crane. Ash is half-convinced that it might tip over, but there's no way that he's gonna pass up an opportunity to just climb up and up and up; the closest he'll ever get to heaven. The ladder is horribly rusted under his fingertips, copper becoming synonymous with blood, but it's the only thing he can put his trust in. Red is already up on the platform, right next to him.

Ash carefully navigates around screws, and bolts, and all other dangerous mechanical apparatus that lies strewn around on the floor, never cleaned up. There was never time to.

Standing on top, shivers roll through his spine. Ripples of electricity roll over his skin, not gentle, but not harsh. It's overwhelming, just this, but in the dulcet kind of way. Ash's breath catches in his throat. He keeps the world alive.

“Hey.” Red calls out to him, over the wind. Summer extends, settling in with warmth and fuzziness.

Ash comes to stand next to him, carefully, to make sure he doesn't fall. It's not like he isn't terrified of dropping down, but he's confident enough that he doesn't think he will. Introspection is a careful thing. Look too deep and everything will shatter. It's everything; all the cities and the grasslands in between and all the hums of the desert sands.

It was kind of -- obvious all along, looking back on it. Ash strays at the edges of a text, sleeps through the gaps between words, always watching, detached. But now -- now, he's kind of *secured* to Red, isn't he.

He has been for a while but -- the attic, the apple -- it's all just cemented itself in a blurry amalgamation in the shape of Red that Ash is never going to be able to get rid of.

After True North, he'll poke into the edges of Ash's thoughts, he'll haunt in the low steady thrum of engines, he'll be there, but not quite there, either. How unfair, how companionship works. It's almost human enough to destroy all of his senses.

Red is still here. For now. This, right now, though, is purely wasting time.

Ash leans over, supported by the railing. It's *cool*, alright. It's talking, mindless conversations with cut off laughter, Red making those too big and too wide hand gestures for some trivial thing he's complaining about; it's all about the sacredness of pettiness.

"I swear you just love the sound of your own voice." Ash says, not for the first nor the last time.

"I do have a great voice, don't I?" Red grins, obnoxious.

"Shut up. You wish you sounded like me." Ash rolls his eyes.

Red raises an eyebrow, staring at Ash. "You talk a lot for a guy who's standing on the edge of a crane."

It evolves; like everything. It's just pushing each other around, *oh, look, look at how far you'll drop*, and a kick in the ankle back, an *d are you really trying that* and then Ash goes to shove him lightly, misjudges everything, and watches Red's sunglasses clatter down onto the metal grate floor, thankfully just stuck in the mesh.

It should be nothing.

Of course, *should* has never lived in the same universe as Ash.

Red shrinks back, covering his eyes immediately. He doesn't move -- doesn't do anything. Ash wants to chalk it up to just having the sunglasses on makes him used to seeing the world duller, dimmer but this is all different. It's like he's blinded, hiding away from the light itself.

Picking them back up off the floor, Ash hands the sunglasses back; Red slips them on immediately, wiping at his face.

Ash stares at him. Red stares back, re-adjusting.

"I guess they weren't just to look cool." Ash says, words clumsy in his mouth. He hopes that the crane collapses in the next second.

"They *do* look pretty cool, c'mon." Red says.

Ash keeps staring at him. He's never known Red to be one to beat around the bush; he's always liked things direct. He just doesn't want to press. He silently watches Red adjust his sunglasses again.

"Photophobia." Red says, as explanation. "Sensitivity to light, that kind of thing, ha. Fucking sucks. I would've told you earlier but, I thought- I thought you'd exploit it or something."

"Yeah, well- yeah, I probably would have." Because honesty is a part of trust. And begrudgingly, Ash can admit that he would've pushed and pushed past the brink, squirreling away the information like some sort of blackmail.

"Not even gonna deny it?"

"Nah," Ash shrugs, "Thanks for the explanation. At least now I know you're not doing it to *try* to be cool."

"I *am* cool." Red raises an eyebrow, like a challenge.

"Come on, dude. Shut up." Ash waves at him, fading back to their skewed, fucked up sense of normality.

Ash can only think of how hard it's going to be to reintegrate, when he's had to spend the overall past year of his life walking, three months running, his core sweltering in every moment. How is he going to live without this? How does someone function, again, without petty arguments, without an anchor?

*

Some rare outposts have always existed out of *safety zones*, and re-opening cities. They've been to plenty, and it's always full of travellers, caravans, murderers, and the like. They're very, very versatile.

But It's not often that you manage to see someone that you met hundreds of miles ago again, but the best chance for that would always be in one of these. It's unmistakably Parrot, and his vibrantly decorated elytra that seems to have gotten slightly more scorched and singed around the edges, and there's two other people with him. One of them wears another elytra, this one designed to look like dragon wings, and the other, polar-bear-like, wears shades.

Ash makes it a point to avoid eye contact. Because it's kind of awkward too. Red, instead, notices Parrot and waves at him.

Parrot waves back, after hesitating from surprise for a short moment. It's not like they've tried to kill each other. It's just surprising to see someone like him again.

Though -- though he keeps staring at Ash. And Ash decides to watch him back, and it might be nothing, might just be paranoia but there's something else around him. It -- it feels like he's something else. Like he would be able to see right through Ash. Parrot looks away suddenly, going back to his conversation with his friends. It's probably nothing after all. They move forward.

*

"It's been over a year since we met." Ash says, without thinking when he crosses off today's number. Ash has already had enough of the sun. "Initially." *Last year's spring.*

"Really? Huh." Is Red's intelligent response.

"Yes, really." Ash shuffles the notebook back into his jacket pocket.

The last few dredges of sunlight come through the leaves. They're camping out in the forest, because it provides the most cover, and Ash has only had the money to buy a camping hammock after his tarp got ripped apart. It's not the best sleep he's ever had, but it's not really possible to have good sleep in the wastelands.

He's pretty sure it's a taiga, as there's small brown mushrooms peeking out from tree roots. Red sits on a tree log, looking over the portable stove. The smell of kerosene lingers. Ash sways passively on the hammock, waiting.

Ash almost thinks that it's already slipped Red's mind, but he speaks up, "I didn't expect you to stick around this long. I'm pretty glad, though."

"Don't go all soft on me, Red." Ash teases, but there's no real bite to it. Maybe something like quiet fondness underneath it. Red's back is turned to Ash. It's -- it's vulnerability. (Maybe Ash could learn).

"Saying *I'm glad* is going soft now?"

"Of course it is. We should be trying to rip each other apart." Ash hums, swaying lightly.

Red knocks Ash's leg that's hanging off the hammock with his own foot, and the perfectly reasonable response is to try and kick Red full force back. Maybe half force. But there's spite in that kick, and that spite has made cities fall before.

"I take it all back, you *suck*." Red's voice has that little grin in it, and it makes Ash smile involuntarily.

In the darkness of the forest, spots of light buzz around. They omit fluorescent, yellow light. Ash has only heard of these little critters.

Red has said that Ash needs to pick up a hobby, to spend his time doing anything other than moping around and hoping the world bows to him. And Ash defends himself, that he does plenty of things, but also that he's *never* moped in his life.

It goes all quiet again, because silence is strangely comfortable now. It's not like a silence that's forced onto them because conserving energy is important, nor it's awkward or tense because Ash or Red has said something and it's resulted in the threat of weapons being drawn.

Silence like *this* -- Ash hasn't had the most experience with.

It's all a little bit more bearable with Red. Although you'd still have to put a gun to his head to make him admit that, you wouldn't have to have your finger on the trigger anymore. Some sort of feeling -- a *something* -- stirs in his ribcage.

Red points to the glowing forest. "Fireflies."

"They still exist?"

"In some places of the world, yeah." Red shrugs, "I don't remember how they're able to glow but it's cool. They're sometimes used as lanterns. Maybe we could trap some of them in a jar."

Ash thinks about how funny it would be to watch Red try to catch a firefly in a jar, constantly flying away from him. He's almost tempted. Still;

"No, no. They're nice like this." Everything seems all the more intimate in the night. Saying something like that isn't a statement, it's an admittance under pale moonlight glow.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

That night, Ash dreams of a solar system. A solar system that circulates around fluorescent yellow and radioactive light and smells like petroleum. And in the morning, before he wakes up, the solar system forgets about him.

*

"What was all of this used for?" Red asks.

He's leaning over the railing, where a wide, open radio telescope sits underneath. That's what Ash thinks it is, anyway -- an antenna sits in the middle of the hemisphere, and the surrounding mirror panes reflect the waves of the sun. It's times like these that remind Ash of how small he is in the grand scale of everything. He looks up at the sky, covered in blue and clouds, hiding away the vast, vast soul of the universe.

The cosmos is infinite and incomprehensible and so beautiful it strikes something fundamental, grafted to the core of his humanity -- so beautiful that they forced him to remember that he had some.

The telescope is divine in its own way. That after life, there will be death, and after death, it will still be burrowed into the ground like buried treasure. It will always look out into the universe, to its partner, for its sole purpose, waiting for a signal.

"Might've been a radio telescope." Ash answers. Red stares blankly at him. "Like, it would receive radio waves and shit. It's broken by now, though."

There's sections of the telescope that has whole mirrors missing, and he can see through it to the skeletal structure that holds everything up. It's all carefully designed like a sacred temple.

Ash has always taken everything he wanted. This time, he thinks, it's better to let it lie. Not like he could carry a radio telescope with him, anyways.

"*Huh?* Why?" Red asks, again.

"I *don't* think humanity was expecting to get infected to hell and back. They had ambitions, and shit."

"No but, why build it?" Red blinks, the sheer cosmic scale of everything slowly dawning on him.

"To- to create images? It's not like I was there, man." Ash shrugs, "It's a shame. I'd have liked to mess around with the tech shit. Whatever. Not like we'll ever get the chance to, anyways."

"Really?" Red asks, like Ash has presented him with some -- something *secret*; something *special*.

"Maybe. I don't know. Something with machines, computers and shit. Or I could just start my own religion. Or just take over the whole world." Ash lists things off mindlessly, and he doesn't think that any of these jobs could ever come back. "I've always been a pretty good businessman before."

"Could start up a business together." Red throws it out into the ring, no holds barred.

"Yeah, and sell what?" Ash lets out a choked out noise that he passes off, internally and externally, as a laugh.

"You were into weapons." Red mentions.

"Maybe this time around you'll be the arms dealer and I'll be the weapon." Ash grins, leaning forward.

Red laughs, "Maybe we wouldn't even sell anything. Money laundering. Commit tax fraud together."

"Ah, the- what was it called again? Fuck," Ash pauses, "The *IRS* - they'd never catch us. We'd be top secret."

Red laughs, again, but this time there's a buzzing at Ash's fingertips, pulsating warmth, too aware of every blood vessel; the hair on his neck prickling. It's a dull electric hum of wind, its particles pulled apart, ozone and cords and the roaring, spinning fusion of far-off boiling stars. He wants to jump off the platform and over the railing to crash straight back to earth.

"I actually wanted to start up a business properly- outside of being an informant." Red looks anywhere but at Ash, "Still don't know what I would've done. I knew that I wanted to call it Sock Inc."

"Sock Inc." Ash gestures, with a light giggle. "Really."

"Yeah- yeah, it was just something that me and an old friend joked about and, well," Red shrugs. Ash opens his mouth to say something more, but Red beats him with a little wave of his hand, "He's not dead. Just... gone. It's all a past lifetime."

He obviously *cared*. That's the important part.

"Why didn't you start it, then?" Ash asks instead, simple.

Red sighs, something heavy and far away. "Just wasn't the right time to, I guess. I found success anyways. It's not all that bad."

But Ash can see the tense, rigid line of Red's body. It's unnatural. Life forces you to control all your reactions, it's just what happens, and this -- *this* -- is something that's wrong. Ash can count on his hands the amount of times he's seen Red's casual facade slip and splinter like *this*.

The last few points of sunlight reflect off the telescope mirrors.

"Let's move, I want to look around the inside." Ash, as the self-proclaimed master of diversions, suggests.

Red follows after him with a little *yeah*. It's also maybe because he wants to just poke around at the equipment, but Red doesn't need to know that.

Inside the building is different from the outside. Drastically different. It's like walking into a different dimension. And they've looted hundreds of buildings before, because staying in one place too long is always dangerous, as zombies love to move around at night. But they've never slipped into a place quite like this. There's winding corridors, and sleek marble floors that are now dusted over with detritus and blood. It all leads to a panel room.

There's also a dead guard in the corner somewhere. Because at one point, humanity seemed to have cared about this place very much.

Humanity has cared about a lot of places. It's nothing in the face of the apocalypse.

Ash still can't blame them, as even past its prime, it's still *something* else to behold. Despite the wallpaper peeling off and decay staining the walls, and that dust flies with every step, it's fucking exhilarating. Ash almost doesn't mind the sure asbestos that's entering his system.

They've had *plenty* of deviations from solely going north, Ash reasons, there's nothing important holding him back from just being a little fascinated. He's always liked the old world technology and all the manipulation within layers of code that come with it but god, this is entirely different.

Something must be showing (god forbid) on his face, obvious enough that Red keeps glancing at him. Ash thinks he gives a little grin, muscles twitching under his mask, when Ash finally stares back at him.

It leaves his mind soon enough as they stumble into the main control center. It looks something right out of the divine, thousands of meters and readings and buttons staring down

at them as if part of an angel. All the switches have piles of dust on top of them, clearly out of use for long, long before the apocalypse. There's all different labels on them, and Ash doesn't understand much, but he can figure some parts out.

There's also a picture of some parts of the faraway universe taped to the wall, curling in on itself in the corner. A memory. They must've come from the radio telescope. Ash wonders how much it has changed since.

"Look," Red points, towards a small booklet thrown away on the panel. "What is that?"

"Maybe they just abandoned the secret to life here." Ash deadpans.

Ash does end up wandering over to it, the booklet faded and yellowed from sunlight exposure. "It's a manual, I think."

It's in a different language, but Ash has been around long enough to pick up small parts of other old world alphabets. These are rune-like, printed and neat, left to right.

Red is right next to him, as always. "You can read it?"

"Only some parts." Ash answers, flipping it open.

There's drawings of machinery, diagrams of screwing different parts together, notes on which part does. Ash can't decipher all of it, parts of the wording used are too technical or hyperspecific, or just weathered away to being illegible.

"It's a manual on how to construct one of these." Ash gestures to the control panel.

Red wipes his hand over the panel, dust coating his glove. "So you just used to be able to order one of these in the mail and then make it yourself?"

"It would've been expensive as fuck." Ash shrugs, and continues looking over the diagrams.

It's like a human body, intricately constructed. Another page turns, and he's looking at technical reasonings, or something like that. The part of the heading that he can read says *Radio*, with a little drawing of an amateur radio. He nudges Red to look over.

"Look." Ash says.

"I'm looking." Red says, fixing the sunglasses on his face. "You know I can't understand any of this, right?"

"Oh. Well," Ash tries to smoothly recover, and points to an inconspicuous panel laying in one of the corners. "It's something to do with radios, apparently. You can plug one in, I think."

Red stares at him blankly. "And?"

"I want to check it out."

It looks like Red is going to protest, or something. probably call him an idiot or bastard, maybe combine the two together, but Ash has already stepped over to the panel. There's a small socket with a wire still connected to it. Ash rifles through his bag, and slips out the radio. It's not been used much.

Red is waiting hesitantly by his side, saying something about the building blowing up, which Ash just tells him to shut up already. He takes the cable, with one last glance and plugs it into an empty port.

There's nothing.

"Well -- it did seem to be abandoned long before the infection." Red states. There's an edge of disappointment in his tone.

"I guess." Ash murmurs. He's dejected despite it.

Red shrugs back, and presses one of the buttons on the panel, randomly, because it can't just suddenly start working.

But it does. And the noise -- *oh* the noise.

Radio static, faltering syllables, nebulous dust. It's entropy. It pierces shrill and loud, fuzzy frequencies coming and going and piling on top of each other. The sounds pulse like a heartbeat.

It's also terribly, terribly loud. Any coherent thought is replaced with static disruption, and Ash keels over, hands over his ears. Red isn't faring any better, from what Ash can see in the corner of his eye, also hunched. Ash can't really recognize if he's panting or not, maybe, he thinks he is at least, it's hard to tell with every sound blocked out. It rips into every fiber of his being, his hair standing on end like he's being shocked.

This -- this *phenomenon* , fuck, what the *fuck*?

"Unplug- fuck- fuckin' unplug *it*-" Red yells over the noise, hands firmly over his ears.

It's a discovery that no one else will ever make. Irregularities weave themselves in and out of it. Ash leans back up, dazed, the sound barely muffled. He grimaces, taking one hand off his ears.

It's so much worse. Every cell in him is splitting apart, trying to hide itself from the incoming collapse. "I'm trying-"

"*Shit* , Ash-" Red keeps yelling, lost over static.

"*Fuck* -"

He yanks the cable back, tearing it away.

Everything stops. It's as if nothing ever happened, the atmosphere returning to normal. The world acts like the very laws of itself have not just been broken and splintered, mending itself

back together in the blink of an eye.

Ash's head is still spinning, the noise ringing. Red doesn't seem to be in much better condition, his hands are still on his head, glancing between the cable, the panel, and the radio.

"What the fuck was that." Red hisses, running a hand through his hair.

"I don't fucking know- fuck, what the fuck." Ash repeats. "There's something fucking wrong with this world."

"God- my fucking head." Red keeps complaining, in the background.

He takes the radio into his hands, and he expects it to shock him, or fall apart into fragments and dust, but it's completely the same. Something simmers.

"Does it still work?" Red asks, still breathless.

Ash shrugs, flicking the dial on. That, though, does send a small electric shock into his fingertips. Fuck. "It's completely broken. Don't know if I'll be able to fucking, fix this."

"I- it's fine, fuck." Red breathes out, still a little shaken. "Let's get out of here, already. This was enough of a distraction."

"Yeah, fuck, yeah- whatever." Ash sighs, slipping the radio back into his bag. He looks back at Red, already walking away, knowing Ash would come sooner or later.

A phenomenon in the world. It's everything that there ever will be.

*

Today isn't a good day. It could be worse. It could be much, much worse. It still isn't pleasant to be nursing an ache from where Redd had hit him over the head. It's fine though, because Ash had got him good in the side, and it probably would've kept escalating if they hadn't drawn an invisible line in the sand.

Because yeah, Red's an asshole, maybe not the worst one Ash has met, but so is Ash. It's perfect.

He leans against the metal chair, sighing. A pendant light hangs limply above them. It's been a good while since they pissed each other off. It's raw warfare. Ash finds home within an annoying itch.

Red is opposite him, across the table. Pale, brown light creeps in through the window, reaching up to his thigh, where his hand lays, lighter in hand, spinning it around idly. Bruise on display on his jaw. Ash doesn't remember where he discarded the empty cigarette box, just that he did, and neither of them want to be the one to buy the next one.

Assholes to the end. It's not all bad. He swirls a drink in his hands, a singular seltzer water. What a fucking luxury.

"This fucking sucks." Ash eventually says.

"You wanna make any other *incredible* observations?" Red asks, still a little petty.

He stares at Red and squints.

"God, your ego is fucking catastrophic." Ash mutters.

"It's not like yours is any better."

Ash thinks that pissing people off is a carefully honed skill -- it's always toeing the line between festering resentment and just good, spiteful fun. Things will always be what they are. Ash rolls his eyes.

Red just laughs at him in exchange, and lightly knocks his boot against Ash's leg. His eyes flicker up, and he's only met with the slightly smug upturn of the corner of his lips. Ash just kicks him back, and they've resorted to fighting, no, not even fighting, just kicking each other like they're kids. He shouldn't be having fun with this. It's violence and death and *childish*.

"Pass me the drink." Red's still grinning.

"Huh? Oh, sure." Ash shrugs, pushing the bottle across the table.

Red takes it in his hands, slipping his mask down and sipping at it passively. He knows that it's a given, when Ash himself was the one who was kneeled over him, unhooking it himself only a few weeks ago, that Red would just -- *be more comfortable* -- start doing it so casually. It doesn't make it anymore devastating.

With absolute obliviousness to Ash's thoughts, Red passes the drink back again. His face glows under the dull light.

Red takes it, sipping from it for a moment. They end up passing it back and forth. How awfully normal. Ash ignores that they're sharing it. It's just a *normal* bottle. Everything about this is completely normal. They *didn't* just try to beat the shit out of each other and end up here drinking out of the same bottle. It's a common occurrence -- the arguing, that is, really. It's perfectly *fine*.

"You alright?" Red asks, watching as Ash brushes his hand past the bruise on his jaw again, just to do something.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Everything's alright." Ash shrugs.

Everything is *not* alright. The weird aching in between his ribs only grows stronger the longer he tries to ignore it. Ash does not mention any of this.

Red nods, and just passes the seltzer water back over. Ash can only force himself to relax back into the chair, metal grate digging into his thighs, probably longer there than either of them have been alive, and stays quiet.

*

Ash doesn't think he'll ever understand Red. He is so full of complexities -- oddities -- a mystery. Deceit and lies come out of his mouth like carbon dioxide, and yet he is the only steady lifeform that Ash has been clinging onto; that keeps Ash stable. He lays underneath Ash's skin, settling into his place between his nerves and synapses and veins.

It's strange to admit this. Because Ash knows everything that he wants to, and he'll burrow his way into something until he knows and can exploit and exploit. His whole exposure to Red was forced, stupidly, and now he's grown attached. Which is even more stupid.

Because -- because it *terrifies* him. To be able to lose again, pure and crude.

A volta buzzes within him. He reclines back into the grass, and watches as the stars dance, twirling to and fro between the void -- their remote incandescence still never fading, everlasting. Red sits next to him, patches of grass peeking out from his fingers. Starlight bounces off him.

He lays out on the crest of a hill -- it's more of a meadow really -- where the grass reaches up to his ankles, and the flowers sway in the wind as if everything is normal. He looks over and he can see the blinking lights of a civilization near, like those little fireflies flickering in the darkest of the night.

Ash was always meant for the stars, for something larger than this universe. To become more and more until there is nothing else; until all of the universes are *made* to breathe in sync with him.

Because living normally has always been boring to him. There's no fun in trying to act as if the world hasn't broken down irreparably behind the walls, and he never saw the fun in trying to start a name for yourself outside the walls, and he never saw the fun in the whole journey aspect because it's all for the *destination*, anyway.

He doesn't like to be wrong. There's no fun in raiding -- but there's fun in business. It's all serious, corrupt, and rotten and it drags Ash in. He doesn't know when he became so accustomed to being with someone else.

Ash has seen a lot of things throughout his life. It's all split over different lifetimes but it converges to this very point. Everything has never been the same. Never the impossible brightness of sun-dappled frost, or the rippling puddles when he steps through them. The current, brilliant trail of stars at night, alight and blazing with dancing spirits.

It's all been here since the beginning, hasn't it?

Red nudges him, so unfairly put together despite everything. It pisses Ash off. His hair is falling around his face, dyed red, steadily growing longer. It's all so *unfair*.

"You want me to do the first shift?" Red asks. It's mundane. Something in Ash sears.

He breathes out, "Sure."

Ash tries to keep his face neutral. He's always been neutral -- he's never cared this much. There's nothing to profit out of *this*. *Something* rips him apart, rib by rib.

*

Old, fluorescent lights flicker above them. Ash thinks he can see dead bugs in them, scattered around like constellations. He wonders how they got in there to begin with.

The bathroom of an old convenience store is wrecked. The *staff only* sign on the front of the door had long since fallen off. The tiles are full of grit and mud, and the last bathroom stall door has fallen off. The taps don't work anymore, unsurprisingly, but the light keeps going on and off. It's the only other thing that bears any semblance of being alive.

It casts an unnatural glow -- lime-green. It's overly synthetic.

Ash sits with blood caked onto his face. It's nothing serious -- there's no life-threatening situation that's about to break down the doors into wood and splinters, but there is simmering annoyance in him. There's a graze on his collarbone from a stray brick. It *itches*. It makes him want to pull out his nervous system nerve by nerve.

He doesn't know why he's letting Red look over him like this. There is nothing close to killing him in any substantial way. A gentle buzz simmers under his skin.

Red is wiping blood off a cut on his forehead in careful, sweeping strokes. "Don't poke my only eye out." Ash mutters, as his hand gets closer.

"I won't," Red huffs. "You have so little faith in me, man."

Ash simply shrugs in response, letting his eye flutter close. His breath fans out over Red's hand while the layers of blood are cleaned off. He lets himself indulge for a moment longer, before opening his eyes again.

"It's only a cut." Red says, eventually.

"I told you." Ash retorts. Walking around bloodied is annoying, but it's not by far the worst thing that's happened to Ash.

"I'd rather check it out, anyway." Red is kind of weirdly cautious. Ash doesn't comment on it, pushing it to the back of his mind and forcing it down into an old, dusty box. "Let me look at the graze, now."

"Fine, fine. Whatever." Ash rolls his eyes.

Ash stifles a shiver at Red's hesitant hand on the small of his back. Ash reels -- Red's hipbones prod against him and Ash steps a foot between Red's. Rationally, this probably shouldn't be something that Ash turns into a push and pull sort of thing. Rationally, Red shouldn't even be this close, this near.

Red's hand slides from his shoulder and tugs at the collar of Ash's shirt. He pulls the fabric down just enough to expose the slant of Ash's collarbone, top layers of his skin scraped off,

revealing an angry red.

With his other hand, he pats the wound dry with spare gauze. Ash thinks that, really, it's a waste of materials. He doesn't say anything more. Red can probably tell, anyways.

Ash presses a firm hand between Red's shoulder-blades until a buried rhythm drums through them both -- two hearts pushed together behind layers of stubborn skin and muscle. The graze stings against gentle touch. It doesn't require any further care. He replays words over and over in his head, cataloging touches and inflections and tones and--

Red leans away, brushing Ash's hair back over the cut on his forehead. Only a sliver of it shines through. He sighs.

*

Sometimes -- sometimes bad nights come. It's not unusual. They're living through a slow, slow deterioration of earth, even if it's slowly starting to try and come back to breathe again.

It's just that -- it's hard out here. It's even incredibly hard trying to survive in some of the safety zones, where food is scarce and it might as well be one of the worst modern (could really you call it *modern?*) cases of hyperinflation that Ash has ever seen. And it's harder to try and make it on the road too, because stealing and looting *works*, but it's tiresome, and it makes Ash want to drop and never get back up again.

That's why it makes sense for everything to eventually take a toll on the human body. Living becomes mentally taxing when you're trying to keep up with virtually every single part of your life to make sure that you can see the next sunrise. This results in Ash getting irritated. Easily.

He imagines a pop quiz. The world is; never enough for him; just enough; today, too much.

Sometimes he just wants to curl up in the corner of a sad little house and fall asleep and never wake up. He doesn't, because Red has places to be, constantly.

But Red isn't oblivious, and he can tell the times where Ash has these little off days. He doesn't treat him much differently, no, because the pity would result in blood and his jugular bitten out, but he doesn't talk as much or push him too far, and he lets him sleep one hour more if he's especially nice.

That's why it's so hard to hate him. Maybe -- maybe Ash hasn't hated him for a while now.

He doesn't know what else that something could be, though. That scrapes at his coronary arteries, latches onto his vena cava, settles into his ventricles and atriums. It's *something* that he thinks he knows but -- it can't be.

It itches at something under his skin. They've become a package deal for the time. Meaningless in the face of eons of the universe.

Instead, he just looks back over at Red. There's something in his eyes when he looks at Ash. He doesn't know what. It makes something in his stomach burn on fire, though. Maybe like

he's the only other person on earth, which he might as well be. The wastelands are solitary, and pockets of civilizations only grow sparser the more north they go.

They talk to people, they pass by towns that become more and more infrequent and overhear gossip and contribute with their own, but they're the only two people in each other's lives that are always there now.

(He says, *it's okay to feel the way you do if he keeps it to himself*. He thinks he's falling apart at the seams into streams of purple and black).

He doesn't know how to play for keeps, despite all this time. It doesn't make sense. He's been winging it, and it's worked, because he tells himself that he's *smart* and he *knows* what he's doing and *omniscient*. But there's moments where Red laughs at something he said, and Ash feels more mortal than ever.

*

"I've heard there's like, water zombies." Red says.

"*Water zombies?*" Ash repeats, to try and let it sink in, on how stupid that sounds.

"Yeah. They've been called *drowneds* though, which is much cooler." Red gestures, "I don't know if they'll be in these parts, though. I heard about it years back."

Oceans have never been something that Ash has gotten to experience, all that much.

Little pinpricks of light from underneath the water light it up. There's a coral reef that stretches on and on for as long as Ash can see, and it's a marvel that it hadn't been destroyed in the fallout after the initial infection. The current threatens to drag him under; water achingly clear, and it seems as if Ash would be able to just step forward and drag his hand across the fans of coral.

Red stands next to him. He's toeing the line between the water and the fine sand. The air tastes distinctly like salt.

The ocean laps at their feet, the tide pushes in and pulls back out. It'd be nice to wake up to this view, but it's only coming closer to night, and Ash doesn't want to risk being swept away in high tide.

There's moving light too, which Ash vaguely makes out as jellyfish. Poisonous and toxic and beautiful, tentacles made of silk. Something inexplicable pulls Ash towards them. A reflection of them both, maybe, swimming in warm water, too.

"Did you ever hear about the Monument?" Ash wonders, idly.

"The Ocean Monument?" To which Ash affirms with a little hum, "Yeah- I've heard about it. I've never seen one in person, though my friend had drawn one out before -- not sure if it was all that accurate, ha. I've never really, y'know, partook in travellin' by boat."

"We should find one."

“Why?” Red blinks.

“Why *not*? Dude- anyone would get stupid rich off of them. *Then* I could do anything I really want.”

Red laughs. “Sure, let’s steal a boat and crash it immediately because neither of us know how to steer. Ash, you see, I don’t want to have survived *hitmen* and die by *drownin’*. Maybe after we *actually* hit true north.”

Ash shouldn’t have to pause and blink at being included in something after all of this. In another life, maybe, he would’ve just laughed it all off, because it’d be another fine afternoon with just him and Redd, but *this* is the only world. The word, we -- we -- circles around in his head like an orbit. It feels like he’s become a fixture in Red’s life -- more than just a companion. *What the fuck has happened to him?*

He breathes out, turning back around to Red. Maybe it’s a tragic race. One day, they’ll both fizzle out, burst under pressure, litter the universe in elements from a supernova. They keep pushing towards the finish line.

And today -- today, it’s just another fine day.

“Don’t lump me in with you. I think I could steer a boat *fine*.” It’s awfully easy to fall back into everything.

*

They’re both self-proclaimed businessmen. Neither of them really have the credits that they used to, but hey, with a job on the side here or there it’s enough to get by. This also means that they have enough money to get two-bed rooms at inns or hostels. Not because Ash is afraid of being *gay* or whatever, but because it’s more comfortable on your own, right?

But there’s also the rare, unfortunate, time that the inn has sold out of every other room. Ash hopes a meteor comes crashing down. The receptionist is especially apologetic, and they keep on giving them an awkward little smile, as if they’re even confused on *why* Ash and Red want a double bed room, which Ash doesn’t get either.

“I’m really sorry, it’s the only room left.” They repeat, again. “You only need to pay-”

“Just take it.” Ash mutters into Red’s ear, “If *this* one is booked near-full, the other ones will probably be full.” And Ash also doesn’t want to *think* about walking anymore, thank you.

Storm water drips onto the carpet. There’s only so far they can rely on charm, business and currency to get them a room. Sometimes, the evil, evil realization that other people have their own lives removes their own ability to make decisions.

“Fine.” With a sigh, Red relents, and he takes the keys for their room in exchange for only a handful of credits. Ash thinks it’s probably too extortionate with the way this whole building looks, anyway.

The room -- well, at least it’s a *room*.

It's not the worst for one of the shadier looking inns. It'd never win any awards, but at least it's livable. There's no mold growing on the walls, which is a massive upgrade from the last room they had tried to stay in. Ash doesn't know if it counts, really, because abandoned buildings exist in their own category. It's the fact that there's only one bed that dampens this experience.

"Your attempt at haggling sucked." Ash says the moment they shut the door behind them.

Red splutters. "As if you could do *any* better. And you- you didn't even *try* to help out,"

"I told you we could try to sleep on one of the roofs." Ash shrugs, playing nonchalant. He's sure that if he tried to scale a roof in his current condition he'd drop from exhaustion.

"Well, we *aren't*." Red throws his bags down onto the small area that could technically be classified as a living area. It seems pretty dead right now.

Ash *allows* Red to take the first turn with the shower, because he's oh-so generous. Ash goes in next, and the water pressure is terribly off. He guesses that's what they get for choosing this place. It's a small respite, but he's forced to get out early when the warm water rapidly starts turning freezing. He towels his hair dry, he changes into something simple.

"I'm not sleeping on the couch." Ash announces when walking back in, because there's never been a good experience with a motel couch, and he contributed in paying -- *minimally* -- so he's going to fucking sleep on a bed, no matter what.

"I'm not either." Red gestures, as he's already laying in bed. "We don't need to do somethin' like a pillow wall, right?"

It's very obvious that it's meant to taunt Ash. "God, shut the fuck up."

Red laughs at him. "Are you going to just stand there or actually get in already?"

"Fuck- whatever." Ash rolls his eyes. They've shared a lot of spaces before, for body heat, out of forced circumstance, and so on. Ash doesn't know why this -- this specifically, Red asking, the dim light through the window, *this* -- is eliciting so much out of him. He keeps it wrapped under a neutral expression.

He still slips under the covers, right besides Red.

It's a weird thing, to be so close and far away from someone at the same time. He can see all the details of Red's face. Every so often, he'll allow the facemask to come off. It's on the bedside drawer alongside his sunglasses. Ash would stare, trying to make out what makes Red want to hide away from the world. However, he's met with the sight of Red's back, his red hair falling over eggshell white pillows.

There's no point in trying to remain awake. Sometimes, when they would be on opposite sides of the room, Ash would just talk, trying to annoy Red, until the singular dingy pillow on his bed is thrown at him, and Ash laughs, and-- and-- and--

Sometimes, Ash wouldn't give his pillow back. In the morning, he saw Red resting his head on his elbow, rough fabric leaving an imprint in the silver of skin on display. In the evening, there was spit and blood and pus.

Ash sighs. He'd totally be fine with *this* if Red wasn't so fucking awkward, because Ash knows that this is all Red's fault, anyways. He hears the storms outside, bashing against the dusty window. Globbs of rain trickle down, and Ash closes his eyes and hopes to sleep.

And Ash closes his eyes and hopes to sleep. *Ash closes his eyes, and hopes to sleep. Ash--*

"You still awake?" Red murmurs.

"Yeah." Ash breathes out.

The atmosphere is something hushed away and trapped in its own bubble. A single word too sharp could easily destroy and pop it into a firework of soap.

"This arrangement isn't workin'."

"I'm not--"

"Shut up, I'm not sendin' you off to the couch." Red says.

"Well. *You* go on the floor. You're practically at the end of the bed already."

"So are *you*." Red gestures at him, "Whatever. I'm trying to suggest that we come closer together so I don't wake up in the middle of the night when you inevitably come crashin' to the ground."

Ash thinks about arguing, to just be an asshole, but he thinks it over. He announces, "I'm being the big spoon."

There's a strangled, choked sound out of Red. Almost a laugh. "You're *such* a bitch." There's less of a fight put up than Ash thought there'd be.

"Pretentious bastard." Ash says back, light.

It's a routine. It's like smoking; ingrained into Ash's very being. Nicotine stains around his brain; cold metal to his throat. It's the actions of pulling out a cigarette, thin and straight and warped, taking a lighter out, the small flicker of flame, a warmth, so tantalizingly close, it's the ignition between the filter paper and the tobacco inside it, sickeningly sweet and bitter and it runs through his veins

Red sighs. "Fine."

It's not exactly the cleanest way they could have gone around this, and he's half lying when he says that kicking Redd in the back of his knee was an accident, because Ash was meaning to go for his shin instead.

Domesticity has never fit in the apocalypse. It never will, because this, Ash says, isn't anything domestic. It's just out of convenience.

It's still, unequivocally, mortifyingly, *lame*.

Ash still closes his eyes, face resting (not buried, *not buried*) against Red's shoulder blades. He imagines that his heart falls in sync with the constant thrashing of rain outside. Red sighs out another complaint, something muttered soft and low which Ash just tells him to *shut up* and *go to sleep already, dumbass*.

He's always seen Red laugh, he's heard it a grand total of times before, he's heard it in his tone too, hidden underneath the facemask. There's nothing to prepare him for the sensation of feeling it right under his hands.

When Ash wakes up in the morning, from the sun beaming through the blinds, they've managed to keep their position like this. The storm had stopped somewhere in the middle of the night, letting the light come flowing back out. Red is a very stable warmth, more solid than bedrock. Ash wonders if this is what people mean when they say that the most important moments were the ordinary, impermanent ones.

A part of him is also tempted to push Red off.

In the end, he stays in place for a little bit longer. To settle an itch underneath his ribs.

*

The boy coughs out, "Don't- please- just leave me here."

It's sad and awful and shaky. It's a sorry sight. There's something terribly different about seeing corpses, long gone, and someone actively writhing on the floor. A part of Ash aches, despite apathy. Red's always been better with people generally, so Ash stays quiet, and lets him handle it.

This -- this is definitely beyond saving. It's not like Ash's case, where it's just blood loss and a gash. He does not think about the attic. There's sprouts of wither like fungi that creeps along his side, up to the old faded scar over his forehead. Dying is a hazard of traveling. It's a dear friend of the wastelands. It doesn't make it any better.

"I'm sorry." Red says, a simple pleasantry. He doesn't have any sort of *business* tone, and he knows the same as Ash. "My name is Red. This is--"

"A." Ash interrupts.

Red looks at him, eyebrows furrowed. As if it's an even more important secret that Red has been given to guard if Ash won't even give his real name out to a dying man.

The boy doesn't discern them with a reply. He coughs, shaking.

"How'd you get here?" Red asks. There's a careful balance between being actively pitying and comforting and playing normal when talking to someone near the end. It's always

different reactions, some shout, some cry. There's still a hint of true sympathy in Red's voice. As if he'll actually listen and remember whatever he says.

"Wanted- wanted to see the world. Maybe make a name for myself," He laughs, but it comes out as more of a strained wheeze. "Become famous."

"That's good," Red talks back. It's not comfort, but it's not dismissive. He's *good* with talking, despite the fuss he makes about socializing.

"I don't know. It was stupid. If I stayed- If I-" The boy chokes on something between bitterness and grief, shaking. Slowly, the sun rises in the window, the first sight of dawn.

"You shouldn't spend your last moments regretting," Ash speaks up, perfectly controlled.

"I suppose- I just-" He coughs, "I wanted to- no, no- I don't want to die like this-"

There's more pain on Red's face than he's seen in a good while. It's not panic, but just -- sadness. It's a deep, ongoing ache in the background like a bruise turning colours while blood vessels mended. Almost like he's seen something similar play out before; something so deeply entrenched in his heart; something viscerally personal about the way he handles this. Maybe not the same, maybe similar, maybe worse.

Unsteadily, the boy tries to rise up, but he whimpers, digging his hand into his side, into where the effect presumably started. It's *wither*, for goodness sake, it's taking over him from the inside. There's no chance.

"*Wait* -" Red calls out.

"Let me- I want to-" He talks in half formed sentences as he slowly limps, towards the patio.

It's slow, and painful, and there's blood leaking behind him. Ash falters at the sight. It's gut wrenching and raw and it painfully scratches something under Ash's skin, like nausea.

He grips onto the floor, fingers rubbing red and sore, "I need to see- the sky- please, just one more time."

There's the very realistic chance that he isn't even going to be able to make it there in the first place. He'll be able to die with his pride intact, without any help but simmering with regrets. It's not like the boy isn't able to see the sky from here, sunlight peeking through windows, but being inside to see it and seeing it outside are two completely different things. Red's fist clenches, and he unclenches it again in the blink of an eye.

It's excruciating. It's bleak. He stifles down a *fuck*, as the boy tries to move, rot and skin slipping from his side.

Ash thinks of the hot desert sun, of tumbleweed.

Continually talking to himself, trying to do something, trying to dissuade Ash or Red from following because this belongs to him alone, everything he's done has been by himself, solely influenced by his own want and need and it's just been him and himself and he *owns* it.

He's struggling, and he eventually collapses on the front step. Which is enough, because he's able to look up and see the wide open sky above him. It spreads apart -- blues and yellows and oranges. Black rot seeps from his side.

"It's a nice view." Red says, standing near the door.

He wheezes out another laugh. It's shakier, and weaker, all energy drained from him and there's so much blood dripping out from his side. He's *so* young. It really is a shame.

