

## all the roads led to you

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## all the roads led to you

by Anonymous

### Summary

His hair is still red, a bright flaming red that clashes horribly with the duller maroons of his pajamas. The skin he pulls at is pale, but his eyes are light brown now, with specks of gray in place of the blue-gray irises they used to be.

*Your eyes are pretty*, Ash had mumbled once in a moment of soft quiet, fingertips just barely brushing his cheek. Red pretends his heart doesn't twist at the memory.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

(the first chapter was posted as a oneshot, and can be read as a standalone)

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

Reddoons, before he fully remembers that he is Reddoons, is given another name and another identity; youngest child to a family of four, living in a quiet, boring neighborhood and notoriously known within his family for his materialistic tendencies.

“You came out of the womb digging your fingers into whatever scheme you could,” His mother would say, fondly exasperated in the way only a parent who had to deal with her children’s antics twenty-four-seven could be. Red, who was four and a half and quietly gathering that the second set of memories in his head isn’t all that *normal*, only smiles.

Reddoons, when he fully remembers that he *is* Reddoons, has already gotten his family to call him *Red* and finally learned enough to put into words the odd feeling in his chest – the distinct sensation of being out of place, out of time, alone even when surrounded by a group of people.

He is in the bathroom, one early morning where everyone is still safely tucked into their beds when all the puzzle pieces slowly click into place - his name, his aversion to maintaining direct eye contact, the ache in his bones for a different life. Red peers up at the mirror – only seven years of age, just tall enough to reach the sink properly – and pulls at his own face, twisting the skin this way and that.

His hair is still red, a bright flaming red that clashes horribly with the duller maroons of his pajamas. The skin he pulls at is pale, but his eyes are light brown now, with specks of gray in place of the blue-gray irises they used to be.

*Your eyes are pretty*, Ash had mumbled once in a moment of soft quiet, fingertips just barely brushing his cheek. Red pretends his heart doesn’t twist at the memory.

In the early light of the morning, Red slips out the door, fully dressed. When he comes back the house will only just be waking up, and the only thing to note will be the pair of shades slipped over his face.

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It takes around another seven years for him to find someone else.

A complete coincidence in the end, a could-have-been that *did* happen, a thousand different little choices that leads up to this: an arcade. Red, bored out of his mind and with enough money saved up to spend a few hours messing around with arcade games. It’s raining outside, the few brave souls willing to go out in the downpour retreating into shops and residences as the weather gets worse.

The lights in the arcade are bright, colorful neon leds illuminating the consoles. Red flicks his thumb and irritably scoffs when the spaceship on-screen explodes into tiny pixels, GAME OVER blaring out over the speakers in tinny quality.

“Well that’s not very cash money. You’ve gotta stay out of range when you reach the higher levels,” A quiet, almost amused voice pipes up from behind him. Red turns around, the glare on his face faltering as he takes in the other’s face. “The enemies have greater durability but you’ve got more space to maneuver.”

The stranger is shorter than Red, dark hair spilling past his shoulders and streaked through with color. He’s wearing a faded, patchwork jacket of jarring colors and carries himself with a kind of confidence that makes Red straighten up and watch – *look closely*.

But in the end, really, it’s his eyes that does it – a deep brown, with purple specks thrown into sharp relief under the neon lights.

“Ash,” Red breathes out, barely audible amidst the noise of the arcade machines. Dark eyes widened.

“Red?” The word hovers in the air for just a moment before they’re crashing into each other, Red’s arm winding around Ash’s waist and another curling up at the base of his neck, Ash wrapping both arms around Red’s back and holding on with a fierce stubbornness.

Red’s not sure which one of them is shaking, clinging to each other with desperation as they are; it could’ve been either Ash or himself and he wouldn’t be able to tell. He pulls back reluctantly – okay, so the shaking was just Red, Ash looking a little wild around the eyes but still keeping his shit together – and pulls at Ash’s arm. “C’mon,” he says, guiding them towards the stairwell, hidden around a corner. “We should- should probably move somewhere else.”

The stairwell is darker than the rest of the arcade room but it’s quieter, music and laughter muffled slightly. They stagger to a stop at the bottom of the staircase, still entwined around each other when they settle down on the steps. He’s still shaking, Red thinks. It’s difficult to tell, when everything clattering around in his brain is just *you’re here you’re here* and *thank the stars I didn’t lose you forever*.

Ash curls over him in the same way they used to do during sleepless nights – it’s more difficult now, with Red being taller and their limbs getting in the way of each other in the cramped space, but they make do. Red digs his fingernails into Ash’s jacket and *breathes*, akin to a man coming up for oxygen after too many years of struggling to take in air. His shades are bumping against his face uncomfortably. He doesn’t bother to move his arms to adjust them. Ash buries his face into Red’s hair and laughs, a half-strangled noise that Red echoes.

“You’re here,” Ash says out loud, almost like he can’t believe himself. Red could sympathize. He was still half certain he’d wake up and find himself alone again, with nothing but strange memories and an overwhelming sense of not being able to fit into place. “How did you-” Ash cuts himself off, skips through three different variations of a start of a sentence before giving up altogether.

“I’m here,” Red mutters into the warmth of the hold. “We can talk later, okay? Let’s just– stay like this for a minute.”

“Okay.” There’s a dull pressure on Red’s head. “Okay.”

For them, for just a moment of time, that stairwell may as well have been a sanctuary.

## Chapter End Notes

hello. this was supposed to be a 'haha im in a silly goofy mood' fic but i might write more for this maybe  
comments/kudos are appreciated and will go directly towards fueling my brain w serotonin  
-np13

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

theres literally not enough words i can use to say how much joy i was filled with at the response to the first chapter. so, thank you <333

i wanna preface this by saying this is still a 'haha funny goofy mood' fic, i have no idea what im doing lol. ~~if any of you are willing to beta-read (i mostly struggle with writing dialogue) pls dm me on [tumblr](#)~~ closed, thank you to the people who offered! THAT SAID if you guys have suggestions on where this could go/scene ideas/etc im open to adding them in somewhere! i think it would be fun ^^

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

There's a spot in the in-betweens of servers where everything collapses inwards into itself. You could call it a black hole. Or a void. Or something *Other*, something different in the way that it's not much of anything at all. A place where time ebbs and flows and players walk the fine line between reality and whatever else is beyond it. Most players called it limbo, the respawn realm; different words all used to describe the same thing. Red didn't like thinking about it much.

Ash calls it a hiding spot, because of course he does.

“And what, you just sit there?” Red had asked him once, before the sky had torn open and everything had gone to hell. Ash had shrugged – or momentarily lagged, it was difficult to tell sometimes – tapping his fingers restlessly on the table they were sitting around. There's a scrap of paper in front of him filled with squiggles that Red can't read. Don, from next to him, is squinting intensely at it as though it would make the squiggles any more legible.

“When the server doesn't recognise you're online half the time, you get used to it very quickly,” Ash nudges Don's arm away when he reaches for the paper with a quiet, *hey I'm working here*, then looks back up at Red. “Wouldn't you?”

“Sure, I suppose.”

The in-between is closer in some moments – when he's letting himself drop through air and a hole in the spawn area until he's immortalized – the last victor of a broken world and the knowledge that the world revolves, breaks, reforms around him. It's closer in the moonlit, empty nights where mobs make themselves scarce and it's just him, standing alone in the center of his base.

Closer, still, when looking into a puddle of water and the warped face within it.

The day the world ends, Red wonders whether the consequences for walking through the void had finally caught up to all of them. It's a quick process – all things must entropy and decay. Some things were just unavoidable.

Which is to say that it happens in a handful of minutes; the carcass of a dragon disappearing into white light, the End filling with song. Flames licks at his feet and disappear when the portal opens underneath his feet, stumbling to a landing in the overworld with the rest of the server inhabitants. Minutes, when Red looks back on it later, that felt like hours.

His ears pop at the change in pressures, the overworld already filling with noise and laughter and yelling as players spawn back in after the End fight – Clownpierce chasing after Vitalasy for whatever the latter had pulled this time, Subz looking over with an exasperated look that Red knows will disappear if he thinks Vitalasy is in actual trouble.

Edging away from the chaos, Parrot has his hands hovering carefully over the dragon egg. The shell gleams bright even in the rain. He's keeping an eye on Clown, clearly wary of a possible swing aiming at his way.

Red runs a hand through his hair and makes a face at the feeling of grease and rainwater mixing together. He picks himself up, careful to steer clear of the edge. The cliff they'd spawned on overlooks a channel of water that leads into the ocean, stretching out into the horizon in a shimmer of blue-green. Red doesn't stop to admire it, barely giving it a cursory glance before flicking his wrist. Half-formed images blur in the space above his wrist – an sword, cobwebs, cobblestone, *way* too much cobblestone, he seriously needed to get rid of that, potions – then a water bucket drops into his waiting palm.

Red breathes in sea-salt and peers over the cliffside. It wasn't that far of a drop, and he did want to get back to his base before nightfall. Maybe one of the others might let him stay the night if he was quiet enough and didn't take anything from the chests. One could hope.

