

nightmares (and a god is waiting in the next room)

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nightmares (and a god is waiting in the next room)

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Summary

“do you know the paper that got him famous?”

red knows this one. “yeah- he designed the first prototype of a working reality anchor.”

“do you know the events that led up to the creation of that prototype?” and there it is. there is a serrated finality in ash’s voice now, which indicates that they’re either nearing the end of their conversation, natural or otherwise, or that there is going to be some sort of big reveal.

“tell me,” *i know you know*, red doesn’t say.

“my bones, my eye, my organs, were in that first prototype.”

or: ash has trauma. red has trauma. and unwilling as they are, they have to confront it sometime.

Notes

heavily inspired by w1ntermute's scp-4231 and the delicate art of sleeping through the night

a tw for a bit of squick (mention of a bathtub full of blood but not graphic)

also some notes:

- marshall carter and dark is an antagonist faction in the foundationverse, they do business deals but with anomalous shit and that sort of thing which i thought suited red's character
- MTF, task force and mobile task force are basically elite teams put together by the foundation, kind of like crack ops. they are specialised in the containment of their particular field of expertise.
- GOC is the global occult coalition, the anomalous branch of the UN
- weaponised theology, red's branch, is basically using religion and it's many rules and loopholes as a weapon against anomalous entities like "demons"
- humes/hume levels are a measurement of how "strong" or "concrete" reality is in a particular localised area of spacetime. how reality benders work is that they have higher hume levels than our reality which enables them to bend reality to their will
- if you are a fan of scp :D ; red is meant to fill in kondraki's character and ash alto clef's

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

he wakes to an empty bed, long cold and the space beside him left to rot. the curtains are drawn, and his head is spinning in a way that tells him this isn't a mere nightmare. he does not know what time it is, nor how long he'd been asleep. he daren't draw the curtains to check outside. his limbs are cold and heavy from sleep and the lack of a blanket.

red slowly runs a hand through his messy hair and sits up, mind still catching up to reality. his other arm reaches out and gropes clumsily at the nightstand, knocking his phone off by accident. cursing, he leans over awkwardly to retrieve it.

he notes ash's eyepatch is still there.

it is exceptionally rare; ie. never, that ash goes anywhere without it.

"ash?" he calls, and the way the air swallows his voice sends a chill down his spine.

unwillingly, he drags himself out of bed, throwing on a singlet top before poking his head out into the corridor.

he knows the hallway outside the bedroom of their shitty little apartment is a mere ten metres long, the bathroom on one end and the living room on the other. two doors between those, one to their shared office, the other to a storage closet.

his eyes tell him it's hundreds of metres or more, stretching off to infinity and everlasting darkness.

ash has told him what to do when this happens.

“don’t go into the infinite corridor, don’t drink water, don’t look outside, don’t try and find where the blankets are.” ash says, hands on hips, a small frown curving the edge of his mouth.

red knows they both have their fair share of trauma. both have episodes where reality explodes bright red and white in colour, where noise is a little bit too reminiscent of screams, when old scars are dripping with blood.

red is the kicking-screaming kind. not especially clean or neat to deal with, but he could be subdued with sufficient force and sedatives. and it clears up as soon as it comes, in relative terms. he won't be able to sleep that night. he'd take out his rifle and handguns to clean, or drink himself into a stupor if ash is especially jumpy that night. the next day at work he'd be dead on his feet and running on the adrenaline that came with the edge of hypervigilance. but it always passed quickly.

ash is something else entirely.

he won't tell red exactly why he's like this, or why he perpetually wears that eyepatch, but the nature of their line of work means red hears rumours, and in the ten years that he's known him and the four years they've been dating, he's slowly put together the bits and pieces he hears about ash. he's slowly gained knowledge of his partner's triggers from experience.

red knows that he doesn't like blankets when having an episode. that ash has claustrophobia. that the sight of snow makes him flinch. the way he winces when stepping on gravel, or even just from hearing the crunch of it.

these are from his first hand experiences. what he hears about ash secondhand, however...

his appearance is jarring, delicate scarred skin highlighted in the shitty bathroom light. his dark hair- cut short at the front, forming bangs highlighting his pretty face, sticks up at odd angles from lying on the cold porcelain of the bathtub.

the scars- long, jagged patches of pale pink, stark against his brown skin, trace their way across his torso and arms in a grotesquely childlike scribble. it's human nature to find patterns; red fights against this with every scrap of conviction he has. his subconscious has already connected the dots. with dawning horror, he shoves this realisation frantically back down into whatever subconscious train of thought it had welled up from.

the lines dance like summoning-runes down his chest and arms, disappearing down under the line of his waistband. twenty-four on the chest. four on the arms. a jagged mess across his hipbones.