It's almost like he's going to respond back, but he's coughing, his body shaking, and-- and--

It's a blaring reminder -- that the universe is not *kind*. Life is a spontaneous accident. Everything is random chance, and the void will blink back, indifferent, and absent, and cold. Nothing -- *nothing* -- is fucking fair.

*

They don't mention it for the rest of daylight.

Red is clearly thinking about it. It's a mistake, because holding onto things in the apocalypse is bound to weigh them down. And if Red wants to keep on carrying the weight of the world on him, then it *will* kill him.

He is just one person in a vast land riddled with cruelty and beauty, the world's catastrophes scarring and peeking through and furthering the struggles of the people who still live on. The least he can really do is move on -- or else the weight of it all will drag him under.

It's not like Ash isn't guilty of holding onto memories, or regrets, but this kind of thing? Completely different.

Red likes to parade that he's stronger than the usual man, which he might be, but the weight of emotions is a tricky thing. It's like water; they slip through his fingers; kills under pressure.

Tentatively, Ash starts, "You handled it well."

Red turns to him. In the dimming light, some things become clearer.

There's something in his gaze. Something far away. Something like the presence of absence; knowing the boundaries of impossibilities; raw solitude. It's nothing like he has ever seen on him. Red has always been there -- always the same. A constant. It gives Ash something to hold onto. Ash wants to *pry*, he wants to figure out *why* it's always them wounding up with blood (theirs or not, it doesn't matter) spilled, coiled up with secrets.

Ash waits for him to elaborate. He doesn't.

fun fact jepexx was going to die this chapter. i spared him. he's too silly to die

there was gonna be an overarching plotline with the radio stuff but i decided to cut it as it felt too Out of this but i fixed up and kept the scene cause it's cool enough on its own so. fun times don't think about it too hard. also it would be a disservice not to say it's inspired off of [are you in the telescope?](#) by gifgas. <- looove this guy

tenth

Chapter Summary

Red laughs, short. "Living is all about caring."

An unbothered facade, slowly breaking apart for Ash to look into. Maybe breaking isn't the right term. It's the slow pull of curtains on stage, coming further and further apart for the spotlight to land on a singular person. It's the slow waltz of Ash's apathy, of Red's muted patterns; bittersweet competition, desperately wanting to be the one who wins.

It's going to be neither of them -- there will never be a winner. Ash keeps trying.

Chapter Notes

THIS FIC [CH8] NOW HAS [FANART](#) !! holy shit look at it now . it is like a renaissance painting to me <33

It's late in the night when Ash finds out how much it affected Red. Involuntarily.

Ash has been busy watching the sun chase away the shadows on the ceiling as dawn settles in. It's not uncommon to have nightmares -- they come free with the apocalypse experience. He's had his fair share, stifled away, and Red is now shuddering, shaking in his sleep.

Slowly, he turns to the couch and reaches his hand out because this one seems -- worse, somehow. Maybe Ash is just overthinking things, with the tones of the boy's voice still itching at the edge of his brain. He's careful, and slow, because he doesn't want to startle Red and end up with his cold metal at his neck again. Probably straight through it, this time.

"Red," and a little firmer, "*Red.*"

Ash's blood runs cold for a heartbeat, and -- and Red leaps up from the shitty, rough couch and his composure is falling apart, pure and raw. Information is processing through his brain, looking at Ash and Ash almost thinks that he's going to try to fight him but instead, *instead* -- despite it all -- he's gripping onto Ash's shirt, and he's yanking him closer, and closer until his head is buried into Ash's shoulder.

It's a tense few seconds. His breath is tight and tornado-heavy in his throat. Ash's hands hover over Red's back, unsure what to do.

“Red?” He repeats, again.

“Shut up,” is the response he gets, “*Shut up.*” It’s desperate, and a little broken around the edges.

“Heard you the first time,” Ash murmurs, softer than usual.

Everywhere, life goes on. The air smells like blood and summer.

It takes a few seconds for it all to sink in properly. Red is shaking in his arms, not exactly sobbing because there’s still that sick sense of needing to stay composed, but his breathing is wet and harsh and messy. It’s not loud or dramatic; it’s almost as if he’s trying to hide it from Ash.

He’s awkwardly holding onto Red, putting everything into faux confidence that it’s comforting. He hopes it is, anyway. Red has a white-knuckle grip on his shirt, which means that he isn’t going to be going anywhere for a good while. Ash always parades as better (because, of course, he is) but Red has always been stronger physically; the sword a constant reminder of what he could do. It’s something Ash’s mind delves into, during downtimes, and pretends to not notice every other time. But now -- now everything is seemingly crumbling.

But it’s not like he can think about that now, when Red is burrowing into Ash. He smells like honeyed death. It’s warm. Not skin-to-skin warm, but -- warm enough.

Ash doesn’t know how long they sit there for. Maybe lightyears. Realistically, maybe a few minutes. It’s still the least he can do, because Red obviously doesn’t want him to go away. He can’t feel Red crying or anything really, just taking time to breathe in and out; a moment of respite.

If he didn’t know any better, Ash would guess that Red is listening to his pulse. But that -- that’s foolish.

Regardless, Ash tries to make his own breathing steady. It wouldn’t help either of them if Ash was panicking -- which Ash would never do, anyways. Quiet moments like these are so rare. It’s a shame that it’s in this situation.

Slowly, and very *very* tentatively, Red leans away. He looks more unguarded without his sunglasses; they’re lying on the half of the coffee table that isn’t smashed in. Ash still doesn’t know why he insists on sleeping with the facemask. It’s like he needs another layer of protection. His hands are scrunched into Ash’s shirt.

He lets Red ride through it. He thinks they’ve delved into dependency a long time ago.

“You okay to talk about it?” Ash asks, low.

“No, no, not now.” Red says.

“Okay.” Ash whispers back. Because he can’t peer into Red’s mind and find out what’s made him freak out so bad. “That’s fine.”

“I know.” Red’s hands slowly fall from his shirt.

The space in the room seems so much emptier when Red inches back to laying down on the couch, breathing out. They’re not going to talk about this in the morning. It’s a silent agreement; almost mandatory for everything that happens when the sun goes down. It’s -- it’s trust.

“Try to sleep, you’ve still got two hours.”

“Yeah. Okay. G’night Ash.”

“Night, Red.”

*

They’ve come to a split. It’s something that Ash has come to mentally call these moments in land where multiple biomes meet at a certain point. A jungle branches off at one point, and then there’s the desert to the east, and snowy plains to the west, and he thinks that’s a mesa in the near distance. These places are so, so interesting to Ash. They’re like a little glitch. He wonders about the other oddities in land formation he’s heard about. He wonders if he’ll ever see them.

This is the only world that there’ll ever be. Ash looks over at Red. He’s messing with a compass, moreso just to have something in his hands than actually reading it.

“How are- ah, no, nevermind.”

“What?” Red asks, tilting his head.

“It’s nothing.”

“C’mon, you can’t just leave it at that.”

Horribly, Ash has found himself ignoring all of his previous parameters that he has set up for interacting with anyone before. Like he doesn’t think without speaking nowadays, which leads him ending up in situations like this.

“Really, it’s nothing.” Ash shrugs, still trying to play it off.

“Bullshit, tell me.”

Ash sighs. These are the times when Red’s stubbornness specifically pisses him off, when he’s latched onto a topic. It’s all spite curled into one single being.

“How have you still trusted me?” Ash asks, because *really*, what the fuck.

It sat in the back of his mind like the gentle whirr of complex machinery, always there, but never delving deeper.

“I thought we were over this.” Red says.

“You made me ask.” Ash gestures, unimpressed.

"Well, you stayed."

It's as simple as that. Ash still feels unsatisfied. There's something just a bit deeper, under the surface, that he needs to delve into. His eyes are flickering between his eyes, and his chest. Ash wonders, if he looks hard enough, if he'll be able to see through his jacket, through the pale flesh and the circulating blood and the bone, and right to Red's beating heart.

"And initially?" Ash pries, a different angle.

Red goes quiet, because, really, this isn't something they just bring up. He keeps silent for a little longer before speaking up, "Someone once put all of their trust into me."

Ash stares. He wasn't expecting a response like that. Or anything at all. Maybe Red would shrug, talk some shit about *business*, or just anything other than that.

“It's-” Red shrugs, suddenly stopping. “It was long ago, it's- well, it's not something for now.”

It's the most awkward and clumsiest dismissal Red has tried to pull. Ash lets him. “That's fine.” He pivots, “Which way are we going, then?”

Red squints at the biomes. “Mesa, and then we should arrive at an outpost, stock up, and then onwards.”

Ash sneaks a glance at Red's map, slotted into a pocket on his bag. It's not something that he should try to be *secretive* about, because it's just a map, and Red always has it at an easy access. It just feels oddly personal. Ash had been in possession of it at one point, after all. Yet, something like a moral code, sentiment, whatever, made him glance over the marks and notes, trying to ignore them. It wasn't his time to look.

Red makes a small noise, waving a hand at Ash, and then he's back in the present again.

*

Ash runs after Red, one hand holding onto the ladder.

He never thought that trains would be one of the first methods of transportation to come back, not really. Ash always saw them as big, hulking machines meant for ages long gone. He didn't think a lot of things would come back either, and yet. It's kind of exhilarating, in a way that's not just pure adrenaline survival, to run after it and hope that he doesn't get rolled under its always moving wheels.

Red is already up in the cargo container, and Ash clambers over the side and drops down. Dust explodes from underneath him.

It shimmers red, coarse under his fingers, it's clearly redstone dust. It's packed into little crates, but there's still some that have either leaked or escaped and sits on top of wood. It's

shit, but it's the good, lucrative material shit that makes people rich again. It's another source of electricity; powers machines and fragments, this train.

It's not like Ash will immediately lose his sense of smell or anything like that, but inhaling a lot of it is definitely not beneficial to his health. It sticks to his clothes, too, and to his gloves. Ash coughs.

He looks over at Red to see how well he's faring. "You blend in."

Red snorts. The facemask prevents him from inhaling as much dust, but it will definitely stick too. It wouldn't look out of place. "Thanks."

Ash leans back, against the wall. The wooden crates underneath are uncomfortable, but it's definitely faster than walking on foot. It's a shame that there's not train connections from everywhere. He's sat in the corner, the only place where shade covers the container. Because it's still summer. Red had shuffled over next to him at some point; their knees touching. Neither of them make a move.

"How'd you even learn about this?" Ash asks. The apocalypse doesn't exactly give out tourism brochures, because one of the last (first?) operating trains would be on the front page.

"Hm? Oh, I heard about it from one of my friends -- Cube. He actually helped work on this," *Yeah, it makes sense it was him.* "But- yeah, I just figured it'd save days of walking." Ash remembers Red saying that *it doesn't run for long*, but it still saves time. "We just need to hop off before the cargo drop-off point. Then we just continue on foot."

"Huh." Ash says. That's a lot of information.

"It was kept secret for a while but you can't *really* hide a whole freight train."

"It's impressive." Ash has to admit. It's also kind of *insanely* cool.

A part of Ash wants to dig his hands into the cables and parts that keep this whole thing running, and the other part of Ash knows that he'd lose his hands if he tried to. The sky passes above them, earnest blues passing, and Ash wonders, how much he'll never get to understand, about a life where he once had the universe in his palm. He just wants to *know*. The misery and sorrow that comes with knowledge does nothing to deter him.

Every day, he can't be unmade. A part of him clings to the world more in every moment, like the telescope situated into the ground, like the rooftop reaching into the sky. He'll never be able to forget this.

Machines sing with his veins. A hot spot of contact next to him. He doesn't want to.

He wonders what Red thinks about; wonders whether it's all cobweb-filled or pure, overwhelming covetous capitalism. He makes his living off of rigged coin-tosses.

"How do they keep it running?" Ash asks, idly, and he doesn't really think Red has an answer.

And Red starts *talking*.

Honestly, halfway through the explanation, Ash does end up zoning out. It's mostly because he doesn't understand half the shit Red is saying; as much as he loves weird old world electronics, he still doesn't get the redstone side.

It's still pleasing to listen to, in the background, like a hazy dream drifting into reality. It might be the accent.

Red has always had a particular cadence of speaking. It's one of the first things he picked up, and it's still prevalent today. Especially the hand gestures he keeps doing. Ash doesn't understand much. He still watches. Maybe he'll make Red explain it to him again, just to annoy him, and Ash thinks about the list of rants he'll go on before, but he'll still re-explain it because, well, Ash asked.

The train rumbles on, steady, as if it would outlive all of them. It definitely will. The constant stress hasn't done anyone any favours.

Eventually, Red asks, "Do we still have the radio?"

"We have a radio, yes. Do we have a *working* radio? No." Ash sighs.

"Oh." *What a dumbass*. "Couldn't you try to fix it?"

"I don't have the shit to fix it. We might just need to get a new one." Ash says, but he still leans over to get it out of its pocket, just to mess with it idly.

Red watches him, quiet. Neither of them move from this position, and they end up talking quietly, a seamless transition in and out of pettiness and laughter. Red moves on from the radio issue; to the conversations that he had overheard at the last motel; to how this one diner closed and it ruined his life when he was a kid; to the difficulties of fucking *laundry*. Ash plays back when he can, focusing incredibly hard to stop the little grin on his face from appearing. God, *what has happened* to him?

And it's just words, just a small point of contact through layers of clothes. Red looks better than he has in weeks.

*

It's been a while since Ash had partook in rooftop hopping.

He's still used to it, because it was the only way to move around in those sun rises high and dips low before long towns. It's all just throwing bags over roofs and jumping over again and again, climbing up pipes and any other types of connections they can get their hands and legs onto, but there's enough zombies lurking that a few bullets and a sword won't cut it this time.

Ash lands with a steady, satisfactory thump of his legs hitting concrete. It's uselessly tiring sometimes, but living is uselessly tiring too, and he's still doing that.

This area is a prime candidate for rooftop hopping, honestly. The architecture is a little shoddy, but flat, and high.

Red lands next to him a moment later, pushing his sunglasses back up as they start to slip. Ash won't hesitate to say that he's better at it, later, though, as the sun is already down.

They're just hoping to make it to the outskirts to sleep in, instead of the main area of town. Usually, they'd just knock down the first rooftop door and file down into the least destroyed room, but there's too many zombies that are out for either of them to be comfortable risking it.

If they keep their footsteps just quiet enough, hope that the moon is only peeking over the horizon, then it'll be easy. Ash quietly watches Red gather his thrown over bag, moving to the next edge already.

It's kind of stupid, following Red. He's still here. Ash feels like they've gone deeper than a simple job a long time ago. It's probably too late to be realizing that now.

"Shitty situation." Ash murmurs, kicking a loose pebble.

"You're the one who wanted to check out the mall." Red reminds, which is the reason why they're so late.

"*You* insisted on looking in every store." Ash huffs. They still have to survive no matter what, life edged between zombies and danger and catastrophes and blinks of safety.

*

Ash had almost come to forget that one night. He still remembers it, in the back of his mind as dread, but it's in the way you remember a discomfiting dream for the first five minutes, thinking it'll haunt you all day only for it to slither out of your subconscious as soon as you look outside.

Walking has taken up most of their time, and also trying to survive the summer heat. It's in full swing again. The heat fades in and out, ebbs out, stays gone, and then swings back around when Ash thought it just got bearable enough. It solidifies like a physical weight on his shoulders, pressing him down. Ash thinks he's going to lose his mind having to survive off of uncomfortably warm water for the next few weeks.

It's different, when they're both sitting around at a little outcrop to eat. Old trees provide shade that scatters across the ground. It's not much. It's in moments like these when the world slows down to take a breath. Ash is busy setting up the pot over the flame, when Red begins;

"I used to have this- this one friend." Red speaks up.

"One friend? Wow, Red, you're so *popular*." Ash mocks, resting his chin in his hand.

"Ash, shut up for a moment." Red sounds *serious*.

Ash rolls his eyes, just to be petty, even though Red can only see his back. He does stop speaking, because as much as he loves being an asshole, he has the knowledge that somewhere in this, there's Red's honest-to-god emotions buried underneath, peeking out into the sun.

"I've just been thinking about, uh, what you had asked me earlier. About trust." Red begins.

Ash blinks. Takes this information in.

A small part of him wants to turn around, to see Red at what's his most vulnerable but that's just an inherent part of trust, too. There's a reason why Red isn't saying it when they're looking at each other.

He might be an asshole, a bitch, a bastard, and everything else that he's been called, and his morals have been rotten through for the longest time.

Ash had brought this up two weeks ago, maybe more. *Why now?*

"You don't need to apologize." Ash settles on, hopes it sounds casual.

"Well, alright. Still, Ash."

It's a small verbal hint. Ash isn't dense, it's mostly just that he's never *cared*. His whole life, nowadays, has come to settle with Red's with some sort of sick amusement from the universe. *Ash* added on at the end, a sort of request -- a prayer, if Ash thinks about it. He does turn to look, because Red wants him to.

"Just- I feel like you deserve an explanation, y'know?"

Ash gives him a half hearted shrug back. "You've been- ah, do I *want* to say this- well, you've been nice enough already, pretentious bastard."

"That sounds like a contradiction." Red says, tilting his head.

"Don't get me wrong- you're still a massive bitch, but you can be- kind. Sometimes." He thinks of the words that rolled off Red's tongue as comfort.

Red laughs. Sort of distant, sort of far away. "Well- the one friend, really, he was more like a little brother to me. He was- good, really, kind. Ah, fuck, I don't know how to talk about this. We promised to try our best, you know? Well, really, he tried to make me promise to be better."

"Oh." Ash says, lamely. "Is he-"

"Nah, he's not dead. We're just- estranged, I guess." Red says, voice strained, which really sounds like a fate much worse. It clearly is.

"Estranged?" Ash repeats.

"It happened a while ago. Three years, I think." Red sighs. "He's the one who left."

There is some sort of awful, raw ache in Red's voice. These things just don't go away. It's not like he can pour down a health potion and watch it all fix itself -- it will stay -- it will fester -- it will linger.

Tentative, Ash prods, "What happened, then?"

Red is silent for a moment longer. "He got- hurt, really bad. Almost died. And it was my fault. It didn't help that I wasn't exactly the best person, back then. I just, fucked up, and he couldn't do it any longer. He wanted to have fun, like- like he *should* have been doing all along. Not playing with his life."

It's quiet. It's hell on earth.

Red continues. "I messed up so fucking bad. I don't blame him for leavin', no, not at all, you know? He was *just* a kid- well, no, not really, he was just a few years younger than me, but, to me, he was just a *kid*. Seeing him bleeding out was- *fuck*. It was *horrible*. He couldn't look at me the same anymore, you know?"

Ash, resolutely, does *not* know.

It's one of those things where they diverge. Ash has not cared about someone in a long, long time. He cares about ideals; about money; about power. Ash cons and he manipulates situations and if he can't then he's always been good at outrunning everything. Ash moves and keeps moving; drives with ambition.

And Red -- Red *is* loyalty incarnate. Ash has known this. He knows this like the constant of how the moon orbits around the earth and the earth orbits around the sun and the sun orbits around the center.

"I didn't mean for him to get hurt, but he still did. It's a miracle that he even survived the axe swing." Red looks away. "I cared but -- not in the right way. He left a month later. He wanted me to be nicer, I guess."

"I'm sorry." Ash says; genuine. It's the only thing he can say, really.

Red shakes his head dismissively. "It's been long enough. I don't know where he left to go."

"I mean. You were an informant, you can just talk your way around, can't you?"

"It's not as simple as that." Red says, messing with the strings of his mask. "I don't know. I'd usually not care but- it'd feel wrong. Somehow, I still have *morality*." He does a half-assed gesture for effect, too.

Red sighs, again, heavier. "I know that he's still out there, you know. That's enough."

Ash nods, slow. It's a lot of information to take in. Something that long ago, would have been kept caged in Red's ribs, and he's just laying it bare because-- because-- it's *trust*. (What an awful confession). Ash has never been used to navigating these topics, because it's easier to just get on with whatever he's meant to do, and now they're talking about the *past* and Red is trusting, fucking *trusting* him, of all people, with this.

Maybe Ash should've seen this collision coming when he hand-fed Red the apple. Before that, even. Maybe when he promised to stay.

"You know, when you had the nightmare and woke up..." Ash trails off, because he's not really sure how to phrase it. He's sure Red will get it, anyways.

"Oh, yeah. It's okay, my bad," Red waves his hand again. "I just freaked out, the whole thing with the boy- god, he was just a *kid* too. He reminded me of *him* in that moment, and it was *awful*. And later- Ash- I just- I don't know, man. I don't want to lose *you*."

White-knuckle grip on his shirt, honeyed death, lightyears--

Ash knows. That Red will follow him to the end. He ignores the dizzying feeling that surrounds it.

Because there's always the possibility that Ash could just *die*. Of course, Ash has acclimated to the threat, but, he's just generally prone to life or death scenarios. It's a major flaw with his plan of survival.

But the idea -- hearing it get *said* -- is different. It's actualized, thrown into the world of reality, and it can never be unsaid. Red makes Ash fucking *confused*.

And he can't deal with it. Not now, or ever.

"You could tell me more about him." Ash says, mostly as a distraction.

It strikes him that he still doesn't know a lot about Red.

Maybe it comes with *business*. God, that guy would be perfect to become some sort of politician. Instead, he's just some traveller at the moment. (Even though that doesn't really encompass it, either).

"Well, ah, his name was Spepticle, Spep, and he was just a nice kid, y'know? Mischievous, kinda naive. It's kind of like- it's like when you left. I didn't know how much I'd miss that sort of connection until it's gone. It was- it was just unfortunate, I guess. Preventable."

Red has to stop to take a deep breath in. Ash stays quiet, decides to let the words linger in the background of his mind.

He remembers the name. The flier on a passing bulletin board -- Mid's photographs. Distant and intimate.

"I really do miss him." Red says, looking over at Ash. "Pass me a cigarette."

Ash stares at him, and thinks about being more of a bitch for a moment, but really. He needs it. He slips the carton out of his pockets, passing one over. "You're paying for the next pack."

"Whatever." Red rolls his eyes.

Red takes it from his hand, fingers brushing. It's surprising how smoothly he's still able to light it even with, well, everything. He takes a slow drag. Smoke drifts into the air.

"He just- didn't like how materialistic I was. He knew that I was a businessman, you know, not an exact beacon of ethics but -- fuck, he told me to try and live my life to the fullest one time, or something like that. It was kind of weird hearin' that from him 'cause he was so- *young*."

"What does living your life to the fullest include?" Ash doesn't think it's his place to pry. He still tries.

"I don't know. I guess he just wanted me to do better," Red trails off, with a little shrug and a sigh, taking another drag. Exhaling smoke, he continues, "God, I used to be such a fuckin' asshole."

"Even more than now?" Ash raises an eyebrow.

"Dude. It was bad." Red huffs out a dry laugh. It's messy. "Fuck, he really was just like a little brother. Things just- changed. I can't blame him. I let him, just, *fuck*. I let him get hurt one too many times, you know?" The words fall uneasy from Red's mouth. Stars line the page.

The world hurts, an ache engrained; wastelands blink, uncaring. Constantly moving on.

"He still cared just- a lot, despite it all. Tried to get me to care more, too." Red continues, unbridled affection seeping into his words.

Ash is hit with the striking realization of *just* how much Red fucking *feels*. Everything is a mosaic of other people, slipping their own fragments into each other. It's dizzying. The suit is being peeled off layer by layer, undoing buttons down to bare skin.

"Is that why you don't get into fights anymore?" Ash asks.

Red rolls his eyes, "Nah, I just don't like *fighting* most of the time. It's just tiring, you know? It's more like, I just keep myself in check."

It's sort of a shame, because Red is (begrudgingly) skilled. He has the wisdom to know that he shouldn't say that, so he just nods along. This is just -- a lot of shit to take in. It's not everyday that Ash sits through the retelling of a tragedy.

Ash nods along, still sitting on the floor, watching Red. Sunlight through the gaps in the canopy dapples over him. Earthbound, wholly terrene. Mortality reeks off of him. He's greater and sharper than a calamity and yet he fucking sits here, leaning against a tree, so blindingly fallible and made of flesh.

He thinks it over, and over again. It *kind of* clicks. Ash asks, "What, so you take pity on anyone you find because of him?"

"Well. Don't phrase it like that but- yeah, he did tell me to be nicer, in layman's terms."

Ash thinks it over *again*. “And then you proceeded to *indebt* me to you.”

“Hey, he said to be *nicer*, not to be nice all the time.” Red says, with a little laugh, and it sounds all the more like him, just a little bit -- broken around the edges.

Ash doesn't really know what to say, with his ribs enclosing on his chest, squeezing his lungs impossibly tight.

“He was just- important to me. He still is.”

“It's like you crave humanity.” Ash blurts out.

Red stares at him for a moment, as if he finds it funny that it's *Ash* asking him. He doesn't know what that means. “And what do you mean by that?”

“I don't know. Friendship. Camaraderie. *Companionship*. Whatever name you want to call it.”

“I'm already human.” Red answers, and doesn't answer. “You're important to me too, you know.”

“I know.” Ash says.

He doesn't know. Something tells him he's known since the beginning.

*

Ash wakes too early to an almost-dawn, and Red is sitting on the opposite side of the bed bathed in shallow, feeble light. Mundane and stupid.

(Sometimes he thinks it would be nice to tell someone about this, too -- about how beautiful it is, through the window, with the sky a pale blue and orange and white and fading colours in between. But of course everyone has already seen the sunrise).

It glints against the edges of Red's sunglasses; drags down his throat. It doesn't hesitate, long familiar, the light redefining itself around pale skin. The early light adds golden sparks to Red's hair, a halo. Not anywhere closer to a saviour since they first met.

(But there's just no easy thing to call it, is there, the gaping wound in his chest, still-beating pure heart, the reminder that the world is cruel, that there's someone waiting).

The sun shines in his eyes. He has a feeling that he won't be able to go back to sleep after this.

There's *something* here -- submerged and half-stifled, but Ash has spent months now living with Red's silences and indulging the snark. There's some nebulous thing just in the corner of the room, an understanding carved into negative space, and he can almost wrap his hands around it. It's just in reach, just right in front of him--

“What are you looking at?”

Ash's thoughts slip away, repeated like an echo until fading out. He can't feel it anymore, focused on the breathing present.

Kindled away beneath asterisks are these kinds of mundane moments.

"Just at how stupid you look."

*

"Fucking, True North." Ash hisses, landscape never ending in front of him. It just keeps on going into the horizon, and Ash thinks that maybe they'll never make it at this rate. It's only a few more months until the last stop.

Red lets out a short laugh, "Think about the pay we were promised, c'mon."

"I could literally trap you by putting a couple of credits under a cardboard box." Ash says, rather liking the mental image.

"I wouldn't fall for a *couple* of credits." Red defends himself, lazily.

"Dude- just, keep telling yourself that." Ash decides to circle back around to the first topic, "Has anyone ever been to True North?" Because Red is the most likely person to have an actual answer.

"There's been rumours." Red gives a little gesture. "I don't really believe them."

"Alright." Ash sighs. He decides to tack on, "You're useless."

Red shoves him lightly, "Excuse me?"

Ash grins and then they're back to playing rough with each other. It's incredibly fun, if he ignores that they're two full grown men trying to shove each other onto the floor outside of a department store. Which he does.

He's a little sad that he doesn't have anything properly underhanded, like a bunch of sand in his pockets to throw into Red's face -- well, that wouldn't really work, either. Ash is yanking on Red's suit, and Red is constantly trying to go for his legs. It's not like they want to kill each other. Well, Ash, maybe; he thinks that it's what his heart wants to do sometimes.

Ash does get a pretty good knee into Red's stomach, but that's just enough to throw him off-balance. He yanks on Red's suit again, pulling him down to the floor with him, dust and sand kicking up all around them.

Pebbles dig into his back, but he doesn't really care as Red is half splayed on top of him, which is a much more pressing issue. Ash loosens his grip on Red's suit immediately as if he's been burned.

It's another moment or so, before Red does sit back up off of Ash's chest, fixing his sunglasses.

Red sighs, tired. “You’re such a bitch.”

Ash grins. His canines peek out, catching on his lip for a second. Ash wonders idly how it’d feel to bite into his skin, whether it’d puncture the epidermis, down into his blood vessels. Ash immediately discards the thought into a paper shredder, and spreads it out into the river like ashes, and never thinks about it again.

“True North, huh.” Red repeats, suddenly circling back around. There’s never a straight conversation with this guy.

“Yeah, you know, the thing we’ve been going towards.” Ash gestures. “It’s like, the end of the world, isn’t it?”

“People have called it that, yeah.” Red says, flexing his wrist idly.

Half-invested, Ash just raises an eyebrow.

“A lot of people. Speg, too.” Red says, the anecdote slipping past his lips like he couldn’t stop it. He’s in a constant state of the zipper in his body being pulled up to the top, before being seemingly yanked down, baring everything.

“Yeah?” Ash prods, allowing Red to talk if he wants to. He’s also kind of curious, really.

“Y’know, Speg always wanted to go there.” Red sighs, candid and raw. He does a hand gesture; it really wouldn’t be Red without them.

“For fun?”

“I guess, a little, yeah. I guess I’m just, what’s it, livin’ vicariously for him? No, no, that’s not how the phrase works- ah, whatever. You know what I’m gettin’ at.” Red shrugs, “The pay is nice, too, I mean. He’s always wanted to know more about space, or somethin’ like that. Really liked the moon.”

“You know,” Ash begins, “For a *businessman*, you seem to care a lot.”

Red laughs, short. “Living is all about caring.”

An unbothered facade, slowly breaking apart for Ash to look into. Maybe breaking isn’t the right term. It’s the slow pull of curtains on stage, coming further and further apart for the spotlight to land on a singular person. It’s the slow waltz of Ash’s apathy, of Red’s muted patterns; bittersweet competition, desperately wanting to be the one who wins.

It’s going to be neither of them -- there will never be a winner. Ash keeps trying.

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Ash messes with the ring on his finger, twisting it around idly. It’s a solid weight, thin silver snaking around. It’s definitely not the flashiest, but it feels nice. It’s not uncomfortable either, it’s one of the few perks that fingerless gloves have except for looking sick as fuck.

Red's watching him, out the corner of his eye, in front of him. Grass brushes past their legs. It's a meadow. It's not the worst place they've been to. He keeps on staring at Ash's hands, the ring, and Ash's hands.

It becomes almost unbearable. "What, do you want one?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I just, I didn't really take you for a ring kind of guy." Red says, with mild amusement.

"Good, cause this ring is the only one I have. What kind of guy did you take me for?" Ash asks.

Red does a small little hand gesture, "I don't know, it's just like, the whole gun thing, you know? Like, weapons and fast cars."

Ash blinks. "They're not mutually exclusive."

They're still walking. They're getting closer to True North. A few more months to go, when it was originally over a year from the starting point. Days -- moments -- everything seems to go by quickly. Ash wonders if he'll find out anything else about himself; changing awfully fast.

"I guess not," Red relents.

"It's like me saying you're not a piercings and capitalism guy." Ash gestures.

Red makes a small little sound, one of his hands coming up to tap at the thin gold ring on his ear. It glimmers in the sun. "I *guess*."

"How'd you even like, pierce it?"

"We used a needle and an ice cube."

"That sounds like a breeding ground for infection."

"And somehow I'm still alive." Red says, telltale grin in his voice.

This has all been for a stupid little job that Ash had no sentiment attached to it. Maybe not anymore. Still -- Ash never leaves things half-finished. It all ties back into a neat little knot. Eventually.

"I used to have a lot more rings." Ash says idly, and a little *really?* from Red just makes him continue. "They were sick as fuck, honestly. It fucking sucked, losing them." He's still pissed about it.

"Huh." Red says back, as intelligent as always.

Ash just gives a little shrug, when Red stops in front of him. "Hold on,"

He has the view of seeing Red rifle through his pockets, the collected composure of a businessman who has *everything* in complete order fracturing as he pulls out just about anything Ash could think of. He thinks he sees a collection of coins, or maybe bottle-caps, in one of his hands, as he continues searching.

“What the fuck.” Ash mutters, “The hell are you trying to find?”

Red makes a dismissive noise. *Wow, how fucking helpful.* He’s ready to start prodding again, but Red finds what he’s looking for as;

“Hold out your hand.” Red coaxes.

“Dude.” Ash stares at him blankly for a moment, but ends up putting his hand out anyways. “Are you going to fucking propose, or something?”

“Can you ever be quiet?” Red sighs.

“I love the sound of my own voice too much.” Ash grins.

Red rolls his eyes, but does actually start doing *something*. Ash isn’t exactly sure, as he can feel the cold metal of a small chain against his index finger, being delicately wrapped around. It feels like he’s done this before. Ash stares down, a little transfixed at how carefully -- tenderly, almost -- he seems to be doing this. It’s never something that he thought to associate with Red. He’s the bright sparks from a fire, explosions of crimson, not *this*.

“Pass me your knife.” Red says. He explains, at the blank look Ash gives him, “I need to cut the excess off.”

“This- *dude* - you’re going to slice my finger off.”

“Do you want me to try to do this with my sword?” Red asks, petty.

Ash resigns himself to the fate of possibly missing one finger. He slips his other hand back into his trench coat, and passes his hunting knife. It seems to have been used for everything other than hunting, at this point. Red takes it from him in his other hand.

For a few seconds, as Red saws away at the iron (at sinew, at fundamental structures). Ash hasn’t seen him do something as intricate as this in a while, hand busy on his sword or messing with a few credits. A part of his brain recognises that the chain doesn’t need to be on his finger for this part, but he trusts Red. He keeps sawing, and Ash is pretty sure he’s going to walk away bloodied and fingerless and--

The chain breaks. There’s no blood. Only the remains of a small chain, and then there’s more fumbling over his hand, more components being attached to make it an actual ring. Then, it just lays there.

Red’s hands leave his. Iron remains, interlocked in chain, overlapping each other, into a single thread, and the sun hits it just right. He messes with it for a moment, readjusting. It’s also insanely fucking cool. It’s unfamiliar. A horrible part of Ash’s brain wants it to become familiar.

“You know, at least you didn’t cut my finger off.” Ash says. He doesn’t know how to phrase the feeling in his chest into sounds and syllables.

Red just laughs, “You’ve gotta have more faith in me, man.”

He doesn’t know how to respond to that, either, so he goes back to messing with the chain. “This is actually sick as fuck.”

“Yeah?” Red pries.

(Red has always been a dog with a bone when he finds out *information*, not letting it go, tucking it away into files. It used to piss Ash off. He vaguely recognises it’s what made him such a good informant).

“Of course.” Ash grins.

*

Ash has always been the type of man that the world is forced to bow to.

There’s also some moments, in his glorious and callous years of living, that have made him pause and stop.

These come and go every so often, although *caring* about someone else nowadays makes them appear more commonly. This, however, does not fall anywhere near that category.

It’s not everyday that you’re faced with your old boss (not exactly, a friend? a colleague?) coming crashing in through the doors of the little hide-y hole apartment that they’ve decided to stay in.

It’s Planet. It’s fucking *Planet*. *Technically*, Planet is Ash’s former old boss. There’s nothing quite as *humbling* as having someone who is younger than you have exactly the same executive power.

There’s two other people with them (*oh god*, *oh fuck no*) and they’re all awkwardly and uncomfortably strewn out across the floor. They’re shouting *close the door; close the door!* and then there’s the even more awkward and uncomfortable silence that splits across the room as they realize that there’s Ash and Red in the room, too. And then there’s the minute shifts and movements of stifled panic as they realize there’s a gun trained on them. There’s only one bullet, but they don’t have to know that.

“Wait- wait -”

Red’s looking back at Ash, and back at Planet, his sword already outstretched and pointed.

“Oh hey- don’t- *stop*. I know him.” Ash tries to de-escalate. Maybe a little hypocritical, as he’s pointing his own glock at the two others (he *can’t* fucking believe this) and there’s a musket with an attached bayonet firmly planted in Planet’s grip, pointed at them too.

“That’s great, because I know him too.” Red says, hushed, to Ash. He sounds almost irritated. This cannot mean anything good.

Planet keeps on staring at them. He’s always had this overwhelming outworld feeling to him. As if they’ve never belonged to the earth, or the place where bombs had fallen and fallen over and over again. He’s also just human. Following next to them is, as if Ash’s day couldn’t get any worse, Bacon and Jaron. They’re all wearing the same patch sewn onto their clothes, a simple design, which intrigues Ash. They have to be close.

“Hi Ash.” Planet says. Still holding on tightly to the musket.

“Hey Planet.” Ash greets back, to be polite. He decides to ignore Bacon and Jaron temporarily, for the sake of his health.

They’re stuck in a deadlock. Ash doesn’t want to be the first to lower his glock, and Planet doesn’t want to let go either. Trust issues happen naturally; the world is unfair.

“What’s this all about?” Red is the first to break the silence.

”Uh- there were raiders. And we didn’t want to get raided. So we ended up running through, and we really didn’t know there was anyone here. We can- we can go if you want?” Jaron speaks up.

“*Jaron,*” Bacon hisses.

Ash grits his teeth. He almost -- just *almost* -- wants to actually pull the trigger.

“Raiders? All the way out *here*?” Red prods.

“Yes- look, sorry for last time-” Planet says, in a voice that sounds distinctly unapologetic, “but we, *I don’t know*- they just decided to go after us.”

Something about that triggers Jaron and Bacon to talk, and the three of them are all starting to talk at once. Ash almost feels a kinship with Red at this moment from annoyance.

Then -- silence cuts through the whole room almost like they've been transported to another dimension as there’s indistinct noise coming from the other side of the door. It’s muffled, and quiet, but they can all hear it, as a group of three, maybe four, people running up through the building. There’s heavy steps on the staircase, and as soon as they fade away, to the roof, the three of them go right back to talking.

And they’re all *arguing*, and Ash can only hear snippets of *hey, Jaron was the one who did the whole thing with the pigs, and okay, but Planet started it first*, and there’s something else about chickens and a court case that Ash doesn’t have the time to listen to.

Ash puts his hand up, to try and garner their attention. “Okay- shut up already-”

“What’s in it for us if we let you stay?” Red cuts in, and he has that *tone* on him again.

Whatever between him and Planet must not be that big of a deal if Red can find it in himself to extort him. Ash tries to keep his sigh quiet.

They can't exactly leave because the raiders are out there, and there's now two more people that know they're around here. Ash thinks that Planet is the only one with a proper weapon, too. It's one of the unluckiest scenarios they could've ended up in.

"We'll, uh- we won't bother you?" Jaron tries to offer.

"Dude- oh my god, we're *done* for. That's *him*."

"Bacon, have some hope."

It's like a comedy sketch from old times. Ash has a headache already.

"Bacon *shut the fuck* up." Ash says.

Planet stares blankly at Red. "There's three of us and only two of you. There's four raiders. You're outnumbered no matter what."

"They don't know we're here though." Red says, spinning Planet around into a little circle. "Call it egotistical but you guys won't be able to win. Y'know, I thought you already knew this but there's no one out here that would do something for nothing. In business, it's always *quid pro quo*."

"Those are big words for you." Ash mutters.

Ash then sidesteps the small kick that Red sends him.

"Well- what would you want from us?" Planet looks at them blankly. He's looking back at Ash and then at Red again.

"Just a favour," Red says, which might as well be code for *I just want you in my debt*. "It's much better than your lives *and* items being taken, right?"

Planet glances at Ash for a moment. Ash shrugs back. It's not at all dissimilar to the way that he's ended up trailing along Red. Though, evolved, taking on its own form; pulled from remains of stars and dust and gas.

"I want to know now." Bacon sees right through it, jumping into conversation. Ash has to focus on breathing in.

"Of course," Red shrugs, the way he commands the conversation is flawless to the point it pisses Ash off. He still seems antsy about releasing the grip on his sword.

They've ended up talking in circles, for a little while longer, anyways. Ash steps in, frustrated at one point, and it goes better from there. Not exactly well, but better. It's just a few supplies, much less than what'd they lose if they continued getting hunted down. Ash leans over to Red, at the end.

“Do you make everyone you work with *owe* you?”

“It’s business practice. What, are you jealous?”

“*What?*” And, “Fuck off.”

*

This whole thing is fucking stupid, weird, and almost comedic. It seems to happen a lot to Ash, being forced into these sort of situations. He’s watched Red and Planet look at each other enough times across the room to get fed up.

“What happened between you and Planet?” Ash asks, crowding into Red’s space.

“What do you mean?” Red says, crossing his arms.

“Don’t act like I’m dumb.”

“I don’t have to act.” *Fucking asshole.* “Where do you know him from, then?”