Something stops him, makes him note of his surroundings; the smell of ozone and petrichor. No one else has left the area yet despite the downpour, still hyped up on leftover adrenaline. He catches Ash's eye through the rain and grins at the way he's carefully folding himself under Vortex's spread out wings. Under the pouring water, the texture of his limbs dissolves into off-color particles when exposed to it.

It doesn't look like it *hurts*, more that Ash is just irritated about having to pull his own skin back together, so Red has no qualms about waving at him in the most obnoxiously cheerful manner possible. Ash flips him off in response.

Well. That was probably his cue to leave. The bucket dangles, a few seconds stretch into half a minute and Red is one step away from leaping off when there's a squawk from Parrot–

*“Watch it!”*

–his communicator lights up–

*[Parrot was doomed to fall by Clownpierce]*

–and the air goes from pleasantly cool to *sweltering*.

It's as though he's standing in the center of an invisible wildfire, surrounded by heat-soaked air and humidity so thick Red can barely breathe. He stumbles backwards with the bucket haphazardly tossed back into his inventory, some distant part of his mind still tracking the half-audible exclams of surprise from behind him.

Through it all, the rain keeps falling. His eyes sting, his shades doing little to keep the water out of his eyes. The temperature spikes, the air hisses–

and the sky

splits

*open.*

For a moment, standing there at the cusp of a cliff, Red wonders if he has gone blind. Everything is black, black the color of coal and the void and the kind of dark that comes with cloudy nights and unlit caverns.

The world, inexplicably, hums.

His legs feel numb. The sky opens up in front of him, blue-gray giving way to endless black and distant, faintly visible pin-pricks of light and all Red can think is that he is about to be swallowed whole.

From behind him, someone screams something that could've been *what the fuck what the fuck* at full volume. He can barely hear it over the ringing in his ears.

“Reddoons-” Someone’s voice – Pangi, he thinks – pitches up above the rest of the yelling and the hum of the sky. “Red, get *back* here!”

A hand clasped around his wrist, tugging him backwards even before he could comprehend the sentence. Mud slips around his shoes. It’s Ash’s face that greets him when Red manages to drag his eyes away from the sky – half his skin is dissolving, reappearing in short bursts. The same panic that Red’s feeling is reflected in Ash’s purple-gold iris.

It’s the last thing he sees before the humming reaches an overwhelming crescendo and the ground crumbles, giving way right under their feet.

The world fades into red, gray and black.

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The world begins on a rainy day in the middle of April, in an arcade stairwell in the middle of nowhere. If Red closes his eyes and focuses, the too-rapid *thump* of Ash’s heartbeat almost drowns out the rest of the hum of music and yelling from beyond their little bubble.

They would have to get up eventually. Red wasn’t sure how long they’d been in here already, but someone was bound to find them at some point.

As though summoned by the thought alone, an employee steps around the corner, visibly startling when they catch sight of them. Red glances at them out of the corner of his eye. Not his problem. If anyone asked, the stairwell was a public space.

...Though, it probably *was* a problem if they were blocking the staircase.

“Are you two alright?” They ask, almost flustered. Ash makes a low noise at the back of his throat.

“Just peachy,” Red snarks, “We’ll move out of your way.” He pulls himself away from Ash – ignore the way it feels like a loss, ignore how it makes anxiety bloom in his chest – and the two of them are pulling each other up and out of the stairwell before the employee can form their next, probably well-meaning question.

The rush of sound and color comes back all at once. Outside, it's still raining. Barely anything was visible through the droplets on the windows.

"We could make a break for it," Ash suggests, leaning closer to be heard over the noise. "There's a store across the street, we could hide in there."

*Hiding spots*, Red remembers, ignoring the chill in the air, and says out loud: "Alright. Count of three?"

They slip out the door, huddling under the awning. He moves to cover Ash with Red's own jacket without thinking, acting on second-hand memories. It takes both of them a moment to remember that it wasn't necessary anymore, Ash snickering as he hands back the jacket. "I'm good."

Red flushes, coughs into his wrist. "Ah. Well— *three*."

Then he breaks into a sprint across the road, water splashing under his shoes and Ash half-laughing, half-yelling from behind him. He swerves around an approaching car, barely noticing the angry honk he gets for that.

When he stumbles into the store, Ash right on his heels, they're both mostly drenched. The older teenager behind the counter looks up at the sound of the door and gives them a dry look. She points flatly at the corner where umbrellas were hung up on a stand. "At least hang up your jackets – I ain't dealing with the mess you're making."

"Sure, sure," and it's only after they escape into the aisles, away from the sharp gaze of the cashier, that it hits Red all at once: this is *actually happening*. He wasn't *alone*.

And if Ash was here, then maybe—

He stops in the middle of the aisle, right in front of the rows of cereal. There's a surprising variety, for something that tastes mostly the same. "Did you ever meet any of the others?"

Ash looks back, gaze wandering from Red to the cereals and then back again. "No," he begins, dragging out the word, "I didn't think- I thought I might've been the only one," he says, shivering slightly. The air conditioner's running, even though it's the wet season and there was no real point of it. The droplets still clinging to their clothes probably made it worse – but Red couldn't feel any of it. "It felt like I was going crazy for a bit, but what else is new?"

"Right," Red says slowly, like he's thousands of miles away from this grocery store and its boxes of cereal and Ash, standing right in front of him. How close had he been, all this time? Could they have just walked down the street – walked right past each other without even knowing?

Could Ash have walked right past him today, neither of them knowing?

There's a hand hovering over his face. "Dude. You alright?"

"...I think I might be having a panic attack," Red admits quietly. It sounds too loud in the brightly lit aisles. There's no one else around.

"Stop doing that then. It's bad for your health." Ash says, a million years away and right *here*, taking his wrist carefully and rubbing slow circles on his palm with a care that contradicts his words.

He has to tilt his head up slightly to meet Red's eyes, and it's an odd detail to be fixated on but despite himself Red laughs, barely a puff of air. "You're- You're shorter than I am now."

“I’ll leave you right here in this grocery store, don’t think I fucking won’t.”

“You wouldn’t.” And Ash doesn’t, even though he threatens to steal Red’s bones and *don’t stand next to me until I’m taller than you again, I’ll kick you* . He waits right there with Red until he’s more or less settled back under his own skin. Neither of them mention it afterwards, still holding each other's hands loosely as they continue through the store.

They end up buying two different boxes of cereal – “It’s all the *same*, Ash,” “Your taste buds are as horrible as ever I see,” – and a packet of gum that tastes overwhelming like mint. The cashier squints at them when they stand next to the umbrella stand to open one of the cereal boxes.

“No messes, we know,” Red grins at her. She gives him a dry look but doesn’t say anything, turning back to her book.

“So,” Ash begins, nudging Red when he almost drops the entire box, contents and all, “is *now* a good time to ask where you’ve been?”

## Chapter End Notes

they gotta have some. some feelings first.

the death message format is an [unused one](#) in the game files

this part was already half written (and i wouldnt be available to update this later)

which is why its out so early! updates from here would be less frequent

once again comments/kudos will be gladly absorbed as serotonin ^-^

-np13

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Notes

**light gore warning** towards the end of the first part of this chapter. starts around 'In hindsight, it's a rookie mistake.' if anyone wants a summary just lmk

thank you to [stilllifewithsaxifrage](#) and [your-secondborn-child](#) for beta-reading!! go check out their writing/art ^-^

(also slight correction for the first chapter: ash and red are supposed to be around 14/15 yrs of age in the 'modern' sections, so it's a ~7 yr timeskip instead of 5. ty to thorn for catching that!)

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

When Ash wakes up, there's dust in his mouth and someone aggressively shaking his shoulder.

“Ash. *Ash* . Wake up.”

“Shut up,” he manages to hiss out, groaning slightly when half his arm clips through the dirt and then refuses to budge. Sunlight burns directly into his eyes when he tries to pry them open. Why the hell was it so bright?

...And wasn't it raining?

He lurches up abruptly, immediately regretting it upon realizing two things; one: Red was way too close to his face, and two: he could *not* feel his legs.

Red yelps, jerking away when their foreheads collide. Ash doesn't even bother staying upright – he falls flat on his back again, squinting at the influx of light. A part of him rankles at letting Red out of his sight, all too aware that the other could put a sword through his chest easily and gain another heart. The rest of him is too dizzy to care.

The sky is still a gaping, pulsing wound above them. So that hadn't been a dream at least. “What.”

Red's face appears back in his field of vision again. “I'm guessing you can see that too then.”

“Yes, Red, I can see the giant fucking hole in the sky.” Ash mumbles around the static in his throat, making another attempt at pulling his arm out of the dirt. No luck. Maybe he was doomed to be stuck here forever. “Where are the others?”

Silence. It hits Ash abruptly, that outside of hearing Red and his own voice speaking, there hadn't been any other sound. Even the grass, the dirt shifting under his limbs and the rushing stream of water next to them seems muted, almost.

The entire world holding its breath, waiting on the cusp of – something.

“Red,” he repeats, quieter, if only to break the silence.