“ash?” red’s voice is hesitant, and it barely leaves his lips before dissipating in the silent air again. ash cannot hear him.

“ash.” he says, again. it’s useless. he can barely speak, cannot move. he can only *watch* , and oh, how painful this is. to see his lover caught in a nightmare of his own making.

the water has already mostly drained out of the bathtub but red can see that ash’s clothes- shirtless, with sweatpants on- are soaked through. *he must be cold* .

his heart jumpstarts with fear and relief when ash turns his head, before red swears out loud.

“fuck me...” he breathes, staring at what ash’s eyepatch usually covers.

“the eyepatch stays on during sex,” ash says, out of the blue.

red blinks. he is fairly sure this is code for ‘the eyepatch never comes off and please don’t ask about it’, because ash is asexual and red doesn’t really like sex. “we don’t even have sex.” he deadpans, just in case.

ash snuffs a laugh. “true.” he reaches blindly for red’s hand, the two curled up together on their cheap mattress in their shitty apartment on that rainy april morning. at least they’d bought an actual bed recently, which was definitely an update from sleeping on a mattress on the floor.

from where red is, face half-pressed into the back of ash’s neck, arms wrapped around his partner, he can’t see much but ash’s fluffy brown hair and the strap holding his eyepatch in place.

now that ash has mentioned it, he’s desperately curious. but he won’t ask, because his curiosity is not worth whatever trauma ash is trying to bury. he knows first-hand how it bubbles just under the surface, magma under a thin layer of obsidian. and he’s gonna try his damndest to ensure he doesn’t poke at ash’s outward facade; isn’t this what he swore when he said ‘for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part’?

red's fingers, entwined in ash's grip. he traces the edge of the sterling-silver wedding band on ash's ring finger.

he feels ash squeeze his hand in return.

he wavers, at the sight of the corridor. he doesn't want to fuck around with reality bending and hume levels and whatever shit that gave don a nerd-boner. this isn't his department.

yet, he'd signed himself up for this, he'd known, even if he didn't want to acknowledge it, ever since their wedding day. hell, ever since he'd decided ash mattered to him more than most other people.

"what lame nerd shit are you working on now, don?" red claps his friend heartily on the shoulder, making the scientist wearing an astronaut helmet jump violently.

"jesus christ, you scared me," don mutters. red peers over his shoulder at his work; he can see a mess of equations, lots of arrows and circled bits, and quite a few scribbles of frustration on his notebook. his laptop is open to an email from zam, from RAISA. there is a half-finished, extremely passive-aggressive response. he knows don will most likely delete this and send something less likely to be flagged by LiFEnet, but red toys with the idea of sending it anyway. it's not like they haven't let don get away with worse before.

"sorry," red says, his smirk rendering any sincerity in that statement null and void. "so what are you working on?"

don lifts up the visor of his helmet to rub the bridge of his nose; red quietly wished that don had forgotten he had a helmet on and smacked his hand against the plexiglass when attempting to do that. "i'm working on answering stupid questions about hume levels and the basics of reality bending because the stupid fucking researchers in other departments can't wrap their heads around the fact that hume is not a particle! it is a system of MEASUREMENT! these fuckers all have PHDs and the intelligence of monkeys!" he looks slightly ashamed at his outburst, before going back to his laptop, presumably to continue berating zam.

"sooo... what are humes?" red asks innocently, but it's ruined with a shit-eating grin.

don scowls, not turning around. "why don't you ask your boyfriend? i'm sure he can answer better

than me.”

red isn't sure why ash would have any idea of don's work; after all, the staple of tools made to combat reality-altering anomalies was named after him- turned reality anchors. ash works in a whole other fucking department, in a mobile taskforce. if he didn't know better, he would call ash's work the opposite of don's; a soldier and a researcher, at least on paper, respectively.

the bathtub is full of blood, and ash is submerged up to his neck. when did this happen? oddly, there is none of the familiar iron tang that *should* have filled his nostrils, had him choking on it with the sheer volume present. there is only a little light fragrance red recognises as ash's favourite brand of air freshener.