“God- you’re such a bitch.” Ash sighs, pillowing his head in an open palm. He knows Red knows, but he seems to receive some satisfaction from hearing Ash say it himself. He’ll play along. “You already know this. Whatever. He was in Lala Legion. Happy? Now answer my question.”

“It’s nothing, really. He just tried to steal from me one time. We worked it out, though.” Red makes a little gesture.

Ash squints, “Did you get your ass beat?”

“Shut up. *No*, I didn’t. Let’s just say I took pity on him.” Which can mean *so* many different things with Red. Not for the first time, or the last time, Ash thinks about suffocating him.

“You know I can hear you, right?” Planet says, right across the room. Ash stifles a jolt.

“You’re not denying anything.” Red does a small hand gesture, much less extravagant than his usual ones.

“Why would I?” Planet shrugs.

Time passes through the evening, where Ash goes through talking to Red, to talking to Planet and Jaron, to cussing out Bacon. The trio are mostly occupied with talking to each other, though. There’s a transportable connect four game with them, and they’re taking turns playing it. It eventually moves into a spare room. Ash flits between, and eventually ends up sitting next to Planet again.

They’re just making small talk, really. It’s been a long time since he’s seen Planet; two or three years have come and gone, which is a lot longer of a time in the apocalypse when the average life expectancy is a little over thirty. It’s inevitable Lala legion comes up.

“I mean. I’m just technically on an extended vacation.” Planet says, shifting around in the seat.

Ash grimaces. He hasn’t kept up with the machinations of weapons dealing in a while. “Is there any way you-”

“No, I’m not going to steal a rifle for you.” Planet deadpans.

He thinks that the grip on their musket tightens too. Ash sighs, it was worth a shot.

“Why’d you leave again?” Planet asks, his feet swinging back and forth, boots brushing past debris. “Like, Spoke did tell me and stuff, but that’s *Spoke*.”

It’s not like he’s really *left*. It’s something between quitting and an *extended vacation*. Ash refuses to dwell on it any longer, and throws an *it’s complicated* label on it. Maybe he should stop doing that. He sighs.

Ash shrugs, “I just did.” Which says nothing at all.

“Yeah. I know.” Planet says, stubborn.

“I just wanted to go wherever I want to.”

Ash can also feel the lingering stare on the back of his neck ever since he sat with Planet. He’s not even going to pretend to consider other options, because through a crack in the door he can see the abandoned connect four game, along with Bacon and Jaron entertaining themselves with a spinny office chair (and he also threatened Bacon the last time he spoke to him approximately an hour ago, so they’re trying to stay out of each other’s way). It’s clearly Red.

“I heard what happened with Spoke, and the totem.” Planet brings up, quieter. The room is still *small*, so Red probably hears it too.

“Mhm.” Ash leans back. “Guys a fucking idiot, he took the effort to go out *afterwards* but somehow *telling* Clown to *tell* us was the better alternative.”

Planet laughs, but he looks at Ash again. “I don’t know what he’s got planned, though.”

“We’ll find out eventually.” Ash shrugs.

Maybe not for a long, long time, long after True North, if the wormhole is anything to go off of, silently stirring in the background. It’s not something that Ash is too upset about. Spoke can do whatever the fuck he wants. Ash is busy now.

He can also feel Planet’s eyes flickering from looking at Ash to behind him, at Red. He can see his vague, blurry figure in the corner of his eye, idly drumming his fingers on the hilt of his sword. There’s a thousand ways that he could be more discreet -- the guy has sunglasses, for god’s sake, and he’s still making it painfully obvious. Red’s trying to look desperately uninterested in the conversation.

Ash sighs, and turns around. “You’re so fucking weird.”

There’s a half-startled laugh out of Planet. Red goes stock-still.

“*What?*”

“You know what I’m talking about.” Ash narrows his eyes.

“I’m not doing *anything*.” Red argues. This feels more familiar -- normal.

An almost convenient crash comes from the other room. Maybe the office chair snaps, maybe one of their bones snaps. Ash still takes the chance.

“You should probably check on them.” Ash says, smoothly, turning to Planet.

“Oh,” Planet says. “Okay! You guys can have fun with your lovers quarrel.” There’s a grin in his voice, and he’s already slipping out of the room when Ash turns again, maybe to strangle him.

“What the *fuck*.” Ash says, loud enough so that he knows that Planet hears.

The notion in of itself is fucking senseless. Ash doesn’t know how many times he’s wanted to knock Red out for any little thing. It’s not something that he can count neatly, like how many arguments he’s won mentally, because the number would break *records*. Ash wouldn’t let himself get entangled in something as messy as *that*, nor would Red. Emotions mess with the status quo -- with the job.

(It’s too late. It’s much, much, too late).

“Is that what they think of us? Lovers?” Red raises an eyebrow.

“*You* weren’t helping at all. Just, shut up. Shut the fuck up.”

*

It’s all warm bodies and harsh breathing.

This is possibly the worst hiding place they could have chosen. Red is frozen next to him, and Ash isn’t sure whether it’s because he’s freaking out or inherent survival instincts but this is a necessity.

He already has his facemask on, which muffles his breathing, but it’s overtly rough and loud and Ash is having to put his palm over the mask, just to make sure. It’s uncomfortably warm in here, and he’s got his head buried next to Red’s neck, to try and shrink them into the smallest size that they can. To make sure that even if the closet door is yanked open, they would hopefully blend in under piles of disrupted clothes.

They all really didn’t think the raiders would come back. It’s natural right, because they already had run up to the roof of the building but maybe that should’ve clued Ash in, because they never really heard them go back down. But that’s normal too, isn’t it? Roof-hopping is

one of the safest ways (still *deadly*) to make sure that you don't end up dancing a little too close to zombies. Either way; they're all sweeping up the consequences of stupid decisions.

Ash guesses that this would have happened either way. Even if they hadn't let the three of them stay, because there's definitely something deeper going on if they're searching the building for them. Or maybe Ash is overthinking. It's hard to *not* think when you're stuffed up in a closet.

Planet, Jaron and Bacon had already left through the balcony. It's a much smarter choice than what Ash and Red are doing right now, but they were actually *ready* to leave, with their packs and bags and the singular gun strapped on when the rush outside the apartment door started.

Their items are in the kitchen, kicked under rubble, so hopefully, the guy who's searching isn't all too attentive. Because it's obvious that people have been here, and that there's two hiding in the closet right now. Ash tries to steady his breathing, quiet as possible, while he hears the old ornamental table be kicked over.

"A-" Red begins, syllables forming.

Ash only presses his palm down more, breathing into his neck, "*Quiet,*"

Red's breath hitches. It seems to do the job.

It's almost an eternity, waiting for the person to go through the apartment to either leave, or end up blind from the light outside the closet being let in. This is a lot of -- maybe the most -- human contact that Ash has to expose himself to. It drives him dizzy, almost a nauseating craving, but all he can do is flex his fingers across Red's knee, because he needs to make it out alive and he still hasn't repaid his stupid favour.

(He's never found anything he wanted that he did want to sink his teeth into, and never let go of. It's different now).

A clatter comes outside the closet. And then--

The door to the apartment slams shut. Red breathes out, shaky, and weak and harsh, but Ash keeps him pinned down because there's a very, very real possibility that the person hasn't left and they're just waiting. It's in the basics of being a thief. It doesn't sound like they've taken anything, though.

Red's hands are digging into him. He wouldn't be surprised if there's indents in his skin after this. The proximity is overwhelming.

Then, quieter, the apartment door unclicks and is shut properly. A few more seconds, and Ash is yanking open the closet.

Red stumbles out and he -- he collapses onto the floor.

"Fuck, *fuck,*" Red groans. He's blinking rapidly behind his sunglasses, trying to get adjusted again to the light.

Ash watches, silently, because he *doesn't* know what to do. That's not normal at all, Ash doesn't hesitate, doesn't pause and think would this be too far, is this too much, he just does and takes and profits and it always works like a gear constantly spinning in a machine but this -- this is not something that he can just force his way into.

Maybe if Ash was a better man then he'd know what to do. But he isn't.

"Fuck, *Ash*." He looks up, and there's *something* else strikingly different about his composure.

Gingerly, carefully, Ash comes down to kneel beside him. Every single second -- every heartbeat, he could just stop and get up. He doesn't. Life is a bitch with no mouth and no lips; but it isn't fun with no teeth that don't come dangerously close to ripping out your throat. And Ash is out of his element again and again.

And there's nothing he can do to not confront it, he can't point to another building and go *hey, let's go there*, or let Red ride through it because this seems worse, somehow.

It's not pure and raw panic, but it's being *overwhelmed*.

"Red," Soft tones keep sounding wrong on his lips. Ash tries them out anyway.

"No- fuck, hold on," It's a mess. His breathing is slowly coming back to normal. "Just- just give me a moment."

"You're okay." It comes out cluttered, and awkward, and Ash's tongue feels too big in his mouth, "You're out now, yeah? It's okay."

Red looks at him over his sunglasses. It's fragile; like the vulnerability of a masked magician exposed. It's raw; an exposed nerve cell. Almost like he didn't expect Ash to kneel down, to come down to his level. Ash is a television saint to him. The ceiling fan stays still behind him as a faux halo.

Ash's hand is hovering around Red's shoulder, because he's not sure if he's supposed to do any of this. His prayer is answered for him, when Red slowly leans into him. It's acceptance.

eleventh

Chapter Summary

“Living is fucking stupid, sometimes.” Ash says, kicking a stray pebble.

Red laughs, prods, “Really, yeah?”

“It's like, *complicated*. Messy.”

Chapter Notes

MORE CH8 [FANART](#) LOOK AT IT NOWW this is so fucking cool i love you artists
<3333

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There are a lot of things Ash likes. He likes the warmth of the sun, candy that melts in his mouth, his notebook, expensive cigarettes, and so on.

But this -- the fading roar of blood in his ears, the metallic relish of blood on his lips, the muttered swears and irregular panting -- is one of the things he could definitely go without.

He wipes away the slowly drying blood from the corner of his mouth with his sleeve. Another stain that he'll have to scrub out of his coat. He's not sure whether most of the blood is his or Red's. Probably his.

Ash likes a lot of things, but Ash loves being an asshole. He loves to bend rules because they're just a suggestion, loves to mess with people, loves to manipulate and exploit. It's a given -- he's always loved destruction as if it's a very part of being. Ash is annoying and cruel and an *asshole* and gets on peoples nerves like he was *meant* to. It's when he presses too hard, pushes the wrong button, that it all explodes in his face.

(He sees the first punch coming. It was hard not to.

He's closer to dying with every moment he lives; another step ahead, another two steps back. Ash has had Red's swords pointed at him a fair few times. From general threats, pissed off remarks, bleak skies on top of rooftops, or the sky above him and the mud beneath him.

This is nothing sharp like Red's sword, or playing with a loaded gun, just the blunt edges of knuckles. Ash keeps breathing. Keeps moving. Red's eyes slide past his own, fury and contempt.

Ash's fingers curl into fists. This isn't a petty little fight, he's messed up again, somewhere along the way, since the start, somewhere, since the start, when the words left his mouth and he's having to pay the price. How fucking hilarious, that a few syllables, stupid awful rashness, can have him clutching onto the brickwork wall, dazed, and Red is still staring, panting, furious).

Red stares at him, right beside him. His mask is pulled down to his chin, a long few moments passing.

They've had *serious* fights before. They've also had petty scuffles. This breaks the scale, somehow. It's tipped to the side, letting everything crash back down.

It's Ash's fault. Something sick swirls in his stomach, as Red keeps looking at him, bloodied, Ash never winning, not a single fucking time between them. Ash destroys and rains violet lightning around him, with no care, and he hurts.

Ash spits blood onto the pavement. It splatters out, scattering over the cement.

It's just Ash and Red. He's waiting for Ash to say something. *Apologize.*

Ash breathes out. His body is filled with nebulosity; a haziness that's somewhere in between crashing adrenaline and the thrum of his heart in his throat.

(He can taste pure copper.

It's a familiarity. Not a friend, not an enemy. He's forced to swallow it down, hot metallic taste burning in his throat.

He thinks Red is yelling something at him, remembers the sparks of something like disbelief, pure smoldering anger, and Ash thinks he yells something back, too caught up in the moment. It's drowned behind the beating of his heart.

Ash knows he's the one coming out worse off from his fight. Red's stronger in possibly every way that matters right now. His jaw has gone numb, blood trickles down to his chin, and he's covered in the sharp stinging ache of bruises forming on his skin, blood vessels bursting.

That's all the time they get to argue about -- about this -- because Ash is digging his thumb into Red's busted lip, his blood, on him, on his hands).

Ash looks down at the blood, from where he spat it out. He knows that the *original* argument was fucking pointless -- just something to do.

He's been on edge for a while, and then they're digging into each other like the sun is going to explode tomorrow and the impulsiveness takes over to make possibly the worst comment he could have, and then it devolves, spirals rapidly.

"You know, I haven't fought like that in a while." Ash begins.

Red glares at him. So much for trying small talk.

"Ash." Red hisses.

Spite and irritation and hate all in one syllable. He hasn't heard that in a while. It cuts achingly deep.

Ash looks up at him, properly. He flexes his fingers out, the sharp sting of pain. It ties him back down. A void growing and lashing out in him. He got this apology thing right, a few times, maybe. If only he can figure out how to do it again.

"Why the fuck- god, fuck. Why?" Red asks, again.

("You just fucking hurt everyone in your life, don't you? Fuck. Fuck you. Maybe I should just fucking run again, because everyone else leaves you anyway.")

Ash regrets it almost immediately as it comes out. Irrationally -- he can't let Red know that, and even as he sees the hurt flash over his face, a memory of him, a memory of Spepticle, and Ash can't slow down as he's pressing, opening up closed wounds, forcing them to come gaping open, because he's never let himself learn to suture.

Red doesn't say anything, not at first).

It's not like Ash can excuse it in any meaningful way. He sits there, bloodied. Ash is the trigger to a gun. Violence will always find a way to haunt. Maybe they'll be this way forever.

He is horrible and he is vile and he is full of jagged edges, scratching anyone who gets too close and it is *horrible*.

Ash snakes a hand into an inside pocket of his trench coat, a pack of cigarettes neatly nestled inside. There's a few left, and he's really been meaning to buy another pack soon, but life gets in the way. He holds the box out to Red, as if it'll make it any better. Some sort of attempt to return to form. Guilt seeps into his movements.

Red looks at him, a little unsurprised, between the box and Ash, and something else, and, "Keep them."

Ash gives a mute nod, pocketing them away again. They hide in the pocket above his heart, nestled away next to the notebook and the countdown of days to come and a pressed tulip.

Everything itches, in distinctly different ways. Ash can't bring himself to unravel the feelings one by one. It's not like he can just turn and run this time, nor like he can ignore it, because Red is his partner in business. He can't not confront this.

He can't ignore it because he's been living with Red for a long time, and tomorrow, he'll still be living with Red, and the day after that, and so on.

Ash has *hurt* -- he's torn open a wound that's even worse than necrosis. Prying past healing tissue and feeling his pulse and still digging in with his hands, blood under his fingernails, scraping, raw flesh.

"I'm sorry." He says, eventually. Being so genuine makes something in his throat feel all scratchy. "I fucked up, alright. I fucked up *bad*, I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."

Red breathes out, slow and steady.

"*Fuck*. You're an asshole."

"I know. I'm sorry." *I hurt you*, unsaid, but known. "Sorry for the blood too."

He doesn't look as bad as Ash. That's not saying a lot, though.

A lot of the red fades in with the suit, and Ash is the one with blood on his nose and philtrum and lip and tongue and chin. He thinks it's a little bit awful -- that he can't feel anything but awful.

"It's fine, about the blood." Red sighs, after a moment longer.

(It was only when he laid there, staggering pain radiating and disorientating.

He's fucked up, he's fucked up so bad, and he's still trying to push Red back, his hand fisted into his shirt, pushing, pushing, and the other hand splayed over his face, fingernails digging into the facemask, hard enough that there's definitely going to be a mark despite the layer.

It's playing dirty and it's playing fair as Ash kicks at his crouched position, which just makes Red's knee dig into his stomach as he tumbles over him, and Ash is so fucking stupid. It is death in the horizon. Looming and constant.

The sun stares behind him once again. Contrasting silhouettes. A demon in the disguise of a saint. Blood seeps into his suit, dyes it a darker red.

Red breathes heavy, harsh. Ash keeps looking up at him.

An executioner. If Red wanted to, he could just kill Ash. Slice his sword through, clean and practical, it's right in reach, but instead he struggles -- all too human -- writhes, a punch right to his side that leaves Ash hissing in pain. Red wants to hurt. Physical in the face of verbal. Red does not want to kill.

Reasonably, he should. However, humans have never been the most reasonable creatures.

"Why the fuck did you say that? Why- Ash- fuck, fuck you-" It's a mess of words, strung together with agony).

Ash sighs. "I really shouldn't have said that."

"Did you just realize?"

"No- fuck, I didn't mean to lash out. It's my fault."

"You know, for a guy who always tries- tries so hard to be the one above everyone else, it's nice to see you actually fall down and be a person. For once."

Ash thinks about biting back again. Throwing Red into the ground and going *fuck you, you don't know anything about me* but Red *does* know more than enough, doesn't he. He bites his lip, wills himself to stay silent.

And it'd just make everything worse. He carefully looks at Red.

Ash is worse than a snake in the garden. He is the evil that comes with it. He remains long after it is gone.

There's aching in his jaw; dizziness in his head. Blood splattered onto the pavement. He ignores it, because that doesn't matter right now, because he-- because Red-- because he fucking cares so fucking much.

"Red, really, I'm so fucking sorry." Ash says, when Red doesn't do anything. He hesitates, throat dry, cottonmouth, and maybe it's a mistake, because he still doesn't know how to do this whole *thing*, as he says, "I'm sure he loved you."

He watches as Red sighs, dragging a hand over his face, hiding, which just smears blood all over his already-bloodied hand. It's a tired and weary sort of thing.

"I still want to punch you. Don't do it again." Red says. It's a threat. It's alright. It isn't, not really, not since everything. But still -- it's an acceptance. Not forgiveness, but an acceptance.

"I can help clean the blood off." Ash still offers.

"It's the least you could do."

Maybe he's been rotting inside out for a long time. Hate blurs between the lines of undying loyalty.

*

"You loved him too, didn't you." Ash says, quieter. It's not a question.

Everything is hidden behind dots and stars.

Red sighs. "Of course. How could I not?"

He's just a man. He craves to love.

"Sorry." Ash says, again, later, when his throat has stopped itching. Genuine.

Ash continues, tissue sweeping over Red's hand. This whole act is weirder the longer he thinks about it; he's cleaning his own blood off the guy who he was tussling around on the floor, who's tried to kill him. Maybe his life is in ruins. Red stays steady despite it.

He dabs off Red's knuckles, and he can't define what this is. It's not tender. It's not *not* tender, either. Ash focuses on just cleaning up the blood.

Time is too finite to hold grudges. Maybe, before, Ash would've let it fester into resentment, into another good reason why he should leave into the horizon and never look back. Now, he's here. *Staying*. They've never settled perfectly; always something to make them push and pull in a strange game of tug of war where the stakes were exceedingly high.

Red sighs, worn out. "You can stop apologizing."

Quieter, "I won't leave, either."

"I know."

*

It's easy to call Red a lot of titles.

He's just Red, to Ash. Of course, he's been a lot of other things before; an informant, a self-proclaimed businessman. He's also a lot of things *now*; an asshole, a dumbass, a pretentious bastard and someone who Ash keeps following because-- because--

"It's good to have you as a partner," Red ribs him, lightly. Ash has gotten used to these sorts of touches.

And Ash just laughs, because of course. Of course--

He's reminded of Mid -- and the star -- and that Red *isn't really one for partnerships*. It makes *something* unfurl in his chest; he thinks he's dying for a moment. It's not an explosion, nothing that makes blaring neon signs that scream *hazard! warning!* pop up next to him just that it's achingly unfamiliar, being pulled apart thread by thread. It's *unfamiliar*. (Not -- not uncomfortable, though).

Ash thinks of when Planet insinuated that -- that they're lovers. Which is just foolish. They're just partners in *business*.

He doesn't know what anything means.

*

There's filth covering his trousers. Dirt, mud, and everything else in between. It's a mess. Thrust into a precarious world, into living under the very last of summer's sweltering and dizzying heat. It's struck back just as autumn comes in.

Ash kicks his feet up, onto a small table outside. It's metallic and circular, made of thin black mesh. Heat always slows the world down. An awning covers them, barely hanging on. He stares out to the street; to the motel sign; to the broken glass that reflects the last points of the sun; slowly leading into the night. All dead. There's a pigeon nest, in one of the windows. A small curious thing, curled up.

Red's saying something, he realizes. He's tuned him out at some point already, like the constant static that you grow familiar with in the night. He's also too tired to take anything in.

“I'm focusing.” Ash interrupts.

Red gives Ash an unimpressed stare, one of his best ones yet. “On what? Murdering that pigeon with your glare?”

“Shut up. Fuck.”

Red laughs at him, and carries on talking about -- about something. He hears the word zombies being thrown around, and Red laughing at his own joke. How stupid. Ash wishes he heard it just so he could tell him how stupid he is.

Zombies had become rarer. It's not like they're completely extinct up here, but they used to always be in the background, in dark corners, waiting for something, a constant reminder to not let his guard down.

It doesn't matter if he's careful for all of his life, a mistake can always send everything into a shitshow. He's getting off-topic. Now, Ash sees them curled in places, still around, less common, but horde sizes increasing, more dangerous. Zombie mutation -- zombie evolution - - whatever. How fucking strange.

It makes everything easier -- zombies biding their time away. It also makes everything a little bit more worrying. He hopes they keep falling as easily as the old ones.

Ash also wants to fall straight to sleep. He's just tired. They need a good break. Maybe something more fun than this.

His attention is caught when Red lays down onto the mesh table. It's more moments of shuffling, until his head pillows halfway on his arms, semi-comfortable. It messes up his sunglasses. Ash watches him, mildly amused, mostly exhausted.

“Do you think one day it'll be normal?” Red asks, looking up at him from his position.

“I've never experienced anything other than this.” Ash says.

It's their normal. They've both been forced into the wastelands, born into calamity.

“You know what I'm asking, dude. I mean *normal*, as in like, before this. Without all the zombies.”

Ash shrugs. He's already burrowed his legacy deep into the stars, the atoms will always remember him. Truly, he doesn't care. He's accomplished a lot. He ignores the yawning abyss of death. He won't succumb. It's how life has always been.

“Probably not.”

“Yeah, I guess. It'd be nice.”

Ash just makes a small noncommittal noise at that. Red stays silent after that, still leaned over the table. The sun slowly moves in the background, streaks over the street. It's probably time to get moving, soon, make a little progress before sleeping.

Life has always been about mimicking what people before them did. It's faux comfort. Ash wonders if anyone else will ever see this sight again. He glances over at Red.

Ash is pretty sure he was only watching the sunset for a *few* moments. Taking pleasure in simple things, or whatever. Ash thought Red was just being quiet out of consideration. He's hit with the sight of him asleep. Fucking asleep, hunched over the table. Maybe this day has been heavier than others, but fuck.

For a moment, Ash debates whether or not to kick the chair out underneath him.

He's not kind. He still doesn't kick the chair.

That doesn't mean he won't make fun of him later, for this. There's definitely also going to be a mesh imprint onto his cheek, where a slither of skin shows from underneath his facemask. Ash just watches silently for a moment. How foolish. How utterly vulnerable of a position. Maybe Ash would fall asleep too, if it wasn't a death wish.

He really doesn't like the wastelands.

Red's sunglasses are still knocked askew. Still perched on his nose, put slightly off from the placement of his arm. Ash reaches out, just because he can, and with his index finger, gently pushes them into place again. Maybe he'll let him rest for another few minutes. Maybe.

There's something stirring in his chest, heavy and obnoxious. It's been there for a while now, just as a *something* that can't leave him alone.

Ash likes the pettiness. He likes breathing out smoke at each other in moonlit nights. He likes arguing, loud and bright and flaring. But this -- this sort of lameness, is, dare he say, nice.

*

There's cold, hard steel digging into his torso.

It's just a shipping container, or something like that, old and abandoned and piled up on top of each other. It'd be the king of scraps haven. It's a half abandoned factory too. Well, fully abandoned by now. It glitters gold under the evening sun. There's podzol leaking into the floor, brown veins clinging to concrete. He could start a trash empire here.

Ash is being pulled up, hand locked steady in Red's. It'd be so easy to fall, and yet. He lost his gloves and hunting knife a few days ago, just by stupid mistake. He still remembers the exact way the sun shined onto the river water, watching them float away.

“Are your hands always this naturally cold?”

“Yeah, I've always had bad blood circulation in my right hand.” He shrugs.

It just comes with the job, sometimes. Repeatedly unscrewing and putting back together weaponry eventually takes its toll.

“Really? That sucks.”

“Nah, I’m used to it.” Ash shrugs. It is *incredibly* inconvenient sometimes. “It’s just, strain, or something like that. Business wasn’t always that fun.”

“Huh.” Red hums, still not letting go of Ash’s hand, even though his feet are firmly planted on the top of the container. It’s kind of awkward. It’s kind of weird. Ash doesn’t want to let go.

“You don’t have to hold my hand. I’m not going to get lost.” Ash says, trying to play it all off; the prickling on the back of his neck, his hair standing on end, the warmth settling in at all the tiny points of contact between a glove and skin.

“Who knows with you.” Red rolls his eyes.

“It’s not going to fucking, like, fall off, either.”

“Oh, right, of course.” Red says, amused, but still lets Ash’s hand drop from his.

Ash thinks of the times that his hands had been in Red’s; of synthetic leather, of a constant push and pull, of the attic, of a tulip neatly folded into his notebook, guarded against his heart, of something constantly bigger than him.

*

Scaling up buildings is never fun. There’s always the lingering threat of where to reach next, whether the next brick will slip out of his hands and he’ll fall and fall and shatter next to its solid, physical form. And anyways, those always have doors to walk through instead.

There’s something completely different about scaling up a ferris wheel. Ash knows that yeah, he can still slip anytime, but it’s fascinating in the same excruciating scale of how vast the universe is. It’s an old, derelict structure; Ash wonders if it will ever work again. He imagines the slow spinning of the ferris wheel similar to the earth’s own spin. He’ll be able to overlook the whole of the area around them -- the pale blue stretch of mountains far away, the blinking lights far, far away.

There’s an actual reason why he’s coming up this time, not like the crane, but because Red’s heard *rumours* about this place, and Ash finds climbing easier. It’s easier to see smoke from fires when you’re on high ground.

“You’ve seen anythin’ yet?” Red calls out, from the bottom. It’s a rather small ferris wheel, but the halfway mark is still an achievement.

“Not yet.” Ash shouts back down.

Ash just focuses on getting up, because looking down has always been a death sentence.

At the top, the wind isn’t as harsh as it was during early dawn, but it rips a chill through Ash. The streets are completely empty and desolate. It’s almost unimaginable that anyone would have lived here, but there’s old shops, broken windows, there’s bakeries -- it was all once part of a greater living organism. Ash shudders out a breath. There’s no one to come and live here anymore.

“There’s no one around,” Ash shouts, from the vantage point. There’s a nest of pigeons on a balcony.

Ash hears an *Okay!* back from Red, or something like that, and he begins climbing down.

Careful around the rusted screws, having to take a break every so often to flex his hands, makes sure to grip the supporting beams tightly.

“*Fuck -*”

He’s almost at the bottom, one or two steps down and he’d be able to land perfectly safe. Maybe they should’ve thought twice about sending the guy without depth perception up, as a part of his trousers snagged onto a bar and he trips, and he’s falling now, and he thinks this is the most embarrassing way to go out.

Ash squeezes his eyes shut, and he expects colour to burst in from the edges of his vision, solarizing to a nearly unreadable white; he expects venom and lightning in his veins for one last time; he expects his head to split apart against the pavement.

The thing is -- he doesn’t expect this part of dying, because he lands on something softer than harsh concrete. He didn’t expect purgatory to be warm like this but oh, oh no.

The light that fills his vision isn’t the angelic white of heaven’s pearly gates, nor the blazing fires of hells.

It’s lightwaves that tell him that it’s just the sun. It’s lightwaves that hit against his retina to tell him that *oh god, that’s Red*. It’d be catastrophic if Ash wasn’t so glad to not have his skull split open right now. He’s staggering back with the additional weight of Ash on him, but he’s keeping his hold tight on Ash. As if he’ll somehow spill out of his arms and back to doom.

“Fuck- *Red -*” Ash begins, stutters out.

“I’ve got you.” And a more breathy, shocked, “*Holy shit, dude.*”

Ash lets himself bathe in the feeling of being alive, woozy and hazy, for another moment, before Red loosens his grip on him. Karma has never liked leaving Ash alone, never liked his unshaken gaze, nor everything he’s done prior.

It’s not that steep of a fall, not really -- enough that it’d definitely be dangerous, but not like his thoughts fretted that it would be. Dangerous, though.

“That was so fucking embarrassing.” Ash mutters. Maybe he should be more shaken. He’s gazed into the void for long enough.

“Not even a *thanks?*” Red says, his hand still hovering over Ash’s shoulder.

“What do you want me to say? *Oh Red, you’re so great, you saved my life! My saviour!*” Ash mocks. He lets out another breath, shakier than the last. “*My name is Red and I-*”

Red rolls his eyes. “God, why do I even bother.”

“Come on, you wouldn’t be here without me.” Ash plays back, letting Red bump his shoulder.

The *something* stirs again. Ash laughs it off.

Later, they will argue, and then they’ll talk and joke back and forth, and Ash will be petty, and Red will let him be and the solar system keeps spinning in the lines between the waking and dreaming world.

*

It's always nice to be back at an inn. Where the lights (sometimes) work and maybe if they’re lucky they get *two* candles, but it's still a large improvement over the discomfort of sleeping in a person's bed who is definitely dead. It's not like they can afford to be picky, but Ash sometimes gets reminded of that fact and it takes him longer than usual to fall asleep.

It’s all very isolating out here. Places further and further apart, more distant. It takes longer to get to civilization, any sort of outposts.

Either way, being able to actually bathe in an actual tub is also very, very nice. Sometimes it’s the little things.

The only part that Ash doesn't like at all is the parts afterwards, where his hair is dripping wet and towelling it dry manually is exceedingly annoying, and they don't have things like *hairdryers* anymore because finding out new ways to make guns is more important. And it’s not like Ash has the confidence to figure out how to build a hairdryer from scrap metal. This leads him to being stuck with his hair, long and annoying and still slightly damp.

"Why don't you just braid it? Cause, y'know, it’s always like that." Red asks after seeing the state he’s in, combined with Ash’s constant complaints.

"It'll just break my hair." Ash explains. He’s got an appearance to maintain. “This shit is so fucking annoying.”

He takes out his brush, some old thing that he’s gotten from long ago. Red’s seen this whole charade before -- a surprising amount of times, the more Ash thinks about it.

"I can comb through it. I mean, if you want."

Ash blinks. Red doesn’t burst out and say *haha, just kidding, I really got you there, didn’t I*.

Ash blinks, *maybe this time*. Nothing changes. Red has never offered anything like this before. He entertains the thought of aliens invading somewhere within the zombies and coincidentally Red had been swapped out just at this moment. Red keeps giving him the same unimpressed look.

"You sure?"

Red looks at him as if *he's* stupid. It's not like Ash can see most of his face, but he can just *tell*. This is unfair, because only Ash can look at Red like that.

"I'm sure, but only if you want to." Red says.

"Okay," Ash says.

Ash would love to say that he *relents*, but it's not like he was kicking and screaming before. This isn't anything much different. He's cut Red's hair once before, this is just a favour. That's the only way to rationalize it.

He turns to sit in front of Red, who stands behind him. A part of him registers this as awful and vulnerable -- his back exposed and easy access to his neck -- maybe if Red wasn't so intent on surviving with Ash (*relying*, he tries to add) then he would've ended up with pink and raw flesh staining the floor. He still has to go to true north; indebted; on a job.

Ash passes Red the comb.

It's trust. It's loyalty to the end. It's *something*. And isn't that the whole problem.

Can't say that, though, so he lets Red start to brush his hair. It's slow, methodical and repetitive. Ash still makes sure to exaggerate whenever Red pulls.

"I *didn't* even move my hand." Red scowls, at some point.

Despite that, if Ash wants to admit, which he really doesn't, it's relaxing. Ash never had anyone else do this for him because he's never needed anyone to -- independence and all -- and having anyone else do this for him a couple of months ago would only be worse than uncomfortable, because he's never let anyone in this far or this deep. It's a little awkward, too. Red finds the rhythm eventually.

Ash doesn't know how to feel about the inherent ease of having someone -- no, not *someone*, Red hasn't been a stranger for a long time -- at his back. The realization is much worse than the sun exploding, than the apocalypse itself.

It's havoc and destruction and craving under his ribs. He knows much more about Red now.

He knows better. He knows Red is an idiot, a complete fucking dork, and a maelstrom, and a cataclysm carved in the shape of a man.

Ash has always lived in the particles in the air, and the lightning, and vitelline membranes, and smoke, and electric currents. He's pulled to the ground like a thunderbolt to copper.

Red, oblivious, continues to just brush through his hair. His hands move in smooth strokes, pausing every so often to carefully detangle knots. It's a weirdly stabilizing, steadying presence. He certainly knows what he's doing, which, well, brushing hair isn't exactly a hard and grueling task, but Red knows how to make it feel -- alright.

Eventually, all of his hair is combed out. It's only slightly damp now, and lies flat against his back. He'll have to repeat this process in the morning anyway, when he actually braids it, but for now it's good. He's pleasantly surprised that Red didn't somehow rip a patch of his hair out.

"Let me braid it next time." Red says, like a promise.

Ash gives him a *look*. Red doesn't back down.

"Whatever. Fine."

(What he doesn't know is that Red doesn't *exactly* know how to braid -- actually, that's giving him too much credit, he's *hopeless*. Ultimately, Ash tentatively takes his hands in his, and guides them along, after explaining and re-explaining and so on for thirty minutes. It isn't the worst experience he's ever had).

*

He throws his cards out on the table, leaning back to lay on the floor. This is such a fucking joke. Ash's always hated playing blackjack, because everyone else apart from him knows how to count cards, and he shouldn't have expected for Red to not be the same.

Technically, counting cards isn't cheating. It still pisses Ash off.

(It also took about twenty minutes of arguing to get Red to take his facemask off, because really, how is that *not* an unfair advantage. It's lazily pulled down to his chin, showing off the beauty mark, and maybe that's even more unfair for Ash's concentration).

It's not like they're playing for any serious, high stakes either. Look, Ash just *really* did not want to watch Red pace around for another hour. It's just something to play to pass the time; even then, the pounding of early autumn rain against the windows hasn't lessened in the time that they've been sitting around.

"You're a bitch, Red."

Red just lets out a laugh in response. Ash hates him. He wants to pull him in by his collar and--

"One more?"

That is not a normal thought.

"We both know how it's going to end." Ash is looking up at the ceiling with more interest than a man ever should. Despite his best efforts to make it move with his mind, the ceiling fan stays still.

"The rain's not going to let up anytime soon," Red points out, "Might as well have some fun."

"What next, are you going to goad me into giving you all of my *actual* credits? Take the clothes off my back?"

"I'd just ask." He can hear Red's grin in his voice. Asshole.

"Shut up. It's too cold. Don't ask."

Red just gives him a light little laugh in response. Ash can hear him shuffling around, collecting all the cards back up, the sound of another mark on their tallyboard, in Ash's notebook, and then moving around the abandoned apartment with a sort of ease. Red's always so confident in anything he does. It makes him equally infuriating and endearing.

Crouching down, Red comes into his vision again. Ash flickers his eyes up to look at him and he thinks that he should be more than a little demeaned at the way Red looks at him -- like a sad, pathetic, sopping wet cat.

"Hey." Red coos.

"I'm not gonna play poker next, asshole. Or three card monte. Or participate in one of your ponzi schemes. Or whatever goes on in your fucking head."

Red laughs. Ash puts his middle finger up at him, immature and childish.

Maybe it's just the way Red always looks horrifically domestic when he's dressed down, suit jacket put away, his button up sleeves rolled up to show off his forearms marked with scars. Maybe it's the way his clothes hang softer and easier around the edges. Maybe that's why Ash's heart pangs when he sees him; something about simpler times, before the world was ravaged.

It's blinding. *Something* blinding. There, right there. But of course, if he can't see it, can't put a name to it, then there's nothing there. It is just white light.

"Do you know how to dance, Ash?" Red asks.

"What."

"I said, do you know how to dance?" Red repeats, amused.

What the fuck. "You know, it's the end of the world, right?"

"It hasn't ended *completely* yet."

"Fucking, whatever, semantics. Still. What the fuck are you planning?" Ash asks, as if he doesn't know already.

Red grins at him, "I don't know, maybe you'll have to find out."

"There's something wrong with you." Ash mutters.

"Oh, come on." Red rolls his eyes, leaning back to allow space for Ash to sit up properly, and then stand up onto the hardwood floor. He feels a little woozy after laying down for so long, but he doesn't let it show.

This is, by far, one of Ash's worst moments ever, and Ash has had *many* bad moments in his brief and terrible life.

Ash thinks this is awfully embarrassing. This sucks, and he's not sure where all of his self-respect has gone. Red looks like a loser. *Ash* looks like a loser. He's doomed himself to this fate. The things that human connection does to a man. It's humiliating.

"Let's dance." Red says, simply.

"Oh, there's something seriously wrong with you, dude." Ash repeats, but he steps closer. Why not entertain it, anyway.

He can't believe he's going through with this. He doesn't know how to dance. Never cared for it because there were more pressing issues, pointed at his throat and heart. He's here now. He's *here* and they're somewhat trying to properly dance -- mimicking old adverts, magazines, other people.

Red's hands wrap around his waist, which Ash bitches about, because of course he does, that *he* should be the one to lead.

Ash also thinks Red kind of sucks at it. He can't count on one hand how many times they've stepped on each other, and Ash eventually does try to trip Red over, just to see if he can. It fails. It becomes more of a game than actual dancing at some point.

"Batard." Ash mutters, under his breath. Red laughs at him, all too close and personal and, *fuck*.

He's having -- fun.

It's not like Ash is scared to admit it. He's had a lot of fun in his life before, toying with power and poking at eternity, biting laughter, everything with sharp edges like a collision. That's *fun*. He's never thought of something so far away, unachievable in its mundanity, as dancing, to be fun. Maybe because he's never experienced it before. It's only a sweeping description of dancing.

They devolve into *swaying* before long, because dancing takes out a lot of energy, a lot more when you're trying to disguise fighting as dancing. Red's touch against him is nice, nice enough that he doesn't know what to do with himself.

They're quiet for a few moments, breathing together, the harsh pitter-pattering of raindrops against the glass remains.

"It'd be nicer with the radio." Ash says.

"Is this *not* nice?"

"This isn't even dancing." Ash answers, kind of.

And really, it's nothing, nothing at all, he reassures himself. And if it's something, then it's just heart palpitations, and he's going to be dead of heart failure in a few weeks.

Roads stretch high above them. It's a highway, but it's one of those colossal ones that just keep going up and up and up. Ash thinks that if he kept walking up that he'd reach the concrete heavens.

It's its own metropolis heaven. Ash wonders if he'd *ever* be able to even reach the top.

There's always been this sort of drive in him, some sort of core component spurred by burning spite; a need to do more and do better and more and keep taking. He knows he's never satisfied. He knows that kills him sometimes; knows that it sears him as much as it buoys him; knows that it keeps him up at night.

The area is in complete ruins. A part of him craves to steal another car and blast straight down the road. Maybe it'd end with the largest car crash, larger than when the apocalypse first began. It's been strangely silent recently.

Ash can hear rustling from the side of the highway, behind Redd's ever present voice. He turns his head, ready, hand on the glock.

He doesn't expect to see a puppy, curled up under rubble. Black fur is dirtied with debris and dust. It's completely harmless. Ash doesn't know how it's survived this long.

"Ash?" Red asks, immediate, at the sudden change in posture.

"There's a dog." He points towards the small little creature. It sounds kind of lame, now.

"Oh." Red turns to look at it, too.

It's a little foolish, but Ash crouches down next to it. Big, black eyes stare up at him. It doesn't move, feeble and weak and tired from just living. Poor thing. The puppy barks at him, rough. It's not the end, just yet, there's always tomorrow.

Carefully, Ash reaches into his pocket. He unwraps a ration bar, and breaks a part off. Red's still watching behind him. Crumbs drop down onto the ground, offering the small little brown square. The puppy sniffs his hands, taking the block into its mouth between small teeth.