“..Still up there, I think,” Red tilts his head up to the cliff. It was sheer luck they'd landed close

enough to the river to not take fall damage – any further and both of them would be down a heart. “But- I can’t hear anyone. Didn’t get a response when I yelled either.”

Ash twists his head towards the cliffside, then back again towards Red. He sighs. “You could just leave me here to decompose.”

“Sure I could.” Red says lightly, like the thought didn’t bother him at all. But Red doesn’t complain when Ash waves a hand at him to pull him out of the dirt, so he’ll take that as a win.

Scaling the cliffside takes longer than it should’ve. Gravity pulls down at them and the towering structures they build up, heavier than either of them were used to. Red curses when he has to adjust his grip for the nth time, and Ash has done the same thing enough times that he can’t even say anything about it.

It could’ve been the strip of void in the sky, weighing down their limbs and rattling their teeth. Or the air itself, hostile in a way Ash couldn’t remember it being. Lifesteal, for all its death and traps, had a sense of camaraderie running through it. For all they knew they weren’t even in the same world anymore.

The first thing they find is the bodies.

Roshambo, eyes half shut and glassy. Mapicc is right across from him, arms stretched out as if they’d been reaching for each other. Vitalasy and Clown further away from them, Vortex and Pangi even closer to the edge of the cliff. Each and every one of them accounted for, clustered together like a macabre constellation.

Everyone, except Parrot.

They all look peaceful, which is the worst part. Like they’d just fallen asleep – and forgotten to wake up. Red checks for a pulse in each one of them anyway, when shaking them yields no results and Ash points out jokingly, maybe they were dead.

*That* comment turns sour in his mouth almost immediately.

“This doesn’t make sense,” What little Ash can see of Red’s face is confused, fear leaking through the cracks. He has a thumb pressed to Don’s pulse point. Ash circles the perimeter instead, too distressed to keep his glitching under control enough to check for heartbeats. “Most of us had at least- what, twelve hearts? Branzly was knocked down to ten, maybe, but-” He cuts himself off with a wordless snarl, hand tightening around Don’s wrist before dropping it altogether.

Ash stops pacing back and forth, careful to stay away from the peak of the cliff. Or rather, where the peak *used* to be. The ground below then near the water stream is littered with chunks of broken dirt and stone. Further beyond that, nearly outside of his render distance; a circle of burnt grass. There’s nothing else within the circle – no birds, no animals, nothing but them and their friends’ bodies.

And, he thinks, uncomfortably aware of the air pressing down around him, the only difference between them and the rest of the Lifesteal members was that he and Red had been apart from the group, right at the very edge when the cliff had shaken, broken apart.

He pulls out his communicator with numb fingers. It takes a few seconds for the screen to light up, but it does thankfully. He clicks through to the status tab, names highlighted in green:

*ashswagg*

*Reddoons*

He closes the tab, opens it again. And again. And again.

And again.

“They’re all offline,” Ash says, the words breaking at the end into garbled static. He doesn’t need to tell Red that there’s something wrong here, that bodies weren’t supposed to be left *behind* like this; they’re both already thinking it.

He startles when something lands on his face, flaky and light. He wipes a palm over his forehead and stares, dumbfounded at the ash left behind on his hand. It’s less soft than what he expects it to be, coarse and almost sand-like in texture. It smells like burning. It smells like the tear in the sky.

Ash looks up. Red stares back at him. He’s still standing over their friends, shades cracked slightly, dust and grass stains on his suit and ashes slowly falling into his hair.

Red clears his throat. “We should probably go.”

“Yeah,” and when he turns to make the trek back down it feels like equal parts relief and guilt. “No point in sticking around.”

They don’t bury their friends. Easier to pretend they’re just asleep that way.

The temperature cools down from a burning heat to something more comfortable the further they get away from the cliff and towards the ring of burnt grass. Part of it is probably because the sunlight has started to fade, rapidly giving way to the night. When Red tries to pull up their coords only random strings of zeros and ones flicker into view, entity counts appearing and disappearing in irregular patterns.

“Okay, this isn’t working,” Ash says, putting away his own comm to scan the area. There aren’t any structures within sight – none of the player-built walls and buildings, nothing that indicated they’d been here before. Past the circle line, the grass is dry and crunches under their feet. “It’s almost night- we need to build a shelter now before we end up having to stay awake to fight off zombies.” Ash holds out an arm, flicking through his inventory. “What have we got?”

“Oh man, you will not *believe* how much cobblestone I have.”

It takes some squabbling, but by the time shadows fall entirely over the land, they manage to put together a rudimentary shelter; torches lighting up the cobblestone walls and dried grass clumped together in an effort to make the floor more comfortable. Red busies himself with sorting out his enderchest while Ash attempts to slot slabs into place as a make-shift awning. It wouldn’t do much to keep them from breathing in ash, but at least it’d keep most of the particles off their clothing without having to stay indoors.

Later, he wouldn’t be able to tell Red what makes him turn around. It could’ve been the wind, the sound of shuffling in a near-silent world.

Or the smell, faint but present even with the blocks of distance between them.

There's a distinct silhouette approaching from where they'd left behind the cliff; the outline of a hood, a flared out cloak. Loops and small bottles hanging from a belt. Pointed ears.

*Vitalasy.*

Ash's eye widens. He drops his tools, wood landing in the dirt with a soft *thud*. Without thinking twice about it, he calls out for Red and breaks into a jog, moving towards Vitalasy.

In hindsight, it's a rookie mistake.

The closer Ash gets, the more obvious it is that something is off about him. It's the smell that tips him off at first – the distinct scent of rot. He's limping forward slowly, the white of bone gleaming from where it's jutting out from the skin of his ankle.

(It was, after all, a long way down from the cliff.)

In the dim moonlight, Vitalasy's face is barely visible. What little Ash can see is rotting, discolored pieces of skin rapidly flaking off to show bits of grey-pink muscle and bone. There's something crawling, wriggling around in the exposed flesh of his arm, Vitalasy's fingers twitching around the hilt of a sword.

It all clicks into place nearly a second too late.

Ash slows to a stop, skidding on the wet grass – just as Vitalasy *lunges* forward, ankle dragging and spilling blood on the ground, sword aimed right for Ash's neck.

He yells, stumbles backwards, only years of dodging the various antics of the Lifesteal members keeping him from freezing up. His own sword falls into his palm out of habit, metal glinting in the moonlight.

Vitalasy's moving slower, erratically. His next strike is sloppy – Ash steps out of the way with only a slight fumble, the soles of his boots struggling to gain friction against the damp grass. Another clash, the screech of metal on metal–

There's a shout, and Ash reacts on instinct; throws himself to the ground and rolls out of the way just as an arrow whistles past where he'd been standing. It hits Vitalasy's neck with a wet noise, a distorted gurgle tearing out his mouth.

When Ash pulls himself back to his feet Red has already thrown himself into the fight, all shining diamond and quick, vicious blows. It's over in a matter of seconds – Vitalasy lacking his usual slippery grace and the broken leg slowing him down considerably. Red drives his foot into the side of Vitalasy's knee - soft flesh sinking inwards, knocking him flat onto the ground–

And in one smooth motion, puts his sword right through Vitalasy's chest.

For a moment there's only the sound of them panting, trying to catch their breath, and the awful, gurgling noises Vitalasy is still making. Red tugs his sword out of flesh, viscera leaking out of the wound and painting the grass in dark colors. He looks up, pauses.

“Uh, Ash?”

Ash blinks, shakes his head to get rid of the particles gathering in his hair. “What?”

“I think there might be more of them.”

He turns to follow Red's line of sight, breath catching in his throat at the line of figures approaching in the distance. Seven of them, maybe, and who knew how many others were lurking out of sight.

At their feet, Vitalasy makes another weak noise.

Ash keeps his eye on the horizon line and on Red, a tense figure of violence next to him. The sword he's picked back up is still covered in gore and somewhere in the midst of the snowstorm of thoughts looping around in Ash's head, he thinks that the image suits Red, somehow.

"We can't stay here," Ash rasps out, pulling at Red's sleeve. "Did you- where's your enderchest--"

"Here, I've got it, let's go," Red falls into step with him easily, turning to run in the direction of their would-be shelter.

Neither of them look back.

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It had been a running joke – quite literally – within some groups of players; pray for better rng, pray to the universe that you don't get rolled by the dragon perch, or the lack thereof. The void-runners – speedrunners, trailblazers, a number of names given to the players willingly diving into worlds to beat dragon after dragon – talk about it like talking to an old friend. The world, and every iteration of it, guiding them along with soft whispers.

The universe, Ash decides, must love watching them struggle as much as it loves to nudge them headlong into the discovery of cool, new, shiny things, or just straight bullshit.

The rain has slowed down into a light drizzle – it had taken the better part of two hours and half a box of cereal, but by the time they had left the store the sky was clear enough that people had started to roam the streets again. Water droplets linger on leaves and windshields, each containing a small explosion of color when the light hits it at the right angle.

Something about the city always seems quieter, after a bout of rain. The buildings washed out, tin roofs and drains shining, and a hush falling over everyone – maybe not kinder but *softer*. Like the world had been purified, sins washed away.