he wants to step closer. surprisingly, ash allows him to.

ash's head is turned again. red tries to remember what exactly he'd seen underneath there, but his head is abruptly wiped blank, fog spilling across his memories like a smoke machine. the one eye he can see- the normal one, the soft brown and amber that held the universe in them, petrified dead wood that swallowed light like the supermassive blackhole at the centre of their galaxy, and commanded just as much fearsome power in his gaze. the ones that trace their way down red's body, the ones that crinkle at the corners in mirth.

the blood is steaming, red realises. ash's eyes are closed.

he tries to step forward, and finds himself on his knees, the cold soaking into his bones. he's kneeling right next to the tub. he can feel heat on his face.

there is still no metallic smell when there by all rights there should be, which disturbs him the most; there is only a slight scent of lavender.

“honey, i'm home!” red shouts.

“shut up, i'm cooking right now.” comes the yelled response from the kitchen. red smiles. how can he not, when it is his favourite person in the entire world he returns to?

red shrugs off his blazer and throws it haphazardly across the back of their sofa as he makes his way to the kitchen. ash is cooking, surprisingly well too, judging by the smell.

“i’m making curry right now,” ash says.

“well, i can see that,” red replies, hugging ash from behind and hooking his chin over ash’s shoulder. red sees him scowl, before a reluctant smile smooths over it. “i actually wanted to ask something, by the way.”

“yeah?” ash says, absently turning to retrieve a small bottle of paprika from the little basket that they both agreed to call a spice rack.

“i saw don’s work today-”

“don turnt?” ash interrupts sharply. red blinks in surprise; this is uncharacteristic of ash.

“yeah, why?”

red feels ash shift under his hug. he doesn’t know why, but he decides to back off.

“don’t worry. continue?”

“uh, so i asked about his work, and you know, he does the- he works with reality-altering scips. and he talked about humes, and stuff...” he trails off, waving his hand absently to emphasise his point. red’s specialty is weaponised theology and his former... first-hand experience with Marshall, Carter and Dark. he doesn’t have the sort of brain to wrap around layers of reality and pataphysics and that sort of shit.

ash tilts his head.

“and he said to ask you about it, or something.” red finishes.

ash hesitates, long enough that red is opening his mouth to ask again, before he responds.

“we’ve been engaged for ten months now, haven’t we?”

*red doesn't know where this is going, and he feels distinctly as though he's being led into a trap.
"yeah, we have..?"*

ash turns off the stove and turns to him. "go sit on the sofa."

well, he's not going to disobey his fiance's direct orders. call him a simp, but that's happily his title now.

ash takes off his apron and washes his hands, before also heading over.

he takes a deep breath.

"red, have you ever heard of type greens?"

the room's reality changes abruptly, like a radio tuning stations, a knob turning for exactly one *click* , and he sees it right before his eyes.

this is ash's domain. the entire world is his oyster, and it's oh-so apparent now; a careful display of power. controlled as the dancing breath of frost and morning dew, coating the world in silence.

the cold tiles are sank back into place, under his knees, the sink, the tub. the dead spider and dust bunnies replaced behind the toilet, marble streaks blooming across the countertop again. *he's repairing things* . and red has never seen a type green repair things before, never seen them reverse the damage they caused. the hallway rushes from the darkness back to firmly outside the bathroom door. the world accordions back into place and it's him, and ash, in the bathroom, and the only thing left broken is *ash* .

his hands are gripping the side of the tub. the bath plug is on the floor, between his knees; red has a vague impression he's the reason it's there. there is also a tangle of dark matted hair- ash's, because red's hair doesn't get anywhere near that long- alongside gunk which is suspiciously dark red in colouration. he wrinkles his nose in disgust.

"you should really remember to clean out your hair after washing," he says, automatically. there is something different now, but he disregards it,

"that's what you greet me with?" the voice is quiet, but there is a sweet velvet steel underneath there he recognises immediately, instinctively.

it takes a second for red's mind to catch up.

ah, that's what's different.

reality is still again.

red kisses him.

"vaguely," says red. "that's a GOC term, right?"

"it is." ash confirms. he hesitates, again. "you know them as reality-benders. wha- who don works with."

red's heard of them. who hasn't? humans with the innate ability to shape reality to their desire. and, as they were only human, after all, they would all inevitably fall prey to their darkest, deepest desires.