"I always knew you had some kindness in you."

Ash's composure breaks for a moment, and he defaults to, "Shut up."

*

Red blinks repeatedly at him, which is incredibly stupid-looking, and also a tiny bit cute. There's something almost puppy-ish to it. Ash resolutely does not think about how easy it is to let Red at his side, behind his back, in front of him. He drops the thought.

Ash really, really hopes heart failure takes him soon.

*

Ash leans over the railing, tapping ash off the end of his cigarette. He hasn't had a good smoke in *weeks*, because stores and markets mark up cigarettes *high*, enough that it could be classified as a daylight robbery, and he'd rather not starve than feed into an addiction.

He lets the smoke blow out into the night air. Like poison.

He remembers late nights before where all he would do is kind of chainsmoke. God, weapons dealing was really fucking annoying; sometimes he still hears Spoke's or Planet's voice in the back of his mind. He hears Red's steps behind him, but he doesn't bother to turn around. Picking people up solely by the sound of their footsteps is something that he's been forced to learn. It's good that Red's are almost so recognisable that it's second nature to know.

Red leans against the railing, next to him. It's spending time together just because he *enjoys* it, or whatever, and Ash still doesn't get it.

It's not like Ash is completely oblivious to the machinations of humanity. It's just that Ash didn't know when it was that Red transitioned from someone that he was forced to be with into someone that he couldn't be without. *Dependency*, his mind reminds.

"You got any more?" Red asks. Of course there's an ulterior motive.

"What's in it for me?" Ash lets smoke flow out. Purposefully into Red's direction.

Red clears the smoke away. "I lent you my lighter already."

Ash sighs, reaching into an inner pocket to pull out the pack, and flick it open. Red takes one. He isn't wearing gloves, exposing his pale skin. Ash takes the cigarette pack back, and slips it back into his pocket with so much effort that it makes it look effortless. It's a reassuring weight. It's cancer, cigarettes and shortness of breath. Drifting with each other, wandering for miles. He may never get this chance again.

"Where's the lighter?" Red asks, staring at Ash. His mask has been pulled down to his chin. Ash almost wants to reach out.

Instead, Ash sighs, again, "So demanding."

"You remember that it's *my* lighter, right?"

Ash just makes a noise in acknowledgement, and rifles his hands through the last pocket he had left it in. He rifles around a bit more. And then again, for good measure. And then again. And--

"I think I might've left it inside." Ash says.

"Where? Ash, I swear--"

"I didn't fucking lose it, or anything. But- well, I don't remember. Maybe on the table. It's probably somewhere."

“*Probably somewhere.*” Red scoffs, repeating after him. He messes with the unlit cigarette in his hand. “Just let me light it using yours.”

Ash raises an eyebrow. He wants to protest further, but, “Whatever. Fine.”

Red is the one who leans in first, cigarette already in his lips and between fingers. Ash only copies the position, and leans closer. It’s a dizzying feeling -- sprouting from under his ribs. The body betrays itself.

Unsurprisingly, Ash has never done this. He’s seen people do it, back when he was still finding out how far he could go. The world was scary; zombies and isolation and loneliness; but the blood staining him was always warm and the cigarettes gave him an excuse for the buzzing in his head, all of the time. Now, the buzzing remains in the form of an addiction and past lifetimes. It’s the sparks that sing in his veins at the closeness. It’s the familiar smell of cold steel and utter pretentiousness. It’s--

Red’s cigarette lights up, and he leans away. Smoke blows out into the open sky. It’s almost unfair. It would never be fair. Red’s presence next to him is pure fucking heat, breathless and purifying and loyalty incarnate.

He has the audacity to look at Ash, the light of the cigarette illuminating his grin. *You pretentious bastard-- you bitch--*

Ash looks away. He can’t look at Red, or else the world will implode around them. Ash taps the railing. He imagines the world shattering underneath his touch.

*

Between the barrenness of the north and the oncoming bleakness of the sun, survivor groups have become more and more uncommon. It’s startling when you run into one, and it feels much, much worse when they have a whole truck with them.

Ash honestly thinks they look kind of weak. Underestimating them is also a very swift way to end up dead. There’s three of them, and two of Ash and Red. They don’t have anything good with them, nothing like an assault rifle or a submachine gun, but the girl in the middle is carrying grenades.

It’s just their luck, because they *do* have swords, and all three are pointed at them.

Of course, no one would win with a sword in a gunfight.

The only exception to this rule is if the gunman has one bullet, and there’s three swordsmen. Red is next to him, his own sword drawn with precision. Maybe it’s bias, but Red’s sword seems cooler; it’s cold and furious steel.

Then, the leftmost guy tenses up, a bright yellow motorcycle helmet covering his face, but his hand twitches a little on his sword. Red’s squinting at him and, oh fuck. It’s pure unfiltered recognition. Oh *fuck*, of course they’ve had to run into someone who has history with Red.

“What are you doing here?” The girl asks. There’s goggles sitting on the top of her head, tinted pink.

“We’re just passing through. We mean no harm.” Red says, immediately slipping into *business*. It’s just the right edge of convincing and vigilant.

“You guys have your weapons pointed at us.”

Ash raises an eyebrow at the guy on the right. Blades are pointed at each other in a poor mimicry of a spider's web.

“*Pentar*.” The girl says, with a sort-of disappointment.

“We’re not trying to steal from you guys or anything. I know enough that I can’t drive a truck. We’re just heading to the closest town.” Ash butts in. He’s lying, and he’s pretty sure he could *try*.

“The closest town?” Left-guy repeats. “You mean Founder’s?”

“Yes.” Ash stares blankly.

“Well, uh, you see- it might’ve recently gotten blown up?” Left-guy laughs a little bit awkwardly, muffled through the helmet. “Not that we were complicit in it, or anything, I promise! We were just stopping by and then it just *happened* to explode.”

Ash can feel Red glancing at him. This is disastrous.

“Oh my god.” Pentar sighs.

“This is... tragic.” The girl mutters.

“Blown up? Like- completely?” Red blinks. He shoots another look to Ash to confirm that they’re *fucked*.

She nods. “Yeah. There’s really no point attempting to walk there. Don’t even think about it, cut your losses and head back to the last outpost.”

Ash looks at her. Ash looks at the truck.

“Hey, Zam.” Red addresses the leftmost guy, confident. It strikes everyone from almost complacency back into gear. “Where are you driving to next?”

“Well- Jumper’s the one actually driving, but uhm, we’re hoping to go up, north-east, you know, to-”

“Would it be too much to ask to hitchhike?” Red asks, tone slipping into casualness, forcing friendliness.

Zam looks at Jumper, and then Pentar. He’s the one who got them into this situation. There’s some mental communication between them, as if this isn’t the first time. Without words, they

come to a silent agreement, with Jumper being the first to lower her sword.

Jumper sighs. “Six-hundred credits.” Which is more expensive than *any* caravan. “From both of you.”

Even more expensive. But still not life-ruining. Ash sighs. It’s better than trying to get all the way back to the last outpost. He ends up shuffling through pockets and producing rusted-over credits, handing them over into her gloved hand. Red drops them in as if credits don’t mean anything to him.

“Thanks.” Jumper grins, “Get in, then.”

*

The truck is -- for lack of a better word -- dingy. It’s obviously an *old* artifact from the old world, but that doesn’t excuse how utterly unbearable it is inside. The scent of gasoline is inherently nauseating. Jumper is in the front, the only one who can drive apparently, and Pentar’s next to her. Red, Ash and Zam are squished into the backseats, and then a fourth person, *Jepex*, had been sleeping in the back when they first entered, now squished with them. It’s a mess. Ash’s back is starting to hurt from the low roof.

“How’d you guys get the truck?” Red asks, idly.

Which leads into a tangent from Zam -- he seems to be the main one keeping them together. Ash thinks he also recognizes him. Something in the back of his mind itches about an empire, about pirates, about the eclipse. It’s been a long life.

Ash sits quiet for most of it, because their radio actually works, even though there’s a lot of wires and other stuff plugged into it that might as well be a blaring safety hazard. If something happens at the front, then the whole truck is going to go down.

“You know, Jumper made me ride in the back once.”

“Isn’t this the back?” Ash blinks.

“Oh, like- the *truck* back! With all of the cargo and stuff. I never want to experience it again.” Zam sighs, “There’s a lot of stuff I don’t want to experience again.”

“Ah. Well,” Red clears his throat, “What are you guys doing? Apart from surviving.”

“Oh, oh!” Zam pipes up again. “We’re, well, mostly *I’m* starting up this- this whole thing right, and we’re trying to recruit people for it, y’know? It’s not a cult but like,” Zam starts doing some hand gestures to them, and that they have *two more people but they’re doing something right now so it isn’t that pathetic, actually*, and it’s the point where Ash tunes out again.

Ash isn’t convinced that it *isn’t* a cult, either. Oh well, he’s too busy nowadays to join.

*

It's only been a day or so of driving. Ash thinks it might also have been a whole eternity.

They're on another break right now. Jumper is doing stretches, talking with Zam and Pentar, Jepex watching from a little ways away, about *something*. Ash doesn't really know what, but he hears the words *void*, and *freakinator*, and decides he doesn't want to try and decipher it anymore. They're standing a good few paces away, far enough that they won't hear or see.

"What the fuck." Red says, looking down at Ash's hand.

In Ash's hand, sits the same brand of grenades that Jumper had attached to her. There's about five; they're small, but expertly packed to be as destructive as possible.

"I stole them." Ash explains. It's not much of one. "Dude, she made us pay six hundred credits. Twelve-hundred together. There's no way I'm letting her steal from us."

"So. You *stole* her grenades in exchange." Red says, and even as much as he tries to act unimpressed, there's a certain lilt to his voice.

"It was kind of easy. She had a lot of spare ones in the little compartment. You want one?"

Red continues to stare. A little amused. "Two?"

Ash sighs, "*Asshole*. Fine."

He would have never let him do this before. He would have never even shown him these before. But Ash doesn't have time to be thinking about things that he would have done before because -- this is the present -- this is *now*.

Red reaches out, a gentle brush of his fingers over Ash's. *When did he start cataloging these kinds of touches?*

Oblivious, Red just slips the two grenades into a jacket pocket. It's only a little unsafe. Red looks back to the hulking mass of a truck, rusted, but still operational. Somehow functioning. Just a machine. It's saved them countless days, though. True North seems closer than ever.

"So. Zam?" Ash raises an eyebrow.

"We go back." Red shrugs, nonchalant. "He wasn't exactly a business rival, just- a rival, let's say. Somethin' along those lines. He was rather good friends with Pang, though."

Ash nods along. "He's rather talkative."

"He always has been. Spex liked him for that reason." Red sighs.

"Really?" Ash asks, prods.

Red nods, and he starts talking, peeling back, exposing his ribs. Even with his arms crossed, his chest has never been more out in the open. He's started to go into some story now, talking and gesturing and laughing.

It cements himself just a little bit further in Red's life. Something in him says that this is foolish. This is a job, in the beginning, and in the middle, it was bitterness and the taste of stereotypes and blood. Nearing the end, Ash -- Ash doesn't know what it is. It's profiting, it's a gun pointed to the sky, it's a deep-seated rot in his heart.

*

They've been forced to take a break, to fill the truck back up, or maintenance, or something like that. Ash has never cared for the details that go into trucks. It's been a few days, and they've crossed a wide breadth of land. Ash is sitting down on the pavement, and if he squints, he could completely cover the truck with his thumb. Red's stood next to him, sun bearing down on their backs.

Jumper's leaning over, half in the driver's cabin, prying at the innards of the truck. It reminds Ash of a surgeon, or a tick, firmly inside. It's not like that at all, as unlike a tick, she's able to pry herself out and begin running.

She yells, "There's something wrong with the truck--"

*

That's the last warning they get.

Everything bursts into pure and raw explosions. It's a rapid liberation of heat bursting out towards him. In a split second, Ash is blinded from the white-hot burst of flames. He sees the truck, and he sees Redd, and everything was just fine, and--

And the blinding, buzzing white pierces him, then shatters into a prismatic spread of colours too numerous to name.

It's mesmerizing. The fire -- the world -- it's so, *so* bright. It's the well-loved crescendo played by an orchestra. It's an experience he'll never be able to see again. It's the ordinary compared to the extraordinary. Any solar flare wouldn't be able to compare to this. A sudden, intense burst of energy and radiation -- pure heat.

It keeps blooming, larger and grander and exquisite and almost as destructive as craving. Ash hesitates, his head hazy and spinning from the burst of gasses that just came rushing out.

And then the gravity of the situation slams back into him, when Red is yanking him up by his arm, with absolute resolution, and Ash is forced to turn on his heel and run and run and keep running until he's sure his body is going to give out and his body tells him *not yet, not yet, you'll live*.

Behind the explosion, in the distance, he sees four figures, off in the opposite direction. He's never had to run so much in his life before.

He's sure it'd be cooler, walking away, calm and collected because *cool guys don't look at explosions*, as Redd says, but the burst of heat ignites fire in him.

Ash had never cared about dying. He seems to be changing awfully rapidly, these days.

It's only when they're far enough away, when Ash doesn't even have to squint to cover the truck with his thumb, nor with his pinky, that they let themselves collapse. Well, Red collapses, while Ash just keels over, heaving and panting, and he's sure the smell of gasoline and smoke is going to stick for weeks on end, but there's still blood rushing through his heart, and he's so terribly alive.

He risks a glance at Red. He's not in much better condition. Still. They haven't fallen into the aching pit of death just yet. It's almost hysteric. Ash wants to sleep forever.

"Not even close." Red says.

*

They've come near to death an awful amount of times.

Sun mid-sky, the past, an unfortunate slip, running and running, *the past*, sweltering heat, blind justice, the list goes on. It's not like life is going to wait, after all, the warmth of a spectre is nonexistent.

They walk. It's a cobbled together road through a cherry grove, the cherry blossoms succumbing to autumn weather, leaves faring red and orange. Keep walking, keep going; the universe observes. The wastelands don't really give time for respite, when the next town is five days away and you only have barely enough food to make it. Overthinking is a waste of time. Ash cannot let go.

He is a leech. He is a parasite. He is a mosquito that will not stop taking blood. He is the malaria and the grotesque and the divine in flesh.

"Living is fucking stupid, sometimes." Ash says, kicking a stray pebble.

Red laughs, prods, "Really, yeah?"

"It's like, *complicated*. Messy."

"I never thought I'd live to the day that you actually call somethin' complicated." Red's grinning, intrigued now. Which is bad for Ash. Bad for that *something*. "I thought you'd say some shit like *you're above it*."

Ash isn't. *Ash isn't* -- Ash does not want to stop living -- Ash wants to stay. *With Red*.

"Nah, it's just like... stupid." Ash thinks a lot of things are stupid.

"In what way, then?"

Everything, everything; oh god, the rot festers, oh god, the parasites multiply, oh god, everything has gotten out of his hands.

How are you still alive; How am I still alive.

"Every way." Ash says, dismissive.

“Mhm. And you still keep livin’ anyway.”

Ash *would've* said something like *I can't die*. He is better than death. He will stare down the void and he will not succumb because he is better. Ash is only human. He is only a mortal thing, with too fleshy and bloody and warm limbs that circulate blood.

Ash *can* die. but still -- Ash won't die.

Ash will cling to life with his hands, he will cling to its red bloodied form and he will dig his nails into it until he tears his own space into time. He will carve a calamity of life in a framework, in figuration and in features, exploitation in business and the con of the fine print and partners to the end. It is dependency and attics and reliance and explosions and attachment and claustrophobia. *Do not leave me, do not go.*

“Of course I do.”

*

Moonlight sneaks between them. It creeps between the curtains, crawls and projects across the toppled over dresser, beams over loose pillows and finally, leaks into Red's hair. It glows, akin to radiation.

The rectangle of light stops short of Ash. He turns onto his side to face it. If he stretches his arm, his hand just grazes it, pale glow cutting across the tips of his fingers. He flexes his hand, watches the light move -- well, it doesn't really move, it stays still while Ash is the one moving -- noticing how it slinks down to his knuckles. Highlighting the ridges and edges, the peaks and valleys, textured secret intricacies.

Ash's shifts his focus further, to Red. He's not asleep, on his shift, and watching Ash with weary interest.

He blinks. Ash blinks back. A gentle breeze comes past.

Red lifts his hand from beneath the blanket on his lap, (so utterly *close* to Ash) and, with the utmost delicacy, places the tip of his finger on Ash's. Both of their stares slide to the single point of contact. Prying moonlight glares from the back of Red's hand. It washes out any pink undertones.

He lets himself touch the sun's vessel, if only for a little moment. Whether all of his skin and muscle and bones will vaporize is fine. Red smells like cheap motel soap from last night.

“Your hands are cold.” Red says, in lieu of a greeting.

Ash shrugs, with a little half-startled laugh. It's like touching glowing starlight.

“You're supposed to be asleep.” Red continues.

“You were practically asleep yourself.”

“*Wasn't.*”

“Sure, whatever you say.” Ash yawns. Red’s finger still brushes over Ash’s palm. It’s something that registers in his brain as really, really *nice* -- it’s these little impermanent moments that attract him to living.

Oh god. It’s *definitely* something. It’s definitely *something*, and it is not heart failure. Ash really wishes it was.

“God- have I ever told you you’re so much better when you’re asleep?”

“Probably. Multiple times, maybe.” Ash grins. “I’m perfect no matter what.”

Ash overturns his hand, with Red's fingertips now resting on the back. He imagines a golden handprint sears on. Ash's heartbeat flickers against his eardrum, its rhythm inconsistent like summer rain on a windowpane. He pictures raindrops on the glass. They collect more as they slide, huge, glistening globs that are lukewarm to the touch.

He feels the world go all soft around him, like pleasant vertigo, brushing past the edge of the galaxy.

*

It’s something. It’s so obviously *something*.

You could open up his chest and find his heart rotting. Sweet and cloying and sparking with feelings as it continues stubbornly beating.

Ash wishes he could say this never started in the first place.

The thing is -- he's known -- he's felt it ever since Red was laying limp, fever-flushed and awful, burning to the ground, that horrible *something*.

Ash thinks that’s when the feeling decided to take a home within him, and his immune system didn’t bat an eye. He’s known that humanity resides somewhere within him, messy and undefined but -- but it was never anything like this. It's not a modest thing that he can quell when it fucking destroys and ravages his chest.

It’s this autumn, this time, when Red turns and bares his face to the first light of dusk, feeble light striking sparks like electricity in his hair, and Ash crashes out, past the point of no return.

But no, no, it was all before that, wasn’t it?

As much as Ash hates to admit, he’s been human for a long, long time. Nothing in the grand scale of the universe, but it means a lot more in the face of the wastelands.

He’s been more than human for the blink of an eye, and eons passed, and eons passed, and eons passed.

Things were easier before, he'd tell anybody. Things were easier because he only had to care for himself -- there was no baggage and no *worrying* about anyone else. Things were easier

because he hadn't inserted himself in someone else's knot of life. If he dies, then there's still an awe-spanning legacy, mortality and morality just a suggestion at that point. It was all way less difficult to deal with.

And then came Red. And then Ash turned. And then came Red again.

Red has always been infuriating and impossible and overconfident and seemed to have made it his whole objective in life -- at least for those first few months -- to find ways to drive Ash insane. He still does.

He's static at the end of an alleyway; and then they're running together, explosion after explosion; Ash kneels over him; and he clasps his hands around Red's; it's a breathing, writhing cardinal sin.

Ash is divine machine incarnate in a man, and would switch the sugar and salt right before Red's eyes. He pushes away the possibility of an end for himself, because he is so much more, and he shatters rules, and he bends them to his whims all because he *could*. Ash laughs and lives and breathes and swears until all noise bows down to him. He will keep pushing as long as he can.

And Red -- Red is still there, still here, despite everything. It's still him and they're still two people. Red is intrinsically designed in humanity, someone who feels too much, and extorts, and corrupts.

Wasn't this all inevitable?

Ash doesn't believe in fate, or the invisible hand of god that pushes life forward. He cuts his own way through, lightning that ripples through threads. But this -- this -- the man he is now -- how he wounds up here -- the human he is, is because of Red's incessantness. A mark that cannot heal.

He has loved and hated hurting Red. To leave a mark, a bruise from his own form, that he specifically made.

Harm is a constant. A little violence as a bonding experience. Ash craves to tear Red apart, leave him ruined by his own hands, and then kneel and press his head against Red's chest because he's the only one who can. The part he hates is when he *hurts* truly. There's no fun in it; nothing like the push and pull of teeth and bruises and fingernails. The difference is vast and it's only taking him this long to realize it.

Ash cannot say he doesn't care. Ash has cared for a long time. It's a lie, disproved by every fibre of his existence.

But-- and--

And Red looks back at him, and Ash can only stare.

It's pathetically mortal, it's everything, it's nothing, it's messy, and it's all overwhelmingly and dizzyingly clear.

Maybe it's an innate part of being human. Ash *has* finally fallen down, and he's being forced to be a *person* instead of his smokescreen of hardware and sanctity.

He doesn't dwell. He's also made a lot of exception to that rule.

Through winter -- where Red kept on slipping through the creases -- where the inherent lack of his presence by Ash's side was a presence on its own. Where he regretted and regretted and he could not figure out why until he could and he still left it undefined and hazy because -- because that *can't* just be who Ash is. That's never been him.

Staying -- changing -- staying.

Ash loves violently and craves destructively. He is constantly pushing him away and pulling him in at the same time and he can't stand it.

Two sides of the same coin, together, never able to land without the other.

That *something*. Blood circulates like dizzying voltage; runs right into his fallible heart and it's as ethereal as the light of a solitary star. A wandering thing, tied down and pulled to reality.

Ash can continue this forever.

He can continue with layers of metaphors upon metaphors about this, leaving it only as a hazy *something* that rests within his chest. Just *something* -- unnamed and blurry and continuously decaying and making him gasp for breath in the moments where Red isn't looking.

Ash has known. This is just an acceptance. Laying something so bare -- so outright -- even in the open privacy of his mind makes everything feel all too raw.

It's human to accept these kinds of feelings. It's human to admit them, and Ash stands here, feet against the ground, breathing in oxygen and shuddering out carbon, the physical presence of himself, of Red in front of him. Ash breathes, Ash stays, and there's that all too prominent side that makes him want to hold him closer, to feel the raindrops on his skin, to kiss the thunder out of him.

The *something* -- the most human of emotions apart from hate. And hey, they've been walking a blurry line for a long time.

He's in love with him. *Ash* is in love with *Red*.

Sometimes, sometimes -- the inexplicable cosmic pull that you experience is not inexplicable, nor cosmic, not just *something* in his ribcage, and it is called love.

[FANART](#) FOR THIS CHAPTER !!!!!!!!!!!!! <3333 good lord i love fanartists
EVEN MORE [FANART](#) FOR THE DANCING SCENE <333 !!!

ohhh no the horror of accepting your feelings. oh nooo.

ao3 writers always try and squeeze in all lifestealers in the narrative like their life depends on it FUKKKK ... why jumperwho da truck driver all of da sudden ...

twelfth

Chapter Summary

Red knows too much. Ash realizes.

Ash *then* realizes that he doesn't want to stop Red from knowing more, and maybe this is setting himself up for certain death. Ash does not want to kill Red. He stopped wanting that a long time ago. Nursing him back to health kind of proved it, too. A lot of things have. Namely the fact that they're still standing here, together, just the two of them.

Chapter Notes

happy 100k words. this swagdoons shit is so serious

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ash expects for the world to break out into catastrophe and purgatory the moment he makes that realization. He waits, impatiently, for the first strike of disaster over the horizon, but -- nothing has changed at all.

Nothing outwardly at least. Internally, his chest feels like it's going to collapse. His ribcage suddenly feels a little bit too small, his lungs a bit too big, and with every beat of his heart, it comes closer to bursting out in the explosive display of violence and love and death.

Somehow -- it hasn't. He's still attached to his corporeal form, more aware of how utterly fucking human every part of him is, to his capillaries; to his bones; to his bile, more than ever.

Perfecting neutrality was one of the first things that Ash had fallen back into. He *can't* let Red know. There's no fucking way.

He can't imagine how it would go and -- and he really doesn't want to imagine what would happen if he did. So Ash keeps every little element of himself under a trusted smokescreen. Ash can only hope that Red hasn't gotten too good at seeing through the foggy hazy blur that Ash stands behind -- still in reach, but away from the pulsing of his heart.

Currently, Ash stays, with Red, rifling through boxes, pointing at little stamps and things that they wish would come back, or how lame is that, or so on. It's a small office, just off the side of a railway. Maybe they'll be able to find something actually useful. Probably not.

“You ever figure out what you'd do if it wasn't the apocalypse?” Red asks, kicking away another box. This one's full of shattered plates.

Ash shrugs, dismissive. “I wouldn't want to work in here.”

Red laughs, short and sweet and *fuck*. “Maybe we would've worked in an office together.”

“You'd fucking suck as a co-worker.”

“*I'd* suck? Dude, come on, look at yourself.”

Ash thinks he's done enough re-evaluation for a whole lifetime.

“You really think we'd be co-workers?” Ash asks, leaning back in the office chair. Loose fluff is scattered on the floor, ripped out long ago.

“Maybe.” Red answers, something itching in Ash about a conversation long ago. “Maybe we *would* find each other in every universe.” *Maybe not friends, but in every life.*

Ash hums, “Wouldn't that be nice.”

*

It stares at them with blank, white eyes. Usually, Ash would be thinking that it's blinded, or something, but the large, hulking horns that come out of it's head, along with the skulk that hangs limply off it, it's definitely just one escaped from the deep dark. He hasn't seen one in ages. Its pelt is stained with snow and blood, covering over fuzzy stereo black.

What the fuck.

“What the fuck,” Red says, whispering, parroting Ash's thoughts.

Ash looks between the deer, and then back at Red. “What do we do?”

The deer keeps blinking at them. Skulk sways in the wind from its horns. It keeps sniffing the air, standing dead-still. It's practically waiting to get hit. *What a stupid creature.* Red shrugs in response.

“Wish we had a better gun.” Ash muses. He's not stubborn enough to believe he can kill it with one single shot from a glock.

“*Dude.*” Red squints at him.

“What? It's literally free meat.”

“Do you even know how to skin deer? That shit looks all, like, complicated.” Red gestures, “And dude, did you even *see* it? There's nothin' normal about it.”

“Tell that to the guy with one eye, *okay*. I swear you said you knew how to.”

“You're gonna push all the manual labour onto *me*?”

“Of course I am.”

“*Unbelievable*. Well, sorry to say, but I never said that.”

Ash sighs, still keeping his voice quiet, “You’re so useless.”

“Oh no, I can’t skin a deer with my *bare* hands. Sorry that I can’t provide everything for you, Ash, the man who can have anything he wants? I’m *so* sorry that I *can’t* just *throttle* a deer.”

Ash hisses, waving him away after a moment. “My god- fucking, shut up.”

Red laughs, in that sort of pleasant and rough quality his voice has. “What, you can’t handle it?”

“No, fuck off- god.” Ash rolls his eyes, and just for good measure, his mouth decides to add, “You’ve always just been the stronger one. It’s your only attractive quality.”

Red’s in the middle of a comeback, or worse, or *something* stupid, when Ash’s words seemingly register as -- *something*. Red stares at him. Ash looks away; looks back after a moment. And it looks like Red’s going to say something stupid, and Ash knows that it’s just going to spiral downward, so he’s trying to figure out something to stop his inevitable doom, and settles on;

“*What*.” It’s not his best.

Red continues to blink at him. Ash decides to walk onwards.

*

“We’re going here next.” Red points, leaning over the map. Ash is perched next to him, sitting on the back of the cheap motel couch. Rough fabric digs into his palm.

Ash glances over. “How long?”

“Probably, uh, next three weeks.”

Ash sighs. He scowls down at the map, as if he could solve the problem of actually having to walk. He’s still never really had a chance to look at it, as the last time he had it in his possession he was so guilt-ridden that the idea of looking at Red’s handwriting made a small part of him internally want to throw up. The charting of the point of True North is perfectly blank, just the idea that something so far out *is* there.

He still doesn’t like endless walking. He thinks of Mid, and the money, and everything with Red.

Sure, Ash has travelled multiple times before out of spite. fuck, you don’t think he’s going to make it through the desert? Well, he’s going through it to spit and laugh at you. If there’s a *no trespassing* sign he *will* jump over it with no disregard. This is just -- different. Way different.

“Where’d you even get the map?” Ash thinks he asked this, at some point, buried between lines and spaces and pettiness. He’s pretty sure Red never answered.

“Pangi.” Red says. The name scratches some part of his mind. Red’s friend.

Ash’s always been a selfish individual. “Let me look at it.”

“Really? Alright.” Red shrugs, leaning back.

He was *always* expecting to get this far, he thinks, like a liar. It’s so awfully, strangely easy for Red just to -- accept. Ash slips down from the back of the couch to look at the map anyways. Aged and rough, infinitesimally small against the scale of the world. It’s aged well, for something made a long time ago.

There’s still Red’s handwriting, scrawled onto little places, doing its best to be unobtrusive and it’s all so *his*. There’s small drawings dotted around.

“I’m surprised you even gave my map back in good condition.” Red muses, still intently watching Ash.

“What?” Ash glances up.

Red gives a little shrug, all casual. “Over winter.”

“...Ah.” Ash isn’t really sure what else he can say. There’s not much he can even say in response, even though Red doesn’t bring it up anymore.

Swiftly, he looks back down to the map and starts pointing to certain points on the map, some places with names that vaguely register in his mind. Red entertains him, just because he can, and also because Ash can see the faint excitement at getting to talk about the places he’s been to.

Ash is also having a very, very hard time trying to ignore everything that’s swelling up and swirling inside of him.

He’s terribly close to Red. And fuck -- isn’t to be human to be impulsive -- as he shifts to crowd even closer to him. His knees knock against his, shoulders brushing together, and if it wasn’t for the small pause in Red’s speech then he would have thought he’d notice nothing of it.

Ash has initiated these kinds of small touches before, of course, but those had been foolishly, obviously casual. There were no deeper feelings from those that would pile and pile up in his mind, no craving to be even closer, to consume, to never move.

Red smoothly continues, drawing points back and forth on the map like an imitation of a star chart, just all the more terrestrial. Grounded.

The conversation lulls into silence after that. Ash just continues looking over the paper, the careful penmanship, a spider-like script concerning the world itself. How fucking strange. How fucking weird it is, to be alive.

Ash looks back up to Red, illuminated by the moonlight in the distance, casting hazy shadows. Red is watching him, too. He looks like a painting, all soft but defined lines. Something about marble statues itches the back of his mind, and Red has never been anything close to perfection, something far from it, standing in Ash's mind with poorly drawn devil horns and a tail, a *businessman*, but he's so -- fully human.

*

They step out of vicinity, back into late sunlit roads.

There's also a lot of blood. It was only a straggler, just one zombie. Red sits on a guard rail. Lucky, because hordes seemingly sprout of thin air, sticking to each other until they starve; but still unfortunate, stench of rot stuck to them for the next few hours. As if it wasn't already bad enough.

Ash runs a finger down the engravings on his glock, idly, just to touch. Swords are just easier to have than guns. It's a long known fact. Guns require production and ammo and money, while all you have to do with a sword is pay for it once. Or steal it.

"Zombies are fucking weird, man." Ash hisses, watching the blood drip down, at their feet. Red is busy cleaning the guts off his sword, bringing it back to a more presentable condition.

"Are you *just* coming to that conclusion?" Red raises an eyebrow.

"*Shut up.* You know what I mean, asshole. Don't act all high and mighty. *Oh, I'm Red, and I'm going to be a bitch -*"

"Dude," Red laughs, light. "My bad, okay."

"I'm right."

"I wasn't saying you weren't-"

"And you're admitting it." Ash grins. Another tally mark for him on his mental scoreboard.

"Ash- Well, ugh- whatever. Yeah, they are pretty fucked up. Why did it have to be zombies, man." Red sighs, leaning back for a moment.

"As if an apocalypse via nuclear war would be any better."

"Well. Alright- okay, maybe you've got me there. Nuclear war is pretty hard to defend."

Ash keeps watching Red wipe blood off. The rag is soaked with blood, just a piece of cloth that will be thrown away after he's finished. It's also kind of mesmerizing, watching the clean sweeping strokes, the way Red's hands move.

Blood is so easily cleaned away. It soaks into fabric, always there, but forgotten after long enough.

"What do you think happens after death?"

Red stares at him. "What."

"Answer the question."

"Dude, at least like- take me out on a date first. Don't just drop this." Red says, uneasy but joking. "Well, we've had the little restaurant bit-"

"That wasn't a real date." Ash interjects.

"So, wait, what I'm getting is you wouldn't be opposed-"

"*Shut up.* Red, we've known each other for, what is it, two years next spring? I think you can answer a question on mortality."

"Hm." Red starts, doesn't really, as he makes a final sweep over his sword. "I don't know, dude. I'd like it to be like, eternal bliss. Who knows."

"People who are dead know." Ash says, just to be petty.

"Oh, of course they do. Let me just get out one of those ouija board things, and let's just ask them." Red rolls his eyes.

"A lot of people turned into zombies."

"Well, do zombies really count as being dead? They're like, called the *undead* for a reason."

"Whatever." Ash huffs. "You're so- I hate the way your mind works."

Red startles, halfway laughing and halfway choking. "Come on, I answered your question. You can't just tell me to answer something like *oh, what happens after death* and then get upset when I don't agree with you."

Ash just waves him away, spitting back some half-assed remark, already moving.

"Do you ever think," Red starts, hands grasped onto his sword. "If they were ever sad and lonely? Knowing that they wouldn't be able to return? Can you even die blissfully anymore?"

"They're dead, Red." Ash says. Death has always been as simple as that.

"Maybe."

Ash quells death down into its own small quiet box.

He doesn't think about how he would die. He's alive, still here, and that's all there will be for this moment. Red watches, carefully. His sunglasses gleam under the fading sun. The edge of the sunglasses, the edge of the sword, ready to cut open.

Ash stares back at Red. He doesn't think about the way he would die.

Ash is just a normal man with a sleeping god inside him; he's a supernova; he's an ordinary traveler; he's the center of the universe; he's an impossible paradox; he's the most natural

existence; he's completely extraordinary; he'll always be Ash at the end of the day.

They're both the collision of galaxies ready to meet forever entangled in death until the universe pulls them apart, ever expanding and yearning. It doesn't spare a glance at the finite lives their bodies inhabit. Ash sighs.

"Don't die, dumbass." Red knocks his leg gently with his foot.

"I'll outlive you." Ash says back, just to argue.

One day he'll go out, bright and sparking, equally oblivious to the world, left to spread stardust in the cosmos. It doesn't matter if he lives to the end of this world, or to tomorrow, or to the heat death of the universe.

For now, it's more than enough. To be here.

*

"What the fuck were you *thinking*?"

"I was thinking about how it looked so cool." Ash answers, letting Red pull out the little shards of glass embedded into his hand. "And it did."

He might have jumped through a window. Not exactly, but that just sounds better than punching through the glass, and then panickedly unlocking it from the other side. It was kind of a dire situation. He'd take the possibility of just maybe breaking his arm (which he *didn't!*) over the very real impending doom of the horde that was gaining speed on him. Privately, he misses his lead pipe.

"You're such a fucking idiot, Ash. It's always you getting into this dumb shit." Red sighs, getting ready to perform the usual routine. "I'm going to start developin' like, gray hairs because of you."

"Aww. You care." Ash mocks.

"Of course I do, dumbass."

Ash stares at him.

He's sure he's misheard him for a moment. Maybe the words in his brain have gotten so mixed up from the adrenaline that *go die* was instead replaced with *of course*. He waits.

Red carries on, dropping the shards off to the side. Ash grits his teeth.

There's no explosion to punctuate the gaping wound that now has been unearthed in Ash. Of course. Of course. How could he not have known? It's havoc and destruction and yearning that gets released in his bloodstream. Stars collapse. It's blinding electricity. He shouldn't be so surprised by this revelation, because *of course*, of course Red does. Red is kind, and a snake oil salesman, and he lies, and he whispers, and he clings onto him, and he's intertwined into the knot. Ash wants to bash his head into a wall.

Red has cared since the start. The backdrop of the desert sun overhead, sand that stuck in his clothes, solitary tumbleweed. He's *cared* and he's never stopped caring.

Ash wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for kindness; for -- whatever Red's feelings are.

Eye contact is almost too much. He has to look down at where their hands are entangled, Ash's palm spread wide over Red's, where he's still picking off the larger shards. Red has his gloves off, and the feeling of skin to skin contact sings his nerves. How awfully pleasant.

Bloody and gentle. It's almost a worse sight.

"How would I ever live without you." Ash says, and it's meant to come off irritated, or at least sarcastic, but everything tells him that he wouldn't even be alive. It's a sick, sick realization. It makes him nauseous. Red is oblivious.

Hands, purple and bruised.

"You wouldn't." Red says, softer, and it really is all that simple. A part of Ash's brain that he tries to drown out registers it as almost sweet, until Red adds, "You probably would've pissed off the wrong guy, or something. Or bled out already."

Red's eyes flicker up at him, and then back down to his hand. It's almost -- not quite, maybe condemnation, just almost -- deifying.

(There's always been a low burning, the drive of being alive despite not knowing who he is. Does a God believe in a mortal?)

Ash thinks about the smoke from his gun. "You would've died like, twice already, if not for me."

There's already bruises forming on his knuckles. Soon, though, they will be healed, when the health potion will smear all over his tissue and into his cells, rebuilding and revitalizing.

Red just sighs again. It's a low, rough sound.

There's never been a clear explanation of the physical pain that emotions make you feel. There's no clear neurological pathway to explain this phenomenon, but it's real, and Ash knows this because there's no other explanation for the way his chest constricts, the ache sharp and heavy and searing. The physical effects of emotions. Ash would try to rationalize it anyways.

Blood is wiped off next, a routine. The health potion is being uncapped. Ash sighs. He doesn't feel like it's only the wound being examined, stripped open.

Ash grins, and he's *sure* he says this *mockingly*, "Won't you kiss it better?"

"One kiss won't make do for all of this." Red says back, easy.

Ash blinks.

Red just carries on wiping the blood off, nonchalant, face hidden. Ash really, really wants to take off his sunglasses sometimes and take his head in his hands and bash their heads together or -- or do something *worse*. Like actually *kiss* him. But he can't. So Ash just resigns himself to glaring.

“What.”

“What?” Red asks, that bastard, obviously amused.

“*What*,” Ash mocks, but he doesn't exactly object, either. He huffs, “Fucking asshole. Just, wrap it up, whatever.”

*

“How did you even get this in such a state?” 4C asks, unscrewing and tinkering with the radio.

Red looks at Ash. Ash looks back. Red turns to 4C, “We don't know.”

4C laughs, in that kind of high-pitched, awkward way that Ash has become familiar with again in the last twenty minutes. “What do you mean you don't know?”

They've properly met twenty minutes ago. He's actually met him on multiple occasions in the past -- business and weapons continue to follow him like an echo -- but he's just never paid enough attention to the customers. He only remembers 4C because, well, it was embarrassingly easy to mark the price up for him. Ash is never going to reveal any of this, because it's not socially acceptable, but also a trade secret.

“We don't know.” Ash repeats. “We plugged it somewhere, some fucking random panel. And then it just- doesn't work anymore.”

Ash decides to leave out the discovery of the noise. He's fairly certain that it was just something to do with the radio telescope itself. Red keeps looking over at him, unsurprised that he left out the most integral part.

4C doesn't seem to care, as he continues messing with the guts of the radio. “That explains it, yeah. Don't plug it into random places, maybe?”

“What a shame, I was planning to stick a fork into an outlet next. Hey, Red, you should-”

Red kicks him, light, in his shin. “Shut up.”

In exchange, Ash cackles, light and airy. “Come on, I insist.”

4C looks between them for a moment, eyes flickering over the two. Ash doesn't know what kind of conclusion he comes to, but it seems to recontextualize everything in that moment.

Later, Ash hears him talking with Red one-on-one. Ash can hear the words *congratulations* from 4C, gesturing big and wide about something, which is the point where Ash decides to

not listen to anymore, because *oh god, was this what Planet was talking about*, and instead hopes that a gaping hole into the earth's core swallows him whole.

*

Caravan rides are bumpy, hell-like, and almost make Ash want to throw up.

He doesn't think he gets travel sick, not at all, driving that car was one of his favourite moments in his life (he ignores the part where he spun out into a ditch). It's just that caravans aren't cars, and they don't go onto smooth highways, and they hike over roads that are only implied into the terrain, rarely paved out -- they're off road vehicles powered purely by redstone. There's only so many times he can take of his head bumping into the roof.