Red's neighborhood is much the same, the same rows of cramped buildings intermediately broken up by clumps of bushes and the occasional tree. It's a residential area. Ash isn't sure why he was expecting something more. Maybe it's the way Red has always felt larger than life, talking his way into and out of situations with a sharpened blade at his hip.

The house across from them is coated in cracked, pale blue paint. Potted plants sway gently on a window sill. There's a splash of color to the side – some kind of graffiti or painting, maybe, Ash couldn't see it from this angle – and the stairs are chipped in places, railings lightly covered in rust. It's an almost fifteen minute walk from the arcade. Ash could easily figure out how to get back to his own house from here.

This entire time – just several blocks and less than thirty minutes away from each other.

Ash laughs. He keeps laughing, even after his chest starts to hurt and sound turns to static, the

world blurring into a smear of lights. Red's saying something from next to him, he thinks, but he's too wrapped up in his own grief to listen – *years* of wondering, of scraping out every bit of himself up to the light to take it apart with surgical precision – *what is this, where did it go wrong, did this really happen or is he just going fucking crazy*–

And everything he could've ever wanted, all just an afternoon's walk away from him.

(How do you even grieve people, friends you aren't sure existed?)

When he comes down from the hysterics, Red is crouching in front of him, soft in a way that did nothing to hide how dangerous he could be. It's an odd thing, being aware of how capable someone was of slitting your throat and choosing to stay anyway. All their sharp edges, right on display – knowing the other wouldn't waver from their side. Ash is almost glad for it in that moment; if nothing else, he could trust Red to watch his back for him.

“Wow,” he wipes at his face, pretending he's trying to get rid of the raindrops instead, “okay, I'm normal now.”

Red makes a noise that could've been a laugh. The piercing in his ear glints when he tilts his head. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah I- I don't know. It's been a *day*. ”

“It's not even three, bro.”

“Exactly! Exactly. Hey, let's break into your house.”

“I have my key like, right here–”

“But this is going to be so much more fun Red, c'mon.” Ash says, tugging up Red with him.

Sure, they *could* just walk through the front door but has Ash ever dealt with his emotions in a way that was reasonable or rational? No. Of course not. Breaking into a house it was.

Red, despite his initial protest, goes along just as easily, scaling the wall in a way that suggested he'd tried this before. They almost fall off once, thrice – the third time was less because of the rain making them slip and more because of deliberate attempts at sabotaging each other – smothering their laughter as best as they could to avoid drawing the attention of any neighbors, and eventually crawling in through the only open window.

They land in a small hallway, right next to a staircase. Red motions for him to move, heading towards the door at the end of the hall.

Picture frames are placed on the walls, old and faded from exposure to the sun. Ash lingers next to a photograph of four figures; Red standing next to a girl taller than him, two people who were obviously their parents standing behind them. He's not wearing his shades in the picture, glancing off to the side instead.

They all look content, if not happy.

“That's Delilah. She's mad at me at the moment.”

“Huh,” Ash looks away from the photograph, moving towards where Red is waiting, “Why?”

“*Well*, she thinks I cheated while playing Uno.”

“Did you?”

Red laughs. “C’mon Ash, you can’t just ask a guy whether he cheated in Uno, of all things.”

“So you did.” Ash furrows his eyebrows. *“How?”*

“You’d be surprised at how easy it is. No one ever checks how many cards you’re drawing from the pile.” He swings open a door. “Here we are.”

It’s nothing like their old, temporary shelters patchworked together from whichever bare materials they could get; Red’s bedroom is spacious, mild, warm sunlight gathering in the folds and creases of the dark purple bed sheets and the carpeting on the floor. Creature comforts, Ash thinks, taking in the small box of piercings and books placed on the shelves, a collection of cardboard cutouts spilling over a desk. A singular sock is draped over the chair next to it.

If he hadn’t been looking for it, he wouldn’t have even noticed the small blade tucked nearly out of sight under the pillows.

Ash flops forward unceremoniously, feet barely inside of the room. Red shuts the door behind them and gently nudges Ash with his foot. He doesn’t budge.

“Alright, you can become one with the floor over there I guess. I’m just gonna—” There’s a shuffling noise as Red walks across the room, followed by a dull *thud* and paper rustling. Ash looks up blearily.

He’s holding a map, carefully unfurling it to place against the empty space above the desk.

“Red. Why do you have a map of the whole country?”

“It just– seemed funny at the time. Can you get the thumb tacks? It’s over in the–” he makes a meaningless gesture with his free arm, “–the top shelf over there? It *should* be somewhere in there.”

Ash rolls over onto his back, pausing to take in the glow in the dark stickers plastered on the ceiling. If it’s in any particular pattern, he doesn’t recognise it.

The thumb tacks are, in fact, not anywhere to be found in Red’s room, so instead they decide on using tape to stick the map to the wall. Ash settles back on his feet, tilting his head to the side. “You know, we should get a cork board. Like the detectives in movies.”

“That’d only work if we ever find the thumb tacks.” Red throws a marker at him, taking the cap off of his own with his teeth. “Okay, so here’s *us*,” he mumbles around the cap, drawing a circle around the residential area Red lives in, another around the arcade. The final one he motions at Ash to fill in – a circle around Ash’s house.

Altogether, it’s not a *small* area. This city was already relatively small enough to begin with; between the two of them, the circles covered roughly a quarter of the city limits. Red takes the cap out of his mouth. “...There *is* always the chance that no one else is back in the same area or the same country. Or whether they remember anything at all.”

Ash hums. “No, no we have to assume the opposite.”

“Why?” Red looks back at him, spinning the marker between his fingers.

“Because otherwise we’d have already lost.”

## Chapter End Notes

me spinning around in my chair at 2am: hey so what if the reason why the zombies in the apocalypse video can place/destroy blocks is bc they used to be players. wouldnt that be fun

trying to write this one was kind of like pulling teeth. i hope you all enjoyed tho !!  
comments/kudos are tucked away gently inside my ribcage  
-np13

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

hey guys

so this chapter was supposed to be written and posted like two weeks ago but then i got a head injury, struggled to focus on screens for a bit + lost my entire outline & all the prewritten snippets which basically killed my motivation for this fic so uhm. anyway ^-^ i didnt get to fully explore the concepts that i wanted to (them meeting up w some of the lifesteal members, in particular) but i didnt want to just leave this abandoned forever either so here is. something! not beta-read bc i wrote this in a haze in 2 days and needed it to be posted b4 i lost my entire mind

pov switches are indicated by \*\*\*. please mind the updated tags  
shoutout to ao3 user alternal for being v supportive about all this <3

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

Ash slams open the door to their shelter. “I’ve just found something *incredible*.”

“Dude, you’re letting in so much ash right now.”

“There’s only one of me unfortunately,” He snickers, tugging off the piece of fabric looped around his neck and covering half his face. Ash closes the door behind him and settles down on the floor next to Red as he faux-groans. He peers over Red’s shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“Fixing my glasses. It’s,” – the frame slips from his grasp, pliers twisting sideways – “going well. As you can see.”

Ash hums. He makes a wiggling gesture with his hand, and Red passes the frame to him with a bemused glance.

The glasses had been cracked after the fall, Ash remembers, just enough that it was noticeable but still mostly intact. Over the months it had gotten worse, the hair-line cracks spreading and the frames slowly becoming battered from too many collisions. They’d had more important things to do – navigating the terrain, looting buildings for their ever-dwindling food supply – to focus on repairing their belongings outside of hasty stitches.

The frame in his hand is crooked, metal bent out of shape and rendering the shades unwearable. They couldn’t do much about the glass itself unless they found an area with sand soon, but the frames – those could be salvageable.

“Didn’t we find something in that building a while back? Just take the goggles, man.”

“No listen, it’s about the *branding*, okay, I can’t just – you know, I can fix those myself.”

“Sure, that’s *exactly* what you were doing,” Ash scoffs, “Hand me the pliers.”

Red sighs, but he passes them over willingly enough. “What did you find?”

“Huh? Oh, there’s a water source nearby. It’s *tiny* but, better than nothing.”

“That’s great,” he can hear the smile in Red’s voice, “think we could start a farm with that?”

“You’re assuming we’d be able to stay in one spot long enough for anything to grow.”

“Fair enough,” and the conversation dies off as Red moves to clear up the pile of armor in the corner.

Red cleans like he’s committed a murder, which wasn’t that far from the truth. He wipes down his weapons and armor methodically, pressing cloth into the gaps and edges with a kind of efficiency that only comes with years of practice. Soon enough, the rag he’s using is covered in flakes of ash and dried blood.

Bloodstains were familiar, easy enough to deal with given time and persistence. It’s the ashes falling from the sky that’s more of a hindrance, smearing under their fingers and scattering into miniscule pieces when they try to dust it off. They have to wear layers when they aren’t under the relative safety of their shelters, to keep from inhaling the particles and potentially damaging their lungs.