"so... what does this have anything to do with-" he gestures around him, again. his usual eloquence is embarrassingly absent. he is painfully aware of how much he needs it right now.

"you know how turnt reality anchors are made, right?" ash says, and there is an urgency in his tone that borders on hysteria.

"no," red says.

ash swallows. "they're made out of a reality bender's bones, liver, and third eye."

"third eye?" red frowns. "i thought they were just humans with higher hume levels than normal."

"they are," says ash. "third eye is a metaphor."

“oh,” red says, stupidly. he’s lost the flow of this conversation. he has no idea where it’s going, and this terrifies him.

“do you know the paper that got don famous?”

red knows this one. “yeah- he designed the first prototype of a working reality anchor.”

“do you know the events that led up to the creation of that prototype?” and there it is. there is a serrated finality in ash’s voice now, which indicates that they’re either nearing the end of their conversation, natural or otherwise, or that there is going to be some sort of big reveal.

“tell me,” i know you know, red doesn’t say.

“my bones, my eye, my organs, were in that first prototype.”

“are you okay?” red asks, at the same time ash does.

he’d never expected the extent of- of this entire ordeal.

sure, ash had warned him, but it’s nothing compared to experiencing it firsthand. the worst of ash’s PTSD so far had manifested in him drawing all the curtains shut, curling up in the corner of the room, removing the ceiling and all the blankets.

*but he’s always been there. always leaving a physical manifestation of himself in red’s reality as a token of assurance, that he’s always going to be there for him, *through sickness and health* .*

*red’s never had to witness his lover drowning in a bathtub of his own blood, he’s never had reality hold him still in an iron grip, never had the air snatch away his words, rendering him *useless* .*

“why wouldn’t i be?” red says.

“whenever i- whenever this happens, i’m always scared i’ll kill you or morph you into some horrific amalgamation of my worst nightmares.”

red pauses for a beat. he knows this too, but he’s more content than ash is to ignore it. their wedding rings are proof of this. “i trust you,” he replies, quietly.

ash laughs hollowly. “i don’t trust myself.”

“i’m a reality bender. don’t bother calling containment, because they know.” ash is bluffing, desperately bluffing and hoping the conman, red, king of snakes, doesn’t pick up on it. it’s half truth. they do know; but they are under the assumption his powers don’t manifest anymore. ash is a pessimist; it’s half lie.

“i would never,” red says. his voice is devoid of emotion and that unique lilt that lent a certain dimension to his voice, something ash never got tired of hearing. it’s absence presses a cold finger to ash’s beating heart.

it’s obviously a revelation for red. and he needs time to process this too, ash understands. still; it hurts, ripping off old bandages covering even older wounds, baring himself fully to red. he’s prepared himself for this possibility, but it still finds a nasty way to surprise him, a sucker punch of sour emotion.

he draws a breath. he stands, to leave, to move away from whatever uncomfortable realisations red is going through, about him, right now.

red catches his hand.

“i thought i told you to stay in the bedroom,” ash says, after red has helped him out of the bathtub and wrapped him in a towel. ash awkwardly shucks off his pants and throws them in a corner, and red catches a faint copper scent. red catches a glimpse of more scars across his legs, white lines, and pelvis, messy gashes, and hips. summoning runes.

“you never told me that,” red says, frowning. he’s coaxing the rusted heater in the corner to life. ash shivers a little, and moves to shut the bathroom door.

“yeah, i did. wait- no. i implied it.”

red finally wins his struggle with the heater.

“wait, you meant it by ‘don’t go into the corridor’, right?”

ash makes a noise of affirmation, perching delicately on the edge of the bath. he pointedly does not look behind him.

“well- how was i supposed to know that?” red grumbles light-heartedly. ash raises his eyebrows, but red’s back is turned as he picks up ash’s sweatpants to throw into the washing machine later.

“you work in weaponised theology, red. you make your living out of figuring out implications and loopholes.” ash replies drily.

“shut up,” red says. he turns to look at ash, crossing his arms and leaning on the side of the washing machine. ash recognises this pose from red’s time in marshall, carter and dark; his negotiation, casual i’ve-got-all-the-cards-here pose. ash remembers this from red’s foundation file. he wonders if red remembers too.

his voice is serious, now. “are you okay to go back to sleep?”

“what time is it?” ash looks to his wrist on instinct, but he’s not wearing anything other than a pair of boxers and a towel.

red shrugs. “i didn’t check.”