Ash sighs. They're here as hired help, mostly because Red has a sword, and Ash can at least look intimidating with his gun and lie and say that he has this much ammo in store with a cunning smile. As of now, he's, for lack of a better term, keeled over in the back, sitting on one of the crates.

It's an unpleasing strain that unravels in him, like the vibration of a rope drawn out too fast, pulled taut. It's vague dizziness; background vertigo.

This is the only reason why he doesn't complain when Red sits a little closer. Ash presses his head to his shoulder, trying to stop his mind from spinning. Maybe he'd drink a health potion for the hell of it at this point.

"You okay?" Red says, hushed.

As if this is a secret between them, kept safe from the sun itself.

Ash groans, "Shut up."

Red just laughs, a sort of rough sensation that Ash thinks would only piss him off even more, but it's -- familiar, isn't it? Not exactly alleviating, but just something accustomed to. There's a temptation to speak further, but surprisingly, he *does* keep quiet.

It's kind of stabilizing, honestly.

It also makes his head feel way more dizzy, in a way. He really doesn't like the realization he's come to. He really, *really* does not like it. His inner core melts like the stars in June. He opens his mouth again, thinks to say something like *shut up*, again, or *I'm gonna throw up on you*, or *stay*, some other awful, earnest thing, and cuts himself off at the last second. Instead;

"We should take over this stupid caravan." Ash mutters. "Maybe just steal from it."

"Ash. The fuck would we do with like, two thousand beetroot seeds?"

"I think there's more than two thousand here." Ash tilts his head, "You're supposed to be the *business* guy. Think of something."

Red bumps him, gently, but it still feels way more forceful than intended with the shitty caravan driving. Maybe he'd just have to spend his last bullet on shooting the driver the more he thinks about it.

“Well, you could start a shitty little farm that only grows beetroot, and starve in like, every other season.”

“Maybe True North is just a really large beetroot farm.” Ash muses. It's a lot of energy for coherence, right now.

“Man- think of the *upkeep*.” Red sighs. “That's so much effort.”

Ash pauses, as if he's suddenly connected something. “So you became a businessman because you're lazy.”

“*What* - dude.” Red levels him with an unimpressed look.

It just makes Ash laugh, spill out into giggles, and the action just makes his head hurt even more. *Fuck*. He tries to not let it show -- still trying to hide weakness after all this time -- but it evidently *does*.

Red quiets down for the moment, his free hand pulling his facemask up idly. His other hand, though, inches his hand towards Ash's back, further, to the point that it does rest right over his spine. It hurts divinely. In turn, his head only presses further into Red's shoulder. Ash feels the spot singe with his touch. It's so, so warm. Maybe -- maybe this is why he ran in the first place.

“Fucking hate caravans.” Ash murmurs.

*

“I've never really worked with swords before.” Ash says.

“I mean, yeah, Lala Legion mostly dealt with guns, didn't they?” It's a basic fact, like the way the sky is blue, or the grass is green, but it still hits Ash with some weird sort of annoyance because it's Red saying it, and *when* did Red know so much about him?

Ash knows that it's -- kind of embarrassing to be realizing this so late on. He's spent the past year of his life with Red, of course he knows. It still doesn't stop that ache in his chest from ruminating.

“Stupid fucking name.” Ash mutters under his breath, “Yeah, guns and that shit.”

(Ash was an auto-mechanical angel at the time. Breathing life into guns, screwing parts together, attaching pieces together like limbs of the human body).

Red hums in acknowledgment, taking his sword off his belt. He stops in the clearing of the birch forest, light dappling through the leaves, gesturing for Ash to come closer. *What the fuck*.

“You wanna try it out?”

“What, like, stab you?”

“No- not *stab* me, just like, holdin’ it. Maybe a swing.”

Ash’s breath stutters in his throat. He does not admit that he has held it before, where the moonlight slipped through the attic window. But that -- that’s long ago. It’s much different now, when Red is standing there, waiting for Ash to take him up on this detour, and they’ve always loved procrastinating, and it’s all too much.

There’s just no other option, is there? When Red offers something so *personal*, private, always on his side. Ash tries to remain casual.

“Sure, I guess.” Ash says.

Red hands it to him by the hilt, nonchalantly. Ash takes it from him, takes it into his palm, oh god, this was just where Red was holding it a moment ago, and no one ever told him that being in love makes your thoughts this embarrassing and messy and pathetic. He breathes out.

Not to mention how -- how easily Red gives it over. It fucks with him. A lot. Instead of saying anything though, he just takes it in his hands, wraps his hands around it, mimicking how he’s seen Red holding it.

“How’s it feel, then?” Red prods.

“I mean. It feels like a sword.” Ash turns it over a few times, sunlight bounces off it.

Red laughs at him, amused more than mocking. That fucking asshole. Ash’s heart flips out.

“I could kill you, you know, I have a sword and a gun and you have nothing on you.”

A fool. (*Both of them*).

Red's smiling under his mask, Ash knows from how Red’s cheeks pull up, and fuck. He’s so cocky -- so fucking sure despite how obviously outmatched he is -- and it just makes Ash want to succumb to indulgence.

“You won’t, though.”

Red knows too much. Ash realizes.

Ash *then* realizes that he doesn't want to stop Red from knowing more, and maybe this is setting himself up for certain death. Ash does not want to kill Red. He stopped wanting that a long time ago. Nursing him back to health kind of proved it, too. A lot of things have. Namely the fact that they're still standing here, together, just the two of them.

“I could.” Ash says, trying desperately to score an imaginary tally mark on his imaginary score board.

“You *could*. You won’t.” Red just smiles again, all too confident. “Why would you?”

“Shut up.”

Ash doesn’t know whether he’s bristling from irritation out of anger or out of begrudging his own raw affection. Red changes the subject, giving him no time to think about it; not the smoothest, but quick.

“You ever swung a sword before?”

“*Duh*. Yeah. I didn't get born into this world holding a gun now, did I.”

“Sometimes with the way you wield your glock it seems like it.”

It’s a *compliment*.

Ash’s mind shouldn’t be reeling over a simple compliment from Red. He shouldn’t be short circuiting, dangerous voltage, over a *compliment*. This would mean nothing before all of -- all of this feelings shit came into play. This would’ve only served to feed Ash’s ever-expanding ego, but as of now? He’s so screwed. Too fucking smitten.

He’s trying to act cool. Ash gives a little (shaky) grin, twirling the sword in his hand idly, the epitome of superiority. Or -- or something, fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Confidence.

“You haven't seen me at my prime, you know.”

“What, so you’re out of your prime now?” Red tilts his head, as if he isn’t mocking him.

“No- dude, *shut up*. That's not what I meant. I only have one bullet, you know, there’s not much to do with that.”

Red just grins at that even more. Ash feels like he’s doomed himself and that there is nowhere else he’d want to be, even if Red is -- Red. He can’t describe the hazy reverence of a creature so human. Ash simply hands the sword back over.

It’s Red’s, It’s *Red’s*, it's *so* Red’s.

“I guess not. Maybe we can buy you a fancy little semi-auto rifle then.”

We. Ash feels like he’s going to short circuit all over again. He’s never been this -- this emotional before. He’s never put so much importance on one person in his life but -- but this is all that he has. He’s hiding everything away behind his layers of glass.

“It's coming straight out of your paycheck.” Ash mutters.

Red just laughs at him again, amused fondness, and no one’s ever told Ash that affection would feel like this, burning and smoking reliance. It feels -- easy.

Ash has seen Red's body plenty of times before.

He's seen it in his usual stupid, businessman-mimicking clothes, he's seen him dressed down in the little sparse moments in inns, and he's seen slithers of skin peek out when he waves his sword around, and Ash has leaned over him, in a stuffy, fucked up attic, and had to unbutton his shirt one by one, and wrangle his arm out of his sleeves.

Ash does not like to think about that week. Ash does not like how it's molded itself into his psyche.

But this isn't the attic. This isn't Ash forcing a totem into Red's hands and it isn't the buzz of mosquitoes and it isn't a gaping necrotic wound.

This is -- not anywhere close to that. This is Red, sitting on the edge of some shifty bed, facemask down, with Ash sitting next to him. He's shirtless, the pale expanse of his skin fully exposed. Scars litter about, plentiful, only a small peek into the kind of life he's lived. Informant, businessman, killer. Ash's is -- so fucking fuzzy -- lightheaded. He can't let that show, so he continues examining Red's skin.

It's all too impulsive. It's too much. It's enough to amplify the knot in his heart to something unbearable and if he didn't know before he certainly would know now.

Somehow, it seems like Ash has lost his sense of shame. Or something.

He feels weird. He feels so weird, because it's not even like this has an excuse to it, that Red's injured and he has to take off his shirt. No, no, *this is indulgence*. It's so much worse.

"That's a bullet graze, right?" Ash asks.

"Yeah." Red answers simply, stretching his arm out; a rippling scar spreads horizontally across his bicep.

Ash reaches out to brush his hand out, just to feel it, before he retro-actively pauses, "Can I?"

"I mean, you're already touchin' it." Red huffs, amused. "Go ahead."

Ash rolls his eyes, but he continues in his movement. He feels how uneven the skin is under the pads of his fingers, the scar rough and indented, darker around the edges.

Red turns to look at Ash's bandaged eye for a moment. Ash stares back with his one, functional eye. *Not now, not now*, says the atmosphere. Red looks away.

He continues poking and prodding, moving onto the scar just to the left of it, and then the one below it, and then the scar just to the right. Red has a lot. Some older, some newer, some that Ash has seen him get. He can't bring himself to look at his shoulder just yet.

Health potions only help the healing process. They kickstart new tissue growth, which really forms the foundation for scars. They can't exactly remove the traces of an injury completely.

Red talks a little, explaining how he got the one that Ash is poking at right now, or just complaining, or talking shit. Ash isn't exactly tuning him out, but he's just -- focused, on the feeling of Red's warmth. It's tender, and Ash's hands are always colder than a normal persons, and he's kind of leeching up Red's warmth.

“You need to get like, hand warmers, dude.” Red mutters, accompanied by a shiver when Ash brushes over one of the more recent scars.

“I’m just siphoning your warmth, you’ll be fine.”

Red lets out a soft little laugh, as he shifts slightly. It just reminds Ash that he has his left shoulder, too, of course, his other arm hasn’t just dropped off in the past few seconds. Ash halts.

It’s inevitable. Ash is going to have to look at it eventually.

“You want me to turn?” Red asks, noticing Ash’s pause, ever so *nice*.

Delaying it only makes it hurt more.

“Okay.” Ash breathes out.

Red shuffles, presenting his left side towards Ash. There’s far worse scars on his body, far worse scars just on his left arm, but his attention is immediately drawn to the small little spot at the top of his shoulder, where the arrow had pierced through. The wound, god -- the fucking *scar*.

It’s small. It’s terribly small compared to everything else, as if it was just a little graze that healed just a bit wrong.

Ash knows it isn’t. It’s only because of the notch apple that it even healed so nicely, and he fucking hates it. Ash knows that he laid, paced, breathed in stifling warm summer air, just so that Red wouldn’t die from the infection. It makes him downright nauseous seeing it be so -- so normal. Comparatively insignificant in size.

He tentatively presses his hand up to it, and he remembers the routine, ingrained into him like muscle memory. Though, instead of being met with decay and rot and black and bruised flesh, it’s a tiny dent, the skin very much intact. Ash freezes. There’s no other word for it.

“Ash?”

“I- fuck, whatever, it’s nothing.” Ash settles on.

Red just breathes out a little sigh, disbelieving. He doesn’t say anything.

He looks through Ash as if he’s a thin sheet of plexiglass; and Ash can only hope that he doesn’t see his pulsing heart. Red sees entirely too much of him, non-metaphorically, too. Through the months. Red knows, of course, he has to know.

Red just brings his free hand up, pushing Ash's hand away from his shoulder, and the temptation to interlace their fingers is almost too strong, but fuck, if Ash can keep one thing to himself, it has to be every single layer of his heart, and even then, it's not like Ash is succeeding -- letting Red know that he *cares*; staying; touching Red like *this* are all layers that have been peeled off by no one else but Ash himself.

He focuses on how Red's hand wraps around his, coaxes it down to another scar, this one on his brachialis. It's even smaller, a thin cut, almost insignificant -- obviously nonlethal. Red presses his fingers against it.

It's a simple work of *distraction*. That doesn't mean it's any less effective as Red starts talking about what that one's from -- some small play-scuffle with Pangi -- and then he moves to the next one, and the one after that.

Ash is hit with how many there are. He already knew that there were a lot, but it's still different to actually feel them under his palm.

Calling Red's skin blemished feels wrong. The scars, injuries, wounds, so on, really aren't blemishes. It's just survival, but it's not exactly that either. A small part of him registers them as incredibly, dizzily attractive, but Ash *can't* say that. They're just marks -- traces of life.

He instead traces his fingers down a longer scar, spanning from his elbow to his wrist, like a heart line.

"There's a lot." Ash murmurs.

Red laughs, "You know, you say such nice things."

"Can't blame people wanting to stab you." Ash says, knuckles brushing over another scar on his forearm, a thin streak this time.

Red laughs again, leaning back, to finagle his arm around and nudge at Ash's leg, where his own stab wound is covered up by his pant leg. "You talk a lot for a guy who I found bleeding out."

Ash just bats his hand away, shoo-ing him off. Though, Red catches his wrist mid air and it's a silent challenge.

"Really now?" Ash mocks.

"Really." Red grins.

This leads to Red tackling Ash in one swift movement, playful, and they're rolling around on the stupid fucking bed, wrestling and giggling, punching at each other's sides, chests, trying to get the upper hand. It's play fighting for the sake of doing something.

It all feels all the more awful -- all the more intimate -- as everytime Ash nudges Red off, it's *all* skin to skin contact, all too dizzying.

He ignores that, though, because he wants to win, damn it, and he pushes Red away again, as Red yanks him by his shirt.

At the end, Red is comfortably under Ash, laid back against the bed. Ash sits snug in between his legs; it's almost cozy in a way.

"Aww, look at you." Ash mocks, keeping his voice as steady as he can.

"You're such an asshole, you know that?" Red says, but his voice isn't exactly displeased, either.

Ash just grins, and leans forward a little more, over Red. It's close but not close enough, just at the right distance where Ash can feel the edge of Red's breath. His hand comes up to prod at Red's eyebrow, where a little scar is, the hair growing around it a little patchy still. It's a subtle thing.

"What's this one from?" Ash asks.

Red shrugs with a little gesture. "I don't remember anymore."

"So it's embarrassing. Got it."

Red just laughs underneath him, murmuring a little *shut up* and pushes Ash back, away.

Not *away* away, but just to where Ash is sat normally again. Which means that prodding around is still fair game. Ash brushes his knuckles over Red's stomach, starting low. There's smaller scars here, old and faded, none recent. Raised skin, dipping in and then back out. He scrapes his fingernails over Red's skin, which just produces a little shiver and a swear. Ash files that away, and pretends like he did nothing.

His hands keep moving, all too indulgent, down his sides to where some of his larger wounds are situated, one that sprawls across his navel to his apollo's belt.

"I got that one from some past fight with Minute." Red answers, his own hand moving to brush over it too. "Nearly killed me."

"Ah." Ash doesn't know what else to say to that. Death is always there; an unwanted constant.

Ash just -- decides to move his hands on. That's the only way he could think of. He carries on skimming over Red's skin and he doesn't really have an excuse for the fact that his thumb keeps on pressing down on various little moles that are dotted around. Red doesn't say anything about it, though.

He's so close -- so unbearably close -- and he acts like this is normal. Everyone does this. Ash has always had a bad habit of lying to himself.

Where has the Ash who would spit and claw and shoot anyone who would come close to him gone?

They're a messy tangle of body and limbs. And Ash indulges. And Ash keeps on indulging. And he doesn't ever really want to stop.

Red keeps talking, idle chatter in the background, about this situation or that situation. Ash keeps responding with little hums, noises in acknowledgment; every so often laughing at some stupid shit; or mocking him; or pressing his thumb down a little bit too hard just to see Red glare at him, unimpressed.

His hands eventually come up Red's chest. A scar that mimics the imprints of pointed sharp stars, bursting all over where his heart resides. Multiple scatter out, not in any neat pattern, messy.

Instead of pressing and tracing down, he leans back. Red tilts his head, although he remains laying flat down.

Ash's own shirt hangs loose, threadbare on him. *This is stupid*, he thinks. He really, probably, would never do this otherwise without the stupid nebulous thing that resides in his own heart. His fingers slip under the hem, and he pulls his shirt up to show off the side of his waist.

A similar scar sits on his side. It's the same amorphous little stars, sharp and jagged, bursting across in streaks like fireworks.

From Red's lips, slips out a single, soft, "*Oh*."

"I think mine looks better." Ash says simply, as Red's hand reaches up to prod at it, which makes his muscles involuntarily twitch.

"Looks lame."

Ash raises an eyebrow.

Red interrupts before Ash can make a comment back, "Where'd you get yours from?"

"Wormhole. Where else." There's not much else that needs to be explained. "You?"

"Yeah, same. Wormhole." *The checks, specifically.*

Ash nods, as Red just continues to trace over his side. It's a simple little action -- hell, it's what Ash has been doing for the past few minutes -- but it feels different. Ash doesn't just partner up with anyone and lift his shirt up to show where Spoke *playfully* hit him with that stupid fucking *po cannon* or whatever they used to call it. (Ash can't forget).

Red touches him like he's a statue made of marble; it's a rare, unguarded kind of affection. His thumb brushes against the sharp jagged edges of the small stars, as if mapping them out to memory, and holy shit, *god*, what the fuck Ash has gotten himself into.

"Off." Ash says, when he can't quite take the tenderness anymore, and bats his hands away.

Red lifts his hand off, letting it lay limp against the bed again in mock surrender. He lets his shirt fall back down, concealing it away. Ash leans over him again, closer. Ash could kill

him. It's intimacy at its prime. When did he first start participating in this?

Ash can't find an answer. Instead, he presses his palm against Red's chest, right over his heart. Where his own set of stars scatter out.

"Is this okay?"

"More than." Red murmurs.

Ash could kill him. Ash could decide that he wants to slip his hunting knife out and plunge it into him, or maybe he could line up the muzzle of his gun up against his beating heart and shoot, and pull it back and watch Red bleed out into the sheets, see the entrance wound peppered with gunpowder residue but--

He just leans down, *closer*, to his chest. Almost reverent. Ash wants to peel back all the layers, sink into the warm heart of his. He could live there.

"Can I?" Ash asks, again.

To rest; to lay. His breath ghosts over his skin.

"Yeah- yeah, okay." Red stammers out.

Ash presses his head against Red's chest, right over his heartbeat. Feels it thrumming, feels the shaky exhale that Red gives. He could kill him right now. He could kiss him -- which really, is just so much worse of a thought. He could do so many things, but he doesn't. Doesn't want to ruin this fragile thing that they're sheltering in the space hidden from the sun.

Because -- because everything's so fucking warm. So fucking awfully alive.

*

Ash pushes open the door. There hasn't been anyone in the room for a long, long time.

"And you said there would be supplies here." Ash rolls his eyes, but still entertains Red, stepping inside. His flashlight flickers, the battery slowly coming to its end. It had a good run.

They're scuttling through an old, abandoned movie theater. He only knows that this is the projection booth because it coincidentally had a half-broken sign that said *projection booth* on the front of the door. Everyone's left this place behind.

Ash continues inside, scanning his flashlight over everything. It's a busy but small room, and the only things left behind are useless machines and fallen ceiling tiles. Practically worthless to attempt to scavenge; everything worth taking has already been taken.

Red watches Ash with mild interest, while pretending to clear the room over for potential supplies. He's ended up messing with the projector on one of the stands, an old frail thing -- one of those ones with spools. This theater must've been left to rot long before the

apocalypse. He wants to see if it even turns on still, messing with random buttons, but nothing ever happens.

At some point, Red ended up watching him poke at it. He snaps out of whatever little trance he fell into with, “Hey, Ash, look at this.”

Ash turns. There’s a small reel of plastic in Red’s hands. “What’s that?”

“It’s a film tape. Film reel? Yeah, somethin’ along those lines.”

“A what.”

“It’s what you used to like, feed into this,” Red taps the projector, “And it would play the movie. I don’t know how *exactly* it works, don’t ask. I used to con people for information, not loot through theaters.”

“Ah, of course, and along the way you just happened to learn how a projector works.” Ash says, staring at the piece of film reel. It seems far too small to be inserted into the spool.

“Hey, hey, you pick up some other knowledge sometimes.” Red says, and holds it out. “You can have it.”

As if it is something so much more than just a piece of plastic.

Ash stares down at it. “What use do I even have for this?”

But he takes it anyway, the pad of his thumb would touch Red’s palm if it wasn’t for the thinnest piece of plastic conceived. It’s just just enough for Red to feel the weird not-heat of Ash’s fingers over his skin, and then it dissipates as Ash moves his hand away.

Red shrugs in response to his question, and goes back to uselessly moving things around.

Ash stares down at it, it’s only a small fragment of something bigger, a section of some movie that people would have flocked to watch, that Ash holds in his hand. He runs his fingers over the sprocket holes on its side, the image in the middle being of something exploding, large and grand and effervescent.

He wouldn’t describe himself as sentimental. Still, he places it into his notebook with the pressed tulip.

“The last town is only a few weeks away, you know.” Red pipes up.

“God, how I *love* walking for days upon days.”

Red has the audacity to laugh at him. “You complain so much, man, is there even one thing in your life that you’re happy about?”

Internally, Ash wants to throttle Red. Or collapse. Or something. He doesn’t know what the more rational option is. Outwardly, Ash opens his mouth to insult Red back and -- he’s interrupted by Red shrieking. Red, usually, does not shriek.

Ash's hand scrambles to his glock, "What- what, is it zombies-"

"*Fuck -*"

Red stumbles back, against the door -- and Ash sees the perpetrator. A spider. It's harmless, non-poisonous, but it carries on scuttling across the floor, limbs a bit too long. Ash stiffens. He does not scream. He just -- reacts appropriately to something dragging its eight legs across the room, hiding back in a small crevice draped in shadows.

They are two grown men freaked out over a spider.

They also don't say anything for a while.

Ash feels -- not the best, frankly. There's just something about going from mortified to terrified to irritated in the span of seconds. He tightens his grip on his gun, (fuck, he really was about to shoot a *spider*) and looks Red in the eye -- this fucking idiot, this dumbass, this bastard who is somehow the kindest person in the world to him -- making him freak out over a *spider*.

"Are you fucking kidding me." Ash mutters, and relaxes his grip.

"Ash- oh my god- you dickhead, *you* screamed too--"

"I didn't--"

"Sure- okay, sure you didn't." Red huffs. "Fuck, whatever, we're leavin' *now*."

Ash laughs, trailing after Red as he pulls the door back open. He hopes the spider knows how lucky it is.

"You know, you wouldn't be acting like this if a cockroach was here--"

"Oh, shut the fuck up already."

*

Back and forth a pendulum goes.

Well, a swing in this case. They need breaks like sensible people, and he's ended up idly swaying back and forth. Ash is mostly sitting on his -- one leg up and the other overhanging - - and looking over at Red, who's just looking out into the horizon. It's getting colder. The middle of autumn, where everything is sadly wet and dead. Waiting for spring again.

He watches the sun, lazily. It's midday, just simple respite.

Red is the only one actively swinging, nothing too drastic, but it's more of a swing than Ash's swaying. He watches Red go up, hands pressed against the steel chains on the swingset, and then back down, and then again.

Ash's hand remains in his lap, idly moving his chain ring around. The one cut by Red. Specifically fitted for him. He tries not to think too much (it's too late for that).

Eventually, Red does get bored of swinging, doing the same thing as Ash; just idly swaying. Two pigeons, on a wire, sit off in the distance. Two people sway. It's a few more minutes, and he's messing with some coin. Another few minutes pass and he's started to whistle.

It's a low tone. Not somber, but low due to Red's tone of voice. It's carried away by the wind, and no one else will ever experience this. Ash enjoys it while he can.

"I didn't know you could whistle." Ash says, a passive observation.

Red stops to look over at him, "You find out something new everyday. Can you?"

"It's not something that I do on a regular basis."

"Awh, c'mon. You're avoiding the question. Can you, or can you not?"

"I can." Ash relents.

"Then whistle for me."

For him. What a dizzying request.

Ash is tempted to scoff and wave Red's words off. *Of course I won't*, or something like that, but -- but he's asking. Ash has crashed fast and *hard*, burning in the atmosphere.

He whistles a simple little tune, not anything much, just a few seconds. It's just *whistling*.

Red, on the other hand -- fuck. It's dizzying.

It's dizzying -- the way he's looking at Ash is as if he's the most divine being on earth, not even made for this world, *starstruck*. It's the only way to describe it. It's unfair, it's so unfair, and there's not even a good reason for him to be looking at Ash like that, it's just whistling. Ash really doesn't understand him sometimes.

Even with his facemask on, his sunglasses, his reaction still slips through like awe-defying blinding light. Red seems to catch on after a few more seconds, as he coughs lightly, schooling his face back to neutrality.

Red stutters out, "Ah. I see."

*

"Fucking- tilt your head forward."

Ash hisses out commands, watching as blood runs down Red's nose, down to his lip. His mask is off, lest it be covered in any *more* blood.

"Shouldn't it be backwards?"

“No. Just, do it already.” Ash says, curt.

Ash is half tempted to push Red’s head down himself, just to hear the little noise he would make. He doesn’t have to, as Red does finally lean forward, and then there’s blood dripping into his lap instead, sickly crimson, from where it pools into his hand and streams down. Ash grimaces.

“You know, this seems kinda poorly thought out.” It keeps dripping.

“Shut up.” Ash mutters.

“I’m still bleeding.”

“God- *you* - fuck.” Ash hisses, and ends up tilting Red’s head up, trying his best to avoid the streams of blood, fingers under his chin.

Ash isn’t sure whether to punch him or wipe the blood off or-

Red stares at him, lazy and tired. Ash stares back, forgetting what he was meant to do for a split second. Red -- Red, fuck. Some part of him thinks that he looks better with blood on his face, and he immediately pushes down that thought before it can evolve.

The blood is probably drying into his trousers right now. Ash doesn't care, he's sure it's been covered before, and it's not like the stain is noticeable. What a life they're forced to slog through. Against the paleness of his face, though, the red is a stark contrast. Humans have always been so colorful on the inside; purple and red organs; yellow adipose tissue; pink fascia.

"Honestly, I don’t even know why it started bleeding.”

“I did it telepathically.” Ash rolls his eyes, being forced to do what he was meant to in the first place.

He takes out a tissue with his free hand, pressing it to Red’s nose, and then tilting his head back down with his other hand.

“You just love to make my life hell.”

“I do, I do.” Ash grins. It’s only fair for Red forcing him to-- to--

*

Fall in love. What else could it have been.

They’re just shy of the gates outside the last town. Maybe it’s an overstatement. The gates are still very much away, but they’re in *view*, and that’s all that matters. It’s not anything similar to the safety zones; it’s a small community. There’s still guards, watchtowers, but they just seem like tiny specks in the distance.

All of the landscape is dusted over with snow. They're just shy of a mountain range, rings of clouds circling around the top. It's not the *worst*, it's not like Ash steps in and sinks down to his knees, but treading through snow is decidedly not very fun. Red fell down a few metres back already, and yelled at Ash for not immediately helping, and pulled him down with.

"Cold as fuck." Red complains, winter coat over his head. There's still a few flakes of snow left in his hair.

"You've said that like, twenty times by now." Ash mutters.

"Yeah, well, it *sucks*."

"What next, are you going to tell me that there's snow everywhere?"

Red gestures to the expanse of white in front, "Dude, c'mon. *Look*. You're talking as if you aren't suffering here too."

"Well, I wasn't saying it *doesn't* suck, now."

They lapse into silence afterwards again, the wind whispers past. It's getting closer and closer. The snowfall is light, minimal really, only a slight dusting; it's just *cold*. Annoyingly so. Ash's hands have numbed by now, despite being in his pockets.

It's fine. They're going to get to the *last town* soon, after all. One last stop in civilization.

Ash thinks, lazy revolutions of the sun, of deoxygenated blood completing its cycle around his body. He's about to say something, try to pry more, maybe, when there's a gasp that comes from behind them.

Red's hand is on his sword, Ash tightens his grip on his glock. They turn in almost perfect synchronization.

For one, Ash does not expect to see Rek here. Hell, he hasn't seen Rek in *ages*. An informant, a weapons dealer, and *Rek*. It sounds like a poorly set up joke.

Red's blinking in surprise next to him, as if Rek is a ghostly apparition that decided to materialize in front of them, or a shared hallucination that's going to fade again in the next few seconds. Ash would feel embarrassed for shouting *Rek!* if Red didn't do the exact same thing.

"Hi! Hey!" Rek grins, waving. He's clad in a yellow and blue parka, snow goggles on. Some spark of realization flashes over, surprise, "Oh, I didn't know you guys knew each other."

"Yeah, well, we do." Red says.

Simply saying that they *know* each other seems like an understatement. It's gone very much past that. Far into layers of skin and blood.

"It's funny how life works out, huh?" Rek grins.

They've been through hell together. Maybe worse. It matters -- it'll matter forever, relationship dredged and scratched into this mockery of functionality. Ash won't let it go. That's too much to say, though, so Ash gives a little shrug.

They end up *catching up*, which is kind of strange, because Ash never really thought he'd be in a position to catch up with anyone, even if that person is just someone like Rek. They continue walking to the last town slowly, snow pressing into the mark of their footsteps, for where it will be covered up again and again by more layers, and new footsteps.

Red knows Rek because of course he does. Ash knows Rek because he used to buy from Lala Legion. He was a pretty good customer. One of the only ones he felt *slightly* bad about overcharging. Whatever he doesn't know can't hurt him.

"We're going to True North after this." Ash says, when the conversation finally spirals around.

"*True North?*" Rek repeats, in awe. "Really? That's so cool, what the hell!"

"Yeah, it's a job from Mid." Red explains, and they're devolving into a rant that Ash can only decipher half of. Maybe because he used to be a rather impermanent fixture in Red's life. It's changing. It's been changed for a while. He's stayed over and over.

Rek warns, "I've seen that there's way more zombie activity here."

"Is that why you're going to a town, for once?" Red asks.

"No, actually, Minute asked me to help out with something! There's a caravan that takes about three months to go down to where he's at, you know, really expensive but he's paying." Rek gestures. "But yeah, it *sucks* around here."

"We'll be fine." Ash says, maybe too self-assured. Red glances at him.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure you will be! It's just that, you know, around *all* True directions things start to get weirder. There's the farlands in the south, you know? I just wanted to warn you guys." Rek gestures. "It's not like I've been to True North, but I've been around a week out north from this town and it just, you know, gets *weird*."

"Yeah, thanks Rek." Red says, with the hint to his tone that he's smiling. Rek picks it up too, as he flusters before grinning back at them.

Ash gives a little nod in acknowledgment. They'll be fine. One more step in the snow, one step closer.

*

Rek leaves with a happy little wave and a grin as soon as they get past the screening at the gates. It's just Ash and Red -- Red and Ash.

Circling forever in orbit. It feels like the whole world has fallen and splintered apart at the seams ever since Ash's whole -- acceptance. It hasn't, because the world keeps on turning;

and everything keeps on happening, totally unaffected by Ash's inner crisis. He'd really, really like to say that it's *not* a crisis, that he has everything completely under control.

It's this. He knows he's in love with Red -- rather obviously. It's all the side effects that he can't deal with. Like wanting to *kiss* him, of all things. Dreadful.

Ash should have never accepted the *something* to become a part of him. But it's too late for that, because he can't imagine what it'd feel like to live without it. Without that star-splitting smoldering ache.

They'll just finish this job and everything will be fine again.

But it *won't* be, because there's that split chance that he'll have to leave Red or Red will leave him and it'll leave Ash scouring back to his old sycophantic ways. Either way. He thinks -- hopes -- it won't happen -- and Ash *wants* to cling onto *this* whole thing they've fostered forever. Even with his startlingly all too human disposition.

They've already packed their things into the small, garage-like storage unit that Mid had bought. It's only a temporary place to leave their stuff in. There's still preparations to be done, like buying out their actual food source for most of the trek, but that's for tomorrow. It's getting late.

It's a logistical, and *physical* nightmare. Ash only has the clothes on his back and his glock, even emptying out his bag and putting his grenades away because they need space for food and clothes and water because they're not going to be entering civilization for months. It almost sounds like a suicide mission.

He's even replaced his gloves, finally. It's not like he needed to put anything like trinkets away, though, because he keeps everything important in his notebook.

Red's in a similar state, it's more bare than Ash has seen him. His clothes and map and sword remain. The sun sinks down behind him.

Ash has started flipping through the local newspaper, out of boredom, and on the front page is a massacre down in the south; Squiddo and Wemmbu stand proudly in the photograph. It must've been a while ago, if the news only got here now. Something about an arrow cannon.

All the way back in summer. It's autumn now. Well, it's not like seasons have any meaning, this far out.

"You recognise them?" Red is looking over his shoulder. More than close enough to send all the electrochemicals fizzing and sparking inside of him.

"Squiddo's an old friend." Ash shrugs. It's the cleanest explanation he could give.

There's so much packed into the term of old friend. He'll let Red figure everything out when he introduces them to him. Maybe. He simply puts the newspaper back on the small outside store shelf, and turns to lean against the wall.

“ I almost can’t believe it.” Red says, looking out north, over the wall that surrounds the village.

There’s more snow, in the near distance. Cold and loosely charted on an old, old map. Someone’s been out there before. Long enough to draw a vague imitation of the land. He remembers that the point where True North is rumored to be, as blank on the map.

“What are you going to do after?” Ash asks, almost hesitant.

Red shrugs, not looking at Ash, “Go back the whole year to give Mid the stuff she needs. Get paid.”

“Yeah, but, afterwards.”

Red sighs, a little more weary. A tired old dog, worn out from the wonders of the world. “I dunno, I’ll decide when we get there.”

We. Of course.

It haunts, it *haunts*. He feels cemented into Red’s life. Right in the spot between his ribcage and his lungs, and it’s nothing like Ash would have ever thought it’d be. A skittish thing. He knows Red is -- strange and affectionate, and he still can’t figure out *why*.

Despite his ego and his over-inflated self mechanized worth, sits the singular question of why *Ash*.

Is it just inevitable? Interwoven through skin and pages and blood and text and thread, that they’d be standing here. Love -- this human thing -- is not anything like Ash would’ve thought it be. He’s seen it, heard it get described, but he’d never thought it’d be this *bad*. He swallows his thoughts, his words like a falling star, about to crash over the edge into catastrophic cacophony.

“Unsurprising.” Ash shrugs, tries to play everything off.

Red sighs, “We should be setting out *after* tomorrow, at first dawnlight.” One last day to prepare and rest, goes unsaid.

Ash trails after Red, as they start walking through the cobbled streets, trying to find a place to stay. There’s the other townspeople’s footsteps imprinted into the snow that lays around the edges.

“That’s so early.”

“Well, man, I don’t wanna travel at *night*. Especially with Rek’s warning.”

Ash rubs his eyes. Tiredness setting in. “I guess, I guess.”

There’s nothing special about the inn. It’s exactly what you would expect from this kind of town, small and slowly running out of business, but still needed. A bucket sits in the corner, catching stray rainwater. The cost to stay isn’t even that much, and before long, they’re

walking up wooden and repaired stairs, their structural integrity questionable. It's one wrong step from falling through, and he's surprised the railing doesn't break.

The room itself is even more unremarkable. It's two beds and a desk in the corner. Ash sighs, and they run their usual inn-routine.

Afterwards, post-shower, Ash lays over Red's proclaimed bed, half on it, half off it, with his legs draped off the edge. It's not as if he's going to be missing Red anytime soon. They're going to be out of reach, just the two of them, hiking to True North.

Red stands over him. Quieter in the night. All the more intimate. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." Ash sighs. "You?"

"I just want to sleep, honestly." It's obviously dismissive.

Before Ash can prod further, Red slips into his bed, under threadbare blankets, jostling Ash a little -- but he doesn't complain, doesn't kick him out to the other side of the room. He doesn't know whether it's because he's too tired to shoo Ash away, or whether he doesn't mind, or whether he wants him to stay, and all the options just mess with his head more.

Ash moves to rest his head on Red's side instead, separated by the blanket. Red's warmth leaks through, rustling as he puts his sunglasses on the side table to lay down properly, on his side. He still doesn't tell Ash to move.

"How long is it gonna be?" Ash asks.

"To True North?" Ash nods. He's been told before but he wants to make sure. "Thirteen weeks."

It's going to be straight isolation. It'd foster dependency if they already weren't.

A long time away. It still feels -- too short, too weird. This is what the past two years of his life have been leading up to, crawling towards the point. There's no other thing for them to point at and procrastinate on walking because this -- this is *timed*.

If they do not calculate this correctly, they will die. Not even in any *cool* way, just from the slow ache of starvation. Ash really, really, does not want to die.

"Thirteen weeks." Ash repeats.

"Yeah. That's what I said. Go to sleep already." Red pokes at his head.

Ash hisses lightly, batting his hand away. "Asshole."

Red laughs, and it rattles Ash's whole frame. Everything feels like he's splitting apart, spilling out static and sunlight aureole and stardust from the cavity in his chest. Red is so close. Right under his head.

Ash is playing a dangerous game. It'd be so easy for everything to just come tumbling out, against his will, his stupid feelings that he only accepted some weeks ago. It feels like dangling their whole relationship above canyon; equally interwoven with layers from a long time ago. Sandstone and love and limestone and betrayal and shale and hate.

This *asshole*. Dumbass -- a bastard. How is he able to continue living like *this*? They've already spiralled past the point of no return. Everything is so warm like this.

Ash breathes out. "Fine, fine. G'night."

Chapter End Notes

[fanart](#) for The Scene <3333

one chapter left what the hell [violently shaking]

thirteenth

Chapter Summary

They lay on the edge of the beginning and end of the world.

Ash laughs. This is all so stupid. Awfully vulnerable. He feels himself splintering, a star about to collapse, the iron core heavy in his heart. Lightning sings in his veins.

Chapter Notes

the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“I still feel unprepared.” Ash mutters.

They have practically everything they need. They have food, water purifiers, a portable stove, clothes, weapons, so on. It’s kind of a logistical nightmare, preparing for thirteen weeks (twenty-six in total, counting the journey back, too). True North. What a fucked up thing.

“It’s fine.” Red rests his hand on his shoulder. “We’ll be fine. I didn’t know you worried so much.”

“Shut up.” Ash sends him a half-hearted glare.

It’s a fickle thing, this whole dynamic that they’re trying to balance. That Ash is trying to maintain. Normalcy.

Even though it’d be so much easier to let go -- ruin him, drag him down, sink his teeth in, unable to let go, a twisted version of a lover’s embrace. But Ash reigns himself in. Poison tastes like liquor at the start. His hand on his shoulder. Ash thinks it’s going to destroy him, bleed him dry before long, but-- but--

Red said it’ll be fine, so it has to be fine.

“Let’s just get there first, okay?”

He’s -- weirdly reassuring when he wants to be -- a scammer, a conman doused in the suit of a businessman. Ash mutely nods.

For a place that's been isolated from mankind for a rather long time, the far far depths out of humanity, the road has kept itself up. It spirals through the canyon, held up through aged support beams.

There's thirteen weeks left to True North.

The sky in the far distance is pale gray, leading into nighttime. The atmosphere seems to have flipped around here; the troposphere waves goodbye. The canyon is covered, draped over with dark green moss and trees, converging down to the river, to which they are walking to the side of. Large, metallic structures stay standing on the rocky sides, transmission towers that haven't succumbed quite yet.

A small, warm point of red light glows in the distance, buried into the canyon. Ash doesn't trust it.

"We're gonna need to sleep somewhere, though." Red says, as they've gone through this argument inside out ever since the light first came in view.

"We're going to walk into like, a cannibal's den, Red." Ash gestures.

"Oh, right. Of course we will, 'cause I'm sure all cannibals have a red light indicatin' that they're home."

"Dude- okay, whatever." Ash rolls his eyes.

The argument quiets down, for the moment, before it will eventually start up again when the glowing light isn't blocked out by his thumb anymore.

A part of Ash registers this as the very same tragic race that they've been participating in since the start. Doubts like that are unnecessary, not now, when they've come into the first expanse of territory to True North. It's going to take so long, step after step, day after day. The sun will extinguish before Ash runs out of things to hate.

"I didn't think it'd be so quiet out here." Red says, hand still resting on his sword.