Ash stops paying attention to Red’s efforts at cleaning at some point, losing himself to the minute, precise adjustments of the metal in his hands. It’s quiet in a way they’d both grown used to, the way even breathing seems like an insult to the muffled hum of their surroundings. He barely notices when Red finishes his work.

He jerks away slightly, startled when Red leans in and tugs at a strand of hair that’s falling out of his braid. “Relax,” Red laughs softly, close enough that Ash can feel the slight rush of air against his neck. He taps the side of Ash’s head, prompting him to turn his face away.

Ash’s hands go still where they’re curled over the glasses. “What are you doing.”

“Your hair is a mess.” There’s a heartbeat of silence, and then, “Do you want me to cut it for you?”

It would probably be easier, more efficient but a part of Ash rankles at the thought of losing the familiarity. He shakes his head and Red makes a noise of acknowledgement, not questioning it. His hands undo the braid in quick, easy motions. Ash shudders slightly when Red begins to run his fingers through his hair, carefully pulling apart the tangles.

He breathes in, out, deliberately shoving down all the alarm bells ringing in his head. It was fine. It was *fine* – if Ash could deal with sleeping under the same roof as Red, he could deal with having the other at his back and putting his hands too gently, too close to Ash’s neck.

And it was nice, soothing in a way, to be cared for. He shoves that thought down even more firmly.

There’s a fuzzy, tingly feeling crawling over his skull. Ash closes his eye and lets himself enjoy the moment.

They find out the hard way that the heart sharing mechanic doesn’t work anymore. They’d half-stumbled, half-dragged each other away from a fight with some of the humans inhabiting this world that they admittedly hadn’t seen coming, dangerously low on health and Red’s counter hovering at a measly six hearts.

Ash hesitates for a split-second before trying to pull up the command to transfer hearts – his own resting at eight – only to hit a wall when he does so. Red looks up at him, composure shaken. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t give you a heart,” he barely hears himself speak, vision out of focus. “I’m trying but—” another error stings at the knuckles of his fingers, “I *can’t*. I can’t.”

Red’s pupils have shrunk to thin pinpricks when Ash turns to look at him. He doesn’t meet Ash’s gaze, which is normal for him but this time, something about it makes Ash think that Red isn’t all present at the moment. He swallows the fear and nausea clinging to the back of his throat and nudges Red’s arm carefully. “Put down your enderchest, we should still have those health pots left.”

The thing about healing potions is that there’s a delicate balance – too little and your wound doesn’t heal all the way; too much and it can cause adverse side effects.

Moving sluggishly, they soak strips of bandages with the potions, the off-white color turning into a dark pink. Red hisses when Ash wraps the bandages firmly around his leg, a splint in place to keep him from jostling it. The air close to it curls, turning into a shimmer of pale pink spirals.

Ash sits back on his heels, blinks back the dark spots in his vision. Red hands him what’s left of the potion bottle and stares at him flatly until he drinks it.

It’s actually kind of unfair how effective his glares are, even from behind a pair of mostly broken glasses.

“Can you move?” Ash asks, placing the cork back into the bottle.

Red grimaces. “Not very far.” He pauses. “You could leave me here.”

“Absolutely not, you moron,” Ash reaches out, pulling Red up and onto his feet slowly. Red slings an arm over his shoulder.

Walking is a slow, tedious process. They hover in the area close to the pond for as long as they can, using that to clean the bandages before soaking it in potion and replacing it again. Ash keeps an eye on their leftover potions, rationing them as much as he’s able.

Half a week passes. The wound on Red’s leg doesn’t close all the way. It’s not the best decision he’s made, but when they change the bandages again for the night, Ash pours more than either of them normally would. Red watches him and doesn’t say anything, probably all too aware of the possibility of an infection looming over their heads.

When Ash wakes up the next morning, he finds Red a whole chunk away and trying to climb the wall of a human dwelling. *Side effects*, he remembers, and thinks of the way Red is laughing at nothing and the impulsiveness. He groans.

“I may have fucked up,” he says to no one in particular, keeping an eye on Red to make sure he doesn’t hurt himself too much. The maniac has slipped twice already, still holding onto the side of the building with a single-minded determination that would be admirable in any other context. From above, Ash can see one of the humans peering over the edge with what appears to be confusion.

Ash could sympathize. He’d woken up in a panic only to find that Red was fine, just heavily drugged and prone to stupid decisions.

Red spots him, waves, and Ash stumbles forward, arms outstretched before Red catches himself just ten blocks away from the ground. He grins down at Ash. The glasses on his face are lopsided from the near-fall.

Ash gives him an unimpressed look. “*Please* bring yourself down before you lose another heart.”

“I can climb a wall. I’ve climbed many walls.”

“Well you’re not going to, like this. Get down here before I kill you myself and save us the trouble.”

He manages to coax (or threaten, which is nearly the same thing) Red into resting back inside their newest shelter, a part of him still carefully keeping track of their surroundings and how much time they might have before they’d have to move again. Enough time, he thinks, watching Red settle into the bed with a pained noise.

Ash pulls out his comm and gets halfway through a sentence – *guys i just watched red try to scale a wall while high out of his MIND* – before the rest of his brain wakes up to give him a shake.

2/27 players online. There would be no response.

He hesitates, thinks, *fuck it* and sends the message anyway, and soon his communicator starts filling up like that: ‘*we found a cave with iron today*’; ‘*theyre learning to track us down faster*’; ‘*is it unethical to eat the rotten flesh of your friends because youve run out of food*’; and so on. Red sees them, he knows, but he doesn’t say anything about it.

His communicator pings with notifications from Red sometimes. Coordinates and small anecdotes that they both already know, like he’s leaving them behind for someone else to see.

(Red’s leg doesn’t heal properly. He stumbles more often, the muscle cramping up during the night. They have to take rest stops more often – but he can walk, and in the end that’s really the best they can ask for.)

Ash isn’t sure when exactly he decides that following Red to the ends of the world is something he’s willing to do, to throw himself into – but when he *realizes* it, it’s a cold morning, his shift coming to an end.

It’s an unconscious habit, is the thing – something that neither of them talk about because there isn’t, really, anything to talk about. Red turns, reaches over to curl a hand around Ash’s wrist and presses two fingers into the joint, directly over the pulse point.

In the dim light streaming from the hole in the roof – another thing to be patched over, his mind idly notes – Red’s eyes are barely open, dark circles under his eyes because they’ve spent more nights running than sleeping. The blue-gray of his irises are filled with something warm and soft.

If it had been anyone else to look at Ash like this, he’d break their fingers.

It’s something Red has done a thousand times before. Still, something about the action makes emotion swell in his throat. Ash almost chokes on the next inhale. Red makes a questioning noise at that, barely audible even in the quiet. His fingers squeeze lightly around Ash’s wrist.

“It’s fine,” Ash manages to say, unsettlingly aware of his own pulse, “go back to sleep.”

Red, barely conscious and oblivious to the world, does exactly that.

From outside the wind rattles in a way that Ash would be inclined to call soothing, if he wasn’t already convinced that the world was trying to kill them. He leans back, lets his head hit the wall with a light thud and breathes out softly, “Fuck.”

What a terrible thing, caring for someone. Red stays asleep, and the world outside keeps humming a slow funeral march.

\*\*\*

Eventually the sky stops being a sky.

The atmosphere thickens, syrupy thick and heavier to move through. His limbs are obsidian-heavy and through it all the cracks in the sky continue to spread, spread—until one day they wake up and the sky—*not* a sky—the world is shrouded in void and endless black.

They work around it, because that’s what they do best. They make more torches and spend even less hours sleeping, time blurring into a thick haze.

Red isn’t sure if it’s just from being around each other all day every day or it’s the weight of the dark pressing on them – they argue more, pressing at buttons they’d long since learned not to poke at. Some days Ash is so agitated there’s electricity humming, dancing in lightning arcs over his skin. Red can’t get close enough to touch him without burning his own skin.

He tries anyway. Restlessness and anxiety turns to impulsiveness, leaves electric burns on his fingertips and colder silences when his mouth runs ahead of him. Ash doesn’t apologize, but when Red has to take breaks because of the spasms, he doesn’t complain either.

(Red tells him he’s pretty once, in the kind of incomprehensible, out-of-reach way a star burning through space would be. Ash bites him before he can even finish the sentence, threatens to stab him, and then actually *does* stab him when Red attempts to finish his sentence anyway.)

All of which, at any point, is basically what Red expects from any interaction with Ash.

It’s also a horrible waste of bandages, which is really the only reason why he doesn’t attempt it again.)

“What’s the point of all this?” Red asks once, leaning against a pile of stone. The words are muffled under his scarf. He’s about to repeat himself, thinking Ash hasn’t heard him, then—

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he glances around, trying to decide whether the shapes in the dark are actual shadows or his eyes playing tricks on him again, “why do we keep bothering with this? There’s nothing here. There’s— this place isn’t alive. The others aren’t alive— well, they kind of are, but not in a way that matters. There’s no one left here for us.” He glances down at Ash, who’s sat on the dirt and slowly gathering sticks together.

