

gather stones together

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gather stones together

by [Felix_J](#)

Summary

Ash asks him out with this sheer point — it's *not* to figure out whether or not they're soulmates. And see where this gets him.

Notes

uh. hi. Hi. little story point. in probably around 2018 i stumbled upon this fun bit of a soulmate au, in the x men fandom, where you get a mark for every person you kiss, unless it's your soulmate, in which case the timer stops. and if you hit ten you just fucking die. literally did not make it up myself. you can probably still find those fics, they did love their cherk both at nine marks making out like "i wouldn't mind dying for you" and "i'd risk my life to find out if we're soulmates" don't do that kids. practice safety.

Anyway! then it got buried in the back of my brain all the way until i wrote [addict of the gallery](#), after which there it went off again. but your honor i love soulmate aus that are aware of how messed up they are. swagdoons soulmate au written by heavily arospec angstlord me surely what could go wrong

oh yeah also this time i changed it to count down instead of up purely bc lifesteal hearts system

feat. very brief mentions of (checks notes. woah!) zamgi, zam/subz/vi/oasis/ivory in a fun "my boyfriend, and his boyfriend, and his girlfriend" kinda way, past ash/jaron and ash/terrain (because they teamed in s3 that one time And it's funny)

in COMPLETELY UNRELATED NEWS hi, for any ccs, continuing further means you Understand and Agree this is written about the minecraft characters. this is all i want from life. that's it you can read now

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

They don't know each other that well. It's good, impersonal. Maybe he won't even try to punch his teeth out. All he knows Pangi's quiet *enough*.

The only image he brings up in his head is a small boy, (to a small boy), by a river playing with stones.

He's home. Of course, where would he be. He looks like he hasn't slept in a good while, as if shrunk in on himself, freckles too pale for spring. That makes the specks along his chin poke out more.

"Hey." Pangi stares with his hand on the doorframe.

Ash taps on the hand. "So can I get in? Hi. Hi, Pangi."

Pangi sighs, and the hand slips. He's pretty sure he stops himself at the last second from crossing his arms, just following with his eyes as Ash ducks and walks in, waits for something, shuts the door then. "You don't have to bother, you know, right." He says.

"Hmm?" Ash's poking around, just not to look at him. The stare's clearly there on the back of his head. "Who said I'm bothering with something? The only one who's gonna is you." Pretends to reach to pick up some figurine from a shelf. Pangi huffs and almost runs for a rash step or two, then stops when Ash just leaves his hand to lay flat. On his fingertips, when he raises it, there's just the smallest layer of dust.

"You're keeping it great here." He notes, brushing it off on the jacket. Finally turns.

"What do *you* have to tell to me?" Pangi's hands are finally crossed. "Listen, you don't need to bother, I told you just now. They've all been here. This and that, Red and Woogie and Mid, I *know*, I know." He tilts his head away, not even bothering. Ash's eyes flicker right over, ah, the clock. He still has some time.

"Can I still tell you one thing, *Pangi*?" He drags out the name. His time to stare, now.

Pangi sighs.

"Shut the fuck up, that's what. I don't want to hear about your thing." It comes out pretty cheerful, all things considered.

Pangi promptly looks back, blinks, confused. There's something on his face too close to relief. "Uh.

Thanks?" He takes a step back. "What, then? Tea?" His expression is *almost* funny.

"You're Red's, Reddoons' best friend, right?" He tilts his head. Pangi's already covered half of the corridor, and he thinks he's trying to run now, but the words make him stop. Something clicks in his head, it must, by how loud Ash imagines the sound.

"You can say?" It's like he's asking him himself.

"Great." Ash nods. "Don't let him get shitfaced, just because he's a quiet drunk doesn't make it pretty, hang around at least for a couple of hours, don't let him grip your hand, whatever. Good luck. I'm out." He turns on his heel.

"*What?*" Pangi's reaching new levels of lost, and Ash debates whether or not to look because he knows what that'll end up in. Does in the end. Does laugh.

"I'm gonna kiss him." He clarifies chilly. "Time to get our mutual shit together, I think. And, one more thing. You and your..?" He pokes at his chin, where the remains of Pangi's soulmarks swarm. "Both fucking idiots. Goodbye, Pangi."

He has to push at the door, but it's not locked. He thinks Pangi runs out after him. Maybe even shouts.

He has *nothing* to tell him, for his love life. No-thing.

Ash laughs again, and it's wet and uncomfortable in his stomach. He'll live. It's what he's been telling himself his whole life — it's just one less mark, and he'll live.

(The small Pangi in his head looks up at him and smiles, and tells him these two stones match on the split.)