"I'm glad it is." Ash rolls his eyes. "Dude, it'd be worse if everything was all fucking noisy."

Ash imagines driving down here. It was never meant for the likes of them.

The sun is going down. Well, he thinks the sun is going down, at least. The gray sky progressively darkens, and the red light glows and flickers, buried into the trees. It really doesn't look that far from the road.

It's not like they can go any further without risking it. Ash really, really dislikes it when Red has a point. He follows after him into rocks and bushes, thankfully not too steep.

"I still don't like this."

"I know."

The light grows more overbearing the closer they come. Underneath it, is a small cabin, tucked into the canyon-side. It's gone through a lot, but it'd keep them safe for the night, as the temperature rapidly cools down -- the sky overcast.

Even closer, the light flickers at the top of something like a radio tower. Really, Ash has no idea. It's thin, and it stretches up, cold metal.

It's not the worst hike Ash has had to endure. Red's still saying something, as he's carefully pulling the door open, bathed under harsh red light. They quietly come in, just in case something decides to leap out, biding its time. There's nothing as far as Ash can tell, and tiredness really is wearing down his vigilance.

Ash settles in on a spare chair in the living room, to wind down. Or whatever is left of the living room at least. It's all covered in a thick layer of dust, unused for what probably has to be -- decades.

Red sits down next to him, on the armrest. Watching over him like some mockery of a guardian angel.

Wordlessly, the idea of the radio tower still floating in his mind, he pulls out the radio. It's been with him for -- the bad months and the good months -- all too long. He starts messing with the frequencies, most of it coming as raw radio static. Red watches.

He keeps turning the dial, waiting for the electromagnetic waves to speak back something clear, when a message catches on.

It's -- somber. The message is broken up, fuzzy, old. Through the buzz, comes;

“We would regret -- immediately -- repeat, leave the area -- there will be -- safe -- staying will result in death as we -- repeat, prepare to clear the infection -- continue for -- refuge point until the viral infection--”

An evacuation notice. It's the start of the end of the world. Is this when they decide to start carpet bombing? Out, in the middle of nowhere, in a cabin. Red looks equally as uncomfortable listening to the message repeat over and over. It has been left running since the beginning.

Ash frowns. He quietly turns the radio off.

The buzzing immediately fades out. It's the apocalypse; the end. He turns to look at Red and-

It's unfortunate that something -- a lump of flesh, mass, bloodied and writhing, decaying and dead and living -- has crawled out of one of the doors, its jaw unhinged. It crashes out, slow moving, crawling, obviously not fed for decades, but it's fucking *alive* in the most stretched term of the word, and the hair on it lays scraggly, pinpricked in strange places. Devotedly inhuman. It's a disgusting thing; the mere sight of it repulsive.

There's a split second, and Ash only has his hand on the glock, pulling it out, but Red's faster, moving easily as he stabs his sword into its brain.

It sinks in with no resistance, into soft and tender flesh. The zombie gurgles, falling down limp. An easy hit. Red has to use his foot to push it down to free his sword. It lays motionless. Fleshy and fat. Ash still has his glock in his hands, pointing down towards it just in case.

Ash stares. Red stares.

"Are we still going to stay here?" Ash asks first. Necrotic rot buzzes in the air.

Red stares at him unimpressed. "*Yeah*. Where else are we going at this time of night? But -- like, I don't want to have a sleepover with a zombie either."

It's only *one*. Maybe Ash would overlook it if they were down south, but this is the north. Zombies are used to travelling in packs, in hordes with each other. They're doomed to decay together.

Grayish fluid leaks out from its brain, where Red's sword had been in just a few seconds earlier. It only crawled before its demise, probably due to its mass weighing it down. It's a weird variation of the normal human-like zombies. Like multiple to make a large one.

"Maybe it'd be safer to just put up a tarp outside." Ash suggests, a little unsettled.

Red raises an eyebrow. "Come on, dude, it's freezin' outside."

"You're the one who's gonna move the zombie outside." Ash grimaces.

"Hey, hey, *I'm* the one who *killed* it."

This goes on in circles for another minute, before the first leakage of the stench of pure rot spills out, and Ash ends up half-heartedly helping Red by giving its fleshy mass a few kicks, letting it roll out of the door and down into the bushes. It shouldn't attract anything, honestly, it'd probably *deter*.

Red is staring at it, though, for a few longer moments. It's not like Ash can exactly tell what he's thinking, but there's something like a thought going on in Red's cobweb filled skull.

"It's weird." Red says.

"What? *Really*?" Ash glares. "You're telling me that like, it's infected by parasites too? Is it gonna jump at us again?"

"No, not that. It's just mutated, I think." Red waves him off.

Which doesn't sound much better than it just being infected by parasites. Ash promptly tells him so, and he just gets greeted with a half-hearted shrug. Great.

"So it wasn't cannibals up here, just a fucked up mutated zombie."

Red just huffs out a laugh, ushering Ash inside, closing the log door behind them. They prop up a dresser in front for good measure, carefully avoiding the stain left behind the zombie. Ash watches Red carefully wipe down his sword, cleaning off the grayish fluid that leaked from the zombie. How considerate.

Ash's glock stays by his side. That's good. One last bullet still left.

*

Ice spikes jaunt out at every other edge. It's deeply weird and they shine underneath the sun. It feels wrong, as if they should all be melting and dripping at the edges but they stand proud and tall. The sun gleams through them, clear and dainty.

Ash kicks snow over the shoddy campfire that they set up last night. It flickers out, muffled and suffocated under the cold. Twelve weeks to go.

"There's really no one out here." Ash mutters, looking back up.

"Uh huh." Red stretches out, layers of jackets rustling. "That's kind of the point here."

Ash's breath comes out in white mist. It's freezing down here. It sucks that this is a necessity, because sure they *could* just take the long route around, missing out the stretch of ice spikes, but also they've only got rations for the quickest route possible; it's not like he wants to spend any more time out here either. Ash sighs. He curses out the wastelands, not for the first time.

Red shivers next to him. He can feel it even through the layers of clothes they both have on. They're standing close together.

Body warmth is important, especially in places where you could lose it as easily as this.

"Are you sure there isn't a little out of place town that isn't mentioned on the map?" Ash asks, legs digging into packed snow in the first step. It's all fresh, completely untouched.

"Maybe. But I don't want to run around looking for it."

"Aww. Wouldn't you just *love* to freeze to death?"

Red rolls his eyes, "Dude, shut up."

Ash grazes a gloved hand over a spike that they pass by. It's still freezing cold despite the layer. Red stares at him, a little unimpressed, but amused and god -- the things Ash would do to wipe that expression off his face.

"The north of the world is so fucking weird." Ash says, as an explanation. He flexes his hand. The chill rips into him; nothing solar about this.

Red laughs, "I've heard the south is weirder."

“I’m not going to spend the next like- two years of my life walking down to the south-point instead.”

“What was it again, the farlands? We could go there.”

Ash doesn’t know why but it makes something in him burst. Being included in future plans, again, but even -- even further on this time. Ash wonders if he’s been collapsing since the start. He kicks one of the smaller spikes, watching the ice break cleanly in half and skitter across snow covered rocks.

It doesn’t break.

He doesn’t know why his brain zeroes in on it. Maybe -- maybe because he’s never really had anything to look forward to, says his mind. His nervous system sparks in agreement, his heart mocks him.

Ash asks, instead, “Aren’t they just a myth?”

“Nah, there’s like, actual photographic evidence of them. And, well, you know, Rek was talkin’ about them too.”

“Oh. Huh.” Ash concedes, in his Ash kind of way.

Red sneezes. It’s cold. By the months, it’s still autumn. In this sort of climate -- it doesn’t mean anything. In twelve weeks, they’ll be through the worst of winter at least, and then the other thirteen weeks walking back, they’ll arrive to the other side in spring. That’s not the worst, Ash hopes.

His footsteps carry him through the blank white snow. The day is clear; bright blue backdrop against the emptiness; filtering starlight through ice.

“There’s something weird about all of the world.” Ash talks, just to talk.

Red pries, “Yeah?”

“*Yeah*. I dunno, I guess it’s kind of late to realize it now. It’s just something I never paid attention to.” Ash’s heart thrums. A strange thing.

They walk next to a frozen over river. Ash has more than enough knowledge to not even attempt to cross it. Light hits the frost layer over it, dispersing it like little clusters of constellations. There’s not much life here -- the climate harsh and cold, unforgiving. The one thing that inhabits this plane are the spikes that protrude out of the ground, some wide and small, others slim but gangly. They could brush against the sky if they wanted to.

Almost dangerous. As if just one wrong move could send them toppling over, smashing and breaking and splitting into their own small fragments, and then those small fragments split further, and so on.

“Were these here before the apocalypse?” Ash asks, hands firmly in his pockets.

“Maybe? I don’t know man, I really wasn’t alive back then.”

Ash glares.

Red puts his hands up in mock surrender. “Well, *alright*, it *might* be one of the things that came with it. Like those weird splits. Side effects of, you know, everything that happened.”

“...Mhm.”

Ash already feels the cold settling in, even with the dawnlight. Even though he’s standing right next to Red, leeching his body heat for himself. It’s practical. *Enjoying* it though -- that’s the self indulgence.

It feels like winter. A worse version of winter, where there’s not even a place to hide away and stow away in those three months and--

“I’ve never liked winter.” Ash says.

Red’s footsteps follow right next to him, “Isn’t your birthday in winter?”

“Well, it doesn’t mean that I enjoy freezing my ass off right now.”

“Technically, it’s autumn.”

Ash hates Red sometimes. There’s nothing more he would like to do than finish this stupid job. There’s also nothing less that he would like to do to finish this stupid job. No one will ever be able to follow after them.

*

Eleven weeks to go.

Night and day have mostly stayed constant for the most part. There’s certain areas where everything feels a little more heavy, but that might be just because of life, and suffering, and everything. Currently, Ash feels like a raw nerve cell, all too sensitive and waiting for an exit out of this.

He sits on the edge of cement, some old structure that’s broken down. Multiple corpses lay out over the bottom. Ash has always heard a lot about these things, *golems*, or whatever. Made up of iron and steel and cobalt -- long since nonexistent. He wonders when their fire extinguished.

It’s not like it’s exactly right to call them corpses, either. They’re made of metal, technically inanimate. Do machines breathe? Does an angel dream?

The land sulfurs, the sky bleeds every colour out. Just eleven weeks. A nice, symmetrical number.

Red sneaks up beside him (Ash allows him to, really, which makes everything in his chest feel all the much *more*) overlooking the same sight. Sand trails down, leading to a small

coast. Red is so close, but just out of reach, just beside him, *everywhere* in Ash's life. What is it, about these moments? It's too far and too near.

Ash watches the bones of the earth's ribcage scrape against the sky. Something, long ago, had lived here.

"I don't think I ever want to walk again." Ash sighs.

"Oh, sorry, is the almighty Ash complaining?"

"Shut up." Ash glares at him, flat. He can just tell that there's a grin etched under his mask.

Red laughs, but he follows instructions. For some reason. The midday sky is blank and empty, away from the world. Everything is hidden beneath the clouds; gray and dull and dark. Live through the days, he'll see the sun again.

"I wonder if it's going to storm soon. I've always hated the rain."

"Yeah. I know." Red says, like it's all so easy. Maybe it is. Maybe--

Ash sighs.

Red just keeps staring, edging between coming closer and just watching the horizon in awkward bliss.

"Stop being a pussy." Ash mutters, eventually.

"Huh?"

And dear god. First, Ash didn't really want this conversation to turn to this. Second, he wishes he could wind it back up -- and hurl it in a box, and slam it shut, never to see the light of day. Third;

"Just- whatever. You can come closer, dumbass."

They've done this whole intimacy thing a lot. It doesn't make it any easier.

An embarrassing amount of times, now that Ash is forced to think about it. Red's head in his lap, they've *shared* a bed before, he's held Red's hand, they practically cuddle every night for body warmth, and he's looked over Red's scars, pressed his head against his heart -- it's a lot. And completely nothing at the same time. It's a *mess*.

"Oh- shut up. Alright."

Red does step closer. Nerves light up, flaring.

He feels like he might die inside. He really, really shouldn't be having this kind of reaction, fuck. Ash is a grown man, and he feels downright *pathetic*. He doesn't know where else he could even be. The apocalypse is awfully lonely and they, as these two, as Ash and Red, will be the only ones to ever stay here.

Ash would have never done this whole falling in love thing if it meant this is what he'll feel like.

It's too late. It makes him feel all pathetic but -- but it's worth it. It has to be.

He still doesn't really get Red. Red brushes against him lightly, just a simple touch, and it has to just be the tiredness exacerbating everything to make every single nerve cell start buzzing. Ash -- Ash feels like he's bleeding love through the text and the pages.

Ash is being too obvious, oh god. Red's going to kill him for this, *oh god*, isn't he.

A part of his brain waits for the sword to come through. Love has mixed with violence ever since the start. *From which start*, he asks. *The start where he found you on the floor, bleeding out? Or the start where he pointed his sword at your throat?*

Red doesn't stab him. He just leans even closer. Head pressed against Ash's back.

"I'm tired." Red mumbles, muffled.

Ash, hesitantly, leans back into the touch. "It's only been two weeks."

"Can I not be tired now? Do I need to ask for your permission now?" Red's voice is more amused than anything, though.

And -- and he *nuzzles* into Ash's nape.

Maybe that's an exaggeration. He just shifts to nose lightly at Ash's neck. Because that's so much better.

And any response Ash has dies and shrivels up immediately in his throat. Ash thinks *he's* going to shrivel up and die immediately himself.

"...Yeah, you can be. You have permission." Ash says, as steady as he can. Plays into this thing.

This *thing*. A part of him realizes that he's just repeating the whole performance of the horrible aching *something*, but it's not like Ash can call it anything.

It's not a charade; not an illusion; all too real. It's just calling it by a name makes it real. Makes it all the more worse. His notebook -- the tulip -- the film reel -- sits heavy in his pocket.

Red gives him so much. More than anything he could've ever imagined. It's stupid, small things, but they're Red's stupid, small things, to him.

And Ash, god, Ash wants to say so much more.

He's everything. He's the negative space between stars, he's a traveling comet crashing and leaving behind a blazing crater in Ash's life, he's defied everything Ash has experienced in his life. Omnipresent, there, always there; nicotine and eternity and space.

Ash used to be a sleeping god. He's not meant for petty, trivial things. But sometimes -- the one thing that can bring a god down -- the rhythm of a heartbeat is too strong.

And Red is so, so utterly human. when his hair is ruffled from the wind, or when he tilts his sunglasses down -- he's beautiful. The fact that Ash gets to experience this, to touch and make sure that he's real and not just a dream that would give under his fingertips and dissipate, is something so wonderful that no other ordinary man gets to live through.

Red is right behind him, following his breathing, his pulse, beat for beat.

He is absolutely, ruthlessly beautiful. It makes Ash want to scream. It's all slightly warmer.

*

The adoringly (*hatefully*) mentally dubbed 'True North trek' *sucks*.

Ash blinks, and he's on the coast, looking out into water and the golden and pure utter warmth and there's the hint of Red's laughter in the edges of the memory. Ash blinks, miasmatic smell clogging up his airways, carefully side-stepping corpses of zombies that have gone too long without feeding. Ash blinks, and the coldness of the tundra is settling into him, bone-deep, and there's a small speck of red, off in the distance, always and always there. The sky doesn't cry anymore.

This has always been the way the world ends. There's no burst of colour that's too bright for his eyes to process, having to lean into ultraviolet and gamma and radio. It's nothing. It's quieter the further they walk out.

Ash still hates sleeping in shifts. Only ten weeks left.

It's worse out here -- where the threats are undocumented, unseen by anyone still alive.

They've long since gone through multiple biomes, but that doesn't mean this one is any kinder. It's a small shelter that they've set up, in a small house on the outskirts of a city. It's grown in, though, surrounded by taiga and podzol.

Red is sleeping, and Ash is waiting for the first light to shake him awake and get out of here already. He really doesn't like this place.

For the moment, though, Ash is relegated to laying, half-curved around Red. A lot of blankets are strewn around. Even though they're no longer in cold frost and snow, they're still in late autumn. The atmosphere is harsh and unkind, loosely following weather patterns.

Ash's head rests on Red's stomach, with Red's sword laid out over his lap. Just a few more hours and they can get going.

It's really warm like this, honestly. Ash wonders whether Red knows the things he does to him.

They'll make it. They've settled into the routine of walking, no matter how hard, no matter how bone-achingly tired they are, they can't just stop so easily. True North awaits, and all

Ash can do is lay here. His hand idly traces down the blade of Red's sword, smooth and cold and well-used. Well acquainted. It's the only sound in the room apart from their breathing.

He wonders how it feels for Red, when Ash is asleep. He's woken up to Red laid over him too, to Red holding him one night where Ash just pretended to still be asleep. Ash wonders whether he runs cold or warm when he's asleep; whether his breath comes out like the whirring of fans; whether his pulse beats like circuits humming in symphony. How does it feel, to be someone else, holding yourself? Does Red like it? Does Red crave the same things he wants? Does Red--

It's a rapacious catastrophe that wants to devour him.

*

Nine weeks. Down to single digits.

It doesn't feel as good as it should. It's hard to, when everyday is slowly beginning to get more and more monotonous. They walk; they rest; they walk; they rest; they walk and on the cycle goes. It doesn't feel as good, because it's the number *nine*, and it's the furthest and closest thing away from zero.

Red tells him to stop thinking so much. Red tells him a lot of things.

They're in the resting position of the cycle once again. That's where the more noteworthy things happen, because it's *rest*. Maybe calling it resting is an overstatement, because really, they're just taking a small break to eat whenever they can. Time has long since become irregular, they've been forced into taking a break in whatever small decent-enough looking place that they can, and whatever horrible no-good place that they can too. Maybe it's desperation.

"This is some kind of observatory, isn't it?" Ash asks, a dome-like building in front of them. There's multiple smaller buildings attached to it.

"Yeah. Astronomical observatory." Red says, with a hint of longing.

Something unsaid -- something that doesn't really need to be said. Red, left over and over again, the words of *someone else would've liked this more than us; someone else, someone that I loved, that I love, a younger brother*. Ash looks away.

Bullet holes litter over the side of the building. They scatter, from one end of the wall to the other, and then to the next wall. They crack and ripple through the foundation.

"Man, what the fuck happened here?" Red asks, brushing his hand over the wall.

Ash thinks he sees a bullet there, a glint of light at the right time, still lodged inside. It will never leave its place.

"War." Ash shrugs back. "People always crave power."

Red turns to him, half-amused and half-unimpressed. "You're always on about power."

“I’m *not*.”

“Mhm. Well, maybe not *anymore*, right, but every word you used to be like, laced with something arrogant.” Red says, so *nonchalant*. It’s infuriating in all the wrong ways. “Like -- like you were trying to convince me you were made for somethin’ larger than this.”

Ash *was*. Now though, he’s not so sure anymore.

Red turns without waiting for a response, the sun shining down on the back of him. It peeks behind the northern atmosphere, a small respite. Red glows. Ash feels like he might collapse in on himself; radiant and irradiated.

Right outside the door of the observatory, a dead pigeon lays on the ground. It’s long since bled out; decomposed and sticking into the hard cement. It’s long-since dead. The pigeon’s feathers decorate it in mockery, *look at what you once were, look at where you are now*. There’s also something much more concerning about there being a pigeon and not having any creature rip into it so far out into the wild.

There’s something wrong with this place. Maybe it’s just paranoia. Ash points to it, “Isn’t it supposed to be eaten by now?”

“I mean, I don’t know,” Red shrugs, “We haven’t really seen much life out here.”

They’ve long since learned that trying to place traps out overnight is useless. Nothing resides here -- as if everything is slightly too afraid of coming any closer to the north.

Red continues, “There’s not many people that have ever passed through here since the beginning of the end.”

Too long, too earthly, too short, too late. Ash trails after him into the building, decrepit and ruined at this point. It’s still shelter.

The first room is unremarkable, completely empty with dust covered, tiled floors, and they move to scour for some place to sit down. The definition of comfortable has gotten looser and looser as they go on. *It’s only been four weeks*, Ash reminds himself. It’s going to just get looser.

Now, though -- the second room they enter; a lifeless corpse lays on the floor.

It’d be unremarkable, too, except that it isn’t just someone -- it isn’t a person, technically -- as it’s a zombie. A thing that is called the *undead* for a reason, that defies the very promise of dying. Zombies don’t die -- they just stagnate. Hibernate. They rattle around even when they’re starving, waiting for something to come into their jaws.

Zombies don’t die except without human interference, driving weapons in and through and beating skulls over and over until the brainstem is nothing like it’s original form. This, though, has nothing of that.

Through its abdomen, skin has been clawed at until the zombie’s guts spill out over the tiles, the fluid from it leaking into the indents between each square piece. Perfectly laid out;

tarnished by rot. There's nothing to suggest that its brainstem has been destroyed.

"Is it dead?" Ash whispers.

"It seems like it." Red murmurs back, though he sounds even more unsure.

"Why- fuck, *what the hell*. It shouldn't be dead. It's a naturally dead zombie. That's a fucking, *oxymoron*."

Red nods along. "Yeah. I'll- I'll stab it for good measure."

Without Ash's input, Red moves to stand closer to it. His boots click against the floor, echoing in the empty space. The sound of his sword is even louder as he pulls it out, and holds it like a dagger. A holy lance, ready to punish.

He stands over the zombie, the sword posed at the rough area where the brainstem is. It doesn't matter, his sword is large enough to destroy enough.

"It kinda looks like you." Red says, thoughtless, teasing. Sword poised over it.

It's stupid -- it's stupid to be thinking of something that happened so long ago; a rooftop and crashing adrenaline. Ash is sure that Red doesn't even think of it, because that's not Ash underneath him right now, not really, as he drives the sword through its face.

Soft, rotting decomposed flesh already easily gives way. The flesh of a zombie who has been dead for god knows how long accepts the sword as if it's part of its own system, as if it's the piece that it has been missing. It doesn't give any resistance, the sword sinking with what looks like little pressure, right through the softened bone and into the brainstem.

Nothing gushes out of the wound. Though it does make an awful, too loud squelching sound; grimy and grotesque as if it's some tender meat that has been left to rot in the fridge for seven years.

Just as easily, Red's sword pulls back out. It's dead again. It's desecrating a corpse for the second time in its life.

Red stares at him. Ash stares back.

Then -- then a *noise* creaks, even louder than the flesh being pierced, throughout the observatory. They didn't see anyone here. There's not been anyone here since the start, there can't be. *What the fuck*.

Red still has his sword in his hand, stock-still, looking at the door at the opposite end of the room. It looms now, a darkness, an entrance into the void.

The first noise could be passed off as something just wrong with the building, rattling and dying from its old age and lack of upkeep.

Then, a second noise crawls out from the opposite end of the room. Like scratching, scraping at ceramics, unnatural through and through in every disharmony that it creates. It bends the

space around them, and everything feels all the more colder -- Ash's heartbeat rings in his ears -- his lungs warn him to *leave* immediately.

Even if it's just a zombie -- it's too dangerous. Too likely for there to be something deeply and truly *wrong* with it.

Ash turns to look at Red again. He's not moved a muscle, waiting for Ash to try and decide what way they'll do this. The scratching continues.

It continues, and it's getting all the more heavier, desperate, and Ash doesn't want to try and play games with his life today. Not when -- not when he has Red at his side.

The door leading to the exit is only behind them. Just a few steps.

Ash gestures. Red nods back. An undying loyalty -- *do not leave, to come with, to be there, to trust*. Ash only breathes out, shaky.

The scratching continues.

Red takes the first step, careful. It's more like shuffling, to avoid the sound of his boots clicking, and the exit feels all the further away. As if they hadn't just been in the first room a few moments ago.

Ash follows in step, in shuffle, with him. The scratching continues, grating and horrible and raw. Ash does not look back; he steps into the first room, still as unremarkable as ever, and he does not look back.

They burst out of the observatory as quickly and quietly as they could. Looks like they can't take a break here if they want to stay alive. Ash doesn't know what that thing was -- is it even a thing, a creature? It can't be anything made up from his own mind, no, Red was frozen right next to him as soon as the first croon rang out.

"What the fuck?" Ash asks immediately, as soon as he deems they're a safe distance away.

"I don't, okay, I have no fuckin' clue. Maybe a zombie but- you know, I don't think I want to go back in and find out."

Ash sighs. He's just wanted some rest.

It doesn't matter. They'll just have to walk, ignore the aching in their legs, out to the next landmark to take their break.

There's something *wrong* with this part of the world. Not just weird -- but wrong. They need to get to the end already, to True North. They waltz into the sun, the road after them crumbles to dust.

*

Eight weeks.

They've been making a good pace, if Ash has to admit. Red's estimates had turned out to be mostly right, somehow.

They're going to need to make this whole trek back, too. Not just the thirteen weeks back, but the whole time back towards Mid. Idealistically, they'll just hitch a caravan back down to the center of the world, to where Mid is. That might as well be most of their budget gone, and another half a year anyways. Ash misses how easy the old world used to have it, with things like cars.

Ash wonders idly what he'll do after this. It's still blurry -- hazy -- unknown, but it's something to think about, while also not thinking directly about Red.

Fucking Red. That asshole. He might've pissed Red off a few moments ago, and they're both silently trying to wait it out, because Ash doesn't want to press the muzzle of his glock against Red's gut.

He idly messes with the chain ring that Red made. It's not like Red got it *for* him, specifically, because it was just some scrap metal, and therefore nothing different. But it is different, because Red still fastened it around his finger. It's some sort of quiet, unspoken promise.

Ash wants to bang his head into a wall sometimes. (His or Red's, it's up to interpretation).

It's the morning. Red ended up waking early, unable to go back to sleep, so they're tensely waiting out for the first light.

The lack of Red next to him is an unnatural absence in of itself. It feels all the more colder, suddenly, without the ability to leech off of his heat. He instead distracts himself, stacking up empty cans, trying to pass time.

(He had to leave a lot of stuff behind. Rations line their bags nowadays instead, enough for the journey to and back. It's not like Ash loved hoarding canned food before, but it's all the more unbearable when it's just one type. It's all just golden carrots -- the only food source viable for this kind of thing. It doesn't mean Ash isn't still going to internally complain).

There's the soft click of a door, and footsteps, as Red comes into the living room. They need to confront it, eventually. Better it be in the quiet not-yet morning than on the road.

"You fucking suck, Ash." Red sighs, leaning against the wall.

Ash abandons his act of stacking cans, instead leaning back onto his hands. "So you've just come into the room to argue with me?"

"Maybe." Red says.

"Would it kill you to answer anything normally?"

"Ash, c'mon. Are *you* really talking about answering things normally?"

There's no room for pettiness in some place with stakes as high as this. They somehow shove it in anyways. Ash simply glares back at Red.

"I'm sorry for doing that shit, fine? It was my bad." Ash murmurs, watching the last light of the moon fade on the carpet.

Red just sighs, stepping closer to Ash. He crouches down again, and a part of Ash is tempted to knock him over, but also that would just make the whole situation worse. He watches, looking up as Red leans over him.

"You're so annoyin', you know that? Everything you do, your *uniqueness* to say the least, your ability to not be able to think past the lines -- all these irritate me." Red murmurs, lifting his hand to pat Ash's head, a little demeaning.

He says it with such *sweetness*, his voice low. A honeyed fever. His words however, tell a much different story. The bleakness of the room fades under the soft glow.

"Is that an insult?" Ash asks, only to be sure.

"Take it as what you will." Red says, grin hidden under his mask.

Ash parrots his earlier words, "You fucking suck, you know that?"

Red laughs. It's like forgiveness and mercy wrapped in a neat little present, in the tones of his voice. "We're still here."

Maybe it's the sleep deprivation, he thinks as if that changes anything. As if all the feelings are unreal.

"Where else would we be?" Ash mutters.

*

Down to seven weeks. Every day feels like a past lifetime, and every past lifetime feels like he's just woken up a few seconds ago. Ash has never felt as -- *secure* -- tied down as this. It's not like he can back out now, nor is it like he particularly wants to. Which really, is the much worse thought.

Ash, shamelessly, leans over Red. He's sitting down, while Ash is standing over him, arms loosely looped around his neck.

Red looks up. "Do you really need to stand like this?"

"It's cold as fuck, Red. Leave me alone."

"Leave *you* alone?"

Ash is the one hanging over him, after all.

"You know what I'm getting at."

Red laughs at him, but he does tilt his head back down, to which Ash responds with resting his chin on top of. Ash, not for the first time, thinks that this probably isn't normal to be doing.

He's never realized how -- how startling physical affection is until recently. It's not like Ash is *scared* of it. It's not something that can crawl and wriggle around and writhe. It doesn't *hurt*. It doesn't hurt if you don't count the searing ache that ripples through every one of his veins and arteries like high voltage electricity.

Affection should be perfectly safe and harmless. Still.

It's no use worrying about this, not when he's so close to Red, cheek now pressed against his hair, and -- and if he keeps thinking, then his heartbeat will give him away. Ash watches him idly. He's drawing, small little doodles, just to destress after the day. Right into Ash's notebook.

Which, well, Ash had lent him. He doesn't think about how easy it is to give and trust. Instead, he focuses on how Red has settled into the feeling of Ash around him, which might as well *also* be a worse thing to think about.

(Privately, in the space of his own mind, Ash admits that he's never really had any physical affection before Red. It's probably what contributed to him ending up like this. The Wormhole was for power. Lala Legion was about profit -- and a little bit of fun. But it would never culminate into anything so exactly tender like this).

Red, really, doesn't care that he's watching him draw. Which is kind of strange, because most normal people would feel cagey. Spoke wouldn't, but also that's because it's Spoke, and Ash would just shake his head at whatever shit he presented him with.

Maybe it's because Red really isn't the most sane, normal person either. He imitates it pretty well, though. A part of Ash says that nothing about this situation is normal in the first place.

Still, he watches. It's a little character -- a little representation. Ash has seen him drawing it before, belovedly dubbing it *Minidoons*.

Ash just keeps watching, because it is nice to watch. It's just downtime, right after the day has properly ended, but just before having to watch out over each other. Maybe he's overthinking it, but this is just another aspect of their fucked up definition of trust.

It's a lot past trust, too. *Love*, his brain mocks.

Quietly, he watches. Observes. Maybe he could be doing something more productive, but he doesn't really want to move right now either. He lets out a soft sigh, and watches as it ruffles Red's hair. Red still doesn't wave Ash away, and the temperature is cooling to something perfectly warm, like it was always meant to be like this.

Ash's eyes flicker back down to the page. There's another small little character, joining Red's. He tries to move to take a closer look, but just presses his chest more into Red's back, and he feels like he might die again.

Red tilts his head slightly, and it's kind of weird maneuvering around like this.

He seems to get what Ash is confused about, as Red just taps the page with the pencil, and says, "That's you."

It knocks every thought out of his head. He feels like he might go unconscious and fall right back into the stars but -- but that's silly to do, over a simple drawing. It's just a little character, it's nothing major, of course--

Ash also wants to tear it out and fold it over and over and slot it right into his heart. Like it's meant to be a part of his very being.

"It's perfect." He says, lamely.

Red seems to fluster, as Ash leans back slightly to properly look at him. A light blush dusts over his cheeks and over his nose. His hand reaches up to fiddle with his facemask, which he realizes doesn't have on just after a second. He smoothly transitions it into just scratching his cheek.

"Wouldn't want to disappoint." Red says, with his lame awful accent.

It's forever in his notebook. It's there, with the tulip, with the film reel, with the months squandered away, with Red. It's just a few more weeks.

*

They keep walking. Ash crosses dates off with a pencil, with charcoal, with blood. Six weeks.

It's the only semblance of time passing that he can cling onto. He really could use a break -- a proper break, not one where they sit on the side of some rocks and he debates on whether or not to smoke another cigarette because it's not like he can just buy more out in the middle of nowhere.

But there's no time for anything proper out here, and they keep walking.

They're carefully walking down the edge of a crater, one of the original explosion sites from when the apocalypse first started. Not exactly patient zero, more like patient two-hundred of the bombing techniques the government tried to use. Gunpowder settles itself into the earth's core. It's not a steep walk down, but the piece of earth that has been carved out is wide and large.

"This is stupid." Ash mutters.

"You say that a lot."

"A lot of things are stupid."

Red just huffs out a laugh, continuing to make his way down the crater, his sword being used as a piece of mountain equipment. It's the shorter way, of course, but Ash still doesn't feel

good about any of this. He follows down after Red, a little more careful.

“We’d lose, like, a potential day’s worth of supplies if we went around it.” Red explains, over and over.

Ash hates it when Red is right.

He mutters out a half hearted response, and just continues following him down, his lanky limbs making it equally harder and easier for him to traverse down. It’s not like he can use his glock like Red uses his sword.

They’re close to the point that the crater flattens out at least, for a broad length of land. It reminds him of the places they’ve passed where humanity had flattened ground for the purpose of building a road out, except there’s no road here, no sign of anyone having stepped foot here in a long, long time.

It’s -- an unfortunate thing.

It’s something that he *also* finds incredibly stupid, when the rock he stands on is a little more wobbly than normal. He puts pressure down, to balance his weight, and the rock groans as it’s unearthed from its resting place; rolling off, down the crater site, and down and down and it flips Ash over, gravity forcing him to fall *down* with it, desperately shielding his face.

He feels his leg hit something, something *warm*, which he registers as Red’s leg and they’re falling down together. It’s almost comical. Red’s sword clatters off somewhere, lost between the sound of sliding down and the feeling of the earth digging in.

Momentum is lost rapidly as they end up sprawled on the floor of the crater. It wasn’t the worst fall -- but it still *hurts*.

Smoke and dust kicks up all around them, Ash coughing, covering his eyes. He’s gotten a few more injuries, his face saved by his arms, his clothes taking most of the brunt of the damage, but he’s still bruised. His body is used to these sort of rough situations, forced through hell and back and again, but it doesn’t make it any easier at the moment.

Everything dies down eventually, except for the dull turmoil of pain, but the dust settles.

Ash’s arms hesitantly drop down, leaving him to stare up at the midday sun. It feels familiar. He’s only dazed, and the pain in his leg is just bearable instead of bleeding out. He doesn’t know how long it’s been. Ash wants to lay here forever.

There’s shuffling next to him, which he recognizes as Red struggling to get to his feet. He’s so close next to Ash. It’s almost a transferral of body heat.

Ash looks over, cheek against the dirt. He can see Red’s sword in the distance, and then there’s Red’s boots right in front of him, and his eyes trail up to look at Red’s face. He casts a shadow over Ash.

There’s nothing broken or sprained anything, Red’s just got a few more rips in his outer jacket, a few cuts and bruises to add to their sprawling collection, but the main thing is that

his sunglasses are barely holding on, one of the hinges broken off where he's holding them. He's still obviously reeling from everything -- the fall and the sun.

It's also a worse recreation of the beginning, where Red leans over him, and lightly kicks him in his shoulder, and goes, "You still alive?"

"Shut up." Ash mutters. *So stupid. Everything is worthless and stupid.*

Red looks into the distance, and then back down, "Good to know."

"How the fuck are you standing already?"

"It's been like, ten minutes. Can you get up on your own, or do you need help?"

All of the time before this -- Ash would be pissed about the insinuation that he needs help. He's *Ash*. He doesn't need anyone to pull him up, sew him back together, even though that's the exact same thing that Red did. He breathes out, a buzzing in his throat.

"Maybe I just don't want to get up."

Red just raises an eyebrow, amused. "Right. Is it really that bad?"

"No." Ash says, immediately. He doesn't need pity -- even though this is just *concern*, concern and worry and it makes all of his feelings sink and explode in his gut.

"C'mon, Ash. I need you to pull out my spare sunglasses." Red coaxes.

They're -- obviously broken on his face. And the way Red says the word *need* -- Ash hates it all. He slowly shuffles up to a sitting position, and Red waits for him, and Ash lifts himself up, and he doesn't pass out this time. His head still feels all woozy and weird but he doesn't know if that's more from the fall or how Red talks to him. At him.

The sun bores down onto them, gravel and sand and grit laying at their feet. Ash moves quietly to Red's bag, hands hesitating.

"They're in the small pocket." Red says.

"Mhm." Ash unzips it with care, and the sunglasses are inside like treasure.

He takes them out, and instead of putting them into Red's hand, he tilts Red's face to look at him. Ash realizes how -- how immoral, how indulgent this is only a second later, but he's too far in, when Red is blinking at him in that confused, endearing way of his.

Ash lifts his hand up in place, blocking the sun out of Red's face, a shadow over him, too. It's then the process of coaxing Red to take the broken sunglasses off, and Ash moves the new set onto his face with careful movement. His hand brushes against the pale of his cheek, and it feels like hellfire low in his veins. It's like crashing thunder, the lightning between their skin.

The sunglasses are on Red's face again, reverently slotted on. It's the worst, most indulgent second of his life as he stays still just to keep his hand up, blocking out the sun -- this sight,

all for him -- before he leans away. God. *Fuck*.

Red stares after him for a moment, before he gives an awkward little cough. Ash's head feels like it might burst alight. Either from *this* or *that* or the stupid fall.

"Was that so hard, getting up?" Red teases, though his voice is a little too high to be normal.

Ash bristles, though his own insides feel like they've been knocked around sideways, "You're a bitch, Red."

Red *laughs* at him, nudges him, pushes a bit, before starting to walk to pick his sword up again. Ash chases after him, just to hit him (lightly, god, why *lightly*) back.

"So now we're stuck in this stupid fucking crater." Ash gestures.

"Dude, okay, *you're* the one who *fell* over. And you can climb, can't you?"

"Well. Shut up. I wouldn't have to be climbing out of here without your stupid insistence to oh, let's go down the canyon, it'll be *quicker*."

"You *knocked* me over." Red says, sword in hand again. It's more of a mock-argument, a return to routine.

Ash doesn't have the spare time to feel pity, so he's following after Red, shaky and aching legs.

*

Five weeks.

It's a good, solid number. Five. There's not many scenarios where there's something wrong with having *five* of something. It's just that five weeks of straight walking are annoying -- especially when there's little room to try and take care of yourself. Hygiene is a fickle thing.

None of the taps in the bathroom work, but he's still standing over the sink, wiping down his face with some tissues. Grime accumulates unsurprisingly fast in the apocalypse.

Red is standing next to him, just watching. Ash can see him staring in the corner of his eye, reflected through the mirror.

It's only a little unnerving. Annoying.

It continues like this for a few minutes longer, until Ash eventually turns to look at Red properly.

"What." Ash asks. Demands.

"You look like shit." Red answers.

Ash furrows his eyebrows, even though he's right, "*What?*"

“Do you really want me to repeat it?”

This situation sucks, Ash thinks. He’s surprised that he hasn’t wanted to tear out Red’s throat all that much lately, but it’s times like these where the itching to bury his hands between his trachea and his jugular vein arises.

Ash is about to turn back to the mirror, continue cleaning, but Red steps closer first, and then again, and his boots click against the ceramic floor. It’s the only sound that Ash’s heart can’t drown out.

Red’s hand reaches up, synthetic leather gloves, and tucks back a strand of hair behind his ear.

And Ash’s heart can’t fucking take *this*, actually.

He doesn’t get why Red is doing this, *oh god, just stay back, is it really that hard* -- but he wants to keep leeching warmth, keep holding onto Red like the bloodsucking parasite that he is. This is completely unnecessary, and Ash’s nervous system is in peril from how much it *wants*. His touch is featherlight, as if he’s overly cautious, and no bloom of supernova could ever measure up to this sight.

Ash feels like he might as well peel the skin off his face; to allow Red to look at the stretch of muscles underneath.

(God watches from the empty dead sodium lights overhead. Red smells like clementines and death).

It’s a deadlock. Red’s the one to take the step back first, but as he retracts, the back of his hand brushes over the edge of his bandages. Ash tenses up, involuntary, no one’s touched him like that in a long time.

“Ah- sorry.” Red says, hand down again.

Ash mentally shakes the feeling off, “No, no it’s fine. I’m just not used to anyone touching them.”

Red has never asked about them before, not really. The time where he divulged and spilled out that Leo was responsible for this was Ash speaking up first, with only Red prodding afterwards. Ash offered to be opened up that time. And everything else is just an unconditional acceptance despite everything slightly off with him.

Like he doesn’t mind Ash having this -- *it* -- and not showing it. It’s not like there’s anything wrong with it, but still. It makes his mind blanket with starlight. Red is so fucking weird. Weirder than anything else he’s ever experienced before him.

Ash lets out a little sigh. The bandages make him *recognizable*, which feeds right into his ego, but it’s annoying in ways he couldn’t have imagined.