“okay...” ash breathes out. “if you wanna go back to sleep, you can go. i’ll call the foundation to let them know we’re both not coming in tomorrow.”

“nah,” red says. “you go. i need to- i’ll join you soon.”

ash raises his eyebrows, but doesn’t question his husband. he throws the towel back onto the rack and heads back to their shared bedroom.

“have you read my foundation file?” red says.

ash sits back down at red’s insistent tug on his hand. “i don’t have clearance. i’m just a task force guy, remember?”

red shrugs, his gaze fixed on a distant point not within the bounds of these walls.

“i suppose it’s time for my big reveal, too. i work for marshall, carter and dark. at least, i used to. nowadays they’re happy to give me my former- ceo? something like that- benefits cheque every three months and call it a day. the last big thing i did for them was delay clown’s takeover of their casino in the fourth circle.

“i- i suppose my secret is worse in a way; they’ll kill me and then revive me to kill me again if they find out i compromised a foundation operation for mickey d’s. so there we are; both secrets in the light. isn’t this the opposite of ‘our’ motto, now? live in the dark, so the world can live in the light?” red spreads his hands in a gesture ash sees when he makes speeches, injecting raw charisma into his words, swaying an audience like he’s bending the tides.

ash blinks, slightly dazed. the chokehold red has on his attention is broken by the conclusion of his speech.

“red, do you wanna marry me?”

now it’s red’s turn to look startled. “what?”

“i was gonna ask you sometime soon-ish, but i definitely had to tell you about-” he gestures helplessly. “and- well. this lined up pretty well in the end.”

“don’t call containment on me,” red says, echoing ash’s earlier words, “and we have a deal.” he grins, holding his hand out for a handshake.

ash rolls his eyes. only his husband would treat getting married as a business deal.

still, he obliges, grasping red’s hand firmly and shaking it.

red practically squeals, flopping back onto the couch pillows. "i'm married now! to the best person ever!"

"cringe," ash says, but he's smiling too. "wait- i have a ring- hold on-" he yanks the drawer of the coffee table open, rummaging around before retrieving a nondescript band with a single ruby set in the top.

"aw, thank you, ash."

his smile lights up ash's whole field of view, and ash wonders belatedly how different this might have gone, still reeling from the whiplash of extreme anxiety and overwhelming happiness snapping through his heart like twin bullets.

ash is sound asleep already, curled up in a position reminiscent of a cat on top of the blankets. he never sleeps with blankets, for some reason. he also somehow manages to sleep with only a shirt and sweatpants on. despite this, he's never made any indication he's cold.

his eye is not covered. red does not look at it. his gaze is fixed firmly on the bedside drawer, than the path to the balcony door, ignoring the gaps in between reality.

red retrieves a packet of cigarettes from the drawer, taking care not to disturb ash. he slips underneath the curtains and slides open the balcony doors, his feet meeting the slight damp of early morning. the sun has barely risen.

he lights a cigarette and inhales the smoke ash has lectured him about on multiple occasions. staring at the grey horizon, he wants to go back into that bedroom and ask *what happened while i slept? why do you hurt so, ash? why were you hurt like so, enough to leave scars on every visible inch of your body and a nightmare where you are drowning, boiling to death in a bathtub of your own blood?*

did you destroy the world and put it back together underneath your shaking hands, while i slept?

how close were you to that point where your own task force would have to come kill you?

ash listens as red retrieves something from the bedroom drawer, but he doesn't turn to check; he is supposed to be asleep. he then hears the balcony door open, and thinks *lord red's really got to stop smoking* . but he doesn't get up because he's preoccupied by sweeping away his demons with the broom of sleep's oblivion, and because red kind of deserves this after the events of tonight.

and he lies there, halfway between alertness and oblivion, fever-dreaming of all the possible realities; he thinks of how close he might have come to killing red, and he's terrified, god is he terrified of the day he wakes to red's eyes glassy and dead with the cold accusation of betrayal.

and though he wants to go inside, red stays there, letting the morning dew settle on him as well, cigarette burning to his knuckles. he thinks about the god lying asleep in the room behind him. ash's scars' patterns, drawn by cold steel onto his skin, are burnt into his mind; and hume fields and kant counters, red's terrified. of him. for him.

End Notes

hope u enjoyed :)

btw i was trying for a coherent narrative here but it is my first time trying this sort of format pls lmk if it bad or it works , ty :D

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