He shakes off the image.

It's been a long time coming, and if he has anyone to blame it's (Red, of course Red, who-ever-else but Red, and also kind of somewhat) himself. He doesn't know. The two thoughts mingle and mix in his brain in one thing. He'll go ahead and guess it *is* both of them. They're both the same exact type of people you'll find notes about in pamphlets and very, very cheap newspapers, and the diagnosis will be *avoid*.

He crashes sideways into a wall, looks up and breathes, tries to catch his breath. There's just the sun there. He has a couple of hours. He also has a counter down the eye like an ugly smudge or a scar, except it ticks down, and by the time he's all clean and pretty it'll be right for the grave. Just the two dots now.

Ash keeps laughing. The wet thing is in his eyes, he thinks, and it doesn't go away, and he wants to come back and cry his shit out on Pangi's shoulder, because he'd understand, to some extent, at least, except that he obviously doesn't want that. Even the scared part of him that's too aware of what's gonna happen and isn't sure how it's gonna lay out the news, to his friends, to Red somehow, whatever, it doesn't *want* it. Need it, more like. By messing around he's gotten himself into a corner, and because he understands he can't just walk out he's gonna bust a hole through the back of the wall.

Thing is. Really, there are a lot of things he would have to keep track of, at the same time, to put exactly how deep in he's gotten himself. So he doesn't do any of that, doesn't think. Just stares. His fingers feel cold, and he lets them hang by, because if he lets the instinct win he might let the one that's telling him to scratch at the dark marks until they're unrecognisable, too, almost like they're

all gone, and that's *bad*, probably.

He might be having a panic attack, and the last time that happened Red gripped him close, and that might've helped back then. Might not have. What it does help, the memory, is pick him apart.

(In all fairness, it starts like this: he never cares for what stands under the name Reddoons, with all his thoughts and... his *him*, not for any reason in particular. Reddoons to him is a friend of a friend of a friend, last stage can be taken out if he's feeling generous. Then they meet, and that shouldn't change his life the way every person did that promised *they'd* be the one, and then took a mark from across his eye until he stopped caring. Concept of soulmates, bullshit, right? Kind of thing you boast to other kids on the playground about.)

(Pangi with two stones in his hand, new stones, dropping them down into the dirt. Time to cast away stones, Ashswag. That time passed.)

(Reddoons changes his life differently. Of course. Much, much worse.)

He thinks he hears shouts still, and then Pangi's hand hits the bricks next to his shoulder. He doesn't flinch, he thinks, just looks up, and his eyes *hurt* but he doesn't think it matters much if he cries in front of Pangi, because that wouldn't make Pangi *understand* more than he already does. He doesn't much. Just *thinks* that he does well. So it would just come out a little bit pathetic.

He closes his eyes, breathes.

Pangi's on five marks. That somehow makes him different from Ash. Nah, he's derailing. It makes him different from Ash because whatever *he* and *Zam* went through, it was real. Solid. Could be broken. It makes him different because *Zam* could never *take* a mark from him and now nobody's gonna be able to.

Ash slides down the wall and grins up at him.

"What's gotten into you?" Pangi demands, and then sits down next, carefully, and looks on, like he's trying to dissect Ash's brains and get out whatever's there. Good luck to him. That will make a lot of blood. "Did you... was it something... did you have an argument, or what?"

Ash laughs. "You're out here saying all this like Reddoons just *talks* to you about me, *all* the time. Oh no, I got into a fight with Ash again, because I'm so smart and he's a fucking moron, and we have matching bruises now. We must clearly be soulmates!" He breathes out. Sighs out. Something. "Pangi, I just want you to take care of him when he's... hurt." The word comes out small. He doesn't... it doesn't work well in his head, to imagine Red hurt. It's more of a sick illusion than actually something that may happen.

"Well." Pangi says, carefully. "Maybe I just don't *want* to see him hurt." He holds out a hand, tries to shake him, or poke, maybe to get a reaction.

"What, really? And here I thought you were childhood friends. Alright, I'll just go get Woogie."

"Come... come on, Ash." Pangi shakes his head. "I don't want him to hurt. Is that better?"

"And I want to, huh?" Ash whispers. Pangi finally shakes him. He doesn't look angry enough, he never is, really. He wonders if he cried when *Zam* finally ditched him. "I'm going insane, Pangi, I think." He can't get his voice to sound strong enough in the slightest. "And I think it's all him."

It happens like this: really, this time it does. It's a birthday party, Mid's, he thinks, although he quite frankly does not give enough of a fuck, because for him it's a month anniversary of the last time he

got a mark off his face and a blocked number in his phone. Blocked from the opposite side, mind you.