It's weak of him maybe, silly to want such an impossible thing but he wishes they had *known* their time on the cliff would be the last time they'd all gather together, the last time he'd hear the rest of the Lifesteal members laugh, the last time he'd be able to lean against them and be leaned on in return. His heart aches, melancholic and yearning – nostalgia for something long gone and lost.

The shadows in the distance keep shifting. They were running on borrowed time.

“There's no one left here except us,” the words spill out more tiredly than he means to. “What's the point?”

Ash is quiet for a moment. “I don't know,” he says finally, voice soft and vulnerable in a way that scares Red, “what else is there to do?”

An unfortunate side effect of being hunted by the corpses of their friends is that eventually, the death actually sticks.

There was a trick to it – and the phrase itself leaves a bad taste in his mouth. A trick to it, as though it was some sort of tip or suggestion being shared among a group – *here's the best way to permakill the undead corpses of your friends for fun and profit!*

Ash is the one to figure it out, albeit unintentionally. They'd spent too long gathering materials at one spot, and Red still isn't sure *how* they're being tracked down but however the zombies were doing it, it was certainly working.

There were others, zombies with faces and insignias they don't recognise, but more often than not it was *their* people. It's Mapicc and Roshambo this time – inseparable even in death, he thinks grimly; a mimicry of a conjoined twin, limbs and flesh torn apart and put back together, twisted and warped until Red isn't sure where one of them ends and the other begins.

He grits his teeth and curses at how his knee buckles under the force of their combined weight, struggling to keep his sword up. From somewhere behind him Ash is leading Zam further into the dark, the occasional flare of sparks and pixels the only indication that they were still in the area.

Red adjusts his weight, sidesteps to the left – his sword falls, Roshambo- Mapicc- they stumble forwards past him, giving Red enough time to step out of stabbing range.

Then he turns on his heel, plants a torch on the ground and *runs*.

In the dark, his other senses shove themselves to the front; sounds amplifying until he can hear his heartbeat echoing with every step, smells thickening until he can almost taste them. His knee twinges when he pushes against the ground – it probably wasn't the best idea to run, but it was better than being shoved to the ground and being unable to get back up to defend himself.

There's a spark, a glow of purple to the right of him, and Red sprints ahead just in time to see Ash throw a piece of lit TNT right at Zam's face.

His aim is true – the explosion that goes off is too bright, white sun spots blooming to life when Red blinks. In the light of the fire left behind, he can see chunks of red and yellow littering the ground. There's a cape abandoned to the side.

Ash turns to face him, eye wide and bright.

“Your hair is a mess again,” Red mildly tells him.

“You asshole,” Ash breathes out what could’ve been a laugh. He walks over to what remains of Zam’s body, kneeling down to watch the way the skin is already trying to knit itself back together, a wet, pulsing noise coming from somewhere near his ribcage. “...How many hearts was he on before,” Ash makes a sweeping motion with his arm, “all this?”

“I can’t remember,” Red admits. “Maybe fifteen?”

“And we’ve tried to kill him just about as many times,” Ash mumbles, low enough that Red barely hears it. He pulls out a dagger from his inventory. lifts it into the air–

–and with a sickening crunch, bring it down straight through Zam’s chest.

Zam stays silent.

The skin stops patching itself over. The rhythmic beating of his heart isn’t audible anymore. Red steps closer, bringing a torch up over Zam’s features. Discolouration still covers his limbs, but the rapid decaying and repairing has come to a halt.

“That was his last life.” Red says, voice flat.

“Yeah,” Ash’s voice is equally as flat, closed off. “Yeah it was.”

Shuffling, snapping noises continue echoing in the distance – a reminder that Mapicc and Roshambo were out there. Still, they take the time to drape Zam’s cape carefully over his body.

They have a funeral later, or the closest thing to a funeral they can give. There are no candles, but they leave a torch and rush through the standard set of repetitive movements. There are no flowers, so they lay stones instead.

It’s one of many funerals.

In the end, it’s an easy mistake. It’ll haunt his memories, later – it was an *easy* mistake, one easily avoided.

There was only so much running you could do before you slip up. The sleepless days– nights– void, Red couldn’t even tell anymore – catching up to them, making their movements more sluggish, slower to react.

They’d gotten caught up in another horde – none of the faces recognizable, their friends long gone and buried – after a skirmish with a group of humans that had gone on for a minute too long.

Red’s trying to be careful, he swears. The knowledge that they’re low on hearts and have run out of healing and regen pots burns at the back of his mind.

But there’s just three of them left, and he just wants to be done with this, to go and lick his wounds

in peace. Tunnel vision narrows his point of focus to the blade in his hands and the corpse in front of him.

He doesn't even notice the other one creeping up behind him until it's almost right on top of him.

A lot of things happen all at once.

There's a *yell*— hands shoving Red towards the ground—

a gasp, the distinct noise of metal slicing through skin and muscle.

He's disoriented – glasses clattering to the ground, knuckles white around the hilt of his sword – there are two bodies crumpled next to him, another above him, and when the smell of rot hits him again he swings upwards—

The zombie hits the ground with a groan, and falls silent.

From next to him, Ash makes a gurgling noise.

Red snaps his head over to him, the torchlight throwing Ash's features into harsh relief. He's curled into himself, hands clutching at his throat even as he gasps, blood pouring over his hands and bubbling up out of his mouth. Red scrambles over to him, placing his hands over Ash's to put pressure on the wound.

He's seen a lot of death, both by his hands and by others. He knows, with a sinking feeling in his chest, that Ash isn't going to make it.

They don't have any potions. The last of their bandages were back at their shelter. His fingers are being rapidly stained bright, bright red, and even Ash's struggles under him are getting weaker.

Borrowed time. Borrowed time.

“Shh,” he hums, running blood-stained fingers through Ash's hair in an attempt to comfort. This is the least he can do.

Ash stares up at him, eye unfocused. He chokes on his next breath, struggling to get up from the floor. It's almost poetic, the way Ash seems intent on fighting even in his last moments.

He doesn't want that. He wants Ash to know some peace, let himself rest.

“You did great,” he's not paying attention to the words spilling out of his mouth, too focused on the crimson bubbling up under his fingers and the scar visible beneath dark bangs. “It's— it's alright, it's alright,” he closes his eyes, pressing his forehead to Ash's. “I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere.”

He's not sure if his words are at all reassuring, but Ash exhales shakily, stops trying to sit up. They sit there holding each other, Ash's grip on his wrist growing weaker until the pulse under his fingers slips away.

They're out of time.

Red barely notices the burn of tears gathering in his eyes, clouding his vision. It's a futile attempt, but he tries anyway – pulling up the command to give hearts, over and over until his fingers are raw and bloody from scraping against code.

He can taste iron at the back of his mouth. Ash's hands have long since gone cold.

Then finally, Red slumps over in the dirt and lets himself cry.

He tries, is the thing. It's not enough, but he tries – he sleeps even less, now that there's no one to watch his back through the night. Red wakes quickly, going from unconsciousness to being on his feet in the span of seconds. He slips on his glasses, the rest of his armor pieces and places the knife next to his bed back onto the belt at his hip, going through the motions without thinking about it.

Then he turns, ready to say something to Ash, and the absence is so jarring he can't do anything but stand there for a few seconds, struggling to reorient himself.

Red goes through the motions. He keeps setting aside supplies for two, keeps building shelters big enough for two people. The word keeps humming, the wind rattles and shakes his bones, and he's the last player of a world that wants him dead.

It takes a long while, but he finds his way back to the cliff eventually. He passes the circle line of dead grass, muffled noises fading into nearly nothing. The sky is wide open above him, an almost physical weight dragging at his limbs.

When he reaches the top of the cliff, there's dried stains on the grass. A torn off claw is lying to the side. Red places it on top of a rock and moves on.

The heart indicator lights up in the peripherals of his vision.

Red breathes in stale air and peers over the cliffside. Below – the crumbling remains of towers and dirt. Past that, there's the first shelter they'd built together, the wood rotting and walls covered in moss.

One heart left.

All things must come to an end. There's no one left to pull him away from the edge, not this time.

(It was a long, long way down.)

*I see the player you mean*

*Red*

*Yes. Take care now.*

*I like this player. It played well.*

*What did this player dream?*

***This player dreamed of sunlight and trees. Of fire and water.***

*It dreamed it created. And it dreamed it destroyed.*

***It dreamed it hunted, and was hunted. It dreamed of shelter.***

*Too strong for this dream. To tell them how to live is to prevent them living.*

***I will not tell the player how to live.***

*I will tell the player a story-*

***But not the truth.***

*No. A story that contains the truth safely, in a cage of words.*

***Give it a body, again.***

*Yes. Player...*

***Use its name.***

*Red<sup>1</sup>do<sup>2</sup>n<sup>3</sup>, Player of games.*

***Good.***

*Take a breath now. Respawn in the long dream.*

***Yes, move your fingers. Have a body again, under gravity, in air.***

*You. You. You are alive.*

*You are the player*

**Wake up**

—

Red wakes up, panting. There's a heavy feeling in his chest – grief for a death long gone.