“Why do you still wrap it in bandages? If you don’t mind.” Ash is confused. “Like, isn’t it healed by now?”

“People,” There’s no people, just a person, but bringing up past names this far out doesn’t matter. “Don't really care whether they’re only getting the eye or half of your face, you know.”

Simply, the wound is large.

“Oh. I see, my bad.”

“It’s not *your bad*, dumbass. You weren’t involved.” Ash placates.

Red nods, and they lapse into silence. Ash doesn’t know whether the right thing to do is to go back to cleaning himself up, or wait for Red to speak up because Ash can read him, all too easy. He can tell what he’s thinking. It’s only a natural kind of thing, when something has been hidden away for so long. Like Red’s lips, like the mole.

Ash asks, “You want to see what’s underneath, right?”

“No- well, *yeah*, but. Fuck. I mean. We've known each other for nearly two years.” Red stammers.

It’s a serious moment, really, but Ash can’t help the small grin. Ash knows that behind all of Red’s fancy business speech, all of the scars that peek out from under his jacket, behind the sharp glint of his sword, he’s just someone. Someone dear to Ash. Doomed together forever.

Like some sickening thing of interwoven love. And -- it's only fair after Red has shown his face to him.

Ash reaches up to start unwinding the bandages, careful. His hair hides most of it out of view. It’s almost second nature, having and living with this for a good few long years.

With each layer of gauze unwrapped, the fabric becomes thinner, see through, until it is all in his hands, and the right side of his face is laid bare.

The obvious, most attention drawing thing is the complete lack of an eye. Completely gouged out, an empty black abyss replacing where it should be. The skin around it is rough too, jagged and coagulated from scars that didn’t heal quite right. It’s an ugly sight. He still remembers the feeling of blood running down, leaking and leaking and not stopping, the adrenaline focused on surviving, adapting to a good portion of his vision being gone.

Ash forgot how -- how bad it was. A part of him wants to cover it back up again, roll the gauze around until no oxygen can reach, but it’s too late for that now. His skin crawls, as he looks at the mirror.

It was a success, technically speaking. The blind eye was taken, and its place came in the void. There’s other deep running scars over it too, just from the messy, childish handling of a sword. It’s a mess of nostalgia and injury of vacancy. The flesh that maggots would love to reside in.

It’s akin to a supernova being unleashed.

Ash just silently stares into the mirror. It reflects him back. It is horrible, having this awful little part of him revealed, and Red is just *staring*.

Everything is almost too much. It feels like he's going to die. Red should kill him already. Ash is pretty sure that Red's not going to kill him, though, but -- but Ash wouldn't mind.

There's nothing appropriate that Red can really say to this. It's so much worse than Ash remembered. The void might as well come alive, and start rotting his face through, festering black ooze and pulsing scars. His face stays the same. Red's still staring, and Ash tries to focus on the mirror, on himself, but that's just as bad, because himself means the very apparent lack of an eye. Red is hesitating for a moment longer, before;

"It's pretty."

Simultaneously, there's nothing that could have prepared Ash for this response.

"My eye being gouged out is pretty to you?" Ash asks, not particularly mean, but just disbelieving.

Red -- flusters, almost. He stutters out, "Okay- okay *fuck*, maybe that was a bad decision of words on my part. Uhm."

"Calm down." Ash is -- amused. "It's fine."

(And incredibly, incredibly dizzy. His whole chest feels like it might burst through with blinding electricity, the pacemakers in his heart struggling to keep up. He can't describe the voltaic faintness. Everything is no match for Red's words, the feeling spreading and shooting through his whole body in starbursts).

"Yeah- yeah. Okay."

Maybe it's not fine in the way that Ash has only had one eye for half of his life. It's not like he can do much about it now.

Red doesn't reach out. His eyes flicker from Ash in front of him, to the Ash in the mirror.

Ash feels weak. He mutters out a little, "Happy?"

"I- I guess." Red stammers.

The word *pretty* floats around in Ash's mind. He'll never be able to get rid of this feeling, will he. Love is a catastrophe and his lightning-nature has only attracted it to stick to him like fuzzy electrostatic.

Ash looks back at the mirror, at the bandages in his hands.

He reaches up, and starts tying them back around. It's routine, wrap it around this way and that way, over and over again, until that part of his face is covered with blank fuzzy white fabric. No one else will ever know what's underneath.

Idly, he lifts his hand up, and pokes over the spot where his eye should be. In the mirror, he watches his finger sink deeper than it should. It's only vaguely uncomfortable; not excruciating like anyone would expect it to be. It's almost a gentle caress.

But Red's still watching him, expression *horrified*.

"Sorry, sorry." Ash mutters, dropping his hand back down as soon as he sees. His eye is still - a weird subject. This far out.

"No- you don't need to apologize- uh-"

This is so fucking awkward.

"It's fine." Ash sighs, again. Without thinking, he adds, "One day I'll let you wrap them for me, yeah."

"Oh." Red pauses. "Yeah, one day."

They need to keep moving. Before long, they leave the bathroom and they're back out into the world, fresh and raw and tired, walking. Ash can't stop thinking.

*

Red's currently fallen through -- into? -- god, either way, he's on the floor. It's so fucking stupid.

Ash laughs at him. He doesn't think about the impending countdown. Four more weeks.

The sun is slowly setting behind them, painting the mountainside in dull oranges. Winter coming means that the days are getting shorter, even out here. Even if the sky tints all too weird colours sometimes -- sometimes fading dull gray, sometimes overcast lilacs -- the revolutions of the sun waits for no one.

"*Ash*." Red hisses, unimpressed, his sunglasses knocked askew.

Ash just keeps giggling, standing to cast a shadow over him, blocking the sun out. The rotting wooden panels lay behind him.

"Are you kidding me, dude?" Ash asks, but he leans over anyway.

He reaches his hand out for Red to take, because -- Ash can't lie to himself anymore, not just because *he's feeling nice all of a sudden*, alright -- he wants to. He wants to have Red's hand in his.

Red takes it, as easy as that, and Ash helps him up. Well, he yanks him up, a little rougher than he meant to, and Red is just about to *fuck* -- stumble into him, before he regains his footing. He's still a lot closer than normal.

Normal, in the most vague, loose definition of the term. The lines are more than blurred. They're undefined, and that's the most terrifying thing that could have ever come out of this

True North thing.

“I slipped, alright.” Red mutters, his hand still in Ash’s.

“Oh, I’m *really* glad you clarified, you know, it’s not like you would fall into the fence of your own free volition.” Ash grins.

These are the little moments away from the mundaneness of travelling. It’s their hands, glove in glove, but it feels more real than anything else. Little bursts of life that come in through, even after they keep on walking, step after step. Just the path and Red and Ash. Through the atmosphere, and onwards, and further.

Everything is so repetitive that Ash finds Red falling over noteworthy.

And later -- later, they will curl together later for warmth. They will eat together later. They will walk and walk together later.

“You know, I was really tempted to pull you down.” Red says.

“Oh, so it’s character growth that you didn’t, huh?”

“God, I’m regretting not doing it now, you know.” Red huffs, his hand slipping out of Ash’s, missing warmth, to pull his sleeve up. A new fresh bruise has imprinted itself onto the paleness of his skin, over past scars. “We could have had matching bruises.”

(As if they don’t already have matching scars).

“You know, I’m fine, actually.”

Red laughs at him, and the sun is hitting him just right, but there’s no time to spare.

Four weeks. It’s constant, constant walking. His feet hit the pavement, the grass, the sand, the gravel, and now, just a simple path, curving through mountains. There’s some threat of falling here, nothing like the crater incident. Keep going higher and higher, and go through the mountains, and through, until they reach True North.

Ash just breathes out, ragged and worn out. Just survive four weeks. Roughly twenty-eight days more of this. Step after step, onwards.

*

It really, really doesn’t feel like there’s only three weeks left. Barely any time has passed, and in reality, just over two months have passed. Time is stranger and stranger, and winter doesn’t wait. They risk moving later and later into the night, because everything out here is dead. A complete lack of prey, of predator, of *anything*.

Fog covers the entire landscape, completely blocking his view. He can only see a few paces in front of him.

His hand grips onto Red's, because it really is the only way to make sure that neither of them are lost. Or well, Red's hand grips onto him, more like that. Yeah, he prefers that phrasing. And besides -- it's kind of really nice. Warm.

The fog is purple-ish in colour, blurry and thick. It doesn't feel anything similar to the normal fog that forms from water vapour. It suffocates. Even with all the other weather phenomena that the world has been forced to experience from the days of relentless government bombing, there's really never been anything like *this*. There's something deeply wrong with this part of the world.

Red carries a flashlight, near-dead, hanging on for dear life, to try and navigate. It doesn't clear the fog up at all, but if they believe it helps then it has to.

"What the fuck," Red hisses, not for the first time.

"If we fucking die like this." Ash mutters. "It's all going to be your fault."

Red, pettily, flashes the flashlight into his eye. Ash grimaces, making sure to list out every single insult ever under his breath, but just loud enough for Red to make out every single one. Red keeps laughing at him.

It's either kicking him and dying for real, or keeping hold of his all too warm hand and living. Undying loyalty to the end.

"You have any idea what's causing this?" Red asks, switching topics.

"No fucking idea." Ash answers, in a whisper.

It feels like if they talk too loud then they *will* just cause an avalanche, despite not being anywhere near the snow. The atmosphere only just feels thicker, colder with every step, as if it's warning them to leave. It's too late for that now.

Ash looks over, "You know a lot of things, Red. Do *you* have any idea what the fuck this phenomenon is?"

"No, no I don't. I wouldn't have asked you if I did." Ash can only imagine Red rolling his eyes. "No one has ever, you know, talked about *this*."

Ash is only tied down by Red's hand in his. Synthetic and all too genuine.

"What time of day even is it?" Ash asks.

Red sighs, equally tired. "Who knows."

They're having mundane conversation in the midst of some unnatural thing. It could be night. It could still be midday. Everything here is fucking with his senses. The grass underneath is pale white, tinted with a sickly ashen yellow. It's not like it's covered with dew, or snow, or anything, it's natural, which makes it even weirder. It rustles like normal grass, but it's aged - weathered, almost.

There's no real hills, or flora, or anything out here either. Just the flat, yellow-tinted, expanse of land, shrouded in lilac.

Red keeps his flashlight on. It's not like it's doing much, but it's lighting the fog up a little. Something like a placebo effect. They'll be able to come to a spot where the fog dissipates, soon enough, if they keep walking, and they've been walking through it for a while now already.

"You know, we haven't seen a lot of zombies." Ash says. None that are alive.

"Yeah, we haven't. And you know, me personally, I'm not complainin'. They can be gone forever for all I care."

Ash can't really argue with that. "Still. It's strange."

"I know," Red sighs. "I just- let's get out of this place first, yeah?"

Ash makes a noise in acknowledgment, and they keep their pace steady. Not too fast, but not too slow. God knows whether the land will decide to crumble underneath.

It's also -- worryingly cold. Not like winter-cold, or like biome-cold, but something else.

Some deeper, kind of cold, that crawls under Ash's skin. That infests and festers and rots from under his fat and muscles. A cold that is almost ethereal, like heaven, except it's a punishment for whoever has decided to head out this far. It's stuck in his head like radio static.

Ash's hands are progressively getting more numb. His body is so tired that he doesn't even have the energy for his hands to shake. The one in Red's hand is much better off than the one shoved in his pocket, because Red is like a living furnace. Though the cold is still affecting him; Ash can see goosebumps rising over his neck, a slither of skin.

Even then, the warmth emanates off him, and even through the leather, it's pleasant.

They are, for some reason, not talking at all about holding hands. Ash is pretty glad. He thinks he'd immediately run off into the distance, into the fog, and get lost forever than have to even entertain that idea that *this* is where he has to scrape out that mess in his chest and present it. A first bruise.

He really, really doesn't want to think about that, so he just squeezes Red hand. A second later, Red squeezes back.

Ash grins, "I knew you couldn't live without me."

"Shut up." Red rolls his eyes. "Maybe *you* just can't live without me."

"Oh, really? Are we willing to bet on it?"

"Dude, you're gonna like, *rig* it somehow. No."

“How would I even rig that?”

Red does a small, sweeping gesture with the hand holding the flashlight, “Look, you’re *Ash*. You do anything you please, you know?”

Ash giggles at that, really. It’s so fucking stupid. His laughter is muffled in through the fog, quieter than normal. There’s no other sound in this sort of atmosphere.

“You flatter me too much.” Ash says, a lilt to his voice.

“I’m not tryin’ to *flatter* you.” Red huffs -- but his hand squeezes Ash’s, again, and they continue in the purple haze.

All feelings are sickening to Ash. This might just be the worst one, still. He doesn’t know how to cope with this because with anger, he acts, lashes out; with sadness, he waits until it turns to anger; with neutralness, he does nothing. With this -- with *love*, what the fuck is he supposed to do?

It’s not like there’s much he can do, without throwing up all his feelings with the taste of acrid, sweetened bile. He just -- looks forward. Onward. Step after step, just walking.

This plane of existence feels like it’s been ripped straight out of a dream. Ash is going to wake up in a few minutes after the ground underneath them rips apart, and he’ll be falling, and falling, and he’s going to wake up in the last small ruins they were at.

Unsurprisingly, Ash does not wake up.

The fog reaches up into the sky, no matter where he looks. Everywhere in front is flat; slightly dusted over with paleness. An iridescent glow that sparks over in messy, world-defying colours -- but that’s just his imagination. It mimics the phenomenon of a brocken spectre, almost.

Though, as they keep walking, it’s slowly starting to get lighter and lighter; from a fog to a gentle purple mist.

It's just a strange thing. Really strange. Is True North going to be like this too?

The further they keep walking, the lighter it’s getting, and he’s not sure whether it’s just the phenomenon or the land itself producing *this*. The grass is slowly returning back to its normal, green colour, with only splodges and the tips of it being the dry yellow-white.

Ash really, really wants to take a break already. It’s been too long just walking.

The mist slowly dissipates, too, and then -- then they’re back in the open sky. The sun has considerably shifted from its midday position, down west -- god, it must’ve been a few hours. They almost stumble out of the fog. With its last breath, finally out in the sun, the flashlights batteries die as it sputters out in Red’s hand. They’ll just have to change them, later, a new task on their awful too ordinary routine.

Ash holds Red's hand just in case. Fingers interlaced as if they're *lovers*, his own voice mocks. Neither of them let go.

“What the fuck.” Ash hisses.

Red shrugs, nonchalant, although there's a bit of unease.

“Yeah- okay. Fuck it. We're not spending any more time here.” Ash just sighs.

Ash sends one last glance towards the landmass. The fog is deep and thick. It is pale. It is almost voidlike. Ash wonders what True North holds.

*

Two weeks.

The passage of time comes to the forefront of his mind again and again -- it's a constant dawdle of sunlight spilling through the gaps in the clouds and the endless darkness of night. It's full of mute warmth, freezing shadows, and an endless cycle that Ash's gaze lingers on without seeing.

It's something all too monotonous. Walking and complaining about walking and silence.

Moonlight comes in through the window. The place they're in is shabby, and small, and the mattress is scratchy and everything here feels carcinogenic. It's not like they can stay anywhere else, anyways. No nice and comfortable motels, no shitty inns that at least had candles, no. Just a room, and a bed, and Ash and Red.

He's pretty sure Red isn't sleeping. It's kind of obvious, when Ash is laid right next to him, almost curled around him like a cat would, even though Red's face is buried in the crook of his elbow.

Ash watches. His one eye gleams under the dull light at Red, night engulfs the outside world. It's like he's preparing for a live vivisection, watching Red's chest rise and fall down as he tries to sleep. It should be easy to fall asleep out here, after all, it's much more peaceful, quiet, than any place they've ever passed through. And that's the whole problem.

Red exhales, and shifts his arm off his face. Must've gotten tired of pretending.

“Ash.”

Ash looks over, blinking lazily, “Yeah?”

“My arm is going dead.”

“You're supposed to be asleep anyways.” Ash mutters, but he still moves, enough so that Red can move his arm.

“I know. It's just, fuck.” Red sighs, worn out. “It's hard to.”

It's hard because of the prospect of vulnerability; it's hard because of the nightmares; it's hard because they've only got two weeks lefts; it's hard because it's a glimpse into death; it's hard because they're coming to True North soon and *oh god*, they're nearly done; it's hard because the fatigue wears away at you until you can't even feel tired; it's hard because it's just two weeks.

Ash's gaze slinks over Red, to the closed window. The night sky is a blank void. Underneath it, though -- stars flutter in the night sky, moving slowly, millions of lightyears away and yet they still reach here. There's something here to be said, about Red. Here, and at his side.

"Yeah. It is." Ash murmurs. Confessions come out to die during the night.

Red just sighs again, like a sad old dog. "Come closer."

"Huh? You just asked me to move."

"It's- whatever." Red mutters. "Just come closer."

"Okay." Ash whispers.

Ash shuffles, even closer than he was previously. His leg slips over Red's, and closer, until his chest rests against Red's side, but his glock is still just an arm's reach away. It's for warmth. It's for comfort. The culmination of everything good in the universe.

His eyes shift up at Red's face, back to his mask, up again and down again. Red's hair has grown longer, nearly obscuring the eyebrow scar.

"What were you thinking about?" Ash asks.

"Just, things." Red answers, all too vague. He elaborates when Ash doesn't let up on the staring. "I mean, you know. It's just that we've been out here for what, eleven weeks now? It's been so long, I mean, we left in autumn and now it's winter."

Ash makes a small noise in acknowledgment. "And in the morning we're going to be out there again."

"Ash, god, don't remind me."

"It's only two weeks, Red." Ash says, softer. Attempting reassurance. "And well, the thirteen weeks afterwards, but you know. Two weeks."

"That's the problem, isn't it." Red sighs. "It's two weeks, but it doesn't -- it's too *long*. Too short."

Another part of Ash would love to be pedantic, to point out that technically means it's just medium; that it can't be long and short, but it is. Two weeks. Even the words themselves feel like mockery.

But there's nothing they can do except walk when they can and sleep the nights out and rest when they can. It's horribly boring. Ash gets bored and annoyed every time he thinks about

it. Time looms and it cannot be changed, even as much as Ash would love to crush every single clock with a mallet. It will not stop time anyways.

Ash just sighs, face pressed against Red's shoulder. He smells like death.

Dying does not scare him, but the concept of death is something he grows more and more uncomfortable with each day. He doesn't want to leave.

There's no satisfactory way to go out. There's less and less each day. There's less until Ash's eyes flicker to Red, and he thinks of the words, *the only way I'd like to die is by your hands*, before he realizes that it would ruin the atmosphere. He's come close to it, before, what's one more time.

Ash isn't sure what he should do with that thought -- that sentence -- a simple string of words. It's already seared itself into his mind. So he keeps them in his chest, instead, constricting air and blood flow.

Reaching over, oblivious to his thoughts, Red tucks a stray strand of Ash's hair behind his ear. It's unbearably intimate. A solar system spins within the boundaries.

"I'm glad that it's you." Red murmurs, all too raw, muffled behind his mask.

Ash leans into the touch indulgently. Fickle thing. "Hm?"

"I don't think I could ever meet someone like you ever again, you know." It's teasing. It's also a dizzying fondness. It's affection hidden through mockery.

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Ash says, hushed.

"Something." Red says, mask obscuring everything. "You still haven't repaid my favour, you know. From the start."

"What- oh," Ash remembers. It feels like a lifetime ago. "I guess I haven't. Dude, it's, it's literally the middle of the night. Why are you thinking about this?"

"It's the middle of the night." Red gives a half-assed shrug.

"Which means you should be asleep, dumbass."

"Keep me company."

"That's what I have been doing."

For far too long. For these past eleven weeks, and everything beforehand, and everything happening *now*.

Ash thinks again, how he would die.

But Red needs -- *wants* -- him here.

*

One week.

A countdown. Metaphorical doom.

Snow has piled up all around them. Even in the far depths, away from new, wasteland civilization, lies the old world. This is the last city before the end.

He's standing on the overpass, a bridge between two broken, cement and concrete buildings. It's almost brutalist. Ash watches the grays of winter fall into night; the most hateful time where shadows creep over the walls, and block everything out, everything except for the numbness and the cold and the doom.

Everything is dusted in snow; untouched for years. Really, snow is just a worse version of dust, much colder, and dust doesn't rise to the level where you have to trudge through it in the morning.

His hands mess with the cigarette package -- there's only one left. He hears it rattle around, solitary.

As if on cue, Red walks over, probably to coax him back inside.

Instead, he sees the packet, and, "Last one?"

"Yeah." Ash sighs, flicking the cigarette packet back open. It used to be so full.

He closes it again. Sighs again. Red's now standing next to him, leaning on the railing with him, watching the snow cover the broken city landscape. It's a secret. There will be no one to see this except for the two of them, time and time again. It is just the two of them, and Ash is content with that.

Ash's heart struggles to stay in control of itself. There's no reason to be feeling this, no explanation why all of his organs feel like rattling around; why his veins feel clotted with stardust; or why a week feels like an insurmountable task.

He looks at the cigarette again.

"Are you just going to keep messing with the box?" Red asks, eventually. When Ash doesn't reply, he continues. "Look, if *you're* not going to--"

"Shut up. Give me your lighter."

"Share." Red asks, as if *he* can demand things of Ash.

"Oh, of course. I'll just cut the cigarette in half. You can get the filter and--"

"That's not what I meant." Red rolls his eyes behind his sunglasses. "Share it like a *normal* person."

Ash sighs, but there's a flicker of a smile over his lips. "Of course. Pass me the lighter already."

Red diligently reaches into his pockets, pulling the lighter out. It's still as dingy as the last time. It's coloured red, fittingly. He presses down on the button, and a flame flickers out. It's warmth and safety and addiction.

Ash takes the cigarette, places it between his lips, and leans down. The filter paper touches the flame, and he sucks the buzzing inwards, and takes the first drag. He leans away to breathe out smoke, not unlike the white mist that already formed everytime he took a breath. It disappears into the air. It's something familiar.

He offers the cigarette to Red after he's put his lighter away, into his jacket pocket. Their fingers brush, and then Ash's hand falls.

Red already has his mask pulled down, and he slots the cigarette in between his lips like second nature. Ash watches silently, as he breathes it in, and he exhales smoke that curls out.

Nicotine, the fuzziness, drowns out the reminder that there's just a week left. Red passes the cigarette back.

It's terribly intimate, really.

Every part of Ash's brain registers this as an indirect kiss. Ash blocks that thought out. And the one that comes after it, where he wonders how soft Red's lips would be, always hidden behind his mask. He's always been good at ignoring the things he wants to ignore. He's not going to leave things unfinished, though.

They've shared a few indirect kisses, but that just makes this worse. It's just saliva though, so it doesn't mean anything.

They're just sharing saliva, and passing the last cigarette back and forth. Every so often, the cigarette ash is tapped off, and he watches it fall until he can't make it out anymore. It will disappear into the snow underneath, eventually.

It continues in silence. Neither of them want to address that there's only a week left.

"Why don't you just take off your mask completely?" Ash asks, instead. He's never heard of ulterior motives in his life. "It's not like we're going to run into anyone out here."

Red looks at him, cigarette poised over the edge. "Hm."

Ash stares at Red. At his lips, flush, his cheeks rosier than normal in the cold air. At the pinprick of a beauty mark, like a star, just next to his mouth.

"You'll still have it, it's not like you're going to throw it away completely." Ash goads.

"Well, yeah. But I've had it on for so long that it'd feel weird. I dunno."

"C'mere." Ash coaxes Red closer, before he registers what he's doing.

Still. Red is leaning closer now, very, very close. There's no other way that Ash can describe it other than *close*. Too close to his lips, too close to his heart beating in his chest. Red's looking at him, curious in that stupid Red way, and Ash isn't going to back out of this now.

"You can stop me if you want." Ash murmurs.

Ash reaches up, finger underneath the straps on the facemask. Red's skin is flushed warm, from the cold, probably. He waits for Red to protest, to lean away and tell him to stop.

Red just blinks, waiting for Ash to continue. There's even the hint of a smile on his face, and *fuck*.

He did not think this far ahead. It's fine. He has everything under control. It feels like true love suicide.

Ash unhooks the string from one ear, and Red is trying to act nonchalant, despite the way his breath hitches. It's some mangled form of trust, cultivated into this. As remote as a hidden star.

And he knows that he's seen Red's face in his life before, a lot of times. The first time, an accident but -- but he knows that he's seen Red's face with pallor and sickness, the same lips drinking from a shared bottle, he's seen him come out of bathrooms in motels. It's *different*, like this, when the mask is completely removed from him, and in Ash's hands.

Everything here feels too much, too much like electricity is searing him from the inside out. He must look like a lovesick fool, standing there with Red's mask in his hands, looking at him, looking at his hand where the cigarette gives off idle smoke, looking at his lips, and *oh god*.

It's sacreligious. Ash has the thought to shove Red's mask back onto him, and leave into the white snow out of embarrassment and never look back. Instead he just puts the mask into Red's pocket.

The universe itself feels unstable; following them into demise. It's *dizzying*.

Red just stares at him, almost amused, the corner of his lips quirked up. And there's the stupid mole, and Ash doesn't think he can take much more of this. The cold flushes Red's cheeks, his lips a little bit more red and chapped than they normally would be. They've sunken in too deep. *Ash* has sunken in too deep.

It's so annoying, and the scent of smoke is engraved onto Ash, and it's shedding layers one by one. Around his hands and his eye and his mind; and the mask lays in Red's pocket. Vulnerability drags into love. He's never been less ready to quit.

"You're wasting the cigarette." Ash mutters out, as a poor distraction just from how disarranged he is.

Red's eyes flicker over to the cigarette. It's slowly burnt down.

"I guess I am." Red shrugs.

Slightly less dizzying, Red offers him the cigarette back. Ash takes it, selfish and immoral. He can barely maintain eye contact when Red does *this* sort of shit, and he doesn't fucking get it.

Ash doesn't dwell. Except that he very clearly much does. He is a liar and a cheat and in love and a fraud and he accepts it as easily as the smoke that he breathes into his lungs, and he exhales it back out just as smoothly. Pyrolysis rattles around his chest.

Red; the universe; himself -- everything is an unstoppable swan song. His hands smell of smoke, and his insides are black, rotting through. One week left. He wonders if he can make it through like this.

Ash looks at the cigarette, just shy of being burnt down completely. He looks at Red.

"You can have the last drag." Ash says.

Red blinks. "Really?"

"Yeah."

Ash holds the cigarette up to Red's lips. It's more convenient.

"How kind." Red says, hushed.

Between buildings of concrete, on a bridge, stand two people. Around them, the snow blankets the landscape, and the only semblance of warmth comes from their bodies, internal, and the heat of the light from the cigarette, external. Between the two people made of flesh and skin, their heart beats intertwine and -- and it is love.

Red leans over, lips around the cigarette while Ash holds it up for him. His fingers are so close to his lips, *god*. There's nothing interstellar about this but -- there should be. Do the stars know how desperate the craving to kiss is? Does heaven know about the things that an aching connection leads to?

Ash watches Red inhale, take the last drag, and turn back to the distance to breathe out the smoke.

"Thanks." Red says, still looking away. "For the cigarette. For sharing it."

"You're welcome." Ash mutters out. He can still see the mole from this angle. It feels like a fate worse than death.

Ash rubs the cigarette off on the bottom of his heel, which Red seems strangely intent on watching, something like awe at such a simple action. (It *is* cool, after all). It's their last cigarette though. There's no more to stave off the nicotine cravings, the feeling of closeness shared between addiction. He drops the butt onto the ground, and it sinks into the white snow.

Everything feels like a slow corruption. It has stained how pristine and untouched everything is, just like their footsteps have. A corruption that comes from Ash's love, and the way that

Red looks at him and-- and--

Just another week of this.

*

Somehow, along the way, three months have passed. Ash's backpack feels significantly lighter than the beginning. There's just enough for the returning journey. It still doesn't make it any better of a thought.

Ash crosses the dates off, into winter, just shy of the new year. It's one of the only things keeping him sane. Nothing here is exactly normal, and the fallout is so, so large here. They're reaching the final point.

If Ash wants to be truthful, it's *almost* anxiety-inducing. But he's also Ash, and the words *Ash* and *anxious* don't go together in a sentence. Instead, he thinks about how it's been just thirteen weeks, and he's been there, every single step of the way. He lays on the hardwood floor of the house, watching the ceiling fan. It is stagnant. It has no worries of its own, it doesn't care that it's been abandoned ever since the beginning. It has no journey, no destination.

Silence lays over the world outside, in hazy paleness. Maybe it's a little bit too late to be anthropomorphizing a ceiling fan.

They're so fucking close, and it's too near and all too fucking far. His experiences and memories and thoughts are a mess, and the floor is so nice and solid underneath him that he wants to sink into it. True North isn't everything, but it also kind of is, and--

Red kicks him, lightly, in the shoulder. Which in turn prompts Ash to sit up, ready to start cursing him out.

And Red is *grinning* at him. All of his face on display.

Ash's heart is fickle at best, and downright traitorous at worst. Fuck. He's ready to rip it out again over and over. Not -- not because he wants to get rid of the feeling (although the side effects of acting *lame* about *Red* would be rather nice to stop) but in a more gentle way. His psyche is frightening.

Gentle, like he wants to *present* it to Red. For him to touch and feel its frantic pulse and whatever else he wants to do. And then for Ash to-- to-- roughly slot it back into his chest. Because that's stupid, and he'd die, and Red would probably mind having a bloodied heart presented to him.

Moments like these don't last. Red's already moved on to setting up the stove, but the image of Red smiling just a few seconds ago has imprinted itself forever. He's watching everything pass, taking his time, holding onto everything the best he can.

I love you like I never knew how. I hate you so much it makes me sick.

They'll keep walking. Tomorrow, they'll still be here, together. It's a cruel, awful, adoring fate. Ash thinks he's overall satisfied with it all, slowly and slowly.

They should be seeing True North soon. Sooner than he thought. He still feels like he's seeing that small, blinking red light from the radio tower, or the crater, or the bathroom and the gauze in his hands, or the cigarette. But he's here now.

The ceiling fan does not move. It's silent except for Red's rustling and -- and really, it's only him that matters at this point.

It's so far so good. He thinks about the words left unsaid.

*

In the distance, a towering structure comes up from the ground.

It's covered in a pale, purple haze. He can't make anything detailed out, it's all covered in an over-looming fog. It's completely unnatural, not of this world, nothing similar to humanity or the divine or machinery. The air even feels thinner around here, and they're not even anywhere close to it. It twists up into the sky, winding up and whispering to the world with rooms that spike out of it like branches. It's its own city.

The night sky is so free of air pollution it kind of scares Ash. It's like all of the stars in the universe have spilled out across. It's a sight that could never be seen anywhere else. It feels like the end of the world -- well, maybe because it *is*.

Maybe it's only the beginning.

Behind, in the further distance, the waves of the ocean lap at the white shore. If he'd try to swim out -- he thinks that he'll be stuck in an endless blue. But he's on land, still far away, and the towering structure is so tall that he thinks he might as well end up in the endless void of the sky.

Red lets out a quiet breath from next to him.

It's nothing like Ash would've imagined it to be.

It's all -- it's all eerily silent. There's no passing words, or anything, or anyone. It's been like that for a while, but this -- this is the truest point away from all of humanity. Stupidly isolated, more than ever, it makes Ash squirm, something in his lung burns like it's all *wrong* but he just exhales out cool cold air. It passes by. There's nothing here.

All of this -- all of everything, has led up to this.

It's terrifying, almost. It's the realization that every credit he's saved wasn't worth anything. That he's never had a point in the face of a thing so awe-defying.

He turns to look at Red, who's facemask peeks out over his suit pocket, only on now when it's too cold to not go without an extra layer. This, though, it's special. The air is the cleanest they'll ever get in a sulfur world.

Ash wonders if the air always feels cooler on the lower half of his face after being hidden for so long, and if the wind is just a little stronger, a little more present this high up. Twists his hair into something untameable, skates along the corner of his mouth, his cheekbone.

Ash breathes in, and lets out a very long breath. The universe-- the world-- himself-- them--

It's over. For now, it's over.

"What now?" Ash asks.

"We've still got to get to it." Red says.

"There's after--"

"And we'll get to that, after, no?"

Ash sighs in response. He wants to knock Red out or do something highly regrettable and inadvisable. Like kiss him. Mostly knock him out though.

"Fine, yeah."

"In the morning?" Red propositions. The moon looks like the sun.

Stars spill out over the sky, like little bursts in his nerves. They all spark and shine down, thousands of millions of lightyears away. They still reach out though -- no matter how long it takes them to change.

Ash's heart clenches so tight, curling into something so compact, that it's a minor miracle his chest doesn't collapse around it -- that his whole body doesn't crumple from the draw of the vacuum, the pull of the void--

It's only delaying the inevitable. Ash still agrees.

Red smiles back, in his not-so-exactly-a-smile way, but still undeniably Red.

(Ash wants to swallow his heart like a falling star, wants to press it inside his own chest to live beside his own, a cross between horrible yearning and an unbearable destructive longing).

In the next day (in the next twenty four hours, the next one thousand and forty four minutes, the next eighty six thousand and four hundred seconds, the next millions upon millions of milliseconds-) everything will be technically over. That should be a neat conclusion, a bow wrapped up, because they'll be able to hire a caravan down, and it should all be okay. And that's all going to happen tomorrow, in a few hours, in Ash's life.

He's not sure if either of them sleep that night.

*

"You know, Speg always wanted to see me happy."

Red says. It's a part of a longer conversation. This, though, makes some part of Ash's heart pang.

"Are you?"

Ash asks. He's always been full of demands. This is somehow different, though. He doesn't know why he's entertaining this, even. Red's life will go on spinning, even if Ash isn't there, he shouldn't care at all.

(He cares so much. *So* fucking much. And that's the most terrifying part of it all. Don't leave, *stay*, Ash thinks he understands Red).

Red looks at him. It's only him, the facemask in his pocket, and his stupid sunglasses, and--

"I'd like to think so."

*

After the light aches its way over the horizon, Red offers his hand to Ash to help him up. With no hesitation this time, Ash slides his hand in. It's skin against skin. Soft, pale glow haloes around Red, and everything in Ash feels so, *so* overwhelmingly real.

Maybe to live is to change, to evolve and sprout rapidly like the ache in his heart until it's destroying all of his nerve endings. It's just him and Red. All life around here seems to have disappeared, and it makes his head all fuzzy if he thinks about it -- though, that might just be the atmosphere. He's not even sure if the light in the horizon is the sun, or the end's poor mimicry of light.

He's used to the cold, literally, but metaphorically -- this *warmth*, this feeling, he wants to learn more and more of it. To imprint it on his lungs.

It's the same as last night. And the nights before that. Desolate. There's not a singular pigeon that flies by.

And it isn't like Ash was exactly hoping for any life to pop up, but it just makes the whole journey feel so much longer. Boots hit the ground, one after another. It's infested with something else other than the usual rocks of a tundra. Here, it's all already barren. The grass is tinged that same pale yellow-white.

It reminds him of the landmass covered in fog. Except around here, it's a simple mist, and the sky is a void black, and the ground is harsh and solid. It gets coarser the further they come, from grass to uneven stone.

Ash stays steady. Not even when the structure, the *thing*, gets closer and closer. He breathes out. He's surprised there's even enough oxygen for them to keep alive. There's something so wrong with every step he takes further.

Red, enigmatic, stupid, beautiful, fool that he is. Oh, how Ash has been dragged so far. How Ash has willingly followed.

*

It takes hours.

Night falls -- at least, Ash thinks it does. The sky's the darkest he's ever seen, and the stars from just last night are blocked out completely. It is a void.

Even being right in front of the structure, it's clouded in dark lavender haze at the top, disappearing into the void at the top. There's so many off-shooting parts, all pale and yellow and purple and *unnatural*. It's a snapshot of something else, frozen and fossilized into the earth's core. It will remain here forever. It will outlast him, and with everyone's last breath, it will keep looking. It's the last destination.

It's not like the coldness of ice or snow, or freezing solitude, or anything. This is something otherworldly. Ash probably shouldn't have the privy to look at. An end *to* the world; *the* end of the world. It's deadly silent.

"What the fuck is this?" Ash says because he can't rationalize this. He can exploit and internalize godhood but this -- it's something out of this dimension.

"It's an, uh, End City. It's- god, I didn't think it really existed. There's supposed to be ones like these at most true points, but- this one's always been rumoured to be the largest. And- *fuck*." Red teeters on breathless; reality and the atmosphere setting into him.

"So you weren't even sure that this thing was here?" Ash asks, everything settling in.

"Well- you're putting words in my mouth. But. It was *guessed* to be here, at least."

"*Dude*."

Ash wants to rant at him, tell him how stupid he is for *leading* Ash along, how much of a bitch he is, how there's no words in the language to describe him, but it's all postponed by the terrible earth-shattering chill that runs through him.

He thinks he will curse him out, anyways. Just later.

The structure does not react to anything happening below it. Bounded by terrestriality. It's the end, in the name, and in the semantics. There's no sun to halo down.

Unsubtly, Red crowds closer to him. Right. Body warmth is always important, it's the thing that keeps Ash alive, his heart beating to the correct temperature, it lets the electricity kiss his cells again and again. They might as well be breathing in each other's carbon. Ash wants and wants and *wants*.

For some reason, he doesn't take anything. His hands stay still at his side.

It's all for survival, Ash tells himself, *Red's doing it so that he doesn't freeze to death*, and Ash's feelings are ready to ignite and combust into catastrophe.

He feels as if he's on stage, suddenly. It's just survival. A play between gods and mortals -- it's all teasing, play-acting, and Red's smile is just a smile. It's all such curiosity, such an illusion. It makes Ash feel dizzier than all the time he's run for his life into the horizon. This is something that has been settling into his ribs for a very, very long time. All the points that they touch are smoldering white-hot.

Ash expects to find something otherworldly at the entrance as they step closer, a guard that would stare down at him, maybe god himself, or karmic justice. Something. Anything.

There is nothing.

“Is this even supposed to be here? Like- *exist*?”

Red shrugs next to him, and he can feel the action more than he can see it. “There’s been rumours about these. Made of milk and love, or zeroes and ones, or something.”

Ash scuffs his shoe against the washed-out bricks. “It seems solid.”

“Well, that’s why they’re rumours.” Red hums. “I remember that it was said to be like- a refuge point, made in the early stages of the apocalypse. But it’s -- something definitely happened to the environment.”

“Do we know what happened?” Ash asks.

“...Not a fuckin’ clue.”

So it’s some sort of unexplainable horror. Some kind of side effect from the apocalypse, a last *fuck you*, from the world, as it withers away. Ash has no clue either. The atmosphere is just *wrong*.

“Is there anyone still in there?”

“By *this* point? God no.”

“Oh. So no one like, after the apocalypse has been here before, right? This means, dude, this is like *our* place.” Ash says, before he can actually think. Time moves slower down here.

Red just laughs, a little grin on his face, and *oh god*. “Just us two. Let's set up the fences, huh?”

“Yeah.” Ash says, out of breath; all the world is lighter than air.

“We can make our own civilization, our own currency, marketplace, military checkpoints, all that stuff.”

The End City is in its own subspace bubble, proud and separate from everything terrene. It’s a stupid, mundane conversation before something -- something indescribable.

Ash breathes out, lost in static. He glances at Red. Red looks back.

Red makes the first step into the building, boots click against the harsh purple floor. It only seems right for him to be the first. Ash follows after him, chasing down the feeling in his chest.

The inside is almost weirder. Pillars lead up further, purple and pale yellow holding onto each other. Embraced. After all, they're the only thing that will stay here. The room seems too empty, not abandoned, just built without a purpose. Gravity struggles against the city's sheer will to stay standing. Maybe living here wouldn't be too bad if they wouldn't starve a week in. His hands mess with the straps of his bag, feeling all too small in a grand room.

"We're here. What now?" Ash asks, repeating his question.

"I don't know." This was all a job, a road-trip, if you squint. There's obviously a purpose. Red isn't talking about that, clearly.

"What do you *mean* you don't know?" Ash asks, voice echoing.

Red sighs, a little more matter-of-fact, "Okay- well, we're gonna find the thing for Mid. It should be upstairs."

This is the furthest north that there'll ever be. For a long, long time.

"I still haven't repaid the favour." Ash says, thinking about it again. It feels like a bygone, already. A separate lifetime. It's still just Ash and Red. That's all they ever will be.

"You haven't." Red says. His steps click against the purple, as they walk to the first staircase of many.

"We've nearly completed the job anyways."

Apart from the whole returning back part, but that's for later.

Red looks down at Ash, a step behind him. "Is that the only reason you've come along with me?"