He hears "party" and comes to get shitfaced, and instead has to sit through long speeches. Mid congratulates herself on living a basic life without a soulmate for one more year, and Ash thinks what's really the point here is she has it easy. Mid, and her nine marks and maybe-probably one regret from those early teenage years, and her perfect archaeologist job, and no soulmate. She'll never know if she had one. And maybe *they're* going to fucking die because of it when all of their dumb marks run out, *searching*, 'cause for all the talk of "progressive society" the pressure is *always* there. But he's not gonna *talk* about it, because it's Mid's birthday, and because he's not doing something that'll make him feel like a hypocrite.

They cut the cake, all purple and black and brown and really all shades of Ashswag, and next to him Oasis laughs and spoon-feeds her girlfriend on the opposite side of the table of her own soulmate. Ash stares into his piece and feels, for once, rather fucking alone, because that white-haired girl that smiles, chewing on the chocolate, has Oasis, who has Vitalasy, who has Subz, and Mid has her Egg studies, and Terry has whatever guy he found, obviously did, in this short amount of time. Ash doesn't even have that familiar cooling feeling in his stomach that everything is going to go to shit and his new partner that he's showing off to the public will close the door on him in a week or two. Just the growing desire to send it all to hell.

Vitalasy salutes him with his smoothie and asks him what he's planning to do here.

Ash honestly says he doesn't know and stands up, shaky for none of the alcohol he's gotten in here, gets out without saying a word. Vitalasy waves him in the back, he thinks, and then leans over to say something to Oasis with a small smile.

He crashes into a room on the side of the corridor that's not closed so it's free game, and that seems dark enough for everyone to leave him alone, slides the door closed with a tip of the shoe. Stupid, stupid. Not thinking requires company and loads of outward noise, or getting drunk or high, and he's not gonna find anything of the sort at Mid's, not to mention it's not like he wants the latter that much. He just wants *something*.

The something finds him by him being blind, because the spot by the window's already taken, but the person turns their head and silently gestures next to them, because it's not taken enough.

Ash looks them over, settling next, elbows heavy against the window ledge, and there's wind blowing them both right in the face, making him twitch.

The person's a man in a suit that's *almost* casual on him, *almost*-everything, between conventionally handsome and pretty, just slightly throwing off, with the sunglasses of his, with something in the posture and tilt of the head and cigarette between his fingers. Ash thinks with apathetic curiosity if that *almost*-perfection extends to his eyes, and they're not dark red like the rest of him. He wouldn't see in the dark, and behind the shades.

He breathes out into the awfully cold air of the open window. The guy next to him jerks the wrist with the cigarette.

"What, another person to think it was too loud in there?" He *kind of* asks, assumes, more like. Ash listens into his low voice, not thinking about anything, and he in turn doesn't continue, like he's waiting for Ash.

"Too many people." He replies, finally.

Too many people who are just happy and don't treat getting to know others like a game. Elimination game.

He sighs.

It's quiet for a good couple of seconds, where neither of them moves, and the cigarette in the... stranger's? He's not *sure* he's never seen him before, probably has.

The cigarette keeps smouldering.

He taps him on the hand. "If you're not gonna finish that, might as well give it over."

Ash gets a confused look, and then gets offered the cigarette, alright. Plucks it out, not too careful. Something expensive, definitely not a brand he's tried enough to guess.

"I have an almost pack full." He tells Ash calmly. Ash shrugs and sighs out sideways, not quite him in the face, if he wants that. "I could..." He shuts up and breathes through the smoke. "I could share, with a face like that."

Ash shrugs, offers the cigarette back. "Does that face look like a soulmate chaser to you?"

He gets looked over too, and hey, that's fair, until the man chuckles and shakes his head. "Not at all." Takes a drag. "You don't look like the rest of 'em, is all."

"Huh." Ash offers him an open palm, short movement with his left hand lying on the right one. "Ashswag."

He blinks, shakes it. "Ash... *swag*?" Comes out a little questioning, trying it out.

"Ash, if you wanna be short about it." He helpfully adds. Then squints at the top of his head, but doesn't get a reaction to the joke.

"*Can* I?"

"I don't care."

His name is Reddoons. Ash settles on calling him Red before he figures everyone does the same, and then he still does. They smoke out three or so cigarettes into the window, and first Ash thinks numbly if that counts as kissing him, out of inertia, not because he wants to. It's deeper than just whether or not he does, want, anyway. What Ash wants is to talk about anything other than soulmates.

They talk about soulmates.