He flops back in bed and puts his hands over his face. "A dream," he tells himself. He has to double check to make sure there isn't blood under his fingernails.

The clock on the wall across from him keeps ticking. He squints at it, the short hand barely visible and pointing at three.

He doesn't get a whole lot of sleep for the rest of the night.

When the burn of sunlight eventually becomes too bright to ignore for much later, Red rolls out of bed and makes his way downstairs. There's the sound of low murmuring, water gushing from the

taps and someone from the next house playing guitar. Red gives it a seven out of ten.

Ash is already there when he gets to the kitchen, Delilah next to him. They're both huddled over a crossword with the kind of intensity Red usually associates with someone trying to plot out a very elaborate murder.

Some days he wonders whether introducing Ash and Delilah to each other had been the best idea. The two of them could probably take over a small city together if they put their minds to it.

There's a plate of toast in front of them, small jars of jam and peanut butter – the horrible, too viscous type that only Delilah can stomach in their household – and a bowl of cereal that's already half empty. Ash looks up at Red, gives him an indecipherable look, and pushes the bowl across the table towards him.

Red wrinkles his nose. "Is that the stuff we bought weeks ago?"

"It's good cereal."

"You didn't even put any milk in it, dude. Get better tastes."

"That's what I keep telling him," Delilah interjects, "Ash, I respect you, as a person, as someone who can beat me at monopoly, but I do *not* respect your taste in friends."

"Not this shit again," Red says, and is promptly ignored.

"You could do so much better than my brother," Delilah tells Ash gravely.

"Oh I know. I'm keeping him anyway."

Red grins, feeling unbearably fond all of a sudden. Ash flicks a cornflake at him, but there's a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You two make me sick. Why doesn't Fritz ever say stuff like that to me?"

"Tell her it's part of the bro code," Ash suggests.

"It's not though?" Red sits down at the table next to them, reaching for the jam. The seal on the lid hasn't even been broken yet.

"It could be if you weren't a fucking coward," Delilah hisses, opens the jar for him, then gets up and vanishes through the door to the living room, presumably to call her friend.

Ash yells after her, "We haven't finished the crossword yet!" and there's a muffled answer that could've been anything from *it's fine* to *finish it yourself*.

Red points a spoon at the doorway. "She's always like this in the mornings."

"What, ready to murder someone?"

"To murder me, specifically. Verbally or otherwise." He takes a bite of toast and jam separately and watches as for a moment, Ash's expression twists into one of sheer confusion.

"There's something wrong with you," Ash tells him. Red, briefly distracted by the way the light from the windows shines through Ash's hair, almost doesn't hear it.

"Well– being kissed wouldn't fix me but it might just help," he says, tilting his chair backwards.

Ash rolls his eyes, presses a palm to his mouth and then smacks the side of Red's head with it.

“Hey!”

“Don't complain, there's your kiss.”

Red splutters. “That does *not* count.”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Alright, alright.” The quiet that settles over the room is a far cry from their days in the apocalypse – less heavy silences and something more comfortable, the buzz of electricity and background noise from the neighborhood waking up filling in the gaps.

From the next room, Delilah laughs lightly, talking to someone they can't hear. Ash has abandoned the crossword in favor of slowly taking apart the paper.

Red eats his toast and jam and feels quietly, overwhelmingly grateful.

The problem is this: Red can tell the exact timing to cook flesh for, how long to boil water so it doesn't make you sick for a week. He knows how to wrap bandages to stem the bleeding until they could get to shelter, how to coax plants into growing in a wasteland – dirt, was just useless *dirt* when there was no water to run under it – and how to negotiate successfully so that your partner doesn't get shot at by a bunch of trigger-happy humans.

Well, semi-successfully. Ash *did* get shot but that was less Red's fault and more the fact that Ash had chucked an explosive through the door right as they were about to leave.

The point is – Red knows a lot of things. He could easily make his way through mathematics – perks of a former business man, fractions and cost-benefit analysis running through his head like second nature – but literature? Fucking physics?? Every server he'd ever been in had collectively looked at physics and politely told it to piss off.

Physics. Hah.

(He hates how they had grown used to the denser air towards the end; building structures with more supports than they normally would, foundations and stronger bases put into place, a process learned via trial and error.

Here in this lifetime, the air is much the same. Heavier. Almost suffocating, when he gets too far inside his own head.)

Academics is, unfortunately, a necessary requirement to getting anywhere in this life, and so Red had begrudgingly trudged his way through classes. His father might despair over his average grades, but there were really more important things he could be focusing on.

Such as running a borderline illegal trading ring for pirated media. The important thing was not getting *caught*.

Time marches on – the rain showers of April give way to the sun-soaked days of summer and keeps moving, until one afternoon Red is staring at the calendar hung on the board in the living

room and realizes that the new academic year is about to begin.

“It’ll be just a different kind of wasteland,” Ash is sitting criss-crossed on the couch, a pile of papers spread out on the table in front of him. “Surely we’ll be fine.”

“Surely,” Red repeats. By some stroke of luck, at least they’d be attending the same highschool.

He sighs deeply at the pen he’s holding, drops it on the table and slumps back on the couch next to Ash – pressed shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh.

It’s probably a little odd, wanting to be so close within someone’s personal space all the time. If Ash is bothered, he never shows any indication of it. He knows Delilah and people on the street gives them weird looks sometimes but Red is so far beyond giving a fuck about what other people might think of him.

His mother on the other hand, had just been delighted that he seemed to be making actual lasting friends.

Ash jabs him in the arm with the pen he’s holding. “Hey, stop that.”

“Stop what?”

“*Sulking*. Look at this,” he shoves a few pages in Red’s face, scribbled all over with red and blue ink. Red blinks rapidly from behind his shades.

“Your handwriting hasn’t improved at all.”

“I’ve seen *your* handwriting. You can’t say shit.”

“This looks like you tried to write with your feet. In the dark.”

“I didn’t die for you to insult my handwriting, Red.”

Silence. Red can hear his own blood rushing through his veins. From outside, a crow caws in an impeccable display of timing.

Ash clears his throat awkwardly.

“Too soon?”

“...What does this say?” Red asks, bringing the papers back up to their line of vision.

“Red–”

“Ash. *Please*. ”

“You’re being an idiot.” Despite his words, he presses closer to Red.

“I don’t think I am,” Red remarks mildly.

Ash raises an eyebrow at him. “Well yeah, most idiots don’t think of themselves as one.” He catches Red’s gaze and holds the stare for an unnervingly long second before glancing away. Red scratches at his arm and pretends it doesn’t itch like something trying to escape.

“I don’t want to talk about it, okay?” He breathes in, putting in the effort to make sure his voice stays steady. “Just- tell me about the search. And that horrifying thing you call a handwriting.”

Ash makes a low noise. “Okay. Okay, here—” he taps a pen on one of the sections scribbled over, ink bleeding into the rows of addresses, “—are all the areas we’ve cross-checked already. And *here* —” another paper, this one larger and filled with rough diagrams that Red vaguely recognises, “are the corresponding sections on your map.”

The paper in his hands is detailed, meticulous notes taking up the spaces along the sides. “How’d you even find the time to do this?”

“I don’t sleep.” Ash grins at him, sharp and bright. Red gets the feeling he’s not exactly lying. He pauses for a second, stops fiddling with the pen in his hands. “...I don’t think a grid pattern search is working very well though.”

“Takes too long,” Red hums in agreement, “We could get school records if we break into the administrative building for the MOE. ...That’s assuming the others are close to our age.”

Ash lights up like the sun at the idea of breaking and entering. “We could go scope it out tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“When else would you go?” A pause. “Don’t tell me you have a curfew.”

It’s an unspoken rule. Red’s mother hadn’t so much as told it to them as she had implied it through years of off-hand remarks and stories about children who got eaten up by the dark. More frequently, there were severe stares if they came back home late after extracurriculars.

Red, who had lived under a sky that wasn’t a sky for an indeterminable amount of time, wasn’t particularly bothered by it, only obeying the rule out of respect for his mother. Delilah, who had to share a room with Red for five years while they were still in primary school, obeyed the rule out of leftover fear from hearing the ‘stories’ Red used to tell her.

All in all, a rousing success.

“Red,” Ash says, leaning in with a glint in his eyes that means shenanigans are imminent and Red will be dragged into them whether he likes it or not, “how would they stop you?”

He’s right, of course – Red has long since figured out which stairs are the creakiest, how to slip out quietly through the window. When they’d been younger, Delilah and he had used to play a game of creeping through the house without making so much noise on the floorboards. There’s very little to stop him from going wherever he likes. Whenever he likes.

“I’ll think about it,” Red tells him, and Ash doesn’t even bother to look surprised when he shows up at the park they’d decided on later that night.

“Look at me, Red,” Ash whispers aggressively, shaking him a little for emphasis, “*look* at me. This is the worst thing to have ever happened to me.”

“You’ve literally lived through an apocalypse. And— *hey*, stop that, that’s my favorite tie— and you’ve gone to school before?? What’s the deal here?”