"Well, *no*," Ash defends. "Aren't we partners?"

He leaves out *business*. Red doesn't correct him.

"And, originally?"

"What do you think?" Ash asks. It was about profit and scamming and leaving before he could get hurt. "Originally, I also tried to run from being indebted."

Red falls quiet at that, as they continue to walk up the spiral staircase to the next floor. The only light comes from rods that are shoved -- *or rather grow*, god knows -- into the walls. It's their breathing, the cold, the silence. Distinctly uncomfortable. If he listens, he could even hear his own blood pulsing through his body.

It was debt, a favour; then it was a makeshift partnership; and it was an inexplicable cosmic pull. And then -- *then* it was love -- love that ripped his inside bare to the stars. But Ash can't say that.

"You know. I wouldn't do that to you now."

Red just smiles. "I know."

Ah. Of course he fucking knows. He just *knows*. Right. Ash has perfected his show of emotions to neutralness and anger, and in the end, it's all seen through anyway. After all, Red is someone who's worn the facemask, of course he would read through Ash. It's just -- how *much* does he know.

How much? How much has he figured out, through careful observation? And even worse -- how much has Ash *let* him know?

Ash looks away, dangerously teeters around the tension between them, steps in sync with his heartbeat ringing loudly in his ears. The thrum in his ribcage beats, and will keep beating as a part of this world forever, from the blood he shed to everything between. Resonance and closed loop of life and death.

They keep walking up.

*

Outside, the ground is *just* about visible. They've been walking, and peering into rooms, and walking again. Ash was really hoping it'd be something simpler, that he wouldn't have to keep doing the same thing that he's been doing for the past thirteen weeks (and a lot, lot longer, really) let alone up *stairs*.

The windows are tinted purple, and make a sharp, outcast sound when he knocks on them, which echoes through the staircase. He doesn't know how long they've been at this, there's no semblance of light -- except the artificial -- and the sky outside is void, but there's still inexplicable light outside.

Ash breathes, heavy. The atmosphere is definitely getting thinner with each step they take. It feels like all his atoms are doing the impossible of splintering and fragmenting.

"How does this thing even stand?" Ash asks, idly, peering out into the world. It's covered in fog. "What world is this?"

He thinks about how far light has to travel between frigid silence before it's ever seen.

"Still ours." Red says.

"It's fucked up. How- what, what the fuck?" This whole thing still hasn't worked itself out. Ash's mind is wires and copper.

Red sighs, from next to him. His breath comes out as mist. "If it wanted to collapse, it already would have."

They've never slotted together like puzzle pieces. They're two gears in a machine, pushing and pushing onto each other until one is doomed to break, but they keep holding on. Ash craves. He longs. All they need is a catalyst, really.

Red's hand brushes his shoulder, gesturing to the next staircase, past the empty room. Ash wonders how anyone has survived the stutter of a heartbeat.

*

For what it's worth, it's a very, very unassuming room. They could've easily gone the other way and missed it completely, but in the center, stands a generator-like machine.

It's a tall, imposing thing. Its body curls around the room, pipes coming out of it like exposed blood vessels, coated over in obsidian. In the middle of it, though, like a heart in a ribcage, stands *the star*.

A nether star. Glowing white, incandescent iridescence.

It's nothing like the pinprick stars out at night, only mimicking their shape to the naked eye, it cannot burn as bright, as it's relegated to the mortal realm, as everything else is in this structure. Mortal-known yet transcendent, mortal-powered but intrinsically eerie.

There's even something that resembles a label, written in a much, much older language, that labels it. *How nice*. If only either of them could read it.

The star glows, steady in its celerity. It has four points to it, almost like the cardinal directions. Rationally, it looks like it should be burning hot against his hand. Almost like it should have melted the generator structure enclosed around it. Nothing happens, though, and the star keeps on pulsing light, unmoving.

Red looks at the slip of paper that Mid gave him. Looks back up at the star, and then down again.

"Are you fucking stupid?" Ash asks.

"Look, I just wanna know whether I'm stealing the *right* piece of old history, okay." Red defends himself, gesturing at the star.

Ash sighs. "Is there anything else in this place that has looked like- like this fucking thing?"

Red stares at him for a few seconds longer. Eventually, he pockets the slip of paper back.

"What was this even used for?" Ash asks, staring at the mess of machinery in front.

"Energy, it seems like." Red taps the obsidian coating. "The star seems to power it, I'm pretty sure. It's stuff that Mid knows, not me."

"That's- *fuck*, alright. Are you going to take it already?"

Red rolls his eyes but he carefully reaches out, between the bars that enclose it like ribs, lifting them up easily. There it is, unprotected, and it does not react. It merely stays floating by itself. Maybe this whole structure just has a different gravitational pull to everything else.

Ash watches. He is above heaven, tied down to this. He is the pilfered code. And yet, yet -- he cannot imagine being anywhere other than here. Natural human contradictory behaviour.

Red finally takes it into his hand. It's starlight in a capsule. Ash watches.

It's a small enough thing where it can be held, cupped in Red's palms. It's resolutely something that a mortal should not be able to harness, but Red holds it so easily. The aureole from it lights up the space around him in a frosted white glow.

"How's it feel?" Ash asks.

Red looks up at him, "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

It's an almost -- intimate offer. Wordlessly, Ash reaches his hand out.

And Red places the star into his palm.

It's emitting light, bright and blazing, streaking off like paintings and statues in a church, like god's fucking light, like religion trapped in a bottle. He expects it to melt through his gloves, to skin and bone, because he's been a sinner at heart, but it didn't do any damage to Red.

The star is just an object, an item, the texture of smooth glass under his fingertips, and it does not care how it's being handled. It only pulsates with light, but the physical form does not move. There's this heavy sort of feeling that comes with handling something like *this*, like blood in his throat, like a cold steel blade pointed at his neck. It's bittersweet menthol.

It's cold in his hand. Cold of a past, of everything before it, and everything that comes after it. Not winter, not the biomes, not of a dead body, but just *cold*.

Cold and all too alive -- more of a presence, than anything. Its vital light reflects off his skin. His hands come away clinging with the scent of burnt ozone, a mix of electricity and singed metal, as if it has just been plucked from space itself.

Ash looks at Red. It's always been about them, hasn't it?

*

It's a sentimental kind of thing.

Ash has Red's sword in his hand. It's not like he has as fine control as he did with a hunting knife, but Red's sword is coldly sharp, something familiar. Ash knows it as a part of Red. It's a background reminder of the deadliness. It's not like anything else alive is here, though.

Red watches him, a little amused, as he carves a neat *A* into the floor.

(The star is neatly packed away in Red's bag. Ash had tried to carve it into the generator itself, already. But it's actually rather hard to carve something into obsidian, and he couldn't take much more of Red laughing at his attempts, no matter how *nice* his laugh is).

It's very sentimental. It's almost as sentimental as the notebook, the tulip, the film reel next to his heart.

Three months running, trying to leave a mark on the road, leads to this. The past always lingers, in the way that Ash sticks to Red, and Red clings to Ash. There's a small silence between them, the sound of breathing echoing in the emptiness.

Red gestures for the sword back, the corners of his lips flicked up at the engraving. Ash passes it back into his outstretched hand, ready to start making the descent back down.

And Ash expects for Red to put it back into its place on his hip, as he takes the first few steps out. He's left his mark, when Red calls out;

"Hold on."

Ash tilts his head, but he stops anyway. He stays.

Red has his sword still in his hand, familiar; it's been comforted like this many times before. The sword makes Red dangerous as an extension of him. A living weapon. Ash sees him bring the sword down to the floor, and there's the same grinding sound of scratching at the purple floor.

He watches Red, but he can't exactly see what he's doing. Ash just waits for Red to step away.

And he does, with a small, sort of smug grin. The *worst*.

On the floor, a not-so-neat $A + R$ lays engraved.

Ash feels -- *fuck*, what does he even feel? It's dreadful nostalgia and sentiment and a weird tenderness in just a few strokes. For a moment, Ash feels content. Unlike those three months, unlike the slough of the past thirteen weeks, everything keeps on repeating and swirling around like those little bugs in the summer that stand out against pale blue skies. He keeps staring at it, burning it into memory. He will never forget this, god.

A part of him is half-tempted to take the sword from Red -- always Red -- again and etch a shitty little heart around it, like he's seen in old graffiti and locks on bridges. But that'd just sell himself out, and -- and they're partners. In *some* way.

"It- It looks like shit." Ash stutters out.

Red laughs. "C'mon, I put *effort* into that."

"It looks like shit." Ash repeats.

“What a convoluted way to say that you love it.” Red grins, and the mole, and the sword, and Red, and *fuck*.

Ash looks at the engraving. “God- whatever you want to believe.”

No one else will ever see it. That’s okay.

*

It feels like forever since Ash took on the heavens.

(Everything feels like it’s from another lifetime, not this, but it’s still him. He is the void of divinity. The same. Maybe not exactly the same when he’s entangled with someone else, caring, loving, in the mortal sort of way -- it’s a lot different).

They’re slowly descending down the structure. As much as Ash would love to try and reach the very top, try and find an opening to the roof and be stuck in the abyss with little oxygen left to survive, live in his own subspace bubble; however, they’ve already gone far enough. Besides, the lack of everything in this sort of dimension leads to the concept of time slipping away, and maybe they’ve been in here for a few minutes, or hours.

Ash will also admit that he doesn’t like the way his skin crawls with the cold, doesn’t like the general feeling of this place. The staircase is unwavering.

The end rods that are scattered throughout the building are slowly dying out. The energy must be going out already, the star extracted and now harnessed in Red’s bag. It’s a mundane sort of fate for it.

They’re slowly descending. Step after step.

Ash is more of a symbiote than a bloodsucking parasite. Does *this* classify as winning when you don’t even have an opponent anymore?

Red is oblivious, more focused on the actual descent than internally monologuing in his head. Every so often, his sword hits a stray step, and the sharp clink of metal on purpur reverberates throughout. There’s no real ambient noise here, silent in the fuzzy radio static way.

Ash can’t help but to gravitate towards him. It’s a terrible weakness.

To be attached to someone *so* much. Ash can lose again so easily. So much more. Having centered himself around someone else; something like *this*; something like a binary star system.

Ash loves and he loves and he’s allowing himself to admit it all. Forever circling. He wants to reach and collide. It’s something inevitable.

The star sits heavy in Red’s bag. Another thirteen weeks, and they’ll be back in civilization. Ash wants to keep everything here for himself. Materialistic and profitable. It’s too late for that, when Red taps him on the shoulder, and there’s no way he’s leaving again.

*

Ash's heart beats loud in his ears. He's sure it's going to escape his chest in a bloody, gorey mess.

There's something wrong.

Terribly, terribly wrong. Ash knows that there was something terribly wrong with this place in the first few moments of being near it but *fuck*. It doesn't make this any fucking better.

He hasn't seen any zombies for a long, long time. Which probably should have made him hurry the fuck up. But he was just so -- *so* happy to be done with this whole thing. They were just another few steps down when Ash first heard the echoing of groans and resonant scrabbling from upstairs, and then the overhead purple stained glass shattering into lavender petals.

Red yells first. They're all coming from the top. It's a small mercy that they were already walking down but now they're running.

It's just that the lights are flickering, really, almost completely out, and the zombies are gaining on them because they have no human concept of fatigue. They are the undead, with their rotting flesh, stretched over too thin bodies and elongated limbs, decomposing and contorting in any way possible because god knows how long it's been since someone alive, with blood and energy, has been here.

And when you've honed something for so long, sharpened and refined over and over, his survival instincts are able to keep him running, even in an environment as hostile and chilling as this.

Ash is pulling Red down -- because he needs to make sure that he stays alive -- because that's the best they can do.

There's a lot of them. Ash can't spare a glance, because he's focused on living, and breathing, and running, and *living*. He can hear the staircase starting to creak under the weight of so much, of necrotizing mass. Gone is the ambient fuzziness, replaced by scraping and keening behind them.

The adrenaline crashing over and over into him isn't the only thing, as the staircase above them starts to break and shatter.

The bottom -- the fucking *exit* -- has been blocked off. Age has not treated it well, as the bridge is rapidly deteriorating behind them, and if they're not hit by a stray brick, then there's the zombies, and then there's *falling*.

They're left to try and duck into the side rooms, and Ash yanks Red into the nearest open entrance, nearly tumbling over in the process.

In the next seconds, Ash sees the staircase completely collapse. Rubble and the zombies falling from up top are gathering faster and faster. Ash breathes, heavy, the noise is ringing,

violent in his ears.

He knows the fall isn't enough to kill something like a zombie, definitely not the ones who have apparently mutated, but it slows everything down. They're all coming crashing down with it with yowls and groans and oh god, *oh god, what the fuck*. He's never heard something so shrill, so equally ear splitting as thunder like this. None of the rooms here even have a door, so there's not even the mercy of it being muffled.

Ash cringes as he glances outside of the door, despite himself. There's so many, more than he's ever seen, and they're already moving again, ready to run and scurry around and claw at the walls. They should be stuck there, but god, there's so many. It's an amalgamation of raw flesh and tender meat that's been left for decades. It's cannibalistic.

Maybe if he had more time to spare, he could spend it on thinking the how's and why's and the what's. He only has time to barely try to catch his breath.

The part of the End City they're in is another empty room, with another one underneath accessible by a ladder in the middle. And outside, below them, the zombies fester. They shouldn't be able to get up here.

Ash exhales all too rough, staring at Red. "What the fuck- *Red*, Red, what the fuck?"

"I don't, I don't fucking know," Red stammers.

"*Shit*, Red." Ash breathes out.

Red runs a hand through his hair, his teeth worrying at his lip. He's looking around the room with controlled panic.

The groaning from just outside the room is rising in volume, and Ash feels like every part of him is clogged with bile, but he dares not look. Looking will just lead to more nausea, but they're obviously attempting to get closer.

Composure be damned, "What the fuck do we do? Red, what do we fucking *do*?"

"I don't, god, Ash, I'm so sorry."

Red looks at him, tragedy entrenched in every single muscle, and there's scraping echoing outside the room.

"No- no, what the fuck are you apologizing for?" Ash hisses.

"I don't know if we can-"

Red looks away, and Ash can't deal with that.

“Shut up, shut up, we’re going to get out of this alive, you fucking bitch, you *bastard*, we’re going to live.”

“Ash- Ash, *fuck*.” Red’s voice is frayed. He walks closer to the entrance of the room.

“I thought you didn’t want to die.” Ash spits.

Maybe they shouldn’t be arguing when they’re tantalizingly close to death. There’s a lot of things they shouldn’t have done.

“I don’t, but-” Red’s words fall short when he peers over the chasm.

“What? *What?*”

“They’re fucking climbing on each other.” Red hisses. “Ash, what the fuck are we supposed to do? They’re fucking coming *closer*.”

The sound outside the room keeps rising, echoing over and over, as if to prove Red’s words. The malodour is almost choking. Ash drags himself to one of the windows.

It’s close. *Visible*. The ground outside might as well just be right there. They were so fucking close to getting out, to leaving, before the collapse of the staircase. *Fuck*. Fuck, what a fucking joke. Red comes to him after a moment, and Ash starts to move from window to window, trying to figure out the safest way to get out.

“Ash-”

“We won’t die.” Ash says, final.

But that might also be a sort of curse, because the squelching flesh sound draws nearer, until Ash figures out that they’ve ended up crawling into the room underneath.

And the floor -- the floor crumbles underneath them.

It’s one last final *fuck you*. The End City is breaking apart. Time liquifies without control.

The purpur gives in, weakened, and it splits the room apart. Ash doesn’t fucking get it, but god, he isn’t allowing either of them to die *now*. They’re separated now -- on opposite ends of the room -- an aching abyss of writhing decaying muscles and a cavity of deformation.

All of them are starting to climb and dig into each other, trying to get to the two targets, and Ash can only bring himself to look over at Red.

Red’s sword is already pulled out again, honed and skilled in killing. If he can’t strategize a way out -- well, at least he can slaughter. He slashes down, a majority of the zombies piling up underneath Red’s side, more focused on getting them down and away.

His eyes lock onto the zombies as they’re crawling up, and it’s so fucking nauseating, and it makes him want to gag and fucking Red -- *Red* is right there. Forced again and again into violence. And it’s not like Ash can do anything but watch, looking down at the

amalgamation, as they climb over and over, sickly limbs outstretched, and Red is right there, but just out of reach. Ash pulls out his glock, targeted downwards, and god, there's just one bullet, just *one*. There's no fulfillment in this.

But with the rate they keep coming, almost multiplying from the inside, there's pretty much nothing he can do.

Red seems to be doing well, but he's on the opposite side of the room, and he can't even spare a glance back at Ash as he keeps hacking and slashing anything that comes close. The sound of squelching blood and muttered curses become idle noise, and everything is covered in gore. A supernova in action; destruction and creation. They keep piling up.

There's always something that slips past. One detail that goes unnoticed in the frenzy of execution. Something crawls, half-dead, up the pile, right up to Red. And--

As if it's going to crash next, Ash's side starts rapidly tilting downwards. And--

Ash can hear the clacking of jaws underneath himself. And--

He aims the glock, targeted, squints at the zombie.

Fuck his depth perception, the way his head spins with nausea, the way his hands shake -- fuck everything that's going against him. Ash could hit Red. Or he could hit the zombie. If he doesn't try then -- then Red will just fucking die anyways, and that's worse, and he can't. Ash can't let Red die.

With a prayer, he pulls the trigger.

It rips right through its brainstem, putting it squarely out of commission.

Ash's last bullet. It explodes right through, blood against the lavender of the floor, a mess that stains Red's clothes further and further. He's shot a zombie for Red, instead of himself, like a fucking idiot.

He watches Red's head flick up to look at him, and oh god, he's so fucked, but this was the right decision. It has to be.

The loud noise brings the attention to Ash's side of the room, tilting, and he watches the mixture of muscles and bodies move further towards him. His hands shake, electricity after the kill rapidly fading.

"Red, Red--" Ash chokes out, shaky, breathless. His doom stares back at him in the glazed over eyes of zombies. They have him cornered.

Mortality scares him.

And Red's looking at him, wide-eyed and his sunglasses are askew. It's fucking *terrifying*. They're both panicked, for a moment in their life.

Ash's panic coming bright, bursting from his chest, scraping against the inside walls, destroying and wreaking havoc. It hurts, and his throat feels scratchy in a way that he's never felt before, painful, panicked, and *vulnerable*. He needs help. He cannot get out of this alone.

"Ash-"

"*Red.*" Ash calls, again.

Mortality scares him, to the cold iron core of his heart. Everything whirrs in his mind, and he can't die, because he's just saved Red, and he's scared of death, and he can't do anything. Their hands, decayed with softened bones peaking out, start to flail up at the platform.

It's vulnerability. It's caring. It's trust. Ash loves. He's scared of death.

Red hisses out, "Jump."

"*What?*"

Maybe it's too late to be doubting himself now. It's far too late to be doubting Red.

Red reaches his hand out, gloved, and Ash has never been so glad to see something so synthetic. His head spins.

"I don't know if-"

"Shut up, Ash, dumbass, just *jump.*"

Ash shudders out a breath, and he never hesitates, he can't hesitate, it's death, and the crack between the room is crossable but it's the thought; the idea of everything going wrong. It's Ash being unconditionally scared, and that he's showing it in front of Red. Everything locked up coming free in an awful scenario, over and over again, and he is so close to dying again.

It's also not a perfect time for a retrospective. Red's hand, outstretched; the zombies writhe underneath; and the platform continues tilting, and he needs to move now.

So he prepares himself, despite the fact that his head feels just a bit too fuzzy and nebulous, but the world doesn't wait.

He leaps, and hopes Red will be able to catch him.

It's worse than anything he's ever experienced. Much, much worse.

That split second of being in the air is acute disequilibrium. Ash proceeds to barrel straight into Red, not even needing his hand, and they slam against the corner of the room.

But the floor is adequately solid beneath him, and Red is perfectly stable, even though the wall is the only thing holding him up. His vision blurs for a moment, and he can barely register that he's not dead under Red's searing incandescence, just incredibly winded. Raw, metallic adrenaline on his tongue.

There's the impending doom right behind them, right underneath, but he's *here*. It's the exploitation of the human spirit. A half-formed thought points out that he's clinging onto Red.

"You okay?" Red asks, a little breathless.

"Perfect." Ash answers. Equally strained.

The platform behind him collapses just a few seconds afterwards, trapping a large amount of the horde underneath it. The structure itself creaks, a living countdown, worse than the ticking of a clock.

Ash steps back, still dazed, and any contact against Red feels like a bit too much in this kind of state. It's harsh but so equally stabilizing, and it twists and fuses in too hot, too unyielding energy akin to nuclear fusion. The world does not wait for him to regain his bearings, as there's loud movement, gurgling of zombies as they move around the room.

(He's never been so glad to be *alive*).

"We need to- get out. Somehow." Ash says immediately.

"I'm the only one with a weapon here."

"They're only going to follow now if we jump out. I don't know- *fuck*."

Ash doesn't want to die like this. There was going to be tomorrow, and a tomorrow after that. He looks at Red, and looks, and looks and keeps looking until he's sure he's going to collapse.

He's virtually useless like this. His glock is done for. No more sunrises.

Maybe he should kiss him, for the hell of it. But they can't die, not like this. Not being bitten and torn apart in the end of the world.

He watches Red look out the window, his hand on his sword, and it's tempting. One last final goodbye before dying at the very, very end of everything. Ash's hand reaches out, to brush against Red's side, over his jacket.

Then, oh- *fuck*.

"Red."

"Take them- take everything you need." It's almost synchronized.

Oh, how easy it is to--

Ash reaches into Red's inner jacket, hands brushing against the lighter and credits and other small pouches and he fishes out the last -- the only -- grenades they have on hand. Red kept them. Of course.

It's all physical contact and intimate. Almost tender.

Death is the warmth of the sun, and the gentleness that comes with it. The sentiment of Ash giving Red grenades. Of course he kept them; volatile and deadly but it's hidden affection.

Ash still doesn't know how to execute this plan though. It'd be much easier with the other three that he had, but it's too late, and he's not going to waste more time doubting when the End City starts creaking again.

He leans, whispers to Red, and it's all a blink, a symphony of movement. Uncapping the grenade and Red is smashing his sword through the window, the glass breaking so easily, and he throws the first, the glass is so fragile and weathered and strained, and Ash uncaps the second, acrid desperation, Red's body already half-out and waiting for him, and he throws the grenade again, shaking, everything is all too quick, but he follows.

And then they're jumping out, so close to the ground already.

And then there's the explosion starting behind them, crackling, bright and terrifying fireworks and he can only imagine the endstone bricks and purpur floors covered in gore. Everything is being ripped apart, lost to time and space.

And then they're on the ground.

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Ash rolls onto cold, hard, *real* terrain, completely earthlike and mortal and bruised, and then he's pushing himself up, and running.

He feels -- unreal. They run and run and run and he wishes that they had a car, or something like that, but he hasn't had the best track record with vehicles, so maybe it's for the best. He'll run into the horizon again, pale mist left behind and into reality and true life. It's all so real. The burning in his lungs, the lightheadedness, and oh, maybe this is what it's like to have been alive, with fear and love.

Not behind the screen of divinity, or holding the universe in his palm, or anything. It's running away from doom, a catalyst, terrified and slightly hysteric but he's *alive* and nothing will ever be able to take him down after this.

The End City crumbles behind them, trapping everything in its embrace. Nothing will ever leave except for Ash and Red, Red and Ash.

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They lay on the edge of the beginning and end of the world.

Ash laughs. This is all so stupid. Awfully vulnerable. He feels himself splintering, a star about to collapse, the iron core heavy in his heart. Lightning sings in his veins.

*

It's all falling back into place, in some way.

"I think we just destroyed a piece of ancient history." Red says, after a long, long while.

They're still on the floor, watching the void sky. Ash feels like he might throw up. The adrenaline has come crashing down, and he's just achingly *tired*, and injured, and bruised. The End City is just a small point in the distance, far, far away.

Exploded and destroyed and forever gone. Ash can't bring himself to care about that.

Blood has crusted into Red's suit, over Ash's jacket. It's all on them, as well as the dust from where they collapsed. It's almost beautiful if Ash wasn't on the verge of exploding himself and collapsing and swallowing everything that's near. Blood and guts bleed into the grass, mostly from Red, from the zombies. Red's sword lies on the ground, just in reach, and Ash's gun lays on his hip, and sentiment in his notebook, and all his feelings are squirming under his ribcage.

Everything has just hit him, full force, not pulling back anything. They were so close to dying. Not only from the zombies but from the stupid fucking stunt they pulled and he's still alive and Red is right next to him and he's *here*.

He's not sure whether crying, throwing up, or bursting back into laughter edged with hysteria is the more reasonable option. Instead;

"Red, shut the fuck up for a second. Oh my fucking god-"

"What? It's true-"

"As if it's all that just fucking happened! I don't fucking- I don't care about the stupid fucking End City being destroyed, I care about the- the fucking *now*, okay? I care that I'm alive. I care that we both didn't fucking go up in the rubble, or get bit, or fucking- *anything*." He breathes, harsh and heavy.

Ash is a selfish and greedy thing. It's within his nature to profit. Now, in the wake of destruction over and over, of the sun, of necrosis, of the end, it's all turned into a jagged-edged tenderness.

"I fucking- god, fuck you, I care about the present, I care about *you*. I thought we were both fucking *gone*."

It's expletive after expletive. Red looks at him, shocked at what feels like the first time in ages. He's only had this expression when, well -- he doesn't like to dwell.

"Are you even fucking hearing me?"

"Yeah- just-" Red stutters, before falling into silence.

It pisses Ash off, funnily enough.

(And the universe is afraid. And the universe says that he's out of luck).

“I thought I nearly lost you, you asshole. You don’t give a fuck about anyone else, pretentious fucking bastard, fucking businessman. God. You- *fuck*. Fuck you, for making me care.”

(Red does care. A lot. Too much. Ash ignores that fact. He’s roused and livid and in love).

He closes his eyes, the world beating slowly beneath his eyelids, like the clickety-clack of his heart, the creeks of the gears that run in his head, far too many memories winding in the gaps and ridges. It’s all too fast.

Maybe it’s inappropriate. Having this conversation after nearly dying, his mind still racing through exhaustion, and maybe this is a mistake, but he saw life, he saw earth, he saw the last parts of the universe folding back into each other like a paper crane for a moment. Fear is a commodity that he’s never shared.

All *vulnerable*. He lays his elbow over his head, baring his neck almost. Ash can’t take this.

Ash is still certain he’d switch Red’s salt and sugar; now with a sort of lame, fond affection rather than debilitating pettiness. Ash trusts Red with his life.

It’s kind of like purposefully pushing a pin into your body. Except you don’t ever take it out. You leave the needle inside, and your skin and flesh learn to live around it. And then one day, you decide to yank it out, and it tears through collagen wound up tight, and it hurts, but you need to get it out. It’s messy because you put it in there. It’s messy because you are forcing it out of its ecosystem. A sharp constant pain that never leaves.

Pale grass sways. It might be the first breeze he’s felt in this area, under the void-blank sky. He wonders of stars and voltage and pigeons and heart fragments and nerves.

In the wake of destruction, lies love, at the very core.

Ash doesn’t care about winning, doesn’t care about weakness for a moment. His whole side is bruised from the fall, but that might as well have been hours ago. Even with everything -- he feels more satisfied than ever.

“Are you even going to say anything?” Ash asks, peeking out from under his elbow.

Red glares. “Shut up. I’m thinking.”

“Be careful. Is it your first time-”

Ash expects the sword to finally hit his throat, stained with blood of zombies and carved with love, maybe a shove or a punch, blood ready to seep out of him. Before he can react, Red is yanking him by the collar of his shirt and kissing him.

Their teeth clack on impact. Admittedly, it does take a moment for the realization to set in. And it settles, hard and fast and dizzying.

Ash isn’t one to back down, despite the electricity that is killing him inside, frying his internal organs and filling his skin with static and it’s everything and it’s nothing and it’s almost not enough but it’s what he’s been waiting for, all this time.

The usually muted tones of his vision solarized to a nearly unreadable white, eyes squeezed shut. Red kisses him like a dying man, maybe because he almost was. Because they both were, and Ash's hand reaches into Red's hair, filthy but weirdly soft, tugging because it's still a *little* bit about control even when they're equals and both having to lay down in another world that does not welcome them; and it's not perfect, not by any means, but it never has been with them.

He bites down on Red's lip, too sharp canines sinking in, just another injury on top of everything. Just another additional ache, but it's a present from Ash. It's only when there's that sweet tang of copper that Ash realizes he's bitten enough to make Red bleed, and then there's a tugging back at his lip.

Ash has been alive, like a machine, running on and on. Now, now he *lives* -- and he will keep living.

It's desperate. It'd be funny, if Ash wasn't also terribly contributing to everything. If he was able to, he'd dig his hands into Red until he draws blood, until he meets his ribcage and he's able to pull them apart one by one until everything bleeds out into white grass. He does nothing like that, and keeps kissing Red. He's not sure which one of them is bleeding more into the other's mouth.

It reminds him of dancing in an apartment. It reminds him of too loud fuzzy static. It reminds him of moonlight curling down the room. Everything smells like gunpowder and copper and near-death experiences. Kissing is unfamiliar, let alone kissing Red, but he *wants* it to become familiar.

All dying men still need breath, and Red leans away first, shaky. Ash feels fucking dizzy, just looking at Red.

Ash wipes the blood off his lip, staining the back of his hand. If it's meant to be, it'll be.

"*Fuck*. Ash. Let me kiss you again."

"Is this you finally calling in your favour from me?"

"Maybe, yeah. Now, Ash, shut the fuck up--"

Ash just pulls Red back in again before he can finish, and *oh*, what a cycle. Complete life and death. Ouroboros. He will die and die and die and he will always pull Red back in.

Red's hand travels from holding Ash's shirt collar to the back of his neck, warm and present, always, always stabilizing. Staying.

It's strange -- when their interactions once revolved around snarling anger and bottomless frustration, when they both struck as viciously as a smokescreen for the instinctive trust. It's not a perfect complement, not when they're treating kissing as an excuse to bite with tenderness.

It's the smoke of a gun, it's the piercing of a sword.

“*uck*,” Red breathes out, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah.” Ash agrees, unable to come up with anything coherent to say. He just pulls Red back in for another kiss, because he can.

Ash has never been good at following rules. Even when he sets them out for himself, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he can't get attached. It's inevitable that he broke it - a long time ago. Back under the desert sun, bleeding out.

Maybe, they'll need to talk about this later. Properly, when they're both not tugging on each other like they've never felt touch in their life. Red's sunglasses are knocked askew again. Red tastes like faint cigarettes and copper and death and clementines and it's nothing like Ash has ever imagined.

Ash wonders how he tastes like to Red. Whether the nicotine overpowers any sweetness, whether it's the nectar of sin and love of blood. Ash is something radiant, ravishing, rapturous; a miracle.

Sun incarnate, and always Red. Always Red, in front, the quiet lull of the moon, and Ash can only dig his hands deeper into Red's hair.

“Fuck you.” Ash mutters, finally leaning away.

Red just laughs at him, his thumb running over the short hairs at the back of Ash's neck. “After that? Really?”

“I hate you.” Ash says.

I hate you in the distinct way that I do not hate you.

“Of course.” Red grins. The stupid mole right next to his lip. God. “I swear you lie more than you breathe sometimes.”

Ash sighs, shutting his eyes for a moment, planning to pass it off as a really long blink. Stars swim in his vision. An ache to reach out, and abandon all worries. A sort of divine completion.

“I thought you were dead. I thought we were both gone.” Ash breathes out.

Red laughs, a little shakier. “You're horrible, you're a horrible man.”

“I know, I know, you've said so.”

And because it's easier to kiss Red than talk right now, he leans back up. Kissing Red is like being worshiped and being attacked at once. This was always going to happen, at one point or another.

Red's lips are kiss bruised, but that still doesn't stop Ash from grazing his teeth over his bottom lip, just to elicit a shiver from him. He shifts, reaching up with his other hand to cup Red's cheek, thumb specifically pressing against the mole, and maybe it'll come off onto his

thumb like an inkstain. It's all lazier now, where Ash isn't concerned, because he's been feeling like he might just collapse from total organ failure, but he hasn't yet, so it's fine.

It's fine, and it always has to be fine, because he's in love with Red, and he's pretty sure Red is--

"You taste like death." Red says, against his lip.

Maybe he does.

The ache in his chest is a permanent affixation now, as he leans in to kiss Red again. It was all a long time coming.

It matters. Every little action, every little world seeping with love. And everything in between. Oh god, he really couldn't have ended up here without Red. They nearly just died, but living itself always, always leads to death. And Ash is -- scared -- and strangely okay with that. He's already fallen down into humanity. Made a home for himself.

Ash just laughs, breathless, back. He doesn't know what exactly he feels like anymore. About to depart in cold hazy dust, about to burn up under mimicry of the light, drifting out in the void, at the end.

So he just -- bites down on Red's lip again. Which produces a hiss, and Red properly leans away, to say;

"You fucking suck at kissing, you know that?"

"Fuck you," Ash bristles. "*Fuck you.* I love you."

It spills out his mouth without meaning to. The whole world is about to fall apart again, creaking, just in a few seconds, the ticking of a clock, mundanity after life-threatening events, all under the void of atmosphere. Ash can't back out now, though.

Ash's heart feels like it's trying to escape, his own guts spilling out, "I love you, *oh* Red. I fucking love you, I am in love with you, and I think I hate that."

Red's staring at him -- something unreadable on his face; which just makes Ash all the more nervous, even though they've just been making out on the floor for an embarrassing amount of time instead of *talking*.

It's unreadable. It's something also familiar. *Smitten*.

"I don't think you do."

"What? Are you saying that I'm *lying* about being in love? We've just ki- do you really think I'd stoop that low--"

"No, no, shut up." Red sighs, leaning over him, right over his face again, and Ash can feel the warmth emanating off of him, and it feels so, so good to be alive. "I don't think you hate it."

Ash stares up at Red, quiet for once in his life.

And before Ash can register anything, Red is leaning back in, but instead of pressing a kiss to his already kiss-bruised lips, it's instead to the bandages over his eye. Ash's uncovered eye flutters close, and although it's just an empty and ruined eye socket underneath, Red kisses it with the gentlest of pressures.

Something indulgent all the way through, something that Ash can just kind of tell that Red has been aching to do the whole journey. It's so soft. It's so unbearably soft, and the way that Red gingerly holds his face makes it all the more stark. Everything in Ash's vision turns iridescent.

"Maybe I don't." Ash murmurs, eye fluttering back open.

"Come on, give me a real confirmation." Red says back. Hidden away in their own space.

Ash just keeps staring up at Red. If Red's going to indulge then -- then he might as well too. (And oh, isn't that just what being tied to mortality is about).

He tilts Red's face, which he blinks at, taken off-guard, and he looks so, so handsome when he's ruined. So unfair. He leans up on his elbows, and presses his own too soft kiss to the mole next to Red's lips. There's a soft hum of approval from Red after a moment, and everything in his chest feels incandescent. It feels *right*.

Ash leans away after a second, voice all too earnest, but it's justified in this scenario, "Yeah. Yeah- I love you."

"How long did it take you to realize?" Red asks, an almost winded quality to his voice.

Ash wasn't expecting Red to ask that. He wasn't really expecting any of this, either. Ash idly tongues at the cut on his lips, the stinging being something grounding in between all of this -- unhindered affection. He feels a slight tremble in Red's hand, from where it's on the nape of his neck, as if struggling to hold himself back. Hands that have tried to kill him, that have saved him, that he has held.

"Fuck, too long."

It's easier to say.

Red laughs at him, a soft rumble, familiar in the desolateness.

"Good, cause, cause- I love you too. I've- I think I've been in love with you for too long." Red says.

An admittance. A confession. It's something vague, but he knows that he can pry the answer out of Red eventually.

"Give me a real confirmation, c'mon." Ash parrots Red's words, now relaxed against the short grass all around them. Red is still sat next to him, so close, so tantalizingly warm against the coldness of the end.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s always been there. I thought you were an annoying, petty bastard, and you know- I’ve threatened your life a few times for it, but...” Red shrugs, his thumb idly tracing patterns into Ash’s arm, and Ash hadn’t even realized that Red’s hand was placed there, and oh god, they’re really meshing into some codependent amalgamation, and Ash really, really doesn’t have the time to care. “I just *attached* to you, you know? And then it’s just... something that’s been there. In the background.”

“This is a really convoluted way of telling me nothing.”

Red heaves out a sigh, more amused, though. Frustration turns into something fond. His hand trails up to Ash’s chest, where his heart is still thrumming, where just shy of it, is his notebook -- the drawing; the film tape; the tulip. They will stay with him forever.

“Maybe right before you turned and ran for winter. I don’t think I *realized* it then, but -- probably there.” Red says, hushed. “And look at us now, at the end of the earth, together.”

Ash blinks, although a smile twitches at his lips. “That’s a really long time.”

“Yeah, I literally told you. I’ve been in love with you for too long.”

There’s Red’s breathing, and then there is the radio static of the end, and then there is love. Ash breathes out. He was meant to love Red like this.

It’s all falling back into place, one by one, and Ash is in such a desperate, scraping, itching existence of love. It scratches at his insides like electricity, the feeling that he’s been carrying around all this time has just been love and love and love--

“Make it last a little longer then.”

Red laughs again, softer, but still oh-so wonderfully Red.

“And you make fun of me for the shit that I say.” Red teases, interwoven with affection.

It’s coming back, over and over, back to endless pettiness. They’re tangled into each other, and it’s the only way that this could end, everywhere else just a little bit too cold, except with Red. Radio wires are soldered to his heart, between veins and arteries, thrumming. He doesn’t care about the rest of the world, that the time keeps passing, just as long as he could stay here just for a little while longer. He was meant to love Red like *this*.

(They’re partners in business. He’s also pretty sure that they’re *partners*, now. Privately, in his mind, it feels -- good).

Ash huffs, moreso amused, “Ah, shut up. Are you going to mock me after I nearly died?”

“We both nearly died this time, hey.” Red points out.

This time. There’s been a lot of times.

The first, the favour. The second, the rooftop. The third, the attic. He's like a mosquito, and he’s like a lover. It is undying loyalty to the end. Trusting Red to keep him safe. Always Red.

Trusting, and loving, and it's a mess.

Ash feels whole. Maybe not hale, or safe, but he's *whole*.

And Ash -- Ash is okay. He's okay with it all; feeling like this. Ash is human and he's weak, of skin that bruises as easily as glass shatters, of energy and static that can decay, of a core that bursts impossibly bright, ravaged by love, and he's allowed Red to settle in with him. Right under his skin. Right where he belongs. He wants to kiss Red. He wants to live inside of Red. He wants his hand around his throat and *his* hand around *his* throat.

Red is something that eclipses all of his feelings. The stars are vast and impossible. mortality is a fleeting feeling -- this lifetime --- a glimpse -- but he is here. He is here. Vast and impossible in of himself.

Ash is tired. He's sure they'll talk more about it soon but for now -- for now this is what contentment feels like. He's certain.

There's no sun in the sky. Just coldness. It feels okay with Red here. it has to be.

"You wanna get up soon?" Red asks.

"I don't know man, I wanna lay here. Rest for a bit." Ash sighs. He doesn't want to move for a long, long time. He doesn't want to leave.

"Okay." Red accepts, an undeniable love in his tone.

Ash settles back down, pale grass under his back, rough and coarse, but it feels good like this. It feels good to be alive, with every breath he takes, with every blink of his eyelids where the world is plunged into black and back into the coruscating present. Red is right next to him, a constant presence. He is there. He wants him to always be there. He doesn't want to leave Red.

"Stay here. With me." Ash asks, in his way of asking.

"Of course." Red answers.

Ash misses the sun. Ash doesn't miss what he once was, the mesh of egotistical divinity and hardwired machinery. Ash is a human, a thing of flesh and blood and love, and that's -- that's okay, as long as Red is with him.

Chapter End Notes

so. the end :] it is a little nervewracking posting this HELP. thank you ashswag zombie apocalypse video for existing. hopefully you enjoyed reading this as much as i did writing it i <3 the apocalypse

thank you for sticking around and reading to well. the end. huge thank you to all my commenters oh my god i adore you guys everyone who i have exchanged prose and thoughts with in the comments and even if it was a small comment thank you so so much <33 and the people who have drawn fanart for this fic hooly shit <3333 also shout out to that one quote account for posting from this fic. i sent it to my beta (they also thought it was awesome). and to simply the people who have read this thank you for reading and getting to the end !!! love you all thank you once again !!!!

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