It starts with Red, after lighting the second cigarette that's between Ash's teeth, staring, so Ash takes it out and grins, says the marks are tattooed. "The real ones are on the ass." Pokes forward, which makes Red drop an unamused cackle and take the cigarette before Ash can really taste it.

"I don't care that much for them, you know." He's silent, and then adds, as if forcefully, probably forcefully. "But mine are four, if you care."

Ash weighs how much that is an apology, and decides it's *not* much, so he just tilts his head, because it makes him want to push the topic down less.

He thinks he remembers him, now.

(It's from the little feuds they had as kids, the *Leviathan*, courtesy of Roshambo, Team Awesome before that, the... the fucking Shades. He never cared that much, but he thinks now Red was one of the kids, out there, in the sand by the sea, always next to that boy with a paper crown on his head. His parents probably cooed and called them soulmates, when they were still too young to even have their marks to play the real game. Of course.)

It doesn't matter.

The next day, when Jaron messages him, asking how he liked the party, he'll tease Ash when he talks about this hour or two. Ash will say he didn't *like* Red. Or, *liked* him, but not like that, and he'll be serious for once. Then he'll tell Jaron to stop abusing his generosity of a man that doesn't block his exes, and get a pixelated meme.

It's really inertial.

"I think I'm fucking sick of people talking about soulmates, that's what." He says, low.

"*Moving against the current*, huh?" Red chuckles. Ash thinks he heard the words either in some movie based on a psychological study, or a cheap ad on TV, or both. "That's respectable."

"Thanks." Ash takes the cigarette that Red still hadn't put up to his mouth, again, maybe with a bit too much force. "You? That's more interesting to know, right. What you think about this great bit of evolution, and not how many *people*... how many marks you have."

Red presses his lips together. "I think it's intriguing in theory."

"*Right*." Ash turns away, breathes out smoke. "And *really*?"

"Damaging?" Red offers. "I wrote my university thesis on that." He cackles. "It's *not* that hard to make up words now."

Ash takes another drag, since Red's feeling so generous as to forget about taking his turn whatsoever, really. He could find his own in an inner pocket, but where's the fun in that. Although he muses on the idea of offering Red his own. There *is* something about him.

The cigarette becomes just a little less interesting when he remembers this one never touched Red's lips.

"Huh. Psychology?" He mutters.

"*Nah*, nah, the influence of the system on society. I am, *was* now, technically, a business major." Ash can *see* the second he starts smiling, and gives back a grin. It's plastic.

Reddoons stares out the window. Ash reaches out and stubs out the cigarette against the windowsill on the outside, with *pressure*, then throws it out, only half burnt. "Alright, businessman." He mutters. Snaps his fingers, once or twice.

Red offers him a new cigarette, silently. Ash grins and shakes his head. "After you."

Red jerks an eyebrow at him, but does go back to smoking.

"You're right." Ash says easily, staring by, sideways at the glass, and he can almost catch the blur of Red's reflection to see how he reacts. "I'm done with it, with the system. If it has anyone to break, it's not gonna be me." He chews on his lip, then adds, lightly. "Anymore."

Red moves the cigarette away slightly and cackles, and says something like *congratulations*. It doesn't mean anything, because he doesn't know him.

(It should've stayed that way.)

(Except that it would have been boring, and for *what* should it have? Not to be *hurt*? To play safe? What? Ash is none of those things.)

"Wanna go out sometime?" He stretches. The thought burns the back of his head like he *did* get drunk.

"Like, romantically?" Red's hand stills. "I thought you just said you didn't do soulmates."

Ash breathes in through his teeth, plucks the cigarette from Red's fingers again. Doesn't take a drag, just crumples it between his fingertips, and really, it's grown so cold here he should step away, but he doesn't care enough. "Not in a *soulmate* kinda way, Reddoons, don't even think so. I just... Listen, aren't you tired of everything going to hell? Are you? Do you want just a... want it hands off, no risk? Aren't you tired of fearing that other person is gonna leave you, 'cause you're just not *meant* for each other, as whoever says?"

"You sound like that's a... often on your mind, there." Red cackles, and it sounds a bit empty. "I think everyone does. At some point, at least."

What Ash does is offers a person he's never met before (enough to know)... *something*. He doesn't know what it is yet, and has to think it's a break of some rules, unspoken rules, which is what drives him.

He puts it in words. Doesn't say, *hey, I'm alone and you have the face of someone who's been fucked through and through by the system, and you know what? It's a pretty face anyway.*

Reddoons gives him a *look*, and he thinks he's gonna at least argue openly.

"I don't really know anything about you." He just says flatly, not exactly carefully, but not *declining*. Looking for a halfhearted excuse he's not gonna use anyway, Ash thinks.