“You have a favorite tie?” Ash says, scorn practically dripping from his voice, but he lets go of Red’s collar and smoothes it down. It might’ve been an apology, in another life – they were still

relearning how to communicate with each other, see how their new edges fit.

Red scowls at him. “I don’t ask you these kinds of questions do I?”

“Because I don’t have a favorite tie, Red, keep up. And I’ve *been* to school. Junior high was not like— *this*.” He waves an arm, at a loss for words to describe the situation at hand. It almost smacks against the side of the stall, and they both stiffen for a second.

“You do realize this is gonna look really bad if someone walks in.”

“People have done worse things in washrooms than have a conversation.”

“There is a perfectly fine, usable classroom on the second floor.” Red shifts, leaning against the wall. “You could have picked *anywhere* except the washrooms.”

Something almost sheepish crosses over Ash’s face. “I kind of panicked?”

... Which is so uncharacteristic of him to admit that Red actually does turn to look directly at him, taking in the way he’s struggling to stay focused, eyes darting to the side at the slightest hint of a noise. Under the fluorescent lights, it’s more obvious how pallid his face has gotten.

“Are you alright?” he asks, half expecting a cop-out response.

Ash hesitates for a long moment, then lets his forehead fall onto Red’s shoulder and breathes out a harsh, long exhale. Red thinks he deserves some kind of prize for refraining from pointing out the height difference.

“There’s a lot happening,” Ash mumbles, making a sweeping motion with his hand that just barely misses hitting Red. Probably as a way of referring to the chaotic and hectic way orientation week was going.

Red catches his hand and idly entwines their fingers together. They stand there, breathing in sync until the bell rings, shrill and loud even through the walls.

\*\*\*

It’s only when Ash is pulling out his blanket – *his* blanket, in a cupboard in Red’s bedroom, that it occurs to him that there’s a spot carved out for him in Red’s home now.

He’s been over here more often than he’s been spending time at his place, biking the thirty or so minutes every morning to reach Red’s neighborhood. It’s Delilah, or their father who usually opens the door for him; he knows about Delilah’s terrifying lab partner and that Red’s father is someone who wakes up at the early hours of dawn to work on paintings and fiber arts projects.

He’s met Red’s mother less often – “She went back to working regularly once Red was old enough,” Delilah had explained once, pinching Red’s cheek exaggeratedly – but it’s probably more often than he’s seen his own parent this month alone.

It’s not even that they’re a bad parent. Ash is fed, sheltered, given warm blankets to huddle under during thunderstorms and winter nights. He has faint, soft memories of a voice reading to him bedtime stories and patiently guiding him through the alphabet.

When he'd grown older the warm blankets turn to warm jackets; a small smile when he dyes his hair and clothes the most obnoxious colors he can find at the nearest corner store; bedtime stories turn into once-a-week nights where the two of them sit in the same room and do their own things, a record buzzing in the background.

It's quiet. Comfortable. Ash sees them at dinner and they've never missed a parent's night at school.

Still, it's a vast difference from the controlled chaos of Red's household. Maybe not warmer but louder, something always happening inside and out of the house, whether it was Delilah and Red getting into a verbal spat that ends with one of them nearly breaking their jaw or whether it was the neighbor's kids, hollering about something or the other.

And now, Ash has a designated blanket. Some of his favorite snacks are in the pantry. He knows where Red keeps all the knives that Red's parents probably wouldn't approve of.

Tenderness has worn down his edges in a way that violence hadn't been able to. There's something secure in knowing there was *someone* like you – someone who had a frame of reference for what was going inside your mind, what makes you flinch. It was like trying to cross a swaying bridge in the dark and looking up to find someone waiting on the other side with a lantern.

It's also very embarrassing, having feelings.

Ash wraps the blanket around himself and drops onto Red's mattress without preamble, ignoring the muffled protest Red makes at having a whole other person's weight draped halfway over him.

They reorganize themselves into something somewhat resembling order – limbs still pressed against each other but no longer at painful angles. Red's thumb traces a line over the side of his forehead, and it takes Ash a moment to realize it's the same spot where an old scar used to be.

“Did you get assigned a partner for that language project yet?” Ash asks, breaking the silence. For an irrational moment, he almost wants to snatch the words out of the air and tuck them back into the hollow of his throat.

Red's eyes are dark, barely visible in the dim lighting. “Yeah, that kid from homeroom – dyed hair, carries around a bunch of notebooks with him?”

“The one who looks like Zam.”

“We could just *ask* him.”

“Right, and if he has no idea what we're talking about? What then?”

Red stays quiet at that. He sighs, “We'll just have to wait and see I guess.”

In between dealing with homework, facilitating the beginnings of a black market among their batchmates, and putting together a pendrive of information which probably breaks multiple privacy laws, they end up taking a beginners class for baking.

Delilah is the one who actually wants to go – something about hoping to bribe her lab partner with pastries – but refuses to go alone, so she blackmails Red into it, and because Ash has nothing better

to do during the weekend than laugh at their combined misery, he goes along with them.

Baking, as they find out very quickly, tends to be specific and involves more precise measurements than cooking does. The first class ends with a disaster of a platter of cookies, which are varying degrees of burnt or undercooked.

The instructors are all very kind about it, mercifully. It's probably why Delilah drags them to the next class, and the next, with dogged determination and what appears to be a hundred articles about baking bookmarked on her phone.

"What does she even have on you?" Ash asks, placing wrappers carefully into the baking tin. From next to him, Red grimaces, pouring the batter into the wrappers with steady hands. One of his little cardboard puppets is tucked into his front pocket.

"You don't wanna know, trust me." He motions towards the clock on the other side of the room. "How long do we have to put these in for?"

Ash squints. "That's not in my render dista—" he stops abruptly. Red laughs.

"Did you just say *render distance*?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Shut up. *Shut* up," he repeats, barely keeping the smile from spreading over his own face, "I'm going to help Delilah. Good luck figuring out how to work the oven on your own."

"Nooo, come back. Ash, you bastard. *Ash*," Red draws out the last word, barely getting it out in between bursts of laughter. He reaches towards Ash with flour-dusted hands. Ash barely gets out of his reach, careful to avoid knocking against the tray.

The indicator on the oven lights up in a warm, orange glow when they place the tray in and set the timer. It's bizarrely satisfying – creating something just for the sake of creation.

Red wipes flour on Ash's face almost immediately afterwards, his features alive and bright. Ash flicks the batter at him in retaliation. From over his shoulder, Delilah swoops in to excitedly show them yet another article.

When the weather cools down to the point where they have to start wearing layers again, they go back to the arcade.

They have to pull up their hoods and sneak around to avoid the employee with dyed white hair who'd found them in the stairwell once, laughing quietly to themselves.

Like they were normal teenagers. Like the most pressing concern in the world was avoiding the well-meant but misplaced concern of an adult. Ash is almost giddy, adrenaline running through his system like a rush of sugar on a summer day.

There are other things to do, he knows. The map and pages of information stacked inside a drawer in Red's room stays as a constant background thought.

But for now—

He lets Red bait him into a mini-war at the ski-ball machine, drifting from game from game – the two person shooters; the game with spaceships and aliens that neither of them can pronounce the name of but briefly dissolve into a competition of one-upping each other's scores; an old rhythm game they abandon quickly when the rapid flash of lights and circles digs unpleasantly at the part of themselves that's still stuck somewhere in a dying world.

Conversation drifts between them, light-hearted insults and jabs that almost get swallowed up into the music and chatter of the other customers. It's comfortable in a way that he couldn't have imagined being before.

"Here," Red says, close enough that he doesn't need to speak louder over the noise. Ash, mesmerized by the kaleidoscope of led lights reflected in the glass of his shades, takes a moment to notice that he's holding out a bottle of water.

"Thanks," he tells him, and hopes the word manages to convey everything else that he isn't saying. *Thanks for staying. Thanks for being here. Thank you.*

Red grins, radiant like the first undulating rays of the sun rising over the horizon, and really, there's nothing Ash can do in the face of that except grin back.

The world goes on.

## Chapter End Notes

extra/some details i did not manage to fit in:

- branzy was meant to be the employee mentioned in chp2/4, it was supposed to be revealed later that clown and him run the arcade. sometimes spoke comes over to chew on the wires and give himself electrical burns
- there was going to be an interlude from the pov of red's mother, who's v chill about her son bringing a whole other person near daily to their house/going out to see him and is like. hmm. is my son trying to tell me something. i'd be supportive of course but how do i make him see this–
- meeting the rest of the lifesteal members was meant to go smth like, they hang out/gravitate towards each other w/o initially knowing that each of them have their memories. they bond anyway (zam in particular had a whole section dedicated to him in the outline, which i dont even remember 3/4ths of anymore)
- delilah's labpartner is midmystic. mid is equally respected and feared for multiple reasons including but not limited to gaslighting her entire batch for six months
- parrot was gonna be the only one of them to not recover his memories. rek recognises him eventually and they all aggressively befriend him. the poor guy has no idea whats going on at any given point

and thats a WRAP. feedback and kudos are v much appreciated!! hope you all enjoyed, despite the story being cut short ^^;

-np13

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