Ash gestures. "Your brand of cigarettes is my new favorite one. That's a fact about me."

Red laughs with his whole chest. The noise buzzes in Ash's throat, and he wants to let it out, but just grins, full face. Red's laugh ends in a broken noise, and he looks back at Ash through the sunglasses and the palm pressed to his face.

That's the spot where Red makes fun of him and tells him *actually* how he lives at the same time, and the first one's clashing with a fun thing called his dignity for him to ever recall, and the second's, really, kind of boring in that it is, no, it *sounds* perfect. Perfectly empty and clean — degree, well-paid job, distant family, friends that aren't really close. The empty part is kinda like Ash's. He doesn't *really* say that. They don't exchange that much, even, and Ash reads a lot off the expressions and understands it's empty because they lack. He also understands Red isn't gonna say no. It feels almost strange.

Makes him want to kiss Red then and there to figure out *just* how mismatched they are.

Red reads something back, he thinks, because it's like his smile's *knowing* when they've already got each other by the elbow leaving the house, and half the people have found a spot in the mansion to fall asleep in. Ash doesn't think it's the right kind of knowing, and half wants him to know exactly *how* Ash works. Half thinks it's some soft of fever dream, and maybe he did, after all, get dead

drunk.

It goes like this: he did not.

It goes like this: Red looks strange in Ash's cramped flat, but he works with it anyway. Goes like this, they argue over the points on Ash's term paper, and Red attempts to answer the tests Ash's gotten sick of in years of distance ed almost without looking and fucking *fails*. Goes like this, Red's never late from work but Ash runs by time to time anyway, just because he can. The first time a colleague of Red's jokingly calls them soulmates, Red buys them mismatched purple and red scarfs, late December so he can't even say it's for Christmas.

He offers it in the street, and Ash has to brush snowflakes off his shoulders to wrap himself up. Then Red, really, sort of ruins his own point by jokingly pressing in with scarves covering up their faces, so they stare each other in the eyes.

"Great kinda protection, Reddoons." Ash makes out. Red ignores it, like that bit didn't happen at all.

Ash always introduces them as partners, yeah, because it leaves them to question, but also just 'cause he never did before, (but now's a different case altogether), and it's too on point, just, *true*. They never do date, even if Ash doesn't outright say people are wrong to call Red his boyfriend. It's good. They never have expectations, so they end up just growing into each other's lives.

Red's the one to make all the mushy soulmate-y jokes, still, the thing he often gets raised eyebrow from Ash for. He only completely understands it's deflection when Red says outright, a bit in. It's what, two months later? Ash doesn't feel any different, except a bit more... free.

Red does have four dots. He never *exactly* shows them to Ash, they're just up there on his neck running a line parallel to his chin, and he rubs it sometimes when he's stressed, and acknowledges it on the few times Ash points it out, gives a flat knowing smile after Ash nibbles on it with his teeth.

"I'm not the kind of person for soulmates, is what." He says. "That's the conclusion I came to."

(Red does tell him, eventually, when it's early into summer, that he was never going to tell him no, but he *was* going to call *it* off, whatever the it of him and Ash was. Ash gives him an ugly smile at it and says, *bet you're glad that you didn't, huh, Reddoons*. Doesn't ask.)

"How so?"

Ash lies with the back of his head on Red's stomach.

"What, did you get bored of the constant breakups?"

It feels so familiar, jarring kind of familiar, when he has to remember *this* topic again, so he turns over on the side. It makes him hear the slip of Red's heartbeat. He doesn't listen in.

"You would understand, wouldn't you?"

"This one's about you, Red."

Red shifts. Ash pulls up, unsure if what Red wants is for him to move off, and not really *wanting* to. Red's look's unfocused.

"What is really the point?" It doesn't concentrate on Ash, even when he must be covering all of

Red's view, so he just... stays. "What is the point, if *it's* just telling you if it works out or not? If... heck. If your feelings are real. If, Ash, just imagine your soulmate dies in some freaky accident. What do you gotta do, bury yourself? And then..." He presses his lips together.

"You really had to think about all that, no way to let it out." Ash mutters, carefully. Runs his fingers down Red's cheek.

Red laughs out.

"I'm not fragile like you think. Like you want me to be." He's *almost* amused.

Ash's hand stills. "I don't *want*..."

"Like you want to see me." Red offers, except it's like a simple truth that he *thinks* he knows.

"That's dumb, Red." When he doesn't stop it with the *knowing* smile, Ash kisses his cheek next to the corner of the mouth.

"Sometimes you just get tired of people trying to figure out if you match by some fucking magic." Red mutters, and his face relaxes. "I'm thinking about it, yeah, doesn't mean it hurts me."

"Okay." Ash says, and he doesn't *mean* the way it comes out sheepish. "Good."

What he does is throw his idea of a relationship at the wall to see if it cracks. Red takes it as just what Ash is, and maybe it *is* true, when he doesn't have limitations.

(After arguing with Zam for too long in a truth or dare on a party the likes of which Ash doesn't like to visit, Zam snappily dares him to kiss Red. Before he can go back on his word, Ash tells him to go fuck himself and walks out the door. Just walks, not runs.)

He wakes up in the middle of the night, in his flat that's kind of, sort of turned into theirs on its own around this spring, with Red's hand crossing over his torso and hanging limp. It's warm, even with his shirt off. He doesn't want to move, not because of it. He's just kinda... frozen.

He fights through moving his hand, to move Red's. Red softly breathes at the back of his neck.

Ash slides down, off the bed onto the floor, and it's so cold it's helping his head chill.

He thinks he just realised something. He doesn't *think*. He did.

Ash grips the phone off the nightstand, grip shaky, and he needs to write it down, needs to write someone, something, a note.

Red shuffles behind him, and Ash *stills* and thinks he's gonna go back to being as much as a corpse, maybe will drop an occasional mumble. He doesn't. In the dark of the room that hides their expressions Red leans over him, looking. Ash knows his features well enough to know every bit in the dark anyway, not what his expression's like, but that his glasses are off, deep blue eyes open to look at.

To an awkward movement of a thumb, Ash's screen lights up, lights up Ash's face, and Red's above him. The image fits, more or less, ruffled hair and a smile, almost flat, and he thinks Red's about to reach out with a hand and touch, but he's just close enough, his face is.

He's used to avoiding Red's lips during sex, but right now, when he's further away, he thinks he's gonna fall apart if he doesn't press in.

So fucking fall apart is what he does.

Under Red's look that's mostly just curious, clutches his phone, hugs his knees and leans back so the back of his head's against the mattress, stares back. He thinks he's in love.

It feels like fear. And he knows fear. He's just sure he never knew this kind of intensity before.

He never, ever wants Red to be his soulmate.

He thinks it looks *normal*, out on the street. *They're just a couple*, right. It's where it hits. He realises *the* fear has come back.

He breaks into a grin and nuzzles with his ear against Red's hands on the bed. It's the closest he can get without looking like he's... looking like everything he's got on the inside.

It's how it goes.

Pangi doesn't look any different now, except maybe for something settling in his eyes that's not *understanding*, but that is gentler now. Thankfully, not enough to be pity.

"Well, you and Red. With you, being or not being soulmates doesn't matter, right? That's the same. You always said that thing."

Ash flinches.

"You figured it out you wanted to be... together not *because* of being soulmates."

"We're not soulmates." Ash says raspily.

"And have you... talked to him, about how that's a problem?"

Pangi finally fully settles down against the wall next to him. Ash wants a cigarette, but the thought snaps back at him with the memory of Red's, and *fuck*, the ones in his inner pocket will probably be.

He pokes Pangi instead. Pangi doesn't react much, just huffs a bit.

"I'm *trying* to, damn it, Pangi."

"By kissing him?" Pangi seems to be almost *laughing*, and hell no, he's *not* got it figured out at all. Ash raises his head sharply. There aren't any tears in there. There are *not*.

"I'm not trying to just *kiss* him on the spot, I'm not a... How do I look to you, Pangi, I'm just gonna *tell* him. I've already asked him to get together about it, like, like we always do, of course we do, but I've told him we'll have a conversation, and we *will*, like civilised fucking people."

"And then you're gonna tell him *what*?"

Ash chokes on the words.

"Listen." Pangi puts both his hands on his knees, takes a deep breath or two. Ash doesn't think even if Pangi wants to make a whole scene out of this, he'll be able to pay enough attention.

"I'm *not* listening, dude." He wheezes out, quiet and almost inaudible.

Pangi picks it up anyway. "Which is why I'm telling you to listen. I think I got this. And I'm not

going to say I don't care and you need to listen to my advice because it's perfectly unbiased."

Ash shakes his head and starts humming something he himself doesn't remember. Pangi puts a hand on his shoulder and waits for a second, then shakes him, just the one violent jerk. Ash's head hits the wall. He squints and rolls it to the side to look at Pangi. There's something... like, ticklish in his limbs now, and he thinks he understands now how it is to feel *perfectly* empty. That makes him smile. Yeah, right in Pangi's face. "And what's the advice, then?"

"Now you listen." Pangi points, and he seems content now. Stupid. "You keep saying you want to let go of the system. Right? Then just, *do*."

"That's not... how do you think that'd *work*?" Ash frowns. "Do you not... Pangi. Pangi, Pangi, Pangi." He sits up a bit, grabs Pangi *somewhere* by the shirt, he doesn't look, shakes. Pangi doesn't, himself, just the fabric, forward-backwards. "You know why it worked? 'Cause it wasn't *supposed* to be anything. It was just a... I dunno." He stops. Lets the hand hang, then let go. "It was all a major fuckup. A... a morph, something we agreed on that wasn't gonna get influenced by stupid things like... soulmates, and soulmarks, and *then!* Then he... you know he's gonna hate me for that. Right." He chuckles, high.

Pangi *looks* like he wants to intercept, but doesn't. Does press his lips into a thin line.

"And then it was *serious*." Ash draws out.

"Then make him understand it's serious. It doesn't *matter*, you keep saying that. Make it not matter then, make it not... like you promised to each other when you first started dating."

"We didn't. We didn't really do anything there, Pangi." Ash drops a small chuckle. "We just... we both hate that word. Soulmate, huh."

"Me and Zam, you know." Pangi bites his lip. Ash huffs out another laugh, stifles it into a breath. "I miss Zam. I miss being... close to him like that, but sometimes you just *don't click*, whatever the marks say. And sometimes you do, even if you take each other's marks. Like Zam and... Subz, I don't know if they even... *fuck*." He shakes his head. "You're both not on one. You can risk it anyway. Come on."

Ash laughs. "That sounds more like something I would say."

"Well, maybe it sounds like something a Pangi would say, too." Pangi huffs. "We don't know each other that well, you know."

Ash thinks it wouldn't be *that* bad if they did.

What he does is get up, and go home, and wait in dead silence, and want to throw up.

Time to gather stones together is what it is, now.

i'm scared, he types out. Stares dumbly at the screen, shakes his head, erases the message. He... he's not gonna have this talk over text, he's just not gonna.

He presses his lips to Red's eye and mutters he wants to kiss him.

Red cackles. "Isn't that what you're just doing." Ash stares for too long.

"It's complicated." He says, and it's tired, and he's gripping Red's hand too strong, and all those little fun words he told Pangi leave him, and his chin shakes. He clicks his teeth, and that doesn't

help. "Red, do you think we're soulmates?"

Red moves him away carefully, puts down the bag. "Is this that talk you told me we're gonna have?" His voice... sounds the empty kind of tired, even if he's still trying to joke.

"Red, Red, just listen, alright." Ash doesn't *want* to have to chase him, look that desperate, but he does, doesn't stop and stare like a fucking idiot while Red walks through into the living room. He finds him, standing there with his back too straight, and Red doesn't turn to face him.

"Alright." Red says lightly. Ash knows that sound — it's fake light. "I'm listenin'."

Him having stopped means Ash can walk in a circle around him easily, take him carefully by the shoulders, fingers more than hands. The fear is... isn't *gone*. But it's easier now. Looking at Red, really, his sharp look poking over the sunglasses.

Ash can't help a crooked, overwhelming smile. "Hi, Red." He says quietly. "Can I spend my life with you?"

Red... shudders, just slightly.

"Ash." He says, low. "Ash." Pushes up the sunglasses on his nose, takes a breath. Ash's smile is twisty now, half a bluff. "Can you... can you explain that? You're just doing this, dropping things on me. And I'm not in your head." Clutches at the sleeve of his shirt, realises he's still in formal wear, there, starts to get the suit off, awkwardly. Ash *doesn't* really appreciate the holdup.

Red folds the jacket on the couch, falls down next to it. Ash sits down, slowly, on the opposite side.

"This was probably just such a dumb idea." Ash mutters. "Fucking Pangi."

"Pangi? What does... Pangi have to do with that." Red mutters, light, and stares as Ash tries to collect himself as much as he can, and *really*, Pangi does have nothing to do with this except give him another bit of stupid hope.

"Red." He says. He's staring into the bland white wall and he can't feel his hands. "Red, are you just *scared* sometimes?"

He thinks Red'll laugh. He doesn't, doesn't make a noise. Just clasps his hands together and *maybe* pretends like he's thinking. "Yeah." He replies. "Maybe so."

"I'm scared..." Ash makes out, and chokes on it. Tinkers with the edges of his open shirt over the t-shirt, and he wants to hug himself again, but doesn't, tilts more than turns his head to take a peek at Red. Red's moved closer. Another creak, and Red's right by his shoulder, so Ash buries his face in it blindly and mutters against it.

"You know what. I've wanted to kiss you for a while. Not like a soulmate. I don't want you to be my soulmate. I just want to kiss you." He takes in a breath. "I want to share all these little things with you, that we do, for... forever. I don't want anyone to tell us what we can and can't do."

"Nobody does." Red mutters, leans back a little. Ash flinches slightly.

"I don't know, Red. Nothing just can be simple, and I... I want it to just *be*. Not simple, just *be*." He says, broken up and nonsensical, and feels like a kid. "I've had a lot of thoughts the past couple of months. All the... all the time, really." He drops a quiet, high cackle and drops his head back. "I think some of them contradicted each other."

"Well, I can't be in your head, Ash." Red says, and it sounds almost sad.

He reaches out, just a bit, and doesn't grab or wrap a hand around Ash, just puts it down, flat against his side.

"I need you to understand, I want to be with you... I want you to be okay." It's like he corrects himself, or isn't sure which he means. "...no matter what the marks say."

"And I want..." Ash raises his head back, looks. "I want to have you." He continues, rushing. "I... even if we're not soulmates, *despite* us not... being soulmates, I just. There's this one thing I can't pretend to do, and it's that this is one huge joke. Alright? Alright, Red? That this is still to... this is still a relationship we just *have* because we're not gonna wreck it because of not being soulmates." He presses his lips into a line. "That's it. That's what's in my head. You're welcome, Red."

Red makes a noise, and this time it *is* close to a laugh, except that it's not happy, just something that goes with the flow.

Ash doesn't want to end it in *and this morning I was thinking of breaking it all off*, so he doesn't add anything at all.

"I... *want* to say I'm... uh, happy, glad, I don't know, that this is important to you." Red speaks up, puts strain in his voice. Ash could hear his voice even if he was whispering. "But I can't, because it's also really fucking you up. And Ash, yeah, maybe you *are* right, and this is stupid to have a *what are we* talk six months in, in this..."

"Oh, you counted." Ash gives him a weak smile and tries, not much and so not to much avail, to make his voice sound smug.

Red finally, actually laughs. "I'd kiss you." He says lightly.

"*What.*" Ash whispers.

"To *settle* it, to just... you look like you'd be nice to kiss, Ashswag." It teeters on being a joke, the way Red likes to, except Red never jokes about *this* one thing.

"To settle it, *what*, huh." Ash wants to grip his hand, the hand that's sorta-hugging him, he needs more.

"That you were right?" Red offers. "That it doesn't *change* anything." He continues in an easy tone. "That the soulmate system can go fuck itself, because I found... found someone with no help from it." He lets out a breath, and the stutter is letting Ash know he's still stressed.

"Yeah? That's so smart of you, Reddoons. To admit I'm right." There's something bubbling up in his stomach, like laughter, just that's hurting it, too.

He does grip Red's hand.

"Thanks." He says, so, so *quiet*. Then adds, thoughtless. "We should do this more often."

"What, talking?" Red has the audacity to sound amused.

Ash does laugh, again.

Red doesn't need to settle in closer, just slip the hand that he's got around Ash down on the sofa seat and turn, to sit in his lap. Ash blinks, stares at the tip of his nose. The smile on Red's face

grows, and grows into something really soft. Ash thinks he waits for him, but after it all their noses almost knock in the middle.

Ash hasn't kissed anyone in seven months; to him, there's a simple association between it and looking back, drawing away feeling what else but *scared*, and then inevitable *sorry*'s.

When they break apart, he's a little out of breath.

He can't see much of Red's eyes, and so he's not sure what he's staring at, his face or the dots up his right eye. There shouldn't be much more of them, now.

"So, *were* you right?" He grins in a jerk, overemotional to the point where it shouldn't be sincere, wets his lips. "I'm a good kisser?" Doesn't really ask. It's *stupid*.

Red says nothing, just shushes him and presses small but concrete kisses to every one of his soulmarks, *just above the eyebrow*, one, Ash blinks, *on the eyelid*, two. Holds still, then. Ash tries to grip his hand, and he thinks it works.

"It doesn't matter, Ash." Red says, somehow *broken*. "We agreed on it. It doesn't matter."

"Of course it doesn't." He breathes out, fights the words from getting stuck in his throat.

The last mark is just below the lower lid, where Red kisses down the line one last time, movement accustomed. Red's. The one that Red should've taken from him.

Ash laughs, quiet and short, and lets his hands crawl over Red's body, on his back, and pretends they don't shake.

He thinks Red does say *sorry*, somewhere in the middle of it.

He hates that the person he gets to kiss for the second time is his soulmate. He'd kiss Red forever.

End Notes

if you watched this far can we get a "this is fucked up or what" comment chain for the youtube algor- ah